The Trans-Baikal

H. Havelock

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THE TRANS-BAIKAL.

Translated from the "Voënnnyi Sbórník" by H. HAVELOCK.

THE principal means of communication in the Trans-Baikal that need be taken into consideration are as follows:—

1. The branch of the Siberian main line from the lake to the Strietenski Station.
2. The roads leading to the River Arguna.
3. For the transit of Russian troops moving on Urga, the roads running from the Baikal to Troitskosavsk.
4. The means of communication by water running in the three above-named directions.

We will now proceed to examine these in detail.

Land Routes.—It may be said generally of these, as of those throughout Siberia, that they are quite in a primitive state, and affect only a small part of the country, and are accessible to a very small portion of its population. The length of the roads available for the transmission of the post is some 1,300 miles, or 1 to every 227 square miles of country. The inadequacy of the means of communication and the great distances to be covered materially affect all branches of the community, clogging all administrative undertakings, and the commercial progress of the country. Consequently in case of war with China the use of the resources of the region would be to a large extent paralysed owing to this cause, and even in peace-time when there is a dearth of grain in one part, it has to be procured from outside, even when there is a superfluity in other parts of the region.

The construction of roads in the direction where they are most needed, from the Baikal to the River Arguna, encounters a serious obstacle in the shape of the Yablonov Range, which forms a lofty and continuous wall all across the province from the N.E. to the S.W. Only one road for wheeled carriages crosses it, and that at an altitude of 4,660 feet, and there are only three or four mountain paths which have been made passable for pack animals between that point and the Chinese frontier, a distance of some 265 miles. Here again we often find that for want of roads the population on one side starves, while 100 miles off that on the other side has to sell its grain at ridiculously low prices.

Most of the by-roads which admit of wheeled traffic are in the S.E. and S.W. parts of the province, *i.e.*, where the Russian population mainly lies. The natives for the most part make their journeys on horse-back. All that part which lies to the north of the high road, having a

very sparse population and producing but little, is almost totally without roads properly so-called, as the only post road runs from the village of Ostrojny on the right bank of the Selenga to Barguzin.

A noticeable feature is the absence of sledge communication in winter, as the snow only falls near the lake, and that not at all points or in sufficient quantity. The contrasts are sharp in that district: between Verkhneudinsk and Kiakhta there is scarcely any occasion for sledges, and wheels can be used throughout the winter, while to the north of Barguzin such a quantity of snow falls that even in November the mails have to be sent from there to the Baths at Turkino by pack animals. On the high road travelling by sledge is for the most part possible only for a tenth part of the way—from the Baikal to the station at Ilijinskaia; over the remainder the travelling is exceedingly difficult either by sledge or wheel, as great drifts of snow gather in sheltered places.

In spring and autumn, and sometimes in summer, difficulties of another kind are encountered, as almost all the roads run along the valleys of rivers, and when the water rises they are consequently flooded, the fords vanish, and crossing is hindered even where there are permanent means of doing so. However, the ground is for the most part stony and there are few ruts, or frozen or sun-dried heaps of dirt. The actual roadway therefore remains in fair condition, but the thawing or freezing of the streams militates against traffic.

Let us now proceed to consider matters from the strategic point of view.

1. *The Siberian High Road.*—This runs through the province for a distance of 650 miles, reckoning from the Mysovaia Station on the eastern shore of the Baikal to the Strietenski Station, where the Amur becomes navigable. This portion of the main road is connected with the Irkutsk by what is called the Baikal Loop, but communication is kept up by the lake, by steamer in summer, in winter over the ice. Its continuation towards Vladivostok is a track which winds round the rocky banks of the Shilka and the Amur, so that all real communication with that place is by means of those two rivers. During two or three months of every year, when they are thawing or freezing, this is wholly cut off, and the telegraph becomes the only link between the Amur country and Russia.

As in war-time all troops and *matériel* would be sent to the Trans-Baikal almost exclusively by steamers on the lake, the selection of a good landing-place on the eastern shore becomes a momentous question. Up to October, 1890, the station of Boyarskaia was so used, but at present that of Mysovaia has taken its place. It is more convenient, as being more sheltered from the N.E. and S.W. winds which prevail on the lake, and sometimes prevent access to Boyarskaia for three or four days.

A wooden landing-stage has been erected at Mysovaia, which is not subject to these atmospheric conditions, and the Siberian Railway will come down on to it, when completed. It is also favourably situated with regard to the Kiakhta trade route, which is the shortest way from Irkutsk to Troitskosavsk and Urga, and the township which lies some half-mile

from the landing-stage is well-suited for the billeting of troops on the march, almost all the houses having small tenements with truckle-beds in them, in which are housed the carters who carry tea from Kiakhta to Irkutsk.

The most important places on the main road are Verkhneudinsk, 110 miles from Mysovaia, Chita, the administrative capital of the district, 298 miles from the former, Nerchinsk, 198 miles from the preceding, and the station of Strietenski, the place at which the steamers of the Amur line end their trip, 65 miles from that again. At Mysovaia the main road connects with the Kiakhta trade route, and not far from Verkhneudinsk with the post road from the same. Near Biankin the road branches off to the station of Shelopugino, and further on to Hailar and Tsipikar. The chief obstacles encountered are the River Selenga, a mile from Verkhneudinsk, the Shilka opposite the station of Strietenski, the Nercha, 2½ miles from Nerchinsk, and the Kurta near Novo-Kurbinskoe. These are all torrents, and the Nercha can at ordinary times be forded even near its mouth on horseback, but with heavy rain or a thaw they all flood, especially the Nercha.

The population is for the most part grouped at a considerable distance to the south of the high road, and such townships as lie along it are the outcome of the "plantations" of the fifties, which were intended to secure uninterrupted postal communication, by the forming of *étapes* and posting stations. Life on this trade route has in course of time left its mark on the settlers, and the farmers and Cossacks there are remarkable for enterprise and intelligence, and are on a far higher level than their indigenous neighbours, the Buriats and Tunguses, both in mental qualities and material prosperity. In summer time no difficulty is experienced in quartering bodies of 500 men or so for a couple of days anywhere along the high road, except between Verkhneudinsk and Oninoborskoe, or between Donmo-Eravinskaia and the township of Beklemishev. Water, fuel, and fodder are not to be found at all points, and the latter is most plentiful where the first is the most so, viz., between Mirsanovskoe and Delionskoe.

2. *Roads leading to the Arguna.*—The sole means of communication between the Baikal and the Arguna is the high road, which however turns off at a distance of some 160 miles from that river. From that point there is a post track for a distance of 85 miles, and beyond that a by-road running through the Alexandrovski Works.

3. *Roads leading from the Baikal to Troitskosavsk.*—The creation of a shorter route from Irkutsk to Troitskosavsk has long occupied the minds of our merchants at Kiakhta, as every year from 800,000 to 1,000,000 poods of tea, valued at from 14,000,000 to 20,000,000 roubles, are carried between those two points. The solution is rendered more difficult by the fact that parallel with the eastern shore of Lake Baikal, from the border of the Irkutsk Government to the River Selenga run the lofty ranges of the Hamar Daban and the Hangar Utskoe, which are almost impassable and bar all the shortest routes from the Baikal to

Troitskosavsk, so that the post road from Mysovaia to the latter has to make a detour by Verkhneudinsk to avoid the northern spurs of the Hamar Daban, forming an arc 250 miles in length, whereas as the crow flies the distance is only about 100 miles. To obviate this the Kiakhta merchants have formed what is on the face of it a shorter route—the Udunga Trade Route—but this is so narrow in parts and so subject to heavy snow storms and in spring to “verglas,” and moreover runs through such wild country, that there are no provisions or fodder to be procured, and in places not even water. The “esaul” Putilov surveyed the country in 1881 and 1889, and the result of his observations was that the best route was by the valleys of the Manturikha (locally “Mandryka”) and Udunga, where there are few material obstacles, and the two ranges of hills much more easily passable than the Udunga Range, and there are only two rivers which need bridging. For the present, troops and munitions of war can be sent forward to the Mongolian frontier *via* Verkhneudinsk.

Water Ways.—The chief defect in these in the Baikal region is the extreme rapidity with which the depth of most of the streams changes. The dryness of the climate makes water evaporate readily, and what was a few days before a great river may to-day or to-morrow be easily fordable. Moreover, the mountainous nature of the country makes the rivers abound in rapids, against which almost every year rafts and steamers are dashed to pieces. For five or six months in the year also the rivers are frozen. Nevertheless, many of the rivers would be of the greatest importance in war-time.

The two main steamship routes are those of the Amur system and the Baikal. There is also a service on the Selenga, not at stated intervals, but when a sufficient quantity of merchandise, mainly tea from Kiakhta, is collected for conveyance. Since 1894 the two Amur companies have been under contracts with the Government, and have built or purchased several new steamers in consequence. The three places at which vessels touch are the Strietski Station, the Shilka Works, and the settlement of Gorbítsa on the Shilka. The former is the limit of navigation on the Amur, though this might with great difficulty be opened up as far as Nerchinsk. The silting up of the river bed at various points since 1879 is the obstacle, otherwise vessels could go as far as Chita. Even now there are a fair number of steamers, with a draught not exceeding 3 feet, which could go as far as Nerchinsk.

As for the Baikal, it will still be of great importance even after the opening of the loop line round the lake, and with the completion of the Siberian Railway traffic will be greatly augmented, as a saving is effected by this mode of transit of some 135 miles. The lake is navigable from the end of April to the middle, or sometimes the end, of December. Under normal conditions the passage takes seven hours, but in bad weather the steamers have to lie off for three or four days. For all practical purposes troops can only be conveyed by steamer.

There remains to be considered the route by the River Ingoda and Shilka. In peace-time recruits are sent on rafts by this route, which takes from twenty to twenty-five days. If they march from Chita to

Strietenski and proceed by stream to their destination, it takes twenty-six days. Rafts can travel from the end of April till late in October, while for steamers there is insufficient water during at least half of the period when the rivers are free from ice. In 1894, the experiment was tried of taking recruits by raft as far as Khabarovsk, but this proved to be dangerous below Blagovieshchensk, and should only be resorted to in extreme necessity.

Each raft consists of some forty pine trunks, bound together in twenties. A quadrangular hole (*proukha*) is made in each trunk near the thicker end, and through this is fastened a stick (*bulavka*), with a "head" at one end. The twenty beams are then lowered on to the *bulavka*, and a 6-inch pin is driven into the aperture made in the *bulavka* at the twentieth beam. When the bottoms are thus secured, the tops are fastened together by passing across the whole an ell and a half from the end a strong pole, and then over every two trunks they put hoops made of birch withes. These are made of such a size as to go easily over the ends of two trunks, and then on to the pole. When the hoops are shipped, they put a lever into one of them, the pole giving the necessary resistance. To secure the lever, they lift it and describe a semi-circle, which makes it drop into the space between two trunks, and the point of resistance is thus shifted to the lower part of the pole. The lever is then forced under the pole, and the spare end cut off. The same process is repeated with the remaining beams. The two small rafts are joined by passing over the *bulavka* of each three birch hoops large enough to admit of the hoops of one meeting those of the other when the thick ends of the beams composing them are pressed together. Birch stakes 2 fathoms long are driven into the space of the first hoops. The rafts thus made can be very easily taken to pieces by merely withdrawing these stakes.

For the accommodation of the passengers the raft is covered with boards, giving a quadrangular space of 72 square ells, including that necessary for the working of the sweeps. At the edges a space is left to keep the men and goods from falling into the water. There are sheds for provisions, two to every 100 men. The rank and file have only the bare boards provided for them, but many rig up awnings improvised out of their tents. From 25 to 35 men are carried on a raft, and where there are deck-houses some 12 to 15 men are needed to do the work required. For cooking purposes, camp kettles are carried, one to every 12 men, for which there is a special fire-place, a frame of four logs filled in with earth.

From 18 to 20 rafts are placed under the command of an officer, forming a detachment (*komanda*), the officer travelling on the last, and three such *komandas* form an *échelon* under the orders of the senior officer. Each *komanda* has a surgeon, or at any rate an assistant, with a field medicine chest. The *komanda* is divided into sections according to the number of non-commissioned officers. On each raft the recruits select their own chief (*starosta*), preference being given to the most educated and experienced; he serves out the provisions and is generally responsible for the party. When they halt for the night he calls

the men's names over, and receives the supplies for the next day, apportioning them among the camp-kettles, receives instructions as to the dangerous places to be passed next day, makes a report to the section commander, and reports any cases of illness to the surgeon. There are one or two pilots to each *komanda*, and these generally guide the leading raft, the others following its course, though this often cannot be done from ignorance of the handling of a raft, of the channel, or other reasons, so that they often sail out over a distance of 7 miles or so. These pilots are Cossacks or natives who can show that they have conducted Government or private rafts with success. The duty on board them mainly consists in working the sweeps, the *starosta* seeing to this; sometimes all the men are at work at the same time, and even the wives. At night, men are told off to keep guard. Rations are issued to the men with biscuit instead of bread, and salt meat in place of fresh. The only difficulty experienced is when a raft runs aground, the provision raft being ahead, for it is impossible to send anything up stream. It may be remarked that accidents are exceedingly rare, none having occurred for 12 years past. The rate of progression where each has a pilot is 80, or if advantage be taken of moonlight nights as much as 130 miles in 24 hours. Certain precautionary measures have to be taken to preserve the health of the men, as camping out on cold nights in early spring, the heavy rains, fogs, and wading in water of a temperature of 41°, together with the close way in which they are packed on the rafts, are all prejudicial to health.

In case of war, the River Arguna will also play an important part as a means of communication by raft, as it runs along the Chinese frontier and forms the only direct route from the Amur to the frontier settlement of Staro Tsurukhaiuevskoe. Both banks on the upper waters of the river are almost destitute of wood, so that rafts cannot be constructed above the falls of Kucherban. It is only used in peace-time by the riparian inhabitants, and that on a very small scale. Some barges are used, but the channel shifts greatly.

Climate.—The climate of the Trans-Baikal differs materially from that of other parts of Siberia within the same degree of latitude, partly owing to the fact that the plateau lies 3,000 feet above sea level, and also that it lies at such a distance from the ocean. The absence of humidity, of sea breezes to temper the heat, and the near proximity of the great Central Asian Desert of Gobi, give it a purely continental character as exemplified by a hot dry summer and a hard winter with little snow. It is also remarkable for the marked excess of sunny days over clouded and foggy ones. The exceptional clearness of the atmosphere and the almost constant prevalence of a clear blue sky and bright sunshine, both in winter and summer, make people often forget the many defects of the harsh and inhospitable climate of Siberia. It of course varies to some extent according to the natural features, and there is a marked difference between the western and eastern portions of the region. That of the western, the part near the lake, between it and the Yablonov Range, is to some extent more temperate owing to the exhalations from the lake,

while the excessive moisture in the air causes a comparatively greater density of atmosphere. From the north this part of the region gives free access to the north winds, which blow charged with moisture from the frozen ocean, while the dry south winds are kept off by the Kentei, Malkhat, and other ranges. It is in part for the same reason that such large tracts of woodland are to be found there; in summer the woods condense the watery vapour and in winter give the fallen snow a certain cohesion which prevents the winds from drifting it. The eastern part, that beyond the Yablonov Range, is quite differently circumstanced. The whole of the southern half, Dauria, is practically a part of the Desert of Gobi, which lies to the south, and the hot dry winds that blow over that Central Asian Sahara pass freely over it. The dryness of the atmosphere is accordingly so intense that such extensive tracts of water as the Torci Lakes sometimes dry up completely, leaving only a whitish sediment of salt. This part of the region acts like a furnace, drying up still more the already dry atmosphere as far as the 52nd parallel. But further north the climate is more humid, owing to the forests, among which lie extensive swamps and marshes. The north winds are here kept off by the Yablonov and Hangan Ranges.

Thawing and Freezing of the Rivers.—The time when the rivers thaw may be taken as from the beginning of April to the beginning of May. The upper waters of the Onon and Arguna are the first, in the beginning of April. The Ingoda follows suit between the 27th April and the 1st of May. The time when they freeze varies from the end of October to the latter half of November, the Ingoda being the first, about October 25th, and the Onon next, about the middle of November, while the Arguna below Ust-Urovskaja becomes frozen from the 20th to 25th October, its upper waters eight to fourteen days later. The Shilka and Selenga are frozen at the end of October, while on the Baikal sledge communication begins from the 1st to the 10th January, and ends May 1st to 5th.

As for the effect of the climate on health, we may say, to begin with, that epidemics among adults are rare, and even then not virulent. The cholera is quite unknown, though it has often shown itself both on the western and eastern verges of the region. The dry air, charged with ozone, and the abundance of sunshine act as natural prophylactics. The north-west winds in spring are apt to cause inflammation of the lungs, but this seldom leaves any bad effects. Chronic catarrh is quite exceptional. The favourable climatic conditions are further demonstrated by the fact that in the Trans-Baikal in summer men and animals are hardly ever tortured by spiders, gnats, and other winged pests, which in many parts of Siberia literally poison existence during the hot months.