

# THE LIVING AGE

Founded by E. LITTELL in 1844

NO. 3915

JULY 19, 1919

## KOLCHAK: A CHARACTER SKETCH

BY JOSEPH REINACH

HERE at least is a man, a real man, a great soldier, a great Russian — *the* Admiral, in a word, as they used to say of Coligny.

First of all, his career is of his own making; he owes his fame and the hopes which an unhappy country has founded on him only to himself. His origins are modest ones. There are no *boyars*, no lovers of Catherine the Great in his lineage. He does not rise, like Lenine, from a line of provincial nobles. His father was one of those thoroughly Russian officers whose portraits Tolstoi has so tellingly painted in his *Souvenirs de Sebastopol*, men who rarely reach those higher grades once reserved for the generals of the Court party. The military nation of Russia, when it escaped from the contagion of neighboring bureaucracies, was always rich in such men, simple, magnificently brave on the battlefield, deeply imbued with the sentiment of duty, and, to use de Vigny's phrase, quite unconscious of their merit.

Kolchak, the elder, at the end of his period of active service was called to an important post in the manufactory of arms at Oboukoff. There the future Admiral passed his childhood and first

youth. He lived much with the workmen, and personally worked in the shops. At fifteen years of age, he entered the Naval School, and graduated among the highest in rank. He was forthwith commissioned ensign and sent to the Far East. In the heart of the Russian naval officer, as indeed in the heart of his more western brother, there is to be found a certain soberness of character and an unopposed sense of religion, characteristics springing from the career itself, and from long meditations in the solitudes of the seas.

Kolchak had a taste for both science and adventure. His hydrological studies in the North Pacific brought this to light. When the Petrograd Academy of Sciences, in 1900, organized the famous expedition for the exploration of the polar regions north of the mouth of the Lena, Kolchak was designated for the expedition by Admiral Makaroff. He quickly became the favorite collaborator of Baron Toll, chief of the daring enterprise. When Toll, after two years, decided to push on toward the pole with a little handful of companions, it was Kolchak whom he charged with the task of

taking to Siberia the personnel and the collections of the expedition. Toll disappeared in the ice. Kolchak, sent in search of him, found and brought back only the journal of his commander.

Soldier and scholar, there you have Kolchak. The courage he showed during the Russo-Japanese war, the impulse which he communicated to the naval staff to organize the defense of the Baltic littoral; his campaign, from 1914 to 1915, in which he freed the Baltic from German vessels — all these carried him rapidly to the highest grade. The youngest Admiral in the Russian navy, he took, in 1916, the command of the Black Sea fleet, chased the Breslau, and set to work at a plan of attack on the Bosphorus. It was while he was at work preparing for this enterprise, that the Revolution, which carried away the old régime in a few hours, broke forth. Kolchak had too closely seen the vices of a gangrened administration, had suffered too much personally from the evil designs of the *camarilla* to be astonished at this sudden collapse. He rallied to the Provisional Government. Nevertheless, his adhesion was not accompanied by any of those theatric declarations of renunciation of the past which caused the President of the Duma, his friend Radzianko, to show his disgust at a certain historic session. Kolchak himself announced the Revolution to his fleet. He interpreted it in the spirit of patriot, in the spirit it might have personified had it not been for the fearful war weariness, German gold and propaganda, and the feebleness of the governing leaders. When he explained that day to the assembled sailors the necessity of discipline, he was acclaimed. Three months later, it was his fate to deal with changed men, men of the famous Pricaz No. 1.

We see Kolchak resisting the muti-

nous spirit with all his strength. For a last time, he talks to the crews aboard the flagship. His appeals to honor no longer wake echoes. Certain wilder ones attempt to disarm him. Then, a deed in the ancient tradition, he throws the sabre ornamented with the Cross of St. George into the sea, and without once looking back, leaves the vessel.

Strange and contradictory soul of the Slav! The same Sailors' Council which had thrust Kolchak from his ship was struck, by his last act, as with a kind of sacred terror. They sent diver after diver down to the bottom to seek the Admiral's sword. They then telegraphed to the Admiral begging him to take command of the fleet.

A man of Admiral Kolchak's temper is not one to play in harmony with Æolian harps. Kerensky, to get rid of him, sent him on a mission to Japan. Destiny has its share in the game. Kolchak was in Japan when he heard of Lenine's *coup d'état*. The rest is known. Kolchak in Siberia early in 1918 almost alone, but to-day upon the Ural and the Volga, chief of a large army and a veritable government. The tireless effort, undertaken for so many months in the mysterious depths of Siberia, required for the assembling of such a force is one of the most extraordinary episodes of a time which is like no other in the history of the world. A will of steel at the service of the purest patriotism is always something of a miracle.

Long before Kolchak, with the aid of the heroic Czecho-Slovak legions, had succeeded in his Siberian enterprise, and while between the Caucasus and the Don, Kaledine, Alexief, Kornilof, and Denikine, who had commanded some of the greatest armies in the world, were busy at the work of gathering together some thousands of officers and continuing war against the

Germans through fidelity to the Entente and were beginning their struggle against the Bolsheviki through horror of their felony and their tyranny, I never ceased to demand the military intervention of the Entente, and since geography is inflexible in these matters, it seemed to me that that military intervention must be the labor of Japan.

Two dominant reasons then justified this armed intervention.

A strategic reason first; the necessity of creating a second eastern front, the first having been delivered to the Germans by the treachery of the Bolsheviki. (The great refusal of all history, this, and one far too often forgotten by friends of the Bolsheviki both here and in America.) That front is to-day reconstituted; it is Poland — Poland independent and free is so truly this new front that all the present efforts of Germany, or to speak more truly, Prussia, are now directed against this noble Lazarus, newly risen from his tomb of the centuries.

Secondly, a moral reason, a reason of honor, the imperious duty of coming to the aid of those intrepid survivors of the Russian army who, refusing to be foul themselves with the treason of Brest-Litovsk, had, at the price of unbelievable perils, gained a refuge in the Caucasus and were fighting and dying there, faithful through all to the Entente.

The hour was the destined hour of Japan. Why did the Empire of the Rising Sun let it drift by? The fault, however, was not alone that of Japan. In the Scripture we may read this definition of the feeble man, 'He who wishes and who does not wish.' The Powers of the Entente limited themselves to fancies; they could do no more than send 'little packages' of men, cannons, munitions, food, and money.

Kolchak to-day thinks himself able to save Russia. He has turned the formless waste of Siberia into a great entrenched camp; he has established connection with Denikine to the south; in the north and west, he is in communication with those 'little armies,' heterogeneous, perhaps, but resolute and ardent, from the Murman coast and Esthonia. Trotzky has fled from half-encircled Petrograd. The English fleet dominates the Baltic. Kolchak holds the Ural solidly and is advancing along the Volga. He will go to Moscow. We will see him in the Kremlin, but the way is a long one.

In effect, the Red army is not to be despised, nor is the Bolshevik government at the end of its tether. The Red army is provided with the various kinds of artillery and munitions which, in violation of the armistice, the Germans left it; and it is led by officers of the old régime who have had the choice between military service and hanging. The government has well guarded its power of issuing paper money, an instrument of tireless propaganda. The Entente having committed the fault of not declaring void the value of all Lenine's rubles, he, more than ever, takes upon himself the right of promising vast concessions of mines and forests to international syndicates who do not remain inactive in his cause.

The Admiral himself has only his loyalty, the sincerity of his words as shown by his acts, and his irreducible patriotism to counter the calumnies which pursue him. I read in one of his most recent manifestos to the soldiers of the Red army, 'Liberty is the sacred right of the people to deliberate in common and to decide its destinies. In a Soviet Russia, this right does not exist. There is neither liberty nor law to be found there.'

The man himself is, without doubt, a democrat and a liberal; but is he a monarchist or a republican? He is something better than a professional republican; he has the republican virtues of one of Plutarch's personages. With him, his country is first, that dear, unhappy, and guilty Russia whom he is bound to save from the German and the accomplices of Germany. He is the standard-bearer of the heroic and glorious Russia of the two first years of the war, that Russia which we loved so much, which gave, before

The Figaro, June 6

falling into the ditch of anarchy, so many unforgettable services to the sacred cause of the peoples.

But the Admiral is more than standard-bearer. The honor of being a standard-bearer and defender of the flag, even to the death, is given, in regiments, only to an officer, bravest among the brave and already famous for his energy and his courage. Nevertheless, there is no example of a standard-bearer being made a chief. A chief must have still other virtues. The Admiral is a chief.

## THE PRESENT CZECHO-SLOVAK REPUBLIC

WHEN a certain French General was given command in 1915 of the first of the Czecho-Slovak Legions, which were formed to fight on the side of the Allies, he is said to have asked, quite innocently, whether these troops were black or white. Nor are prominent Englishmen much wiser. At least, one member of the British War Cabinet was recently unaware of the difference between a Slovak and a Slovene, and a certain foolish weekly paper at one time demanded whether the war was to be continued indefinitely for the sake of the Czecho-Slovaks, of whom it admitted that it knew very little. It is of very great importance that Englishmen should now maintain a close contact with the new States which have arisen in Europe and keep themselves informed of the chief events taking place there.

One of the most serious problems in Czecho-Slovakia at present, as in many other European countries, is that of the currency. When an independent

government was set up, a flood of Austrian paper money was circulating in the country. The government has steadily resisted a temptation, to which many others have succumbed, and has issued no new paper money of its own. It has indeed gone a step further, and made preparations for a capital levy to be applied to the deflation of the currency. The mechanism of this plan is as follows: Last March, all currency notes had to be handed in to the banks by their holders in order to be stamped. No unstamped notes, except those of very small denominations, which it was not practicable to stamp, were to be subsequently recognized as legal tender. Of the currency notes handed in, half were at once stamped and returned to their holders. A charge of 1 per cent of the value of the notes was made by the government for stamping. The remaining half were retained for the time being by the banks as compulsory deposits, on which interest at the rate of