

**Graham Camfield**

## Among Russian sects and revolutionists: the extraordinary life of Prince D. A. Khilkov

### Book section

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## The Khilkovs in Peace and War

On 19 March 1856 an imperial manifesto proclaimed to the Russian people the end of the Crimean War and recognised the pressing need to address the problem of serfdom. Tsar Alexander II had been on the throne for just a year and the prospect of peace and hopes of much needed reform gave cause for optimism among his subjects. It appeared to herald a relaxation of the former oppressive regime of Nicholas I, and hold promise of greater freedom for the people. It was at this significant moment in Russian history that Prince Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Khilkov was born in November 1857 to a life of wealth and privilege as a member of Russia's ruling elite. His formative years were to witness the consequences of emancipating the serfs on his own family estate, the return of war in 1877, and the assassination of Alexander II by a terrorist bomb in 1881.

The Khilkovs were numbered among the most ancient Russian noble families, who traced their line back to Rurik, founder of the Russian State, through the sixteenth century Prince, Ivan Khilok (Riapolovskii), from whom they derived their name.<sup>1</sup> Generations of Khilkov princes gave distinguished service to the Tsars, while their wives and daughters served as ladies in waiting at Court. A strong military tradition ran through the family. In the nineteenth century Stepan Aleksandrovich Khilkov (1786 – 1854) had distinguished himself in the war against Napoleon and held the highest rank of Lieutenant General in the Emperor's Own Life Guard Hussar Regiment. It was natural, therefore, that from an early age Dmitrii Aleksandrovich was marked out for a military career.

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1. A. A. Zimin, *Formirovanie boiarskoi aristokratii v Rossii*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 41.

Of his parents and his early years we know little. His father Aleksandr Dmitrievich (1834-88) was a Colonel of Hussars, who served with honour in the Crimean War, then went into retirement in 1861. His mother Iuliia Petrovna (née Dzhunkovskaia, 1837-1916) appears as a single minded Russian matron, who above all prized the honour and position attached to the ancient name of Khilkov. Her own family, the Dzhunkovskiis, were of more recent noble origin.<sup>2</sup> In the eighteenth century they were priests and a strong thread of piety appears to run through the family. Iulia Petrovna's uncle, Stepan Stepanovich (1821-70), had converted to Catholicism abroad, entered the Jesuit order and conducted missionary work among the Eskimos and in Skandinavia. In the 1860's he left the order, renounced Catholicism and was accepted back into the Orthodox Church in 1866. Looking forward to the path taken by Dmitrii Aleksandrovich, there is, perhaps, a foreshadowing here of his own unusual spiritual journey.

Dmitrii Aleksandrovich, born on 13 November 1857, was their first child. A second son, Alexander, was born two years later, but sadly did not live beyond his late teens. There is a suggestion, albeit from a critical source, that he committed suicide and that the Khilkov home was far from happy.

The conditions of family life in which he (Dmitrii) grew up in childhood were not at all favourable for the correct development of his moral-religious understanding (in the Prince's own words, throughout the whole of his childhood he saw only one decent person close to him - the coach driver Emelian), - and (it was) these very circumstances which marked the beginning of that path by which Prince D.A. Khilkov also came to blind enthusiasm for

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2. From Stepan Kondratievich Dzhunkovskii (beginning of the 18th century). The family held property in Poltava and Kharkov. The estate at Pavlovki was Dzhunkovskii property.

the views of Count L.N. Tolstoi, and his brother - to suicide in his youth.<sup>3</sup>

The author of these remarks, Archpriest T. I. Butkevich was a dedicated opponent of Tolstoyism, and his article, based on a visit to Khilkov in 1890, was published at the height of the Orthodox campaign against Tolstoi and his teaching in 1897. He wrote of course to undermine Khilkov's reputation, but there was some truth in his description of the family. Much later, in 1914, the priest Iakov Prikhodin, who had befriended Dmitrii Aleksandrovich in his latter years, also wrote of his 'disorderly upbringing'. His father, Aleksandr Dmitrievich, had been a distinguished and exemplary officer, but it appears that in retirement he fell in with a circle 'who had a harmful influence on him, as a consequence of which there was disorder in his family life'.<sup>4</sup> Here was a family scandal that was barely mentioned, suggesting marital breakdown, separation, and another, illegitimate, family. Some further evidence comes from a letter of Countess Tolstaia to her husband in April 1887. From a conversation with Khilkov's aunt she had learnt that he had taken in his 'dissolute and drunken father' with his 'awful brood', who had all moved into his farm, which was close to where his mother lived.<sup>5</sup> His health must have been failing at this stage as he died at the beginning of January 1888.

Dmitrii, or 'Dima', was his mother's favourite. Many years later she would recall with pride how, during a visit to Italy, the Queen of Greece (formerly Grand Princess Ol'ga Nikolaevna of Russia) had been so charmed by the small boy with golden curls that she took him into her own carriage.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of 1866 her

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3. T. I. Butkevich, 'V gostiakh u intelligentnogo tolstovtza', *Sankt-Peterburgskii Dukhovnii Vestnik*, 43 Oct./Nov. (1897), 846-74.

4. O. N. Naumov and B. M. Khilkov, *Istoriia roda kniaziei Khilkovykh* (Ekaterinburg: Ural'skoe, 2008), 143.

5. S. A. Tolstaia, *Pis'ma k L. N. Tolstomu* (Moskva: Academia, 1936), 393.

6. D. A. Khilkov, 'Zapiski D. A. Khilkova', *Svobodnoe slovo*, 1 (1898), 153. Hereafter *Zapiski*

ambition for Dima took a first step forward when, shortly after his eighth birthday, his name was entered for a place in the Imperial Corps of Pages, an elite school, whose pupils were drawn exclusively from families of the highest rank.

At the age of twelve, in June 1870, Dmitrii took his place among the 150 pupils of the Corps. Organised into four junior (general) classes and two senior (special) classes, the emphasis was on military training and preparation for high command or state service. Nevertheless, following reforms in the late 1860's the Corps at this time could also boast a broad even liberal education, probably the finest in the Empire. M. M. Osorgin, a pupil during the late seventies recalled that the teaching 'was simply brilliant. The majority of the professors were outstanding'.<sup>7</sup> In the final year the first sixteen pupils were nominated Pages of the Chamber and were attached to the personal service of members of the Imperial family, requiring frequent attendance at Court functions. This honour fell to Dmitrii Aleksandrovich in 1874 (aged sixteen), an indication of his high ability. Indeed in the final examination of the Corps he took sixth place and on graduation received a commission as cornet in the Hussar regiment of the Imperial Life Guards, his father's old regiment, stationed at Tsarskoe Selo. On entering the regiment in August 1875, promotion followed swiftly. Within three months he was promoted from cornet to lieutenant and the following year, in September, was appointed commander of the fourth squadron and given other responsibilities. He became head of a school for soldiers' children and clerk to the regimental court. The latter he soon gave up and spent six months as quartermaster, while continuing with the school.

From the few accounts we have of this period of his life it is clear that the

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7. D. C. B. Lieven, *Russia's Rulers Under the Old Regime*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 100.

young Dmitrii was a devout Orthodox Christian. According to Pankratov, ‘he came to love divine service, served as a sacristan in the Corps Church, he frequented the churches of St Petersburg and sought after splendour and dignity’.<sup>8</sup> In later life he looked back with great pleasure to his time as sacristan, looking after the holy objects of the church and preparing them for divine service, never missing a service. He was an exemplary young officer, writes Novoselov, ‘distinguished by his refinement, piety, talent, and marvellous elegance of manners, and a fine gift of speaking. It was widely said of him that ‘he has the remarkable ability to be liked by all’.

At that time, at the beginning of 1877, attention in Russia was becoming focused on events in the Balkans, where fellow Slavs had risen against their Turkish rulers and were suffering terrible reprisals. The Tsar’s declaration of war on Turkey in April was followed by a wave of popular support for a holy crusade to liberate their Orthodox brethren. Along with countless others the Khilkov family were caught up in the general enthusiasm. Both Alexandr Dmitrievich and Iuliia Petrovna (as a Sister of Mercy) volunteered and departed for the Balkan front. As a conscientious and dedicated young officer Dmitrii wanted to practice what he had been trained for. To his dismay his regiment was not among those called to active service. Disillusioned with the off duty life of an officer and determined to go to war, he sought with some difficulty a transfer to the Caucasian front. Finally on 30 May 1877 Imperial permission was granted for him to join the Kuban Cossack regiment under the command of the Commander in Chief of the Caucasian Army, Grand Prince Mikhail Nikolaevich, brother of the Tsar.

There is a more colourful account, related by Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, of

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8. A. S. Pankratov, *Ishchushchie Boga: ocherki sovremennykh religioznykh iskami i nastroenii*, 2, (Moscow: A. A. Levenson, 1911), 89.

Khilkov's decision to enter the war. Bonch-Bruevich wrote a lengthy obituary for Dmitrii Aleksandrovich in 1914 in the left-wing newspaper *Kievskaiia mysl'*, which drew on conversations during the period of their friendship in Switzerland in the early 1900s. The picture he paints is of a young man, who, for all his excellent qualities, enjoyed the sometimes boisterous life of an officer in St Petersburg. In a story that could be straight from the pages of a romantic novel he tells how Dmitrii, who was after all only nineteen years old, had become smitten with a gypsy girl and was intent on marrying her. His plan, however, was frustrated by lack of means for a dowry and the girl's reluctance to leave her people. Utterly dejected he saw the war as an opportunity to drown his sorrow and even to die for his lost love. Before he left made a final visit to the gypsy encampment to say farewell. As he did so he was stopped by an old woman, who 'prophesied' that to be safe in battle he should always be mounted on a white horse; if he should dismount, he would perish.<sup>9</sup> With details that are absent from Khilkov's autobiographical *Zapiski*, Bonch-Bruevich makes much of the influence of this gypsy encounter on Dmitrii Aleksandrovich's attitude and subsequent behaviour in battle. As we shall see, he attributes this to a mystical vein in Khilkov's character, which was observed also by Pankratov, but which was totally at odds with the rational portrayal in the *Zapiski*, edited by the 'no-nonsense, Tolstoyan Vladimir Chertkov.

The Russian forces had crossed the frontier with Turkey on 12 April under the Supreme Command of Grand Prince Mikhail Nikolaevich and Major General M. T. Loris-Melikov. By early May the Russians had seized the key strongholds of Baiazet and Ardahan, and occupied a significant area of Turkish Armenia. Instead of following up their victory over the demoralised Turkish forces efforts were

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9. V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, 'Pamiati D. A. Khilkova', *Kievskaiia Mysl'* (2 November 1914).

concentrated on besieging the fortress of Kars. Given this respite the Turkish commander, Mukhtar Pasha, withdrew to Zevin, between Kars and Erzerum, to regroup and await reinforcements. At was at this point that Dmitrii Khilkov entered the war. At first, he writes, 'I saw only the ostentatious, beautiful side' of the war.<sup>10</sup> Soon, however, his initial idealism began to turn to disillusionment. Being on the staff of the detachment commander, Prince Chavchavadze, he was able to observe the campaign as a whole and became acquainted with the chief commanders.

In this situation, he writes, I was struck by something I had not in any way expected. The majority of these commanders thought only of themselves and gave no thought to ruining the whole operation or thousands of men, if by this they had some hope of harming another commander or receiving a decoration. I soon saw that in practice what was happening was the complete opposite of my expectations. I was disillusioned and began to pity the poor deceived soldiers, whom, indeed, they treated as cannon fodder.<sup>11</sup>

The appalling waste of life and neglect of the men made him determined to protect the Cossacks under his command.

On 13 June Loris-Melikov mounted an attack on the Turkish position at Zevin, only to be repulsed with heavy losses. The Turks now took the advantage, forcing the Russians to lift the siege of Kars and retreat to the frontier. Only Ardahan and Baiazet remained in their possession. Meanwhile the Turks took and fortified the Avliar-Aladzha heights, a strong position commanding the approach to Kars. At the beginning of August the main body of the Russian forces, including Khilkov's detachment, were encamped at Kuriuk-Dere, with an advance section at

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10. *Zapiski*, 79.

11. *Zapiski*, 80.



Bashkadykliar. Khilkov at this time was in command of a special operations unit (*okhotnichiaia komanda*), involved in specific and usually dangerous missions, chiefly in the field of reconnaissance and spying. To form his unit Khilkov especially requested Cossacks who were under military discipline and otherwise destined for a correctional battalion.<sup>12</sup> From them he forged a successful unit, devoted to their commander. On one occasion he led them in a daring attempt to scale a dangerous cliff-face to take a Turkish fortress by surprise. ‘Why should we not attack the fortress from this side?’ he asked the men. ‘Why indeed, your honour, where you go, we go also’, they replied. As it happened the ascent had to be abandoned when the unit came under fire from the Russian artillery, mistaking them for Turks.

Among the men under Khilkov’s command at this time was a Tatar named Zamat, who had a curious and colourful history. For many years, as an *abrek*, he had led resistance to the Russians in the Caucasus mountains. Following a voluntary surrender, he was exiled to Sakhalin, from whence he later escaped. On return to Russia he volunteered for the Turkish War and served with distinction, particularly at the siege of Kars. His true identity, however, was discovered, and Zamat was forced to flee and return to his former life in the mountains, where he was later murdered as he slept. His life reads like a Caucasian romance, but Khilkov would recall the Tatar’s significant influence on his life at that time. For Zamat, it appears, was untypical of his race in that he had a horror of taking life<sup>13</sup>.

On the evening of 8 August Khilkov was ordered by Prince Chavchavadze<sup>14</sup>

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12. ‘Okhotnichii komandy’, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’*, (St Peterburg: Brokgauz i Efron, 1897), 22a, 502.
  13. Pankratov, *Ishchushchie Boga*, 92.  
Joseph James Neave, *Leaves from the Journal of Joseph James Neave* (London: Headley Bros, 1911), 146-9.
  14. Prince Zakharii Gul’batovich Chavchavadze (1825-1905), from 1878 Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Combined Caucasian Division.

to lead a night attack on the Turkish cavalry camp in front of the main enemy position on the Avliar-Aladzha heights. To Khilkov this was a foolhardy enterprise, which could not possibly influence the course of the war and would only endanger his men, who were likely to run into enemy troops on the way back. Chavchavadze, however, was not swayed by these arguments. With a troop of fifty men, among them Zamat, serving as an under officer, Dmitrii Aleksandrovich reached the camp to find the Turks asleep. The Tatar was reluctant to attack and kill sleeping men; Khilkov concurred and aimed to take them alive.<sup>15</sup> The startled Turks, however, naturally retaliated and in the confusion of the moment an event occurred which was to prove a turning point in the young officer's life. He writes:

We set off, reached the camp and found the Turks asleep. Here things began which are unpleasant for me to recall now, but at the time I gave them no thought. Having become separated from the Cossacks, I ran into two Turks. One of them thrust at me with a rifle. I thought he wanted to shoot me and I fired the revolver, which was in my hand, point blank at his head. He fell. As he fell he let go the bay horse, which he held by the reins. The other Turk fled. I rode after him shouting, 'The bay is mine'. The fleeing Turk was holding the reins of the bay. I wanted to take it [...].<sup>16</sup>

On return with a prize of eleven horses and two Turkish officers, Khilkov and his men were congratulated by all. Something, however, troubled him. He felt at first that it was his failure to retrieve the bay horse, but that night the real source of his disquiet became clear.

I woke in the night and for the first time began to think of the Turk I had killed

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15. John Bellows, *Letters and a Memoir* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904), 219.

16. *Zapiski*, 81.

and realised clearly that it was all because of him. I could sleep no longer, the Turk stood before me. Fortunately, I did not see his face, but his figure, - he was wearing a hood, and the hood stood up like a cone, - I remember to this day.<sup>17</sup>

The following day the conviction grew that he could no longer stay in the detachment and that he must purge himself of the sin of murder. He therefore began to consider how best to approach his commanding officer, Grand Prince Mikhail, with a request to quit the detachment. For a professional soldier this was an odd reaction, but he had seen no purpose in the raid and he had killed a man for the sake of a few horses. He shared his dilemma with fellow officer, Prince Georgii Il'ich Orbeliani, with whom he shared a tent. Orbeliani at first took it for a joke, but seeing the seriousness of his intent, and to protect his comrade from shame informed Colonel P. P. Valuev, whom they both respected. Summoned to explain himself, the Colonel made it clear to Khilkov that he did not approve of such foolishness. For his part Dmitrii Aleksandrovich insisted that his sense of guilt was so great that he had to fast and make confession. The Colonel was not impressed, suggesting that perhaps fear was the real motive for wanting to quit. When Khilkov denied this, Valuev gave the following remarkable advice:

Stay in the detachment, go where you are sent, only don't kill; you see no one has ordered you to kill. Forget that you have a weapon, and the next time a Turk aims straight at you, keep still and do not defend yourself. If you are killed, you will in this way also atone for your sin of murder; but most important, you will no doubt discover to what extent you cannot kill.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 82-3.

To the young Khilkov this advice, cynical as it may have been, seemed quite fair. Subsequently, on more than one occasion he was able to put it to the test. About this time, however, he went down with dysentery, which became progressively worse until he collapsed and was taken into the hospital at Aleksandropol around 10 September.

During the second half of August the Turks, in a surprise attack, had overrun the Russian advance position at Bashkadykliar and occupied the strategically important heights of Kizil Tepe. The Russians counter attacked, but failed to retake the heights. From the end of August through September there was a lull in the fighting while both sides maintained defensive tactics. On 20 September the Russians, now reinforced, began an assault on the Turkish positions. The fighting continued for several days. In the hospital at Aleksandropol Khilkov could hear the sound of cannon fire. Quietly discharging himself he rejoined his detachment, though still far from well.

Weakened by the Russian offensive the Turks took up new positions on the Avliar Aladzha heights. The Russians maintained the offensive and on 3 October joined battle with the forces of Mukhtar Pasha for possession of the heights. That day Khilkov's detachment was in reserve. Unable to observe the battle because the Turks had set fire to the plain, Khilkov and the others rode forward until they came in sight of Malye Iagny. On the summit of this mountain, at a height of around 2,000 metres, there was a Turkish position. All at once they noticed that the Turks were evacuating the stronghold. On reaching the summit Khilkov and his men found it deserted. It was beginning to get dark, but the Cossacks were keen to pursue the retreating Turks. Against his better judgement he consented and, catching up with the enemy, found himself in a dangerous situation in which his small band was out numbered. As he

urged the Turks to surrender he was shot at. The bullet passed under his left hand. His first thought was to kill the Turk, but as he drew his sabre he recalled Valuev's words and the dead Turk. He was struck by the thought that it was pointless to take another sin upon himself, when he stood in imminent danger of death. Shortly afterwards he was almost killed when a bullet just missed his ear. In that case the assailant did not escape, but was struck down by Khilkov's comrade Orbeliani.

The Russian victory at Avliar-Aladzha proved a turning point in the Caucasian campaign. Mukhtar Pasha's forces retreated in disarray to Erzerum. A Russian force under General Geiman marched on the city and began what proved to be a protracted and fruitless siege, while another force concentrated on Kars. Towards the end of October (beginning of November) Khilkov's unit volunteered to join a Cossack detachment under the command of Prince Ferdinand Witgenshtein, which was to join Geiman at Erzerum. Khilkov was still feeling weak from recurring bouts of dysentery. En route the detachment of about 800 men was attacked by a much larger Turkish force. Khilkov and his men were driven into the mountains, their ammunition all but spent. Pursued by the Turks they came upon a young Russian infantryman, completely dazed and bewildered. Hesitating for a moment Khilkov stopped to rescue the lad, at great personal risk under the constant enemy fire. Once again his actions were guided by Valuev's advice and the memory of the dead Turk. Although in mortal danger, he experienced an extraordinary inner peace.<sup>19</sup>

On 10 October the Russian forces commenced the siege of Kars. Within the fortress the Turks were well prepared for a long siege. Nearly a month later Russian troops successfully stormed the citadel in a surprise attack by night. During the time of the siege Khilkov was involved in a number of operations around Kars. One night

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19. Ibid., 87.

he was ordered to take a force of around one hundred men across the river into a village below the fortress. It was suspected that the villagers were supplying the Turks with information about Russian positions. Khilkov and his men cleared the village, discovering at the same time several Turkish soldiers concealed there, one of whom was disguised as a Turkish beauty.<sup>20</sup>

By now the notion of nonviolence, initiated by Valuev's advice was becoming a guiding principle of Khilkov's life. An incident around Kars further influenced him in this direction:

He was leading his men in a charge of Cossack against Turkish cavalry. As the two forces approached one another, Khilkov saw, coming directly towards him, a Turkish officer with his sword raised. The moment of impact came; but the officers looked into each other's eyes and they passed without either bringing down his sword. On the side of the Turkish officer there may have been merely hesitation at the critical moment; but Khilkov said that the friendly look in the eyes of the Turk disarmed him, and he felt he could not kill him.<sup>21</sup>

From his own account as given in the *Zapiski* and also recounted to Bonch-Bruевич he survived many astonishing close encounters with death. His daring, some would say reckless, missions were invariably successful and sustained very few casualties among his men, who came to believe that he had a 'charmed' life. His undoubted courage was recognised by the award of several honours: the Order of St. Vladimir 4<sup>th</sup> degree with swords and ribbon, St. Anna 4<sup>th</sup> degree with inscription 'For valour', and St. Anna, 3<sup>rd</sup> degree with swords and ribbon. By the end of the war he had risen with

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20. James Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, 2 (London: Dent, 1923), 59.

21. *Ibid.*

distinction to the rank of Colonel at the mere age of twenty two. All this, according to Bonch-Bruevich's narrative, he firmly attributed to the gypsy prophecy.

Being of a somewhat mystical inclination, D. A. Khilkov, like many soldiers and sailors, who have been in great dangers, believed in and always gave heed to various omens, predictions, premonitions, fortune telling, and so on. He always attributed his successes in the Turkish war to the gypsy's fortune telling more than anything. When I was on the point of trying to raise an objection with him, pointing to the undoubtedly careful planning of all his military ventures, to the solidarity and unity of the detachment, to his application of new methods of manoeuvring and, finally, and to the outstanding courage of both himself, and of all those subordinate to him, he suddenly began to get angry, irritated, avert his eyes, he did not look me in the face, as though I could 'give him the evil eye' and fired off rapidly:

No, and no again, that is all nonsense! You would speak to me about 'courage'. No courage at all! It is all rubbish! Terror, so awful, bullets are whistling, you grasp your head involuntarily, you even shut your eyes, but you ride, you have no idea why...You think: Lord, if only I could get away quicker! - and here bang! Bang! Shrapnel! – it blows up, whirls around. Fear drains all strength from you! I'm done for, you think! Well, but then somehow you are even coming out of it! ... And it is all, of course, the gypsy woman: she foretold it.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of the final assault on Kars, Khilkov was on the staff of the General Officer Commanding and was able to observe the courage and determination of the Russian troops in their effort to take the citadel. The fall of Kars to the Russians on 6

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22. Bonch-Bruevich, 'Pamiati D. A. Khilkova'.

November 1877 signalled the end of the Caucasian campaign, although Erzerum continued to hold out. Early in 1878 the campaign in the Balkans also came to an end and peace with Turkey was concluded initially by the Treaty of San Stefano, later modified, under pressure from Britain and Austria, by the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878.

Two days after the fall of Kars a grand military parade was arranged on the occasion of the name-day of Grand Prince Mikhail. Amid an atmosphere of general jubilation, the Grand Prince congratulated Loris- Melikov on his success. The victory celebration was marred, however, by an unforeseen incident, which made a strong impression on Khilkov. He writes:

Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, there appeared in the open space between the troops and the commanders a Doukhobor wagon. Everyone was rejoicing so much that they had not noticed it before. They began to shout at the Doukhobors and to urge on the horses. From inside the wagon came the sound of groaning. It was laden with wounded. There were many stones around Kars. The wagon bounced over the stones. The wounded moaned pitifully. The Doukhobors urged on the horses and from the wagon a thin stream of blood ran to the ground.<sup>23</sup>

He did not stay for the end of the celebrations, but returned to his quarters. Only six months earlier he had arrived in the Caucasus, fresh from the parade grounds of St Petersburg, and full of youthful idealism, taking pleasure in the trappings of war. Very soon, however, its terrible realities became evident and were vividly portrayed for him in this poignant scene outside Kars. Behind the pomp and show he saw the pretence and hypocrisy of the chief commanders and their callous indifference to the suffering

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23. *Zapiski*, 88.



of their troops. Many years later Khilkov wrote,

In 1877 I took part in the war around Kars and I know and can demonstrate that as a consequence of the hostility between Loris-Melikov and Grand Prince Mikhail Nikolaevich it turned out thus: Loris-Melikov would have an idea but the Grand Prince would try to thwart it, and thousands of soldiers perished. Not only did they not shoot the Grand Prince as a traitor, but made him a Field Marshall. As soon as the Turks began to move, the Grand Prince made off to Tiflis, in order to receive a Cross and write reports. Three times without need they seized Bolshie Iagny, and, having taken it and killed thousands of soldiers, left the following day.<sup>24</sup>

While disenchanted with the conduct of his superior and fellow officers, and deeply affected by his own crisis of conscience, Dmitrii Aleksandrovich chose for the present to remain in the army. There was no desire to return to the former life in St. Petersburg and he chose, rather, to transfer to one of the Kuban Cossack regiments of the line. During the winter of 1878-79 they were quartered in the Akhalkalaxskii district of Tbilisi province with a population including some 6,000 Doukhobors, living in eight villages. The precise origins of the sect are obscure, but it is likely that the first Doukhobors were followers of a seventeenth century Russian hermit, Danilo Filippov, whose teachings also gave rise to the Khlyst sect. Danilo rejected the written word of the scriptures and the Orthodox liturgy for the 'living book', the Holy Spirit, which indwelt every man. He claimed, moreover, that the spirit of Christ was continually resurrected and that he himself was a living Christ.

Over the years the Doukhobor leadership became increasingly autocratic, and their teaching more militant. This led inevitably to conflict with the authorities and

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24. From unpublished work by O. N. Nedogarko.

persecution. Under Alexander I a large number of Doukhobors were settled in Taurida, by the Molochnaia River, where they remained for forty years. In the early 1840's allegations of brutalities at the Molochnaia River colony led to the exile of around 4,000 Doukhobors to the Caucasus. Here they settled on the bleak slopes of the Mokrie Gory (Wet Mountains), where they had to contend not only with a severe climate, but also the warlike native tribes. By hard work and adaptation the Doukhobors managed not only to survive but to flourish. Forced by natural conditions to give up their traditional farming methods, they turned to a pastoral life, building up large flocks and herds.<sup>25</sup> Among the few advantages of this inhospitable place was that they were, by and large, beyond the reach of the Russian authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical. Nor were their consciences troubled by the pressures of military service, since their settlements were technically penal colonies and therefore not liable for conscription, and universal conscription was not introduced into the Caucasus until 1874. Under their leader Lukeriia Kalmykova, who ruled from 1864-86, the Doukhobors enjoyed a period of great prosperity, which was also marked by good relations with the Tsarist authorities. During the Russo-Turkish War they proved invaluable to the Russian forces in the provision of food, horses and transportation, although for many it meant a compromise of their principle of non-violence. In return for their cooperation, however, they were granted exemption from military service and well rewarded.

Khilkov was, of course, familiar with their service in the war, but a chance encounter in Tiflis made a great impression and stimulated his interest to discover more about the sect. In a carpet shop full of customers wanting to pick up the

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25. For the exile and resettlement of the Doukhobors and other sectarians in Transcaucasia see: Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

merchandise and take it outside to examine in daylight, the wary and distrustful Armenian shopkeeper was doing his utmost to discourage them and keep his stock secure. Into the shop, threading his way through the crowd, came a tall figure, who went straight to the counter, selected several carpets of different size and value, put them on his shoulder, grunted something to the shopkeeper, and began to walk out of the shop. The other customers were astounded and turned angrily on the shopkeeper: why did he not trust them to pick up and examine the carpets, but let some peasant, without a word or payment, walk off with a whole heap of goods? The Armenian listened calmly and replied, 'he is a Doukhobor', and then continued to shout and bustle about to ensure that no one else made off with any carpets. For Khilkov, the outstanding trust shown by the local Armenian merchant towards a Russian peasant sectarian, particularly in a time of war, must be indicative of some extremely remarkable qualities among the Doukhobors.<sup>26</sup>

Opportunity to learn more about them came after the war when he was quartered for a time in Troitskoe, one of the Doukhobor villages of Akhalkalaxskii district. Now he was able to observe at first hand how they lived and his first impressions were very favourable. He writes: 'I was struck by their wealth, stature, beauty, and the absence of subjection and servility in their faces'. One day as he sat in the home of one of the Doukhobors they observed an officer striking a Cossack in the street. This provoked a question from his host.

He turned to me and asked if I believed in icons. I replied that I did.

Why?

Because they bear the image of God, I said.

And may one strike an icon?, asked the Doukhobor.

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26. Bonch-Bruevich, 'Pamiati D. A. Khilkova'.

I said that it was not permitted.

And how was man created? he continued.

I said that it was in the image of God.

Then he said:

How then is it permitted to strike the living image of God - just as that officer has beaten the Cossack, - but not strike an image on a board? Why?

Having no answer, I began to argue that he did not understand anything. The Doukhobor was silent. When I had finished, he did not begin to answer my arguments, but asked

Have you read the Gospel?

I replied that I had read and still read it.

Then he said:

Read it you may and still be reading it, but I see that you do not understand it, read it again.<sup>27</sup>

That winter Dmitrii Aleksandrovich read the Gospel and at the same time sought to learn more about the teachings of the Doukhobors and Molokans. Before long he came to the conclusion that they were closer to the Gospel than the Orthodox. In addition to seeking out the very limited available literature, written almost exclusively from an Orthodox standpoint, he began to write down their teaching for himself. Some years later this was to form the basis of his '*Uchenie dukhovnykh khristian*' [Teaching of the Spiritual Christians], compiled as a summary of their teaching in the mid-1880s and circulated widely in manuscript. This, according to Bonch-Bruевич, was the only correct information at that time about these sectarians written down impartially by a secular person. For Dmitrii Aleksandrovich it was the first step of his

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27. *Zapiski*, 89.

journey away from the Orthodox Church into spiritual Christianity, and from the Establishment into dissent.

In spring 1878 his regiment moved into the city of Erzerum, which had been ceded to Russia at San Stefano. Their stay, however, was short lived - the Congress of Berlin in July returned the city to the Turks. The following autumn the Kuban Cossacks were assigned the task of guarding the newly established frontier. Here Khilkov was to spend more than a year as lieutenant in charge of a *soten'*, a squadron of one hundred Cossacks, guarding seventy versts of the frontier. In the summer months they lived in the mountains along the frontier, but in winter were quartered in the small town of Kagyzman. Dmitrii was billeted with a Turkish family, with whom he soon became friendly and who taught him their language.

For administrative purposes the newly acquired territory was divided into districts (*uezdy*) under the authority of a district commander (*uezdnyi nachal'nik*), an office equivalent to that of district police officer (*ispravnik*) in the Russian provinces. From his Turkish hosts Khilkov learnt of abuses by Russian officials against the local Muslim population, particularly the Turks. In a neighbouring district the *nachal'nik*, Karagezov, was especially notorious. He expelled Turks from their homes, pulled down their houses and sold the timber to the government. On another occasion he rounded up, with the help of Cossacks, the wealthiest Turks in the district and kept them until they paid to be released. The use of Cossacks to support these abuses greatly disturbed Khilkov, particularly when the Russian officers permitted them all kinds of excess in return for protection. Such was the hostility of the native Muslims in Kagyzman district, that the *nachal'nik*, Drachev, often demanded Cossacks to escort his officials to the villages and Kurdish settlements. During Khilkov's first

winter there eighteen members of his regiment, including a colonel, were murdered. Even in Kagyzman itself Russian soldiers were often found dead among the high walled alleyways.

Untypically, it seems, Khilkov and his men were respected by the local population. One incident in particular served to raise their esteem. On this occasion Drachev had demanded an escort of fifty men to accompany one of his officials to a Kurdish encampment. Knowing the proud and fierce nature of the Kurds, and fearing bloodshed, Khilkov set off after them. On reaching the camp he ordered the Cossacks not to mention his arrival. He discovered from the Kurds that the district commander was demanding taxes from them, which had already been paid twice over, once to the Turks and once to the Russians. Khilkov then confronted the official and declared his intention to return to Drachev and explain the situation. Before leaving he commanded the Cossacks to use no violence. As he reached Kagyzman, he found to his surprise that the Cossacks were not far behind. It appeared that as soon as he had left the Kurds, the Russian official had ordered the Cossacks to catch and slaughter some rams. When they refused the furious Russian began to curse Khilkov. The Cossacks immediately mounted and left, leaving the unfortunate official at the mercy of the Kurds, from whom he barely escaped with his life.<sup>28</sup>

For his intervention Khilkov expected some disciplinary action. The Kurds, however, had spoken the truth and the district commander, Drachev, was afraid to make a complaint. Among the Muslims Khilkov's integrity and justice marked him out from the rest of his compatriots. They found it hard to believe he was a Christian, and some were convinced that he was not Russian but Ossetian, and a covert Muslim. Despite the general esteem in which he was held by people, officers and men - his

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28. 'Kavkazkii geroi', *Letuchii listok*, 5 (30 April 1894), 2.

squadron was reckoned to be one of the best in the Caucasus - Dmitrii Aleksandrovich was becoming more and more disillusioned with military service. His duties were not onerous and an abundance of free time gave him opportunity to read and reflect. The role of the military in the Caucasus following the war revealed the army in a new, disturbing, light, not as defender and protector, but as oppressor.

Before long the Russian regime became unbearable for many of the Turks and they decided to cross the frontier into the Alashket valley, inviting Khilkov to join them. At the time he gave their offer some serious consideration, but more and more his thoughts were on his own village of Pavlovki in Kharkov province. In 1880 he finally resolved to resign his commission and return home, intending to devote himself to the land and to improving the condition of the peasants.<sup>29</sup> On 24 June 1880 he left the army for 'domestic reasons' and returned to Pavlovki.

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29. *Zapiski*, 92.