

# RUSSIAN DOCTORS AND NURSES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

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## **Russiese medici en verpleegsters in die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog**

Gedurende die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog (Anglo-Boereoorlog) het die Boeresaaik 'n oorweldigende simpatieke reaksie in Rusland geniet, sodat dit geen verrassing is dat voldoende geld ingesamel is om twee mediese afdelings van Rusland na Suid-Afrika te stuur ten einde die Boere by te staan nie. Die Russies Rooikruis Afdeling het siekes en gewondes in Natal en die Transvaal behandel. Die Nederlands-Russiese Ambulans het hoofsaaklik in die Vrystaat gewerk. Russiese medici het honderde en honderde gewonde Boere behandel en hul bitterheid en die verskrikking van terugval en nederlaag ervaar — en in sommige gevalle ook krygsgevangenskap. Die meeste Russiese dokters en verpleegsters het Suid-Afrika teen Augustus 1900 verlaat, maar een dokter het by die Boeremagte gebly tot aan die einde van die oorlog. Hierdie soort bystand kon uiteraard nie die verloop van die oorlog verander nie, maar dit was 'n belangrike teken van die morele ondersteuning vir en internasionale solidariteit met die Boere.

In hul herinneringskrifte, dagboeke en artikels het die dokters en verpleegsters die Russiese lesers van hul ervarings in Suid-Afrika en van hul indrukke van die Boere en van die oorlog vertel. Hierdie artikel deur twee Russiese outeurs is gebaseer op hierdie stof, waarvan die meeste aan historici van die oorlog onbekend is.

During the South African War (Anglo-Boer War) the Boer cause met an overwhelmingly sympathetic response in Russia, so it is not too surprising that enough money was raised to send two medical detachments from Russia to South Africa to assist the Boers. The Russian Red Cross Detachment treated the sick and the wounded in Natal and in the Transvaal. The Russo-Dutch Ambulance worked mostly in the Orange Free State. Russian doctors treated hundreds and hundreds of wounded Boers, sharing with their army

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the bitterness and horror of retreat, defeat and sometimes even imprisonment. The majority of the Russian doctors and nurses left South Africa by August 1900 but one doctor stayed on with the Boer forces until the very end of the war. This assistance could not, of course, change the course of the war but was important as a sign of moral support and international solidarity with the Boers.

In their memoirs, diaries and articles these doctors and nurses told the Russian readers about their experiences in South Africa and of their impressions of the Boers and of the war. This article by two Russian authors is based on these sources, many of which were previously unknown to historians of the war.

"Please, convey the gratitude of my Government to the Head of the Russian Red Cross for their fine work."

President Kruger's letter  
to Dr. Leyds

In the very first days of the South African War the Russian Red Cross, one of the few organisations in Russia that enjoyed the support of both the government and the public, offered its services to both sets of combatants. This was not an easy decision: when the matter was discussed by the Board several members had reservations about offering assistance to Britain, for during the Russo-Turkish War the British Red Cross had not offered its assistance to the Russians.<sup>1</sup> Good will — or the fear to irritate Britain — prevailed but the British Government rejected the proposal. On the other hand, Dr. Willem Leyds, the Ambassador of the Transvaal in Europe, expressed deep gratitude on behalf of his government which accepted the offer right away.<sup>2</sup>

### The Red Cross Detachment

The recruitment of medical staff and preparations for the expedition began immediately. Volunteers applied by the hundred, a striking fact when one considers how difficult and dangerous such work was likely to be in a hot climate far away. The Red Cross selected the most experienced and professionally most appropriate people.

Nikolai Ivanovich Kuskov, a doctor of twenty five years' experience, the Main Physician of the St. Petersburg Mariinskaia Hospital and Associate Professor of the Military Medical Academy, was appointed head of the Detachment. There were five other doctors in the Detachment. Three of them, Doctor Sergei Yakovlevich Chistovich, a surgeon, Vasily Ivanovich Davydov and a military doctor, Alexander Karlovich Eberhardt, held the degree of Doctor of Medicine while the other two, Doctors Anton Iosifovich Sadovsky and Otton Karlovich Golbek, were very experienced surgeons. All were senior, even distinguished

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Gosudarstvenny Voenno-istorichesky Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of Military History of the Russian Federation). Fund 1265, file 1393, Document No. 1.

2. *Novoie vremia*, 2 November (21 October) 1899; *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta*, hereafter referred to as *Vestnik ROKK*, No. 47, 1889.

people, and Chistovich and Sadovsky were descendants of well known medical families.<sup>3</sup> Four medical assistants, nine nurses, twenty hospital attendants and two administrative-economic executives made up the rest of the staff complement. Captain Alexei Potapov was attached to the Red Cross Detachment by the War Ministry as administrative secretary.

Preparations for the expedition were made easier by the fact that the Red Cross had some experience of work in Africa. In 1896 during the Italo-Ethiopian War it sent its medical detachment to Addis-Ababa. On the orders of Emperor Menelik II the street where the tents of the big Russian hospital were set up was named the Russian street — a name it still bears in spite of all the vicissitudes of Ethiopian history.

The Red Cross Detachment left St. Petersburg in December 1899, sailed from Odessa to Lourenço Marques where it disembarked, arriving in Pretoria on 13 (26) January 1900. The next day the entire staff was received by President Kruger who expressed his gratitude and wished the team all success.

At first the Russian doctors were under the impression that the Boers did not actually need their assistance, for medical detachments from several countries were already on the scene, and, at the outset of the war, at least, the Boers did not suffer particularly severe casualties. Kuskov wrote to St. Petersburg: "There seem to be more nurses in Pretoria than the sick and wounded."<sup>4</sup> At the height of the fighting this situation changed drastically.

From February till May 1900 the Detachment worked in Natal. At the beginning of February the Russians set off for Ladysmith, where severe fighting was going on. The main hospital for 60-70 beds was opened in Newcastle, the second, a smaller one, in Volksrust. At the end of March a third hospital was opened in Glencoe.

The Russian doctors treated not only the war wounded, but civilians too. Sadovsky wrote that sometimes the Boers could travel for 6-7 days to seek their advice. They "set up their tents in the square in front of the hospital, and came in whole families."<sup>5</sup> Chistovich echoed him: "Having heard about several patients who had recovered after our treatment and thus having been reassured about our medical qualifications, the local inhabitants and even the farmers from distant areas of the neighbouring districts, as well as burgers from the commandos, began to get hospitalised and treated at our out-patients department so willingly that we in Volksrust often had to refuse admission to the hospital because of the lack of beds."<sup>6</sup>

From February till April more than 600 patients were treated in these three hospitals; more than 5 000 received treatment in their out-patients departments; and 120 operations were performed. Kuskov wrote: "the hospital is overcrowded and more and more patients are being brought to us. During the night shifts there is not even a minute to sit down for rest, we are up and about all the time ..."<sup>7</sup>

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3. *Vestnik ROKK*, 27 November 1899, No. 48, p. 541; *Rossiiskiy meditsynskiy spisok, izdanniy meditsynskim departamentom ministerstva vnutrennykh del na 1899 god* (Russian Medical List for 1899 published by the Medical Department of the Ministry for Home Affairs), St. Petersburg, 1899.
  4. *Vestnik ROKK*, 1900, No. 12, p. 93.
  5. Anton I, Sadovsky, *Vospominaniia o Transvaale i putievyye vpechatleniia, Chitano v Gelsingforskom voennom sobranii* (Memoirs of the Transvaal and Impressions of Travel there. Presented to the Helsingfors Military Society); *Voienno-meditsynskiy zhurnal*, St. Petersburg, May 1902, p. 1519.
  6. Sergei Ya. Chistovich, *Meditsynskaia pomoshch v Tranvaale. Doklad, chitanny na torzhestvennom zasedanii v pamiat N.I. Pirogova 23 noiabria 1900 g.* - *Otdelnyy ottisk* (Medical Aid in the Transvaal, Paper presented at the meeting in commemoration of N.I. Pirogov on 23 November 1900 - Reprint); *Bolnichnaia gazeta Botkina*, St. Petersburg, M. Stasiulevitch 1901, p. 10.
  7. *Vestnik ROKK*, 1900, No. 27, p. 209.

With the retreat of the Boers, the hospitals were relocated. The Newcastle hospital was moved to Pretoria where it continued its work until the end of May. Then, several days before the city was occupied by the British, the Russians retreated with the main force of the Boers to Waterval-Boven, a town on the railroad between Pretoria and Lourenço Marques. The Volksrust group attempted to retreat to Pretoria on 29 May, but was cut off from it by the British troops. After a very difficult march it finally reached Waterval-Boven by Boer wagons. The Glencoe group left under British artillery fire. It moved with the Boer rearguard and reopened its hospital in Charlestown. All three groups were finally reunited in Machadodorp. There the Russian doctors and nurses worked on a hospital train and organised expeditions to the battlefields to assist the wounded.

At the beginning of July 1900 Sadovsky led the Russian flying field ambulance to the front line where the unit moved around on horseback. Louis Botha attached the unit to General Ben Viljoen's commando, with which it stayed from 8 July until 12 August, treating 328 sick and wounded. On 10 August the group was ordered by the Russian authorities to return home together with all the rest medical staff. "The recall was a total surprise to us. It happened at the time, when the unit was doing the neediest and most useful work", wrote Sadovsky.<sup>8</sup>

Chistovich also regretted the unexpected and untimely termination of his service. "The further the British advanced", he wrote, "the more split up the Boer detachments became, the more shortages they experienced at the front line, and the more they felt the lack of hospitals and dispensaries. To meet the demand two small ambulances from our Russian detachment were sent to the nearest front line and a dispensary opened at a nearby station. Our hospital, which at that time was the closest to the front line, was extended as much as possible. And at such a moment out of the blue we received orders to return to Russia, leaving everything. Not only were we taken unawares, but so was the Transvaal Government. Apart from our detachment on the line of the Boers' further retreat there were only three doctors and two hospitals already full of patients. The Government was put in a very difficult situation, when in the three days left before our departure it had to find substitutes for us who could take over the ambulances and the hospital full of sick and wounded, etc."<sup>9</sup>

However, the authorities in St. Petersburg had decided against allowing the Russian medical staff to work in the conditions of a guerrilla war. On 14 August the detachment left South Africa.<sup>10</sup> In six and a half months it had treated 1 090 sick and wounded in its hospitals and 5 716 outpatients.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Russo-Dutch Ambulance

Another medical detachment sent from Russia to assist the Boers was the Russo-Dutch Ambulance. The funds for the equipment and staff and for the expedition itself were raised in Russia by the initiative of Pastor Hendrik Gillot, Minister of the Dutch community of St. Petersburg. His three appeals to the Russian public were such a success that by the end of December 1899 the enormous sum of about 100 000 roubles had been collected. As a result

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A.I. Sadovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 1532.

9. S. Ya. Chistovich, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

10. *Vestnik ROKK*. 1901, No. 1, p. 3. See also *Inostranny kalendar Krasnogo Kresta na 1901 god (The Red Cross Foreign Calendar for 1901)*, St. Petersburg, 1901.

*Vestnik ROKK*, 1900, No. 52, p. 449; No. 19, p. 227.



1. The Russian Ambulance at Newcastle



2. The Russian Hospital in Kroonstad

the Russo-Dutch Ambulance was better equipped than any other medical detachment to arrive in the Transvaal.

There were four Russian doctors in the detachment: Vladimir Alexandrovich Kukharenko, Karl Gustavovich von Rennenkampf, Teodor Teodorovich Weber and Leo Wilgelmovich Borhaupt. Four nurses were attached to the hospital, the most experienced of them, Josephine Yezhevskaya, having begun her career two decades earlier during the Russo-Turkish War.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1900 the Russian staff arrived in Naples, where they were joined by the Dutch staff — three doctors and five nurses. One of the Dutch doctors, Evert Cornelius van Leersum, became head of the whole team. From Naples the expedition sailed to Lourenço Marques on board the German ship *Kanzler*. They reached Pretoria on 3 (16) February 1900, receiving a great welcome and meeting with President Kruger, just as the Russian Detachment had before them.

The Russo-Dutch Ambulance began to operate in the Republic of the Orange Free State near Modder River. With the retreat of the Boers it moved to Kroonstad and set up a hospital there with 106 beds. Part of the Detachment, with Dr. Kukharenko at its head, worked in Vereeniging, but by the end of March it too moved to Kroonstad. In March and April alone the Kroonstad hospital treated 800 sick and wounded. Dr. Weber's group worked at Fourteen Streams for a month and a half.

The further advance of the British troops made the work of the Russo-Dutch Ambulance very difficult and at the end of May it too left South Africa, except Dr. Kukharenko and his group who were taken prisoner by the British when the latter occupied Kroonstad. The British asked Kukharenko's group to treat their wounded and sick, who were mostly suffering from typhoid. In the first evening alone the hospital admitted 215 patients. Kukharenko worked with the British for three weeks and his staff even longer, until 1 July. Before leaving Cape Town for St. Petersburg Kukharenko sent a letter to Moscow:

"The British suffered from a great shortage of medical personnel...", he wrote. "In Kroonstadt, for example, where they had some sixty thousand men, there were only three British doctors and altogether we had about a thousand patients... The sick were lying on the bare floor and there were neither medicines nor lower rank medical personnel. There could be no question of proper medical treatment and men died like flies. Among the British there raged a particularly severe and highly infectious strain of typhoid which we had not found among the Boers. The soldiers had been immunised against this typhoid but without effect... The hospitals were overflowing and the less severe cases were removed to the south, to Bloemfontein by the first available trains. The mortality rate was enormous. Every day dozens died and there were many deaths in our hospital too."

The Commander of the British troops, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, twice visited the hospital where the Russians worked, on one occasion shaking hands with all the doctors and nurses. "I am very grateful", he said, "for the effort you are making and the trouble you are going to on behalf of the sick and wounded British officers and men." Kukharenko was very appreciative of the attitude of the British. "I consider it my duty", he wrote, "to observe that

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12. *Novoie vremia*, 29 November (11 December) 1899.

the British always treated me, an enemy military doctor, with remarkable courtesy and consideration, and I am taking with me the best memories of the time I spent among them."<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The last doctor

One doctor who came to South Africa with the Russo-Dutch Ambulance stayed with the Boers until the end of the war. Karl Gustav von Rennenkampf, or Karl Gustavovich, as he was called in the Russian manner, was a German from Reval (now Tallin), the capital of Estonia which at that time was part of the Russian Empire.

Rennenkampf — who was 29 when he came to South Africa<sup>14</sup> — was not only a good doctor but clearly also an extremely good organiser and a man of real humanity. His Russian colleagues could not speak too highly of him, stressing his resourcefulness and his ability to find a way out in complicated circumstances. Nurse Sofia Iziedinova often mentioned him in her memoirs, always with a praise. She refers, for example, to "Dr. Von Rennenkampf, as usual our saviour in difficult situations" and "our real saviour turned out yet again to be Dr. Von Rennenkampf."<sup>15</sup>

Iziedinova also stressed Rennenkampf's special kindness to his black patients. "Doctor Von Rennenkampf also undertook the care of sick blacks who, in accordance with local custom, were not accommodated in the hospital (our Dutch doctors would never have permitted it), but were put in a tent in somewhat unsightly conditions and without beds. Doctor Von Rennenkampf asked me to carry out his prescription for the black patients and together we managed to create more humane conditions for them. He got hold of some blankets and I improvised pillows out of anything I could find and gave them the necessary plates and cutlery."<sup>16</sup>

From June 1900, after the Russo-Dutch Ambulance had left South Africa, Rennenkampf, who had decided to stay on, was attached to the troops of General Koos de la Rey, Assistant Commandant-General of the Transvaal. His troops fought in the Western Transvaal until the very end of the war and Rennenkampf stayed with them throughout that period. On 16 December 1901 De La Rey wrote to President Kruger: "At present all the doctors have left us. In all the territory under my control there is only one doctor, Rennenkampf, a Russian, who is infinitely devoted to us and has done a lot for us."<sup>17</sup>

Rennenkampf set up a hospital in the western part of the Western Transvaal, near Lichtenburg. The hospital had only twelve proper beds — the rest of the patients, as well as Rennenkampf himself and his aides, had to sleep on bare wooden boards. All the sheets and pillow-cases had been cut up for bandages, so sacks, stuffed with grass, were used as

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13. Letter from Doctor V.A. Kukharenko, Cape Town, 5 June 1900, *Moskovskiiye vedomosti*, 16 August 1900.
  14. *Rossiiskiy meditsynskiy spisok na 1899 god (Russian Medical Registrar for 1899)*, St. Petersburg, 1902, p. 94.
  5. Sophie Iziedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister*, Johannesburg, Perskor Publishers, 1977, p. 67, 77. We quote the South African translation of the book.
  16. S. Iziedinova, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
  17. *Sbornik materialov po anglo-burskoi voine v Yuzhoi Afrike 1899-1902 (Collected materials on the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa, 1899-1902)*, Military Academic Committee of the Main Staff, St. Petersburg, Vol. 20, 1902, p. 94.



Dr. Karl Gustav von Rennenkampf



pillows. Rennenkampf's aides consisted of a Lithuanian, who successfully acted as a medical attendant, a Dutchman, and three or four black servants. In addition the Boers who brought the wounded to the hospital often stayed on to help but they were, of course, medically unskilled. In practise everything depended on Rennenkampf. There were no women in the hospital.

Often, Rennenkampf went to the battlefields to help to bring the wounded to the hospital — a dangerous stratagem since British troops were everywhere around. The doctor had to find roundabout routes, hiding out in the dry bush and spending nights in deserted or ruined farms. Several times the British shot at his hospital cart.

The British seem to have understood what a redoubtable force Rennenkampf was. At the end of the war his hospital was captured and completely destroyed — even the beds were burnt. Rennenkampf lost all his equipment, medicines and clothes. After the war De la Rey wrote out an indignant statement about this appalling breach of military convention and gave it to Kitchener in person. Kitchener promised that the goods would be returned, but this was never done.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. The doctors' view of the war

There is much more information both about and from the Russian doctors and nurses who assisted the Boers than about the Russian military volunteers who fought for the Boers. Every issue of the Russian Red Cross society periodical, *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta*, published information about the Russian medical detachments in South Africa and several articles about the Russian hospitals appeared in other periodicals, Maximov's article among them.<sup>19</sup> The doctors and nurses themselves published far more about their South African professional experience and adventures than the volunteers. The main reason for this must be the fact that they had come to South Africa on an official mission and thus their activities there did not in any way contravene international law. Moreover, the doctors wanted to share with their colleagues the professional experience acquired in South Africa. They gave lectures and presented papers about the treatment of wounds inflicted by newly developed weapons, about cases of diseases which were either rare or non-existent in Russia, and about the effects of a different climate on familiar diseases.

Thus Kuskov<sup>20</sup> and Eberhardt<sup>21</sup> published detailed medical reports; Kukhareenko's memoirs appeared in the newspaper, *Moskovskii Vedomosti*;<sup>22</sup> Weber published an article in the *Novoie Vremia*;<sup>23</sup> Potapov published his travel notes;<sup>24</sup> the South African letters of

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18. K. von Rennenkampf, Vom Ausgange des Burenkrieges, *Revaler Beobachter*, Nos. 182, 184, 186 - 15(28) August, 17(30) August, 20 August (2 September), 1902.

19. *Moskovskii vedomosti*, 3 December, 1899

20. [Nikolai I. Kuskov], *Otriad Rossiiskogo obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta v Yuzhno-Afrikanskoj Republike Transvaal v 1901 g. Otchet upolnomochennogo obshchestva N.I. Kuskova (Detachment of the Russian Red Cross Society in the South African Republic of Transvaal. Report by the Representative of the Society N.I. Kuskov)*, St. Petersburg, 1901.

21. Alexander K. Eberhardt, O komandirovke na teatr voennykh deistvy v Transvaale (Concerning the Mission to the Theatre of War in the Transvaal), *Voiенno-meditsynsky zhurnal*. November 1901. The first half of Eberhardt's report has been translated into English and published in South Africa in 1977: *The Russian Red Cross in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*. The Report by a Russian Doctor, translated by C. Moody, *Historia*, September, 1977, No. 2.

22. *Moskovskii vedomosti* 1900, Nos. 22, 65, 73, 86, 102.

23. *Novoie vremia*, 6 July 1900.

Dr. Van Leersum, the Head of the Russo-Dutch Ambulance, were translated and published in Russian;<sup>25</sup> and Rennenkampf who did more for the Boers than any other doctor from Russia, published his memoirs in German in the Estonian newspaper, *Revaler Beobachter*.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the doctors who wrote mainly on medical subjects, the nurses shared their general impressions with their readers. Two nurses published their memoirs, Olga Baumgarten<sup>27</sup> from the Russian Red Cross Detachment, and Sofia Iziedinova from the Russo-Dutch Ambulance. Yezhevskaja's letters were published in the *Novoie Vremia*,<sup>28</sup> while Iziedinova's book, the most detailed of all Russian memoirs about the South African War, was translated into English and published in South Africa three quarters of a century later.<sup>29</sup>

As far as we know no Russian materials, with the exception of Iziedinova's memoirs and a part of Eberhardt's report, have been studied or used by historians of the war. Even Rennenkampf's memoirs in German did not attract their attention, perhaps because of the fact that the circulation of the *Revaler Beobachter* was very small and few people outside Estonia knew about it. Yet there is material of real interest in these publications.

Eberhardt gives the most detailed list of diseases which the Russian doctors had to treat and the type of surgical operations that they had to perform, and even furnishes descriptions of such details as the patients' staple diet in the Russian hospitals. Sadovsky and Chistovich (of whom the latter became famous in Russian medical circles later on) wrote not only about medical problems but about the conditions of medical service in the Transvaal generally. Neither was much impressed with the medical service itself but rather they were struck by the Transvaal's preparedness for war when it came to supplies of medicines and medical equipment.

"Different bandages, all kinds and types of splints, stretchers, wheeled stretchers, everything was in abundance; we were supplied with everything whenever the need arose", wrote Chistovich. "The medicines were stocked ready to use, either in the form of tinctures, extracts, powders and ointments, or pills or tablets. The latter were stocked in huge quantities, were of excellent quality, and were very convenient to use. Drug containers, bottles, gallipots — all these were in abundance, all were supplied to us at first request. Finally, we received a whole consignment of various medical equipment, from medicines and bandages to underwear, clothes, shoes, and kitchen equipment. The latter came from military hospital stock, which was received by the Transvaal from France at the beginning of the war."

However, Chistovich noted that "the quality of these French medicines and bandages was much worse than of those stocked by the Transvaal Government", and that the hospital "used them only in dire need". The doctor wrote that "both the hospitals and the majority of the railway stations were supplied as much as possible with different transportation means,

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24. *Soobshcheniie g. Potapova, administrativnogo sekretaria russkogo ortiada Krasnogo kresta, otpravlennoho na teatr voiennykh dejstvy v Yuzhnoi Afrike (Report by Mr. Potapov, Administrative secretary of the Russian Red Cross detachment, sent to the theatre of war in South Africa)*, n.p., n.d.
  25. *Moskovskiiie vedomosti*, Nos. 102, 108, 113.
  26. K. von Rennenkampf, *op. cit.*
  27. O. Baumgarten, *Vospominaniia o Transvaale sestry miloserdiia obshchiny Sv. Georgiia, 1899-1900 (Memoirs of the Transvaal by a Nurse of the Community of St. George, 1899-1900)*. St. Petersburg, State Printers, 1901.
  28. *Novoie vremia*, 9, 22 May, 2 June, 1900.
  29. S. Iziedinova, *op. cit.*

the former with carriages, horses and mules, the latter with an adequate quantity of different stretchers, all for transporting the sick and the wounded from the stations to hospitals and back." Finally, Chistovich remarked: "Little needs to be added about the food, clothes, shoes, lighting materials, fuel, etc.: everything was supplied in abundance and was of a fine, even an excellent quality. In this respect everything was organised so well that it could serve as a model for the supplies of any regular army at a time of war."<sup>30</sup>

Chistovich knew what he was talking about. He was directly involved with the supply of medicine and equipment for the Red Cross Detachment throughout the time that it was in South Africa and he had similar responsibilities for transportation. "During almost all the second period of the war", Chistovich noted somewhat dolefully, "from the occupation of Pretoria till the retreat to Dalmanutha I, all on my own, was landed with the task of supervising the transportation of patients by the only railway to Delagoa Bay which was still in the hands of the Boers."<sup>31</sup>

Sadovsky concurred about the plenitude of medical supplies. "Everything necessary for the accommodation and treatment of our patients was supplied from Pretoria immediately, at first telegram request [...] There was no lack of either the medicines or bandages."<sup>32</sup> Of course, this doctors' paradise came to an end as soon as the war entered its guerrilla stage.

Sadovsky noted the very high percentage of recoveries in the Russian hospitals. He did not, however, attribute this phenomenon exclusively to the good quality of the medical care there but modestly argued that the recovery rate "can be explained by the fact that the Boers are a very healthy and strong nation [...], and that the food during all the war was excellent. The commandos always had fresh meat [...]."<sup>33</sup>

Chistovich also thought that the Boers were a very healthy people. "Tuberculosis is very rare", he wrote. "Syphilis and other venereal diseases are almost non-existent; hereditary constitutional forms are almost impossible to come across; even malignant tumours exist only as a great rarity. The majority of the diseases in summer are malaria and in some areas, enteric fever, and in winter rheumatic diseases and different diseases of respiratory organs. If we add to this a significant number of chronic diseases of the digestive canal and, very commonly among the female population, diseases of the genitals resulting from numerous pregnancies and deliveries without any medical care, the list of the diseases would be almost complete."<sup>34</sup>

Both doctors wrote about the Boers with great sympathy and warmth. "Parting with the Transvaal and the Boers I can ascribe only the best characteristics to this nation", wrote Sadovsky.<sup>35</sup> Rennenkampf, too, noted the humanity of the Boers who, having imprisoned British soldiers, would often let them go after confiscating their horses and weapons, as opposed to the British whom the doctor constantly accused of bad treatment of the wounded.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, several Russian doctors reflected on the cruel attitude of the Boers towards their black workers. Sadovsky, who praised the Boers so highly, at the same time noted that "it

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30. S. Ya. Chistovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.

31. S. Ya. Chistovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

32. A.I. Sadovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 1513.

33. A.I. Sadovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 1516.

34. S. Ya. Chistovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

35. A.I. Sadovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 1532.

36. K. von Rennenkampf, *op. cit.*

is a Kaffir who looks after the cattle, it is a Kaffir who cooks the food, and the washing is done, and the babies are nursed by the very same Kaffir [...] The Boers treat the Kaffirs very severely. The Kaffirs are not allowed to sleep in the house but have to huddle in the yard. They are seldom given meat and have to survive on pap, a thick porridge cooked from a coarsely pounded maize. When we had a wounded Kaffir at our hospital we had to put him in a shed for want of a separate lodging."

Russian doctors and nurses met many Africans. Sadovsky wrote: "We saw a lot of Kaffirs", wrote Sadovsky, "and made close acquaintance with them in Volksrust because all our servants were black and they were often replaced; some returned home, and the landdrost sent others to replace them. Moreover, we often visited their kraals." The Russian doctors generally regarded the Africans they met as "kind, naive, extremely effusive and, as far as it was possible to judge, very able" but, on the other hand, lazy. Such characterisations are so imbued with the spirit of the epoch that the reader is often left with the impression that they did not result from any personal encounters but merely reflected a widely spread and stereotypical view.<sup>37</sup>

Medical detachments, Russian or otherwise, did not and could not make any change to the course of war, but they did help to ease human suffering and at some stage to create the impression of international solidarity with the Boer cause. This was, no doubt, psychologically important for the Boers and they appreciated the doctors' efforts. In his 1900 letter to Dr. Leyds President Kruger wrote: "Please, convey the gratitude of my Government to the Head of the Russian Red Cross for their fine work."<sup>38</sup> Later, at the end of 1901, Kruger wrote a letter to Dowager Empress Maria Fiodorovna in her capacity of patron of the Russian Red Cross Society. In this letter he expressed his gratitude to both the Russian Red Cross hospital and the Russo-Dutch Ambulance.<sup>39</sup>

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37. A.I. Sadovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 1525-1526.

38. Willem J. Leyds, *Derde verzameling* (Correspondentie 1900), Deel I, Biejlagen, Index, N.V. Geuze, Dordrecht, 's-Gravenhage, 1931, p. 255.

39. Elisaveta Kandyba-Foxcroft, *Russia and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, Cum Books, Roodepoort, 1981, Appendix XI, p. 339.