

THE RUSSIAN BOER GENERAL

Apollon Davidson

*Director: Centre for Russian Studies
University of Cape Town
University Private Bag
7700 Rondebosch*

Irina Filatova

*Department of History
University of Durban-Westville
Private Bag 54001
4000 Durban*

Your services to my Fatherland were of extraordinary importance'
from President Kruger's letter to Yevgenij Maximov.

Die Russiese Boere-generaal

Sowat 250 Russiese vrywilligers het aan die Boere se kant aan die Anglo-Boereoorlog deelgeneem. Die mees merkwaardige figuur onder hulle was kolonel Yevgenij Maximov. Hy was 'n afgetrede offisier in die Russiese leer and het na Suid-Afrika gekom toe hy 51 jaar oud was. Die Franse kolonel De Villebois-Mareuil, bevelvoerder van die Europese Legioen, het hom as sy adjunk aangestel. Na Villebois se dood het Maximov bevelvoerder van die Legioen geword - 'n posisie wat hy om verskeie redes nie lank beklee het nie. Nogtans was hy vir 'n wyle bevelvoerder van een van die grootste, bes opgeleide en mees gedissiplineerde buitelandse afdelings in die land. In Mei 1900 is hy tot die rang van veggeneraal bevorder.

As 'n uiters dapper persoon wat deur politieke visie geïnspireer is, het Maximov met verskeie beroemde Boereleiers bevriend geraak en selfs as raadgewer vir die presidente van die Boererepublieke opgetree. Verskeie boeke is al oor Villebois-Mareuil geskryf, maar weinig oor Maximov. Hy word bloot in sommige Suid-Afrikaanse publikasies oor die oorlog vermeld, en in Rusland is hy feitlik vergete. Die outeurs van hierdie artikel het in St. Pietersburg op sy persoonlike argief afgekom. Sy Suid-Afrikaanse dagboek, 'n brief van president Kruger, instruksies van Villebois-Mareuil en ander onbekende dokumente van die Anglo-Boereoorlog maak 'n prominente gedeelte van die argief uit. In hierdie artikel bespreek die outers hulle bevindinge en die gebeure rakende Maximov se deelname aan die Anglo-Boereoorlog.

About 250 Russian volunteers participated in the Anglo-Boer War on the side of the Boers. The most remarkable of them was Colonel Yevgenij Maximov. Maximov, a retired officer of the Russian army, came to South Africa when he was 51 years old. The French Colonel Villebois-Mareuil, Commander of the European Legion, appointed him his deputy. After Villebois' death, Maximov became Commander of the Legion - a position which for various reasons he did not manage to keep. He still remained commander of one of the largest, best trained and disciplined foreign detachments in the country. In May 1900 Maximov was promoted to the position of *veggeneraal*.

A person of immense bravery, inspired by a political vision, Maximov soon became friends with several famous Boer leaders, and even adviser to the presidents of the Boer republics.

Several books have been published about Villebois-Mareuil, but very little about Maximov. He is just mentioned in various South African publications about the war; in Russia he is almost completely forgotten.

The authors found Maximov's personal archive in St. Petersburg. Maximov's South African diary, a letter from President Kruger, the instructions from Villebois-Mareuil and other unknown documents from the Anglo-Boer War constitute a prominent part of the archive. In this article the authors discuss their findings and the events around Maximov's participation in the South African War.

It is common knowledge among those interested in the history of the Anglo-Boer War that many Russian volunteers came to South Africa to fight for the Boers. How many? The usual answer is 225: the estimate by British and American war correspondents who were witnesses of the events.¹

Russian volunteers were people of different political views, social standing and even nationality (all the Russian speakers were called "Russians" by other nationals, although there were Jews, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and many others among them). Little is known about them. Their generation was swept away by the winds of three Russian revolutions and three wars, the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, and the Russian Civil War. Those who survived the revolutions and wars, had to go through either Stalin's purges or the torments of exile. In their later years they had something more significant to think and write about, than the romantic heroism of their youthful thrust to defend a 'just cause' at the other end of the world.

Lieutenant-Colonel Yevgenij Yakovlevitch Maximov, friend of several famous Boer leaders, adviser to the presidents of the Boer republics, a person of immense bravery, and somebody who might have a secret mission in South Africa, was one of the most remarkable among the Russian volunteers. His fate was particularly fascinating, and in a way particularly sad.

The Deputy Commander

The colonel, in fact, is a man of action, and his manners savour somewhat of the camp. He is a believer in the poetry of war, and says he likes nothing better than to hear the whistling of bullets and the thunder of cannon; and, in fact, when he indulges in recollections of his service with Skobelev, the handsome 'white cuirassier', his face lights up, and he becomes a poet inspired by the noise of war.

...He was brave even to rashness, as all his men told me, while he delighted in relating incidents which showed the indomitable bravery of his Dutch followers. One instance will show that there was no exaggeration on either side. At ..* the colonel ordered his men to attack a position. They hesitated,

1. Quoted in Howard C. Hillegas, *With the Boer forces* (Methuen, 1900), p. 257; *The Times history of war in South Africa, 1899-1902*, vol. VII, p. 89; *Voyna anglichans burami*, Redaktirovano 2-m biuro frantsuzskogo general'nogo shtaba, *Perevods frantsuzskogo* (Sankt-Petersburg, n.d. [1905])(*The war of the British with the Boers*, Edited by the 2nd board of the French General Staff, translation from French (St. Petersburg, n.d., [1905]), p. 65.

thinking the attempt was sure to fail. The colonel, exclaiming 'You'll see I am right', dashed forward, and his men followed him. The colonel was wounded in four places: in the foot, shoulder, ear and temple.

...This fourth wound, on the temple, was by far the most serious, and when he received it, the colonel fell like a log, while his men gathered round him, and opened a sharp fire to protect him. The incident shows the high qualities of the officer as well as those of his men.



Colonel Yevgenij Maximov

This was how a Belgian, Alice Bron, wrote about Maximov. She worked in South Africa from February to May 1900 as a nurse of the ambulance sent out by the Dutch and Belgian Red Cross Association. Alice Bron called herself "colonel Maximoff's sister of charity (his own expression) and sometimes his secretary".² In spite of this characteristic, she was rather a disinterested observer, having no particular reasons either to praise, or to abuse him. She spent only a few days with Maximov, but those days in May 1900 were critical for the Boers and everybody who stood for them, and in such circumstances people get to know one another quickly.

More information and documents about Maximov have come down to us than about any other Russian volunteer. Before the 1917 revolution his short biography was published in the *New Encyclopaedia* by Brockgauz and Efron, the best Russian encyclopaedia ever.³ His name was mentioned in several books about the South African War.

Most important, however, is Maximov's personal archive in the possession of his family in St. Petersburg. This contains many curious documents - a letter from President Kruger, other correspondence, award certificates. Maximov was awarded for his participation in the Serbian war against the Turks in 1875 (he went to Serbia, having left service in the privileged cuirassier regiment) and for the Kahal-Tekin expedition in Central Asia in 1880. The family preserves relics which Maximov brought back from his travels, including his trips to Ethiopia in 1896 and to Central Asia in 1897.

The most valuable document in this archive is a small brown pocket notebook, Maximov's South Africa diary - 138 pages, unfortunately very difficult to read. Maximov wrote his diary for himself and did not watch his handwriting. His notes were scrappy, often consisting of one or two words - hints to remind the author later on of this or that episode. It is difficult and in many cases impossible to understand what these words implied. Maximov's handwriting is generally difficult to read, but it is made worse by the fact that he often wrote while riding, or travelling by train.

The authors were unable to decipher the whole text. Maximov's son, Alexandr Evgenievitch Maximov (1902-1991), helped us. The notes were more or less detailed from the end of February 1900 to the end of March 1900; in other words from the time when Maximov decided to change the pen of a war correspondent (he came to South Africa as a correspondent of the Russian paper *Novoie Vremia* - *New Time*) for the revolver and the sabre, to the moment when he went into action.

27 February, Pretoria.

I am giving way to my old instincts. Today I decided to raise a corps and set off for the fight. In one day I found 18 volunteers, willing to come under my command. Ganetskij, Captain (? - A.D., I.F.) wants to join even as a soldier, I think I'll have two captains there, my aids (Ganetskij and Lieutenant [...]), and four lieutenants, elected by soldiers and approved of by me. I shall try to arm them with sabres and revolvers and begin raids to the flanks and the rear of the enemy. Tomorrow I shall speak with Reitz.

2. Alice Bron, *Diary of a nurse in South Africa being a narrative of experiences in the Boer and English hospital service* (London, 1901), pp. 188-189, 208.

3. *Novyj entsyklopedicheskiy slovar'* (*New Encyclopaedia*), article, "Maksimov Ye. Ya."

28 February.

[...] I think that the Boers will not sustain the big war for more than two months, and will then resort to guerrilla war. Kruger went to Ladysmith, which means that it was bad there. The Boers were beaten in the environs of Colesberg yesterday. Cronje has not been released yet. The English asked for a truce to take away the dead. The Boers agreed in exchange for the English retreat from the left bank of the Modder River. Steyn decided to fight till the end to defend the Orange Republic.

Maximov failed to form his own corps. Another Russian volunteer, Lieutenant Ganetskij, intercepted his initiative and started to form the Russian Detachment. The European Legion was being formed by the French Colonel de Villebois-Mareuil, who had come to South Africa before Maximov. On 23 March Villebois met Maximov and offered him the deputy command of the European Legion. Maximov wrote about this meeting:

Visited Villebois with [...] Short, with grey moustache, wearing imperial [cap - A.D., I.F.]. He was glad and offered me the 2nd Command and the organisation of the detachment. He has 30 Fr[ench] and an unknown number of Dutch.

Villebois and Maximov visited Chief Justice Hertzog together, but otherwise Maximov had little time to speak with Villebois. On that very day, 23 March, Villebois was going to take the field at the head of a large detachment of the Foreign Legion. He wanted to occupy the town of Boshof and to cut the railway between Kimberley and the Cape. In fact he only left on the next evening, but even this extra day left him too little time for anything, except writing instructions for Maximov and several other officers. Later on Maximov gave permission to publish the French original and a Russian translation of those instructions in St. Petersburg. Since it remains unknown outside Russia, we quote the whole text:

Instructions for the formation of the European Legion.

In the absence of General Villebois-Mareuil Colonel Maximov will take over the command and continue with its organisation, on the following lines:

- Hasten to gather the Europeans at Kronstadt while making contact in Pretoria with the Secretary of State Grobler and, if need be, directly with General Louis Botha at Glencoe so as to find out how many men we can count on and by what date.
2. Form the Legion by nationalities into platoons, and then into squadrons. Appoint officers as needed while respecting the ranks already acquired by the leaders of the units already constituted. Make them camp and prevent them from staying at hotels.
3. Place isolated men into units which suit their nationality, or if that is impossible on account of their numbers, into whichever unit are necessary for a tactical grouping.
Conserve the mobile supply depot left here and give out nothing from it. 60 horses were asked for and we have rounded up only 23.
Continue to pursue the acquisition of the remaining number.

5. Besides this mobile depot destined for the raiding cavalry, provide as well as possible for the supply of the Legion and its (outillage), relying on the means of war, leaving as a lower priority a lot of the improvements to accommodation which no longer have a bearing on the general situation.
6. There is only one French Platoon here and half the Dutch contingent. Some Germans are expected with Lieutenant Vrangél, some French with Lieutenant Galopaud. No news of other contingents.
7. In case of retreat during the General's absence, load the wagons, arrange them in a column and get them into the hooflaager where the raiding detachment will always rejoin them and ought to find its wagons.

23 March, Kroonstad
General Villebois".⁴

Villebois did not make a particularly good impression on Maximov. He wrote:

Villebois complains that he has been working 8 days, and couldn't do anything. Clumsy. Fawns on the authorities. Spoke with Hertzog standing. I seated him.

Maximov was definitely irritated by the fact that Villebois gave instructions not only to him, but to other officers as well:

A lover of giving instructions. Did not let me in.

Why did Villebois decide to appoint Maximov as his second in command? There could be several reasons for this. There seems to have been no other officers of Maximov's rank among foreign volunteers. Besides, Maximov made a name for himself as a brilliant rider and an expert shot. Among the Boers such a reputation was not easy to get. Maximov gained it by shooting a springbok at a distance of 800 metres from a moving train (he was travelling from Pretoria to Bloemfontein) and later on by handling a very restive horse. Besides, Villebois was interested in the Russian army and had even studied it. In 1888 a book of his about it, entitled *L'Armée Russe et ses chefs en 1888*, was published in Paris. Perhaps, he wanted to learn more and to use the experience of a Russian officer.

Moreover, Villebois could not be unaware of the fact that this recent Russian arrival had made the most astonishing contacts with the Boer political leaders, suggesting that he was a person of unusual influence. On 4 March Maximov was received by President Steyn. Not only did the interview turn out to be rather lengthy, but after that the Russian revisited Steyn on several occasions. On 13 March he was introduced to President Kruger. Maximov also often met with Abraham Fischer, the second most important person in the Orange Free State Republic, the State Secretary of the Orange Free State Republic Blynnau, the State Secretary of the Transvaal Reitz and General de la Rey. On 17 March he spoke with Louis Botha, and on 22 March he was introduced to Chief Justice Hertzog. From then on he saw

4. A.N. Vinogradskij, *Anglo-burskaia vojna v Iuzhnoj Afrike (The Anglo-Boer war in South Africa)*, vol. II (St. Petersburg, 1902), Supplement no. 13, pp. 263-264.

Hertzog almost daily.

During his first meeting with Steyn, Maximov put to him the idea of appealing to the great continental powers (first of all to Russia) for assistance in order to stop the war. On 6 March, a day after his meeting with Steyn, Maximov wrote in his diary:

My conversation with Steyn had a very serious result. St[eyn] decided to speak with Kr[uger] and to send letters, however, not the way I offered, but rather with the deputation of 5 people with Fischer at the head. Two Burgers from each Republic. First, as I said, to Russia, then to Germany, and last to Paris and the Hague to the Queen of Netherlands. I've approved of this project, but I am afraid that such a big deputation will attract the attention of the British, and [they] may, perhaps, wreck it.

Another Russian volunteer wrote that Maximov put forward this proposal to President Kruger and Steyn at a closed meeting and managed to persuade both.⁵ Maximov's proposal finally evolved into the idea of sending a delegation to Europe, which duly, though belatedly bore fruit in the mission led by Fischer. It was not Maximov's fault that the mission was prepared so slowly and sent so late that by the time it finally arrived in Europe, all possibilities for the continental powers to interfere had been lost.

Why was Maximov so influential? Other Russian volunteers speculated darkly that he had come to South Africa with a secret mission from St. Petersburg.

On 29 March Maximov saw General de la Rey. The next day, wrote Maximov, De la Rey was:

leaving for Brandfort, where he supposes to give a fight on the weekend.
Will send me a telegram, telling me where to go.

The last coherent entry in the notebook was made on Friday, 30 March. At 6 in the morning Maximov was busy training the Dutch detachment of the European Legion.

Hertzog promised 53 horses on Monday [...] Nothing heard of Villebois [...] How dull that we can't move [...] We look forward to the fight. Indeed we can hardly wait for it.⁶

At the battlefields

Villebois intended to be away for a week and to return on 31 March. Maximov did not want to wait. He was longing to be on the battle field already when he spoke with Villebois before the latter departed. This is, perhaps, what Villebois meant, when he gave instructions to one of his aides and wrote in his diary:

I trust he (this aide - A.D., I.F.) will act as a restraining influence on Maximov.⁷

5. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal (Warsaw Military Journal)*, June 1902, p. 559.

6. Ye. Ya. Maximov, *Zapisnaia knizhka 1900 g, (1900 Notebook)*, Manuscript, pp. 2-5, 16, 38-44, 55-56, 61, 68, 71, 80, 92, 94, 98-100, 105.

Roy Macnab, *The French Colonel Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers, 1899-1900* (Oxford, 1975), p. 180.

However, it turned out that Villebois was very impatient himself, perhaps even more than Maximov. He did not prepare his raid well and his movements were not carefully thought through. In the beginning he even lost his way. It was very hot - 38°C - and Villebois felt very bad. Even the notes in his diary became barely intelligible.⁸ His detachment, the best trained part of the European Legion, about 125 men, was beaten by Lord Methuen's troops. On 5 April the detachment was unexpectedly attacked by the British. Villebois was killed. Among those who were taken prisoner, were Lieutenant Nikitin (who had refused to join Ganetskij's Russian detachment), Georgian Prince Bagration Mukhranskij and his friend Count de Breda, commander of the French part of the detachment. Lieutenant Nikitin told the story of this ill-fated raid to the Russian doctors and nurses, with whom he returned home by ship after his imprisonment.⁹

Maximov knew nothing of this and was impatiently waiting for Villebois to return while trying to prepare the European Legion for future battles, introducing regular field training and military discipline. He spared no effort in providing his men with weapons and ammunition, and on 3 April requested 150 carbines and 3 000 cartridges from the Transvaal authorities.¹⁰ Finally, still not having heard from Villebois, Maximov got De la Rey's permission to set off for Brandfort and led the majority of the Legion there. However, the day after their arrival Maximov's position drastically changed.

The Boer authorities received the news of Villebois' death and the fate of his detachment, and President Steyn sent Maximov a telegram, appointing him as commander of the European Legion. But the commanders of several detachments, including the Russian Corps, refused to have Maximov as their commander. Every problem that Villebois had, when he was forming the Legion, resurfaced and worsened.

Maximov tried to defuse the crisis by suggesting that De la Rey appoint his (De la Rey's) brother as commander. This De la Rey did, but his order never came into effect, for the Legion was not a unit of a regular army, but rather a loose collection of volunteer detachments, and the commander of each of them tried hard to preserve their independence.

Maximov remained the commander of only one of these detachments, albeit a big one, the Hollander Corps. Even there he could not avoid problems. Only a small minority in the Corps were professional soldiers. The rest were not used to army discipline and required a great deal of training. Already the first days of training in Brandfort brought complaints and protests against the strictness of the discipline. Maximov accordingly announced his resignation as commander. The troublemakers then apologised and requested Maximov to stay on. Moreover, several individuals of other nationalities showed their appreciation of his leadership by joining his Corps.

Maximov's reputation among the Boers and that of his Corps was high, exactly because it was more disciplined than other volunteer detachments. Besides, Maximov led several raids to rescue Boer families from the farms captured by the British. While this did not result in any significant military advantage, it won Maximov still more respect and gratitude from the Boers.

On 11 April Maximov suggested to the Military Council that an attack should be launched against Plaatz Amerika. The idea was to seize unoccupied hills and to cut the

Roy Macnab, *The French Colonel Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers, 1899-1900* (Oxford, 1975), p. 193.

Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 120.

10. Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Kommandant-Generaal (1888-1900), vol. 0, Ref. CR 3803/00, Part 1.

railway line beyond them. Maximov thought that this would effectively separate the British units operating between Brandfort and Plaatz America.

Sophia Izedinova, a nurse from the Russian medical detachment in South Africa, later wrote:

According to this plan, the Freestaters under General Kolbe and Maximov's Hollander Corps were to mount a surprise attack by night and capture the British outposts on the hills around Plaatz America. On the same night General Philip Botha was to occupy the nearer of the two hills, unmanned by the British, and to move at dawn onto the hill in line with British positions. They would thus be in a position to provide a crossfire to cover the assault on the railway line by Kolbe and Maximov. As a diversion for the British reserves General de la Rey was to simulate an offensive movement in front of their main positions on Tafelkop.¹¹

This carefully worked out plan failed, for the three participants could not coordinate their actions. Maximov and Kolbe did what they were supposed to do, but Philip Botha's troops never moved. Maximov put this down to Botha's dislike of night operations - a new tactic for the Boers.

Maximov's biggest battle took place in the environs of Thaba 'Nchu to the east of Bloemfontein. At the end of April generals Philip Botha and Kolbe with several volunteer detachments decided to reunite General De Wet with the main Boer forces, from whom he was cut off by the British operating between Bloemfontein, Wepener and Thaba 'Nchu. The resulting battle took place on 30 April. The Hollander Corps managed to seize the greater part of Tubakop without large casualties. Of Maximov's men 150 took part in the battle, and only two were killed and five seriously wounded. Unfortunately, one of the wounded was Maximov himself. The dramatic battle of Thaba 'Nchu was described in *The Times history of the war in South Africa*:

As they came over the plateau, they saw Captain Towse's party and bore down upon them with the intention of surrounding them. The whole movement was visible from the English position in the plain below, but the foreigners advanced so steadily and in such good alignment that they were taken to be a party of British soldiers. Captain Towse, who was moving forward at the time, did not see them till they were within hailing distance, when Maximov called upon him to surrender. Hastily getting his men under cover of some stones, Captain Towse answered by a volley at pointblank range; at his point the English gunners below realised the position. Luckily they had the range, and were able to help captain Towse's little band by pouring shrapnel into Colonel Maximov's ranks. The party of thirteen held their ground, answering volley for volley, and though seven of them were killed or wounded, with the assistance of guns they drove their assailants off into the cover of the rocks behind. Maximov was wounded by a shot from Captain Towse, but Captain Towse himself paid dearly for his gallantry and for the VC, which rewarded it, by a bullet which took away the sight of

11. Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 129.

both his eyes.¹²

The award to Towse of a Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria herself naturally brought this incident to the attention of a large international public. At first the British thought that Maximov had been killed - a version reflected in Stuart Cloete's novel *Rags of Glory*.¹³ A painting in the Afrikana Museum in Johannesburg depicts Captain Towse firing at Maximov at point-blank range.

Maximov did not die, but the fate of his now leaderless Hollander Corps was indeed tragic, for the next day the Corps suffered large casualties and the new Commander, Gessing, was killed. In the next important encounter at Vet River, the Hollanders were almost completely wiped out. Only some fifteen or twenty survivors made it to Kroonstad. Maximov was also brought to Kroonstad. It was there that the Belgian nurse, Alice Bron, found him on 12 May, several hours before the British troops entered the town. Alice Bron decided to join Maximov after she found out about Villebois's death. She wrote:

I was told that Colonel Maximov, who had come from Russia to fight for the Boers, had taken over the command of General de Villebois' Foreign Legion; that he wanted a small field ambulance to follow the Legion wherever it went; and that an offer to form such an ambulance had been made to a foreign medical man, but declined. I requested our consul, who knew Colonel Maximov, to write to him on my behalf. The Colonel replied at once through his secretary that I could come, and that I was to make arrangements with a doctor of the Russian ambulance to follow him to the front. The Colonel himself was under treatment at the Russian and Dutch hospital at Kroonstadt for four wounds he had received only a few days before. The Medical Committee approved of my plan, gave me a pass, and authorised me to telegraph to them for any supplies I might require. I obtained my passport, and started at 8 p.m., arriving at Kroonstadt next morning at eleven. I went to the hospital, expecting to find my wounded officer, but he had left for Pretoria!

Alice Bron came to Kroonstad on the eve of its seizure by the British. She expected to find Maximov on a hospital bed, but he was not there. He was trying to go on with his service. She saw him only at six in the evening, because at seven in the morning he rode out and spent the whole day with President Steyn. When he returned to Kroonstad the Boers had already left the town and exploded the bridge. The nurse told Maximov that it was time to leave. She related her argument with him as follows:

He exclaimed - "Never, never have I run away from an enemy".

"It's not running away" I replied; "it's going away. Do you want the English to have the pleasure of taking you prisoner?"

"I don't care. A few resolute men -"

"It is all very well to talk about resolute men", I rejoined, "but you are the only man left in the place. All the others are running away".

At length we decided to go, but the getting off was not so easy. I cannot here related all the annoying, though laughable, incidents that occurred.

12. *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1900*, Vol. IV (London, 1906), pp. 98-99.

13. Stuart Cloete, *Rags of Glory* (London and Glasgow, 1967), p. 352.

About eight o'clock, an hour and a quarter before the English arrived, we started, the colonel on horseback, his secretary, his "boy", and myself in a kind of dog-cart, into which we had thrown an incalculable number of packages.

Soon, when they were already on their way, they saw an immense sheet of flames shoot up towards the clouds on the horizon behind them. This grew and spread out into a furious sea of fire. Kroonstad was burning. Alice Bron's narrative continues:

The Colonel's wounds are causing him great pain, which he cannot hide in spite of his pluck. On we go. The cold is becoming intense. At midnight we sight a camp fire, and ask ourselves the same old question - Boers or English? Maximov, in spite of our remonstrances, rides off to investigate, calling to us to wait for him ...

"Look at the colonel", I continued, "he is going straight for those people. There is no doubt about it, he is as bold as a lion, though he's as obstinate as a mule".

Maximov was lucky. The soldiers around the fire turned out to be the German volunteers. By that time Maximov was completely exhausted and in pain. Soon he could not ride and had to be driven in a cart. Alice Bron wrote that the Boers, whom they met on their way, repeated Maximov's name to keep it in mind, saying that he had fought well. Finally, she brought Maximov to Pretoria. She wrote:

his wounds were slow to heal, and, as I told him after my first inspection of them, proved so severe as to prevent him from taking any further part in the campaign. He was compelled, much against his will, to give up.¹⁴

The glory

Maximov received a hero's welcome in Pretoria. After Thaba 'Nchu *De Volksstem* wrote:

He is a very brave officer, and faced the enemy at 20 paces.¹⁵

According to Izedinova, Mrs. Louis Botha told her:

From my husband I know that your Colonel Maximov is the bravest man in the Transvaal and a gifted leader. You are living in the same hotel as he and will see him today. Please tell him that we all want to be under his command, the bravest of those who are fighting for us.¹⁶

Izedinova wrote that State Secretary Reitz spoke of Maximov very highly as well:

You know, sister that I am not greatly impressed by all these foreigners

Alice Bron, *Diary of a nurse in South Africa being a narrative of experiences in the Boer and English hospital service* (London, 1901), pp. 1162-163, 188-189, 192-193, 196-198, 204, 207-208.

15. *De Volksstem*, 3 May 1900.

16. Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 185.

who come offering us their services, but concerning your countryman, I am happy to say that we were both mistaken in our caution. All our commandos who have come into contact with Colonel Maximov, praise his bravery, his ability to discipline men and the value of his advice. General Louis Botha said that although he is not coward himself and has seen many brave men, he not only never saw, but never imagined anything like the bravery of this Russian colonel. And one of the Dutch who served under him, said that one couldn't but follow him, he is a real leader.

Izedinova related that soon after Maximov's arrival in Pretoria, "six commandants and several hundred burgers from various units proclaimed Maximov a *veggeneraal*, an honour accorded to him alone among all the European volunteers". She considered that Maximov was more honoured by the Boers, than Villebois, who became *veggeneraal* (field, or combat general) by appointment, not by election.¹⁷

It took Maximov some time to realise how bad his wounds really were. In Pretoria he tried to carry on as usual. On 15 May he requested that Pretoria arsenal replace 20 of his detachment's Martini Henry rifles with the more advanced Mauser rifles. Gone were the days when Maximov had to wait for ammunition. His request was fulfilled next day. Besides, Maximov got 3 000 cartridges for the new rifles.¹⁸

Maximov's notice with this request, now housed in the Transvaal Archives, shows that he was still hoping to return to the battlefield. However, it soon became clear to him that he would have to leave, and he finally handed over the command to P. Blignaut, son of the State Secretary of the Orange Free State Republic.

The official ceremony of handing over was held on 22 May 1900 in Hollandia Hotel in Pretoria. *De Volksstem* reported:

... Since Colonel Maximov was prevented by his wounds from reassuming his command it has been decided that Mr. P. Blignaut should be elected *veggeneraal*. This proposal was accepted with acclaim. Then, appreciation was expressed for the services of Colonel Maximov, who in his turn praised the bravery of the European Legion in general and the Hollander Corps in particular. Referring to Mr. Blignaut he singled out his courage and his ability as a tactician. When Colonel Maximov had finished speaking, three cheers were raised.¹⁹

Izedinova wrote (perhaps from Maximov's own words):

The Corps which was handed over by Maximov to Blignaut was not the original Hollander Corps but a body of several hundred not only Dutch but Europeans of various nationalities, predominantly Germans and Frenchmen and even Boers attracted by the Corps' reputation.²⁰

Before his departure Maximov attended the last session of the Transvaal Volksraad.

17. Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 185.

18. TAD, Kommandant-Generaal (1888-1900), vol. 0, Ref. CR 6156/00, Part 1.

19. *De Volksstem*, 23 May 1900.

20. Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 133.

According to Alice Bron two special chairs for guests of honour were brought into the hall. They were occupied by

the Irish publicist and patriot Michael Davitt with his long beard and still young face and the wounded and profusely bandaged General Maximov. Before the entry of President Kruger there occurred a small incident which it gladdens me to be able to record. The chairman, General Lukas Meyer, had already taken his seat, when General Smuts went to him and drew his attention to something in the hall. Then he got up, descended from his elevated seating and approaching General Maximov, publicly thanking him on his own behalf and that of all his comrades, for his services to their country and for the blood he had shed in it defence. Still weak from his wounds, Maximov was confused and, partially rising, murmured something about the insignificance of his services.²¹

Maximov left the Transvaal at the end of May 1900, several days before the fall of Johannesburg and Pretoria. The majority of foreigners were leaving South Africa at this point, many feeling disappointed in the Boers, for whom they had come to fight. Not Maximov, however. Alice Bron, one of the disappointed, stressed that Maximov did not share her feelings. He spoke warmly about the Boers as a nation, and enthusiastically about many of their leaders. President Steyn was one of his most admired heroes. She recalls:

What the Colonel told me of Steyn, his sufferings and his alternation of hope and despair, was absolutely painful. Steyn is the noblest, finest, and most disinterested figure in the Transvaal war. He is the incarnation of bravery, self sacrifice, and stainless honesty. He, at any rate, has not filled his pockets with bribes from the country he is now fighting. His conscience is clear, his hands are clean; he is a *savant*, his heart is in the right place, and he is as brave as a lion.

Maximov must have been very eloquent, and Alice Bron must have held his opinions very high, if she could write without even seeing the President:

The name of Steyn will always remain in my mind as a symbol of everything noble and great.²²

Izedinova wrote more about Maximov's adventures in the South Africa War than any other author. She interviewed Maximov himself, as well as the people who knew him. She was in a good position to do so, since they returned to Russia by the same ship. But how reliable was her information? Villebois' biographer wrote about Izedinova's memoirs:

Sister Izedinova ... had a highly chauvinistic attitude towards the foreign volunteers - except for the splendid Russians, the volunteers were mostly

-
21. Alice Bron, *Diary of a nurse in South Africa being a narrative of experiences in the Boer and English hospital service* (London, 1901), pp. 188-189.
 22. Alice Bron, *Diary of a nurse in South Africa being a narrative of experiences in the Boer and English hospital service* (London, 1901), pp. 188-189.

bad.²³

This was not true. Izedinova certainly did not admire all the Russians, and her picture of Ganetskij was very unfavourable. As far as her admiration for Maximov was concerned, her memoirs leave little doubt that the nurse was in love with him. She may have been biased in favour of her hero, which does not necessarily mean that everything she wrote about him was wrong. Several other people, who seemed to have no particular personal interest in Maximov, particularly among the Boers and other nationals, were equally fond of the Russian colonel.

The mission

Why was it then that in spite of all his admirable qualities, Maximov did not manage to lead the whole of the European Legion? One reason was that, of course, few volunteers liked the strict military discipline that he tried to introduce, and still fewer were willing to risk their lives as readily as he did.

But Maximov was also not an easy person at all, and he did not get on well with people. Alice Bron knew what she was talking about, when she wrote, "he is as bold as a lion, though he's as obstinate as a mule". Maximov was quick to show his temper, and often a streak of authoritarianism. His notes about other volunteers were arrogant and sometimes rude. His notebook is full of such remarks: "A chick. Snub him, when an opportunity offers ... I'll introduce proper order". Moreover, when he was angry, Maximov could sound directly threatening. He also talked of "bringing men to book", along with others needing being "severely reprimanded".

After Maximov's departure one of the French volunteers spoke about him with the Russian military observer Zigern-Korn. He admired Maximov's courage and considered him to be a good field officer. However, Zigern-Korn wrote, "his opinion about Maximov's military education was not very high".²⁴ It is not clear what such opinions were based on, but they were of course detrimental to Maximov's reputation.

However, there was something else. Many Russian volunteers did not trust Maximov. Volunteer Diatropov considered Maximov to be a police (*gendarme*) officer. He also heard that Maximov was

a secret agent of our (Russian - A.D., I.F.) government, that he has the widest power, and, among other things, he is ordered to report in detail about the activities and behaviour of the Russian volunteers in the Transvaal.²⁵

Were there any grounds for these suspicions and rumours? Certainly, there are many unanswered questions about Maximov's life. Neither his military service record, nor his personal archives, nor even his family records and memories help to resolve them. The military service record gives no explanations, but only facts; the archives, however valuable, are not large; and Maximov's son did not remember his father for he was only

24. M.A. Zigern-Korn, [*Vojna Burskaia ... Tietrad' 2-ia*], Rukopis', Publichnaia Biblioteka im. M. Ye. Slatykova-Shchedrina, Otdel Rukopisej, (*The Boer War ... Notebook 2*, Manuscript, M. Ye. Slatykov-Shchedrin Public Library, Manuscript Division), p. 89.

25. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal (Warsaw Military Journal)*, January 1902, no. 1, p. 22.

two years old when Maximov was killed. Maximov's wife lived into old age, but she was the last person to give her children any detailed information about their father. In the seventies, when we were searching for Maximov's family, former neighbours still remembered her. They told us that she was a nice lady, living in a constant fear that the Soviet authorities would one day discover that her long-dead husband was a "Tsarist General".

Maximov liked military service, and was a talented officer. Why was it then, that at a very early stage of his career he left the privileged cuirassier regiment? There was a remark in his service record that he attempted to commit suicide, when he was still with the regiment, though no indication as to why this might have occurred. Suicide, whether real or attempted, and whatever the reasons for it, was considered an almost fatal blot on any reputation, particularly that of an officer.

It is striking that later on, at the end of the 1870s, during the Russian-Turkish War and the military campaigns in Central Asia, Maximov was always offered non-combat and thus somewhat despised positions in the supply and administrative services: as head of a medical detachment or administrator at a railway station. This would have been humiliating for any career officer, but quite unbearable to a man of Maximov's temperament.

The idea that Maximov was a police (gendarme) officer had some foundation, for at one point in his career Maximov did serve as a gendarme officer. In 1881, when the Narodnik terrorists assassinated Tsar Alexander II, Maximov among many other Russians, outraged by the acts of terror, offered his services to the Gendarme Department. Maximov was a staunch and passionate monarchist and he wanted to serve the cause in which he believed. He was sent to the Caucasus, but after a few years realised that the gendarme service did not agree with him. He sent in his resignation, which was readily granted.²⁶

Nevertheless, the fact of the gendarme service could not pass unnoticed among the Russian volunteers in South Africa: gendarmes were very unpopular among wide circles of the Russian society. The more liberally-minded among the Russian volunteers also did not like the fact that Maximov had come over to South Africa as a correspondent of the *Novoie Vremia*, a very conservative nationalist paper, and this too doubtless prompted suspicions that he was serving darker, reactionary ends.

The Russian volunteers knew that at first Maximov was sent to South Africa as a correspondent of the War Ministry, but that Britain did not allow Russia to have an official military correspondent at this war. Maximov still went, already as correspondent of the *Novoie Vremia* and two other papers, the *Sankt-Peterburgskiiie Vedomosti* (the *St. Petersburg Herald*) and the *Rossiia* (the *Russia*). The British had tried to prevent him from getting to South Africa even in that capacity. He then sailed to Alexandria by a Russian ship, intending to go further on board of the *Kanzler* together with the Russian doctors and nurses. The British did not allow him on board. He went to Port said by train, and from there to Lourenco Marques by sea via Djibouti, Zanzibar and Madagascar. He came to Lourenco Marques three to four weeks after the arrival of the *Kanzler*.²⁷

Whatever Maximov's compatriots in South Africa knew about him, it was less harmful for his reputation than what they did not know, but were trying to guess. Even those of them who were not prejudiced against Maximov, thought that his activities were suspicious. One of the volunteers wrote:

26. Posluzhnoj spisok Ye. Ya. Maksimova, Voenno-istorichskij arkhiv Rossijskoj Federatsii, (Military Service List of Ye. Ya. Maximov. Military-Historical archive of the Russian Federation).

27. Sophia Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 9.

By ways known only to him he earned the confidence of the Transvaal authorities, began to visit President Kruger without ceremony, became quite at home with old Reitz, entered into relations with Steyn [...] To us, ordinary mortals, who never even dreamed of the honour to have tea with Kruger or Reitz, his activities seemed highly mysterious.²⁸

Alice Bron wrote that she "could relate many interesting incidents and execute sketches, that would represent certain Boer personages in a far from flattering light", but her conscience compelled her "to observe the strictest secrecy".²⁹ Was there anything serious to hide? Did Maximov really come to South Africa with a special mission or special powers? If so, what could these be?

In all probability Maximov did have a task from the Russian War Ministry. Maximov retired about a quarter of a century before the Boer War, yet the War Ministry considered his departure for South Africa so important that it informed Vladimir Lamsdorf, the Deputy Foreign Minister, about this fact, and very favourably for Maximov too. Maximov, the journalist, hardly wrote a few lines for the papers that he was supposed to work for. Maximov, the officer, did send his reports to the Military-Academic Committee of the Russian General Staff.

Even this, however, does not sufficiently explain the attention of the Russian, the South African, and the British officials to Maximov, for several other Russian officers among the volunteers wrote reports to the Russian General Staff as well. All these reports were received with utmost attention, and their authors enjoyed a hearty welcome and special treatment from the military authorities later on, although all seemed to have left Russia for South Africa unofficially. However, none of the volunteers, except Maximov, received any special attention before they left, or at least we do not know about it.

Even if Maximov did not have a secret mission in South Africa, he certainly behaved in a way that made his surrounding think that he did. If he did have such a mission, his instructions must have been given to him orally. We could not trace any documents with such instructions in the archives, thus we can only guess what these instructions could be. Maximov's idea about letters to European powers might have been his own, but it might have been prompted to him by some Russian military officials as well. Otherwise why would he try to assure the Boer leadership of the positive reaction of the Russian government to such letters? The Russian government might have sent Maximov to South Africa to advise the Boer authorities on their European or at least Russian policy with the ultimate goal of facilitating the coalition of continental powers against Britain. Or else, the Russian authorities might have tried to overblow the meaning of Maximov's mission in an attempt to demonstrate that Russia was doing something for South Africa, while in fact it could hardly do anything at all.

Whatever Maximov's mission was, the Russian volunteers did not like what they saw, or guessed about it, and as a result did not accept Maximov as their commander. From them unfavourable rumours about him spread to other volunteer corps.

The belief that Maximov was a police officer was widely held, wrote the well-known Irish political activist Michael Davitt.³⁰ Villebois-Mareuil's biographer repeated the same

28. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal (Warsaw Military Journal)*, January 1902, no. 1, p. 22.

29. Alice Bron, *Diary of a nurse in South Africa being a narrative of experiences in the Boer and English hospital service* (London, 1901), p. 208.

30. M. Davitt, *The Boer fight for freedom* (New York, 1902), p. 335.

story.³¹ A French volunteer, Le Coy de la Marche, wrote about Maximov's attempts to command the European Legion:

In spite of the support, a little luke-warm it is true, of President Steyn, despite the written orders, he could not succeed in the task. It demanded, in effect, a moral authority which everyone accorded the General, but which was then unanimously refused Colonel Maximov, in particular by the Russian who could not pardon his position as a police officer and even professed a certain contempt for him.³²

Maximov's ill-wishers used these rumours against him. Avgustus, one of the Russian volunteers, who joined Ganetskij's detachment, wrote that the rumours deprived Maximov "of any hope of occupying among us the position which he definitely deserved both by his battle reputation and personal qualities".³³

Maximov was bitterly conscious of these rumours and sometimes flared up. Avgustus quoted an incident when Maximov shouted at his compatriots:

So Gentlemen! I shall expose your tricks. Now I don't want to discuss, who of the Russian volunteers spread the rumours that I am a gendarme and a secret agent, we shall discuss it another time!³⁴

Such outburst could only make things worse for him.

Some volunteers changed their opinion about Maximov later. Avgustus, for example, became Maximov's ardent admirer. He wrote:

'Received according to the dress, seen of according to the wit' - M-v perfectly fits into this saying. Shortish, dried up, stringy, with characteristic sharp features, in a worn out Austrian-style jacket and high boots - I can't say that at first sight, at first meeting he makes an enchanting impression. But it was enough to speak with him for an hour or two, catch his slightly mocking expression, his look somehow piercing his companion, a look of a person, who often saw the terrible spectre of death face to face, hear his sharp and passionate voice, see the movement of his facial muscles. His whole appearance conveyed the spirit of something primordial. One could feel that he is a person of gust, of strong passions and adamant energy. Such people can not sustain the tight framework of ordinary peaceful daily routine, they yearn for the open spaces, for freedom. People of his type leave their trace in history as fearless travellers, who discover new unknown lands, as navigators, warriors, popular leaders at the time of great upheavals, or catastrophes. Their name stand out in line with the names of Dezhnev, Przheval'skij and Sten'ka Razin. Or else they become victims of human stupidity and indifference, and with their wings clipped suffocate somewhere on the outskirts of the universe in the rank of a retired captain ... M-v was obviously in his forties, but his eyes lit up as those of a youth,

-
31. Roy Macnab, *The French Colonel Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers, 1899-1900* (Oxford, 1975), p. 170.
 32. Le Coy de la Marche, *Souvenirs de la guerre du Transvaal: journal d'un volontaire* (Paris, 1901).
 33. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal* (Warsaw Military Journal), March 1902, no. 3, p. 217.
 34. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal* (Warsaw Military Journal), March 1902, no. 3, p. 216.

his nostrils dilated and trembled, when he spoke about his past, or about his plans in the Transvaal.

Avgustus thought very highly of Maximov, more highly than of any other volunteer. He wrote:

He came to the Transvaal now not only to experience the delight of playing with his life, as all the rest of us sinners, but because he was hoping to serve the great course of protecting the weak and oppressed, and not as an ordinary soldier - he had more far reaching plans.³⁵

Avgustus was a sharp observer and a good writer, and his opinions deserve attention. However, Maximov was a special case. At least partially Avgustus' admiration for Maximov could stem from the fact that both were Monarchists, Maximov even more fanatically so than Avgustus.

Yet, if one leaves aside his political views and his somewhat difficult temper, Maximov remains an outstanding personality, one of the most interesting and brilliant among all the volunteers.

President Kruger did not forget him. On 13 February 1902 Kruger sent Maximov his portrait and a letter of gratitude from Utrecht, where he was exiled:

... Your services to my Fatherland were extraordinary important and deserve great respect. Motivated by the absolutely selfless impulse of your soul, you have fulfilled your duty as an able and fearless representative of the Volunteer Commando under your leadership - and I am convinced that if it were not for inevitable circumstances that made you leave, you would still have continued to fight for the sacred course of liberty and justice, which you so nobly considered to be your duty. Let everything that you have done during your lifetime be the source of great moral satisfaction for you, and let happiness and prosperity be your destiny. This is my sincere wish.³⁶

Two *Veggeneraals*

There was much in common between the destinies of the two foreign Boer *veggeneraals*, the French Colonel de Villebois-Mareuil and the Russian Colonel Yevgeni Maximov. They were of the same age: in March 1900 Villebois was 53, and Maximov 51. Both were fearless warriors, people of enormous courage. Both came to defend an alien nation at the other end of the world, because both thought that its cause was fair. Both felt that they did not have enough war in their lives, and, perhaps, not enough glory.

There was an element of despair behind many volunteers' motivation for coming to South Africa. Villebois and Maximov were not exceptions. Villebois had lost his wife, and left a 16 year old daughter in Paris, when he was going to South Africa. He asked his brother to look after her, in case he did not return. He went on to be killed in his very first battle on the African soil.

35. *Varshavskij voennyj zhurnal (Warsaw Military Journal)*, January 1902, no. 1, pp. 24-25.

36. The letter and the portrait are in Maximov's archive which now belongs to Maximov's granddaughter, Nataliia Alexandrovna Maximova.

Maximov's ruined career and the desire to make up for it must have added to his passionate wish to go to South Africa. He returned to Russia wounded, but alive. A hero of the Boer War, he must have been very popular in Russian society. He soon married. A romantic family legend holds it that Maximov saved his future wife from flames at a ball, where her light dress caught fire from a candle. His young and beautiful wife had a child, and was expecting another one. But someone with Maximov's quicksilver temperament is always at risk. He was soon plunged into disgrace when he killed Prince Sain-Vitgenstyne in a duel. True, it was Vitgenstyne who had insulted Maximov and provoked him to fight. But duels had long fallen out of fashion as a way of resolving disputes. Still more important was the fact that the Prince was very young, and society held it that for such an experienced soldier as Maximov the duel was not fair play, but a brutal assassination of a helpless victim.

In 1904, when the Russo-Japanese War began, Maximov strove to get to the front. It was not easy: he was 55 and long since retired. After many futile attempts he wrote to Nicholas II, and got permission to join the Orlovskij Regiment. He was killed on the spot, not even in the first battle, but before it by a stray bullet. His comrades in arms told his family that he was expecting to be killed that day.

However, there is a big difference between Villebois and Maximov. Villebois was buried with the honours of war. His name is remembered both in his country and in South Africa. Information about him is found both in French and South African biographical dictionaries. Several books about him were published, some soon after his death, others many years later. Two have appeared in the last two decades. The last one, published in Paris in 1982, was devoted to Villebois and Kruger. Villebois' name was put next to Kruger's, and the picture on the cover depicted them together, although it is highly doubtful that such a photograph of the two of them together was ever taken.³⁷ The copy of this book that we bought at a second-hand book shop in Cape Town was signed by the author. His inscription ran that Villebois was "de modèle à Edmond Rostand pour son *Cyrano de Bergerac*".

Maximov's name is not to be found among any heroes of the past, whether real or fictitious. No books were written about him, either in Russia or in South Africa. South Africans paid at least some tribute to Maximov: a short article, based on Izedinova's memoirs, was published in 1969,³⁸ and recently biographical articles about him appeared in two South African reference books of military history.³⁹

In Russia Maximov is completely forgotten. His name is not mentioned in Russian dictionaries, except in Brokgaуз and Efron. His grave in far-off Manchuria is either forgotten, or does not exist.

This is a fate, after all, shared by so many Russians who, had they belonged to other nations, might have been celebrated with pride. But so terrible have the ordeals of Russia's people been in this century that those alive did no care, or did not dare to care about the memory of so many dead.

37. A. Keaney, *Le Lion et le Sanglier. Deux héros de la guerre des Boers: Paul Kruger et Geores de Villebois-Mareuil* (Paris, 1982).

38. Elisaveta Williams-Foxcroft, A Russian "Veg-generaal" in South Africa, in *Lantern*, June 1969, vol. XVIII, no. 4.

39. Ian Uys, *South African military who's who, 1452-1992* (Germiston, 1992); Jacques Malan, *Die Boere offensief van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (Pretoria, 1990).