

## THE GREAT RUSSIAN FAMINE OF 1891–2: E.W. BROOKS AND FRIENDS FAMINE RELIEF

“**T**he thermometer was at 6° below zero, Fahrenheit and there was a breeze blowing, so the ride of two hours duration was a bitterly cold one and our faces and ears suffered slightly from frost bite. The route lay chiefly over the steppe, a treeless, trackless and dreary waste of snow, so we were by no means sorry to come to the end of it. We passed one or two small villages on the way, but no house more important than a peasants cottage.”<sup>1</sup>

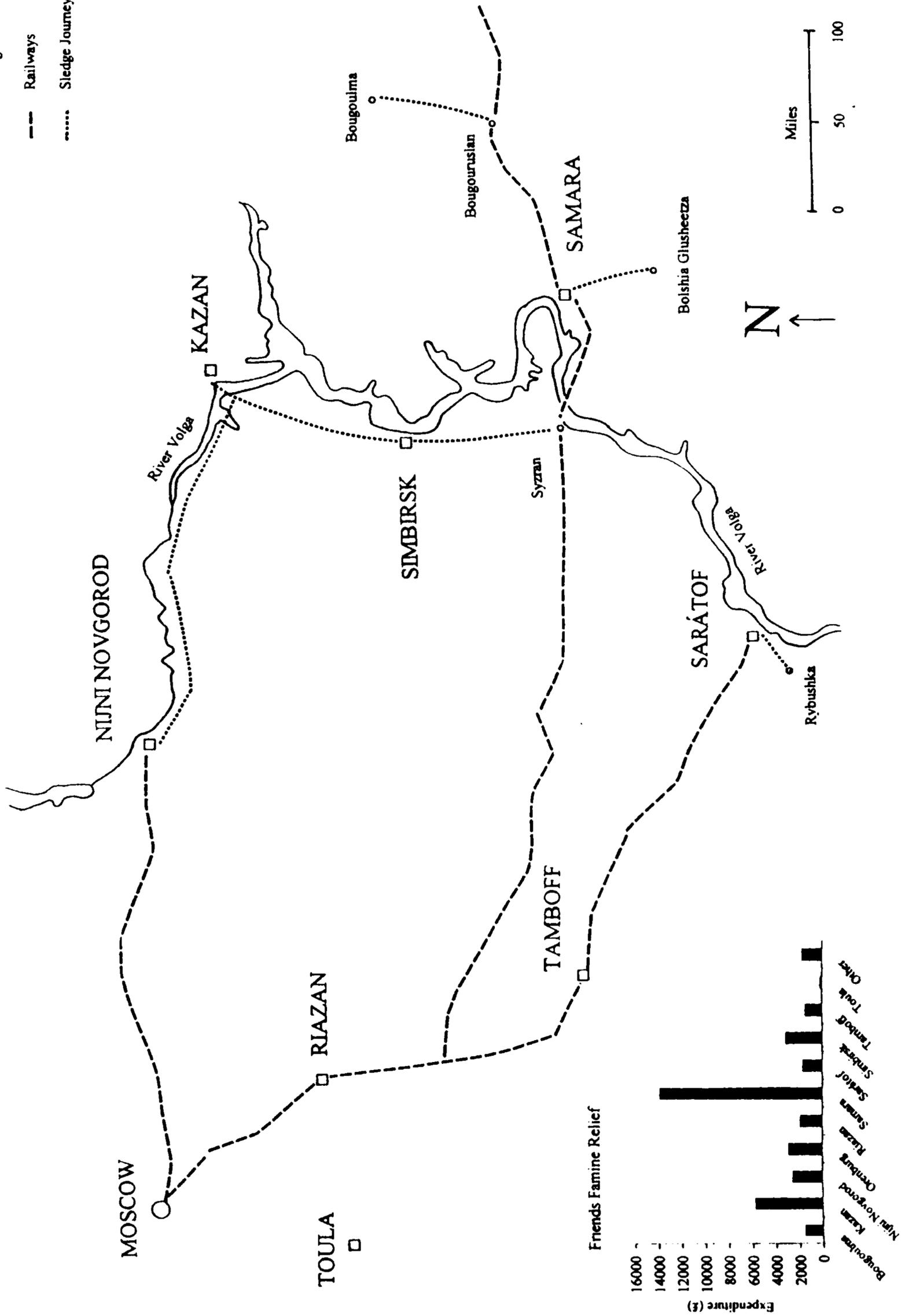
So wrote Edmund Wright Brooks in December 1891, of his first sledge ride in Russia. Together with Francis William Fox he had departed from London twenty days earlier, charged by the Meeting of Sufferings to investigate the degree of distress caused by the widely reported famine. Closer inspection of some nearby houses graphically illustrated the conditions under which the Russian peasants were living.

“The house of the [‘rich’ peasant] was such as would be thought very poor in England (the floor being of earth) and consisting of an entrance shed and one apartment which was kitchen, living room and bedroom all in one, if that could be called bedroom which possessed not the slightest vestige of a bed.

It seems the arrangements of all peasants’ cottages are identical: a brick oven is built in the middle of the one room, in which the bread is baked, whilst the stack of hot bricks warms the room, and on a sort of loft-floor over the oven, without bedsteads of bedding of any description, and without undressing, they sleep. It is a hard life and a hopeless lot: notwithstanding which it is only fair to add that the general appearance of the peasantry, both men and women, is cheerful and clean. Almost their sole food is black bread and their drink water, tea or coffee; meat they seldom or never get. The cottage of the ‘poor’ peasant which we saw was miserable indeed, and the poor inhabitants appeared in the last stages of destitution, burning the thatch of their poor out-

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-house for fuel, having no other, and being dependant on precious gifts for their rye-meal. In this cottage we left a small donation of four roubles."<sup>2</sup>

During the month long journey they became more and more convinced of the magnitude of the distress and the necessity for action. They were not alone in calling for action; in Russia hundreds of committees were formed to raise money for famine victims, while prominent men such as Anton Chekhov and Count Tolstoy undertook practical aid. Their intention was to render as efficient help as possible to those overlooked by the authorities. Overseas aid was also forthcoming, with the Americans dispatching several shiploads of flour and cornmeal, while in England many funds were set up to aid the distress.<sup>3</sup>

In 1890 the frosts had come early, soon after the winter crops were planted. As a result they were subjected to sub zero temperatures without the usual protective layer of snow. When spring winds came they carried away the topsoil and by April, the long dry summer had begun in earnest. For many areas no rain fell for nearly three months, the subsequent harvest was naturally insufficient.<sup>4</sup> By the autumn an area double the size of France was devastated, with at least sixty-eight percent of its population requiring assistance throughout the winter and until the harvest of 1892.<sup>5</sup>

The area centred on the Volga, Russia's mighty river, and indeed the longest river in Europe. In this area nearly 90 percent of the population were employed in agriculture. It should be remembered that Russian agriculture primarily employed very primitive farming methods compared to those of Europe and America.

The failure of the crops in such an important region of Russia was seen as a catastrophe. In consequence bread prices would rise in the industrial areas where wages were barely sufficient in normal conditions.<sup>6</sup> By May in seven provinces peasants were surviving on 'grass porridge' and 'green bread' (a mixture of lime-tree leaves & bark).<sup>7</sup> For the Russian periodical *European Review*,<sup>8</sup> the famine was bringing to light the fact that the peasants were forced to live from hand to mouth. As a result they consumed everything they produced with little if anything set aside for emergencies. In their view a famine would naturally follow a bad harvest.

For many contemporary writers whether the famine would instigate a revolution was of greater consequence. Lenin apparently opposed the use of humanitarian relief, as he believed the destitute peasants would help bring the revolution one step nearer.<sup>9</sup> Modern

historians still consider the famine to be a major tragedy, if not the most important event in the pre-Revolutionary period. It highlighted the incompetence of and culpability of a discredited regime and set the people on a collision course with the Tsarist government.<sup>10</sup>

In October *The Times*, reported that the harvest had been a complete failure in many districts and was bad in all others.<sup>11</sup> In ordinary years these areas produced a sufficient surplus to be exported. This year, however it was estimated that at least 20 million of grain would be required to maintain life; by the end of October the government had raised this sum as a loan.<sup>12</sup> It was customary in normal years for the Zemstvo or local council to collect grain from the peasants in order to store it for emergency uses. However in recent years many Zemstva had imposed a tax instead; for these areas; there were no stores at all.

While *The Illustrated London News* provided graphic representation of the appalling conditions, *The Times* regularly reported that the authorities were failing to meet even the basic needs of the rural population. They also published letters giving first hand accounts of the conditions in Russia and appeals for financial aid.

It was against this background that at the Meeting for Sufferings on 6th November 1891, a committee was appointed to consult with Herbert Sefton Jones over the seriousness of the Russian famine.<sup>13</sup> The committee consisted of Isaac Sharp, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and six others; later the number was increased to 16.<sup>14</sup> They also collected reports from various sources, including the agents of the British & Foreign Bible Society as well as the Foreign Office and consulted with Dr. Baedeker and Madame Novikov, who had intimate knowledge of Russia,<sup>15</sup> as well as considering first hand accounts such as that of Leonard Owen of Voloshkino, near Nijni-Novgorod. He wrote "Thousands are literally on the point of starvation. I can assure you that it is impossible to exaggerate the deplorable and heart-rending state in which the peasants of the Volga district are."<sup>16</sup>

The committee approached Sir Robert Morier, the British Ambassador to St. Petersburg, who initially could see no harm in a deputation being sent to Russia. As a result the proposal to visit Russia was sanctioned by a special Meeting for Sufferings on 27th November, as were the services of Francis William Fox<sup>17</sup> and Edmund Wright Brooks as commissioners.

Edmund Wright Brooks was born 29th IX 1834, the second son of Edmund Brooks and his wife Ann (née Wright). He received an education at Sidcot School and later entered the engineering works of John Fowler & Co. of Leeds. By the 1860s he had set up in business in

Guildford. However following an inspection of a cement works he became much impressed with the potential of such a business. As a result he was to establish the first Portland cement works on the north banks of the Thames. By the 1890s he was employing over 500 people and was possibly the largest employer in this part of Essex.<sup>18</sup>

At 11am on Monday 30th November 1891, the two Friends commenced their 75-hour journey to St. Petersburg, capital of Tsarist Russia. Before the end of the day, the Foreign Office had received instructions from St. Petersburg that a Quaker mission would not be agreeable to the Russian government. Despite this their arrival appears to have been anticipated. At the Russian frontier their passports were inspected. However the officer had received a telegram and he immediately gave instructions that their luggage was not to be inspected and personally escorted them through the barrier.

Once settled in St. Petersburg they immediately set about making enquiries of the British Charge d'Affaires who informed them of the unfavourable response from the Russian Government. However they were more successful during a forty-minute interview with Mr. Pobêdonostsef, who as Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod exercised considerable influence.<sup>19</sup> He informed them that 16 governments were effected and that the major problem was the transportation of the available crops to this area. The rivers Volga and Don were blocked with ice, there was insufficient hay to feed the horses and the railways were inadequate and lacked sufficient rolling stock.

Most significantly the government considered the task as their own and declined the commissioners' offers of help. However, as private individuals they were free to proceed and he took both men by the shoulders, proclaiming "we are brothers in Christ".<sup>20</sup> For the next two weeks they went from meeting to meeting gathering information in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. It was an eighteen-hour overnight journey to Moscow so that by the time of their return they were understandably feeling slightly fatigued.

It was suggested by General Kostannotoff, the military governor of Moscow that an interview with Alexander III could be arranged if the British Ambassador would make the necessary introductions. However Sir Robert Morier was unwilling to intervene. Another three years were to pass before E.W. Brooks would be granted an audience, and that was on another matter.<sup>21</sup>

On the 14th December, they received an invitation from the 63 year old Princess Marie Dudakov Kirsakov to 'take tea' with her sister and herself. Her appearance must have been startling as she was

always shabbily dressed and carried around an old satchel 'worth about two pence'.<sup>22</sup> She admitted that she had read about the two Friends in the newspapers. This meeting was to prove very useful. Here they met Count Heiden and his family who were very interested and keen to assist in any way possible. This was to be the beginning of a twenty year friendship.

It was necessary to employ a guide to help them with their investigations. He proposed to take them on a "... tour of inspection amongst the villages, within a radius of 20 or 30 miles of Sarátof and northwards along the course of the Volga to Samara."<sup>23</sup> After nearly sixty hours travelling they arrived at their first port of call, the Norikoff estate. The trains in Russia were notoriously slow and they covered vast distances. For the great majority of travellers pillow, blankets and a tea set were prerequisites of any railway journey.

Before leaving England the committee had called upon Madam Olga Novikov who confirmed all the press reports and provided an introduction to her son, Alexander, who was managing the family estate near Bogodolensk, in Tamboff. His refusal to allow alcohol on his estates, would have met with Brooks' approval.<sup>24</sup>

Here they had their first introduction to travelling by sledge and horse. They spent the day inspecting the deplorable condition of the peasants in the area, despite their host's reticence to do so. He expressed the government's view that there must be an ulterior purpose to the inquiries. Despite this with their help he was to organize eight kitchens to help feed the local peasants. The following day they departed at 5am for a '... very cold moonlight ride...' to the railway station and their onward journey to Tamboff. This was one of the smallest of the affected provinces with little in the way of industry.

At Tamboff they called upon the governor who impressed them with his actions.<sup>25</sup> However of more importance was the introduction Count Heiden provided to a Mr. Tchitcherine. Through his English wife they learnt of the condition of the poor in the government of Tamboff. The local government intended to provide each family with only 30lbs of ryemeal per head each month. However the father and the first two children were excluded from this allowance!<sup>26</sup>

A further eighteen hour train journey brought them to Sarátof, 'the golden port of the Volga'. In the previous seven years the river had apparently receded from the once busy wharves. Here they met Pastor Thompson, a German Lutheran, who highlighted the plight of the German colonists who resided along the length of the Volga. The rainfall during the past year had apparently average only 10



E.W. Brooks in a Wolf-Skin Coat  
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centimetres, while for much of the area no rain had fallen for over five months with temperatures rising to 100°F (38°C) in the shade.<sup>27</sup> As well as hearing of the loss of crops, they also learnt of the dramatic losses of cattle; here up to 4/5th of all cows and horses had either died or been sold for a couple of roubles. Not surprisingly Brooks was eager that the Committee should immediately start raising funds to alleviate the suffering. This he saw as a 'grand opportunity of providing in a practical and effective manner'.<sup>28</sup> He was however concerned over the policy of *The Times* towards Russia and sought the co-operation of the *Daily News*.<sup>29</sup>

Before setting out on a seven day sledge journey of around 400 versts<sup>30</sup> (265 miles) it was necessary to take sufficient provisions on their newly constructed sledge.<sup>31</sup> With travel in sub-zero temperatures special clothing was required, and in a letter to his family, E.W. Brooks describes the clothing they purchased in Sarátof.

"...enormous wolf-skin fur coats, with enormous collars, which can be turned up, entirely if enveloping our heads right above our caps, enclosing ears and face and thus protecting them from the keen wind. Ridiculous if as we should appear in your eyes, we have been thoroughly glad of them to-day and found them none too large or too heavy. We also wear great felt boots reaching half-way up to our thighs, and astrakhan caps."<sup>23</sup>

Their first overnight stop was at the village of Rybushka, a distance of 57 versts or 6<sup>3/4</sup> hours uncomfortable sledge ride from Sarátof! The track passed over "...the low mountains which lie in a most singular manner on the right bank of the Volga almost from its source to its mouth...".<sup>33</sup> Here they found around 3000 people beings supported solely by outside contributions, especially from their fellow German colonists in Sarátof. For Brayley Hodgetts, the German colonists were in a worse condition than the local Russians; even the Red Cross were passing them by.<sup>34</sup>

The following day they travelled a further 40 versts to visit several villages. At Salofka (10,000 inhabitants) they saw pot-bellied children due to malnutrition. Indeed the staple diet currently consisted of Rye gruel for breakfast, boiled cabbage for dinner and rye gruel for their evening meal. Just before midnight they arrived at the home of Mr. Schmidt in the village of Merser, through whose efforts the level of poverty had been alleviated locally.

The next day they progressed to Gsloi Caramus, passing within feet of their first wolf. Here they discovered up to 19 residents

crowded into one small room. The local pastor had opened a soup kitchen where on alternate days 3-400 people received a meal. At Volskaya, they learnt that less than 4 percent of the 'cultivators' had seed for future planting. Here there was a fear that as German colonists the government would be unwilling to provide assistance.

Later they travelled to Hansau, a Mennonite settlement. This was "...laid out with a broad street some 100 feet or so broad, bordered on each side with a row of handsome trees. The houses are large, well built and tile roofed but as they were built many years ago they are no evidence of the present financial condition of the people."<sup>35</sup> This community had suffered four bad harvests of which last year's had been the most serious; their survival was aided by a loan from which they had purchased sufficient seed for sowing and food. They also prophetically warned that as spring arrived famine fever will strike and that 'millions must die.'

At Warzenfeldt, they learnt how 100 men and women were given a basin of thin soup without bread or meat every second or third day due to the kindness of the local Pastor. Throughout this journey they had little trouble securing fresh horses to pull the sledges and houses were willingly opened to them. "We had seen enough during this visit of enquiry to show that help was urgently needed if the peoples lives were to be saved. So we decided to start home at once to report to the Meeting for Sufferings what we had seen."<sup>36</sup>

When Brayley Hodgetts visited Sarátov in January, he found he had been "...proceeded here by two English Quaker gentlemen, who visited several villages and investigated the distress."<sup>37</sup> The Russian press reported that in this province 42,000 of the distressed population were receiving no help from the authorities. The majority of these were labourers, harvesters and small artisans.<sup>38</sup>

On their return to St. Petersburg they received an invitation from the Heidens, who were keen to help in any way possible. The Countess Alexandra Tolstoy again joined them together with Princess Nadia Mestchertsky, who both requested information on their mission. Afterwards the Countess confided to Brooks that it was initially felt that "...at that time they thought you were sent by Lord Salisbury."<sup>39</sup> This was a sentiment they had earlier heard from Alexander Novikov in Tamboff province. They felt however that they had made a favourable impression and were confident that the Tsar would receive a full account.

While Brooks departed on the 4th January, Fox remained in Petersburg in order to have a further interview with Mr.

Pobêdonostoff. The original coolness he found had gone, as they were no longer considered to be agents of the British government. Through these discussions it became apparent that the Friends would be free to distribute the relief fund as private individuals provided that none of the money was received from any government. Pobedonostoff later produced a letter stating this.

Fox had experience of Indian famines and this led him to expect the major problems to be, first the transport of grain from the southern ports and secondly, irrigation of the fields. Throughout their journey he had made enquiries and discovered that transportation of grain would not be as serious a problem as expected, provided it was undertaken before the thaw set in. With regards to irrigation they hardly saw any attempts, but when it was, the crops were significantly improved. He drew up a scheme for temporary irrigation primarily using gravitation fed by springs or simple pumps. Despite presenting this to the government, all these provinces were again gripped by famine in 1906-7 and in the 1920s. On both occasions committees were formed and action taken to alleviate the conditions prevalent in Russia.<sup>40</sup>

On the 8th January Brooks presented a full and detailed account to the committee. He was convinced that there were sufficient opportunities to distribute the relief through private channels. He also considered that it was imperative that action was taken immediately as the thaw was only two months away. After this point transport would be impossible and many thousands would die. As an inducement to start a relief fund he put forward £250 and offered his services to return to Russia. At his last meeting with the Heidens he had promised to return and personally distribute any funds with the Count's assistance.

At a special Meeting for Sufferings on 15th January 1892 a circular was issued to all Meetings throughout the country. Also appeals were sent to the leading newspapers in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Newcastle. This described the millions of destitute and starving people. They also announced that all the funds raised would be distributed as all expenses of administration and travelling expenses were to be met by the Society.

Brooks had expressed a concern to the committee over Fox's inability to understand or communicate in Russian, French or German. As a result both Herbert Sefton Jones and Edwin Ransom of Bedford, who had experience of Russia, offered to accompany Brooks on the return journey. In the event it was Sefton Jones who was selected, while Ransom 'waited in the wings'.

By the middle of February the fund stood at over £17,000 and several thousands of pounds had been forwarded to the trustworthy committees identified by Brooks and Fox. The planned departure was slightly delayed by 'an attack of influenza' on Brooks. However by the 15th February they set off on the long journey to St. Petersburg. They wrote from Berlin on the 17th advising that Brooks' health was 'well sustained' and, by the 19th, safely settled in their hotel he was 'none the worse for the journey'.<sup>41</sup> On arrival the Princess Dondoukoff Kirasakoff met them with an invitation to call upon the Heidens.

They spent much time interviewing religious ministers who had come to St. Petersburg to raise funds to alleviate the starving. One of these was Pastor Francis who was responsible for the distribution of the flour being sent from Philadelphia. He had apparently managed to arrange free delivery by rail with the government. Discussions with the American Minister, Mr. Smith, revealed that he anticipated several more shiploads of flour from various parts of the states. They feared that the arrival of this flour at areas far from the railways might be too late to prevent terrible catastrophes and would in any event arrive after the thaw.

Through discussions with Count Heiden, who had just returned from Toula, it was decided to direct their attentions to the Governments of Sarátov and Samara, together with Kazan to the north and Orenburg to the east. The intention was to find trustworthy persons who were already engaged in administering relief or failing that to set up their own committees. In return for financial grants the committee in London expected detailed accounts of the expenditure.

The problems of transmitting money between London and St. Petersburg, let alone the rest of Russia was to drive Brooks to distraction. With evidence of an early spring he waited anxiously for sufficient funds to arrive to enable them to embark on their mercy mission. With Count Heiden's help they entered into an arrangement with the Volga Kama Bank whereby the fund's bankers Messrs. Barclay Bevan & Co. would confirm sufficient credit in favour of the Russian bank. This would enable them to withdraw funds as required from the various branches. In the meantime he was still awaiting the arrival of the originally promised funds, which it seems were wrongly directed to Moscow!

Count Heiden and Herbert Sefton Jones proceeded directly to Samara to make the necessary preparations. This included organising a supply of cooked meat, cooked fowls, bread, etc. which froze and

kept 'perfectly fresh' until required.<sup>42</sup> Samara is situated at the extremity of the great 'loop' of the Volga. While most of the other towns lie on the left, Samara has been attracted to the right bank of the main stream. With its fine public buildings and churches it had a most impressive appearance.

Brooks frustratingly awaited the requisite funds. Before leaving, Pastor Francis confirmed that there were 50 truckloads of American flour available to them to distribute. This he valued at around £4,000. Finally after a four day delay the money was received by the Volga Kama Bank. At 8pm on 29th February, two weeks after leaving England, Brooks was able to depart for Samara. A journey, which despite travelling day and night would take more time than that between London & St. Petersburg.

In Samara they were cordially received by the Governor who informed them that large quantities of grain was daily arriving from the south for distribution by the Red Cross and local agencies. Despite this, experience showed that what was supposed to last a month could barely last beyond three weeks.

On the 5th March they departed in two sledges for Samarofka 50 versts away. Here they met two responsible ladies who they felt would be able to provide reliable relief up until July. Afterwards they travelled a further 45 versts to the village of Dimietrovka, where they met Mr. Schmidt. He informed them that the government was the sole support for the local population. With their aid Mr. Schmidt's schemes were extended to support other local villagers. This was especially important as official assistance through the Zemstva provided 30 lbs. of grain per head per month. However this excluded all children under 2 years of age and all males between the age of 18 and 60!

Here they met an impressive young student from St. Petersburg who, utilising her own money, had set up a soup kitchen in the neighbouring village without any outside help. The following day in the company of Mr. Schmidt they travelled several versts to visit this village. They arranged for her to receive assistance through Mr. Schmidt, who they had selected as a suitable individual to administer any relief they were able to give locally.

A further 38 versts brought them to Smolyanka where they lunched at the local hostelry and changed horses. The Count who, as a former judge, was a figure of authority, called the local priest and representatives to report. They immediately formed them into a committee and provided the necessary finance to support the local inhabitants.

Their next destination, Bolshia-Cllsheetza was 60 versts distant and took them until midnight. The journey had been very cold and when disrobing Brooks discovered his Bashleek frozen to his cheek. They roused the proprietor of a hostelry who with reluctance vacated the best room. Discovering unmentioned insects residing they "...determined to sleep in the middle of the floor ... we spread our rugs on the floor over an armful of hay, and our travelling pillows placed to receive our heads we lie down side by side like 3 dead fish on a slab and soon were all fast asleep..."<sup>43</sup> On another occasion they stayed in the house of a 'rich' peasant, just big enough to accommodate 3 beds. In the middle of the night he was awoken by Sefton Jones who couldn't sleep due to the number of companions in his bed! On investigation Brooks too found he wasn't alone but simply said to them, "if you will leave me alone, I will leave you alone", which they apparently did.<sup>44</sup> Indeed they were not alone in noticing this aspect of house guests. Others too have referred to the houses 'swarming' with insects or *Klop*, which the peasants considered to be beneficial.<sup>45</sup>

In the light of day they made their enquiries and discovered great distress with governmental and Red Cross assistance keeping people alive. The people only had a light meal once a day or even on alternate ones. On leaving the village they came across a Tartar village which together with its inhabitants had a most miserable appearance. Through their priest or Mollah they learnt that as Mohammedans they were unprovided for in the governmental arrangements. Others not accounted for were the wanderers who came to most villages in search of food. As these were not members of the commune, no provision was made for them by the Zemstvo and the Red Cross provided limited support.

After a week's travelling they finally arrived back at Samara at 6am on the 10th March. Here they caught up with letters from home informing them that £1,000 had been received from the Hon. Gilbert Coleridge fund,<sup>46</sup> and a telegram from Pastor Francis authorizing them to distribute 70 railway truckloads of American Flour. However Brooks was becoming increasingly concerned that the thaw would set in within a fortnight, thereby hindering transportation for some time.

While in Samara they made the acquaintance of Prince Pierre Dolgorukov, who had brought some aid to the people around Bogoruslan. The local population was apparently Mohammedan or Tartars, who were very difficult to deal with due to their mistrust of Christians. With their assistance the Prince intended to return and

establish bakeries in the district to distribute bread through local communities. They also learnt of the work of the Tolstoi family who had set up 270 free soup kitchens throughout the province.

Jonas Stadling, writing in 1893 about aid in Samara, commented that "Private benevolence was supplied mainly by foreigners... Out in the province it was likewise mostly with foreign money that private relief was carried out. The English Friends distributed through their representatives much help, and supported Prince Dolgorukoff's sanitary expedition to eastern Samara..."<sup>47</sup>

In October 1891 *The Times* reported that Samara province was suffering due to the incapacity of local government to cope with the situation. It was reported that in many cases the really destitute were suffering needlessly while the more prosperous were receiving help. The Russian press were reporting that due to the dry summer and autumn many localities were suffering from a water shortage. As a result for many melted snow was the only available source."<sup>48</sup>

As a result of these revelations the local governor was keen to show how successful local administration of famine relief was. He summoned the Presidents of the local councils to report in public. However the representative from Bougoulina's account was so totally unsatisfactory that the Governor and Mr. Shiskoff, President of the Red Cross committee decided at once to investigate further. Here a dispute had arisen between the Tartars and the Zemstvo as to how any relief should be administered. As a result nothing had happened other than a stirring of religious prejudices on all sides. Indeed the Tartars expressed a desire to die rather than comply with the Zemstvo conditions.

In the company of Mr. Shiskoff and Prince Pierre Dolgorukov the three commissioners travelled overnight by train to Bougouruslan. The following day they left by sledge at 6.30am and travelled until 8pm to reach Bougoulma, a distance of around 60 miles. The road after a few miles became exceedingly bad such that the sledge containing the Count and the Prince overturned dragging them upside down for a short distance. Luckily they were unhurt.

While Mr. Shiskoff made official investigations, the others travelled into the surrounding countryside. The Count applied his legal training to elicit the required information from the inhabitants. While no one appeared to have died here they learnt that the Tartar village of Chalpy had formerly a population of 2000, of which half were believed to have died of starvation, and that in the outlying districts at least 60,000 people were starving.

On their return to Samara they found a letter awaiting them from the committee. This alarmed both of them as it appeared the committee intended to send out more commissioners. Both felt this was uncalled for as they would arrive after the thaw and they would find it difficult to follow in their sledge tracks. In one of Herbert Sefton Jones' few letters to the committee he felt compelled to make his own observations.

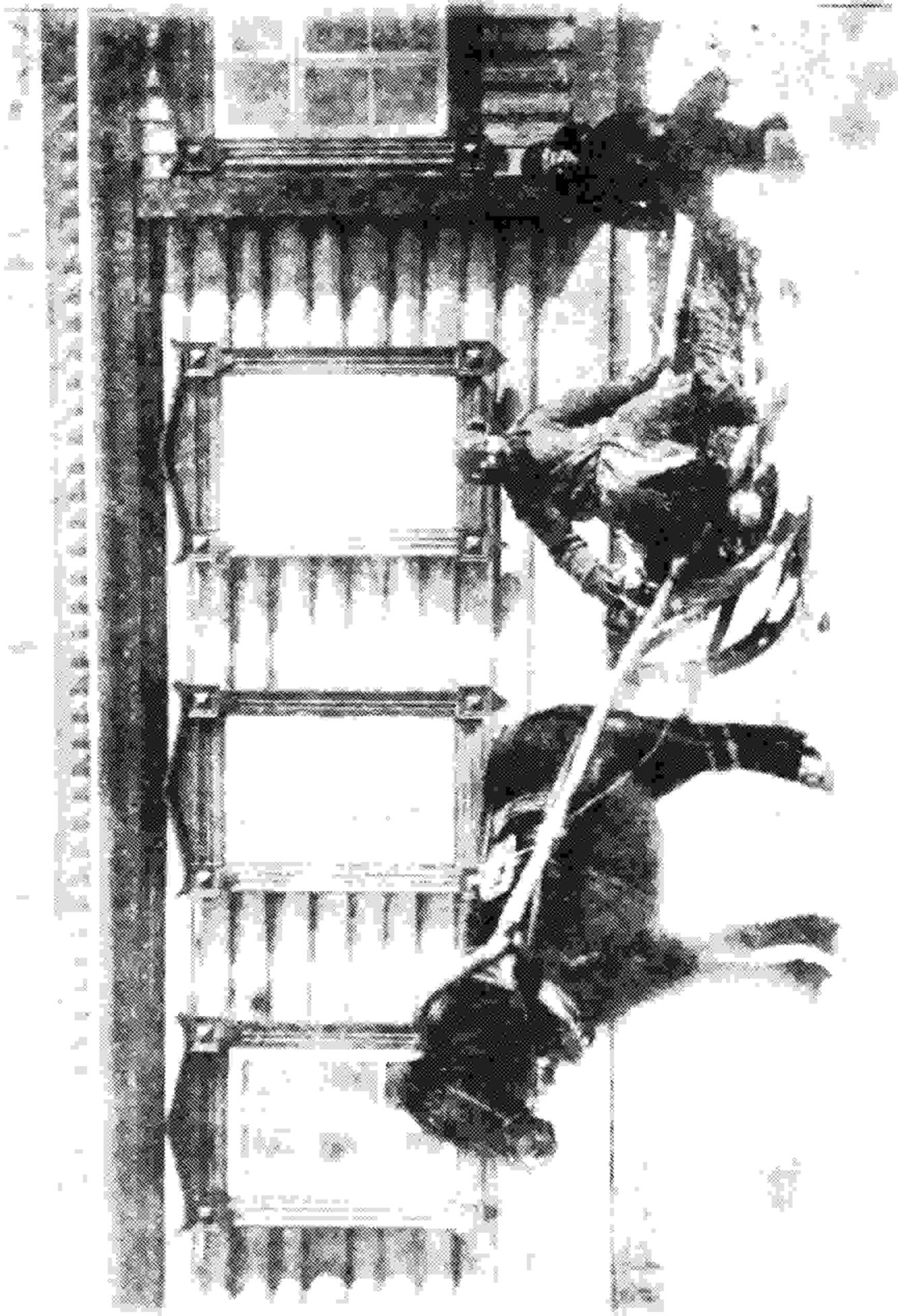
"I myself felt not the slightest doubt but that the sum which we have distributed will be faithfully applied... to actually check the operation of each local distribution would require months of labour of commissioners familiar with Russian customs and language."<sup>49</sup>

Travelling the short distance by train to Syzran, they set out on their long journey across country to Kazan, and eventually Nijni Novgorod. Their first destination was Simbirsk a large town 97 miles distant. He believed this could be accomplished in a little over 12 hours with six changes of horses. In reality everything took longer than expected and finally 24 hours after disembarking from the train at Syzran they reached their destination. They had travelled continuously through a cold night with snow falling until around 3am.

Through the Governor they had learnt that the total population in the area was 1 1/2 million of which the Zemstvo and the Red Cross were supporting nearly half. In addition the local 'nobility' were actively involved in supporting the peasants. They visited several soup kitchens and formed committees where none existed. Before leaving the weather changed from the favourable bright clear skies and frost to the less favourable cloudy and thawing conditions.

Their next destination was to be Kazan, which they believed to be another two days journey. This was a long journey, the thaw was setting in and they found themselves in danger of being stranded 300 miles from the nearest railway station until the Volga became navigable. They finally arrived at Kazan at 6am after an 18-hour sledge journey from Letzoushic. By now they were convinced that the 'Society of Friends' was a household word in Russia and he believed that the memory of their task "...will last the lifetime of the present generation."<sup>50</sup>

Kazan was famous as the capital of the Tartar Khans. It stands about 3 miles from the left bank of the Volga. Only in times of floods did its waters reach the city; at other times communication with the



Simple Russian Sledge  
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Volga is through the river Kananka. The old citadel, or Kreml's, only remained in the form of two stone towers. Despite its remoteness from the railway at least half the population were involved in track and manufacture and it had boasted a university since 1804.

Approaching the Volga they discovered the ice was breaking. "Our sledges took us about half way across, we then got down and walked or were drawn with our luggage on small hand sledges or toboggans to the waters edge, a boat which was in readiness soon landed us on the other side when sledges were in waiting to receive us..."<sup>51</sup> As they felt they required some protection from the inclement weather, they hired a heavy hooded type of sledge. However the thaw made road conditions much worse than expected, the first 23 versts should have taken around 4 hours. Instead they continued into the night and beyond into the early morning.

"Almost immediately after starting up the hillside over which our track lay we were met by a torrent of water of the volume of a river which percolated through the dark snow... the result was that though the snow looked smooth and fair in the surface it was as treacherous as the slough of Despond. The horses feet broke through the surface and the poor animals were immediately up to their bellies in water; – struggling to extricate themselves, they only floundered deeper till I began to fear that one of them would drown, stepping out of our sledge to lighten it, I was instantly up to my knee in the water..."<sup>52</sup>

Help was at hand to extricate them and they proceeded until with heavy snowfall and a rising wind they became stuck in a ditch. Darkness was falling. However "it is never quite dark on the snow covered ground..."<sup>53</sup> This time their fellow travellers were nowhere to be seen and indeed the driver was completely lost! Eventually a search party located them and led them to the warmth of the nearby post station. After breakfasting and an hours rest they set out again for a further 13 hours to reach the village of Akozeino.

By now they had accomplished 20 percent of the journey to Nijni Novgorod in 26 hours! They exchanged the two heavier sledges for three lighter ones, each pulled by three horses. The lighter sledges, however, provided little in the way of comfort or protection but they could skim boat-like over the snow. As a result they could travel much faster especially as the frost had come on again. What in summer would be a pleasant and enjoyable journey across the Volga, in winter became extremely unpleasant and uncomfortable.

The road continued to be waterlogged and the sledges unfortunately were not watertight. For several days they sledged for up to 20 hours a day in their new lighter sledges. From the comfort of a warm room in Nijni Novgorod, Brooks described this part of the journey as "...the most disagreeable, the most arduous and the most memorable journey of my life. We arrived somewhat worse for wear, faces scorched with exposure to sun, wind and driving snow, shaken and bruised in body and wanting rest but otherwise well."<sup>54</sup>

While in Simbirsk, they had sent a telegram requesting the remainder of the fund to be forwarded. Following consultation in London, a cheque for £5,000 was drawn together with a covering letter stating that "there is a little feeling of anxiety amongst some of our committee..." regarding the public placing of the funds.<sup>55</sup> On arrival in Nijni Novgorod they found the letter awaiting them. Understandably after travelling for 4 days and 1 night Brooks was to put it mildly disturbed. He wrote "I was under the impression that Herbert [Sefton] Jones and myself possessed the confidence of the Committee... before these people can send accounts it is obvious that they must first spend the money and make use of the goods brought... the expenditure has been intended to run over 2 months, the probability is that accounts will not be furnished until the 2 months have expired. The committee in their expectations must be at least be reasonable."<sup>56</sup>

In a personal letter to his friend J.B. Braithwaite he pointed out that he could not have undertaken the mission if it was desired he should operate on the principal of 'universal suspicion'. During the journey he found that the Russians were raised in his esteem and had everywhere been received with the greatest kindness and respect.<sup>57</sup> Even when he arrived in Moscow, he must have still been frustrated by the committee as he wrote "well I could tell those friends that it is much easier to stay comfortable at home and find fault than it is to come here to do better."<sup>58</sup> He concluded that it had taken him much more time than he had anticipated but would remain a 'matter of much satisfaction to me.'

Eventually a letter reached them explaining that the earlier letter from the committee had been misunderstood. Their explanations were satisfactory and the committee recorded their fullest satisfaction and confidence in the two commissioners. Brooks was confident that the government, agencies and private charities could between them maintain the general public to a reasonable degree until the next harvest was gathered. The first two American steamers had by now begun discharging their truckloads of flour.

These had been received with music, ovations and banquets, while the Tsar gave gifts to the two captains.<sup>59</sup>

Sefton Jones remained behind in St. Petersburg awaiting further instructions from the committee, while Brooks returned to England at 6pm on 12th April. He finally arrived home on the afternoon of 16th after an absence of 8 weeks and 5 days. It was just over 23 weeks since the Meeting of Sufferings had set in motion this momentous task. During this time he had travelled many thousands of miles, endured severe hardships in an inhospitable landscape and visited countless destitute communities. Despite being time-consuming they had found it most satisfactory to travel by sledge from village to village, make the necessary inquiries and 'adjudicate on the matter' As Richenda Scott reminds us "it was no light effort for a man nearing sixty... but it would need more than such discomforts to put off a tough Quaker ridden by concern".<sup>60</sup>

In total they raised £37,262 15s. 2d., from over 3,800 individuals and groups. This included donations from churches of all denominations, together with 156 local Friends meetings and also Friends in Philadelphia, Richmond (Indiana), New York, Quebec and Toronto. The funds were used to supply flour, millet, salt, wood, peas, seeds, hospital and medical supplies, wheat flower, corn, buck, wheat, pease, potatoes, cabbage, meat, fat, oil, eggs and bread. Kitchens were opened over a wide area which helped many thousands of peasants through the harvest. In addition feeds were provided to keep as many horses and cows alive as possible. It had been calculated the kitchens worked on about 3 kopeks<sup>61</sup> per head per day and recipients would usually divide their portions into 2 or 3 parts thereby ensuring that everyone received at least something.<sup>62</sup>

Many correspondents commented on the unexpected benevolence shown to them by so many 'strangers' and that "...the year 1891/92 will not be forgotten when the present generation had passed away..."<sup>63</sup> Indeed throughout his travels, Brooks discovered that news of the English aid in all its forms was widely known and greatly appreciated. Somehow news of their visit preceded them and on arrival they would sometimes find the locals kneeling as an expression of their gratitude. This demonstration always disturbed Brooks and Count Heiden would have to shout at them to get up.

Before the main committee was discharged in November 1892, a minute of thanks was sent to Count Heiden acknowledging that the "...successful administration of the fund...[was] due in the highest degree to his efficient aid". He was deeply touched but felt he had played an 'unimportant part'.<sup>64</sup> News of a poor harvest reached

Brooks in the spring of 1893 and again in the winter of 1894, which was considered. However it was decided to take no action. Finally in 1894 the committee was wound up and all its papers placed into safe storage.

Within two months of his return he was standing as the Liberal candidate for South-East Essex in the 1892 General Election. Despite his valiant efforts he failed by only 542 votes to remove the Conservative incumbent. Brooks also made several other journeys to Russia, which included the 1896 visit to St. Petersburg in order to collect information on the Dukhobors, who were subsequently assisted to resettle in Canada. In 1899 he travelled with John Bellows to Russia and visited Count Leo Tolstoy. While in 1895 he presented an appeal for religious tolerance to Nicholas II.

Shortly before his death in 1928, he looked back on this episode with much satisfaction. Observing "we were pitched out of our sledges half a score of times every day, but there is dry and crisp snow each side of us and it never hurt us to fall out, it was simply an experience!"<sup>65</sup>

*Barry Dackombe*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

For more information on the Society's involvement in subsequent Russian Famine Relief:

*Quakers in Russia* by Richenda C. Scott, published by Michael Joseph, 1964.

*Quaker Encounters: Volume 1, Friends and Relief* by John O. Greenwood, published by Williams Sessions, 1975.

*A Quaker Adventure* by A. Ruth Fry, published by Nisbet & Co., 1926.

<sup>1</sup> Friends House Library, London (hereafter F.H.L.), description of journey to Novikov estate 6° below is equivalent to -22° Celsius; Letter dated 21st 12 1891, Tamboff-Russian Famine Committee (1891-94) (hereafter R.F.C.) folder 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> A detailed account of Tolstoy's work is given in, Jonas Stadling, 'With Tolstoy in the Russian Famine', *Century Illustrated Magazine*, vol. 46, (1893), pp.249-263; Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, (1996), p.159; James Y. Simms, 'Impact of Russian Famine, 1891-1892, upon the United States', *Mid America*, 60, 3, (1978), pp.171-184.

<sup>4</sup> Figes, p.157.

<sup>5</sup> George S. Queen, 'American Relief in the Russian Famine of 1891-1892', *The Russian Review*, 14, 2, (1955), p.142; James Y. Simmons, 'The Economic Impact of the Russian Famine of 1891-92', *Salvonic & East European Review*, 60, 1, (1982), p.68.

<sup>6</sup> S. Stepniak, 'The Russian Famine and the Revolution', *Fortnightly Review*, pt 51, (1892), pp.359.

- 7 Stepniak, p.359.
- 8 Quoted in *The Times*, 12th January 1892; Stepniak, p.359.
- 9 Stepniak, p.359; Figes, p.129n.
- 10 Simms, (1982), p.63; Figes, p.161-2.
- 11 *The Times*, 16th October, 1891.
- 12 *The Times*, 26th October, 1891; *The Times*, 31st October, 1891.
- 13 Herbert Sefton Jones had travelled to Russia as a young man, spent some time exploring the Pamirs, a series of high valleys bordering Afghanistan and China, before settling in Nijni-Novgorod. He was multi-lingual and spoke fluent Russian.
- 14 The committee included E.W. Brooks' cousin Thomas Marsh, his uncle Alfred Wright and son Herbert Brooks together with his brother-in-law and partner Bedford Marsh. Other members were William Jones, Thomas Pritchard Newman, Robert Horne Penney, Joseph Gundy Alexander, Henry Tuke Mennell, Reginald Ryley, Edwin Ransom plus three commissioners.
- 15 London Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1892, p.104.
- 16 Letter dated 12th November 1891, R.F.C., folder 10.
- 17 F.W. Fox was an engineer with experience of irrigation works in Egypt and involved in a wide variety of humanitarian works. He was born 15 IX 1841 to George and Rachel Fox of Kingsbridge, Devon; see J.E.G. de Montmorency, *William Francis Fox: A Biography* (1923); and also *Contemporary Review*, February 1924.
- 18 The most extensive biography can be found in *The Grays and Tilbury Gazette and South East Pictorial Telegraph*, June 23 1928; p.5; see also *The Friend*, 13th July 1928, pp.635-637; the history of Portland cement in Essex and E.W. Brooks involvement is detailed in *The Victoria History of the County of Essex*, Vol. II, (1907), p.492-3.
- 19 He had held this post since 1880. It provided an important link between the Russian church and the Tsar. He was also one of Alexander III's most trusted advisers.
- 20 This action was illustrated in the *Daily Graphic*, 28 January, 1892.
- 21 In 1894 E.W. Brooks presented an appeal for religious toleration to the newly installed Nicholas II
- 22 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1932, private collection.
- 23 Letter dated 13.12.1891 – R.F.C., folder 10.
- 24 He had taken the temperance pledge in 1841 at the age of 6; Membership card for Melksham Total Abstinence Society, private collection.
- 25 Letter dated 21st.12.1891, Tamboff – F.F.C. folder 10.
- 26 Letter dated 23. 12. 91, – Sarátov – F.H.L., Temp. MSS, Box 13, folder 13, bundle A, pp.62-76.
- 27 *Op. cit.*
- 28 *Op. cit.*
- 29 George Cadbury was proprietor.
- 30 A standard Russian unit of distance: it is equal to 0.6629 miles or 1.067km.
- 31 The sledge was ordered and made in one day for the equivalent of £2.10 shillings. *Grays & Tilbury and South Essex Pictorial Telegraph*, 23 June 1928.
- 32 Astrakhan is a town in the lower Volga, the caps being made from the skin of young lambs, whose wood resembles fur; *Grays & Tilbury and South Essex Pictorial Telegraph*, 23 June 1928.

- <sup>33</sup> Letter dated 26.12.91 – Rybushka – F.H.L., Temp. MSS, box 13, folder 13, bundle B, pp.77-95.
- <sup>34</sup> E.A. Brayley Hodgetts was *Reuter's* correspondent, who travelled through the Volga region to investigate the famine. His reports were regularly published in *The Times*. He also published *In the track of the Russian famine*, (1892); *The Times*, 29th February 1892; 3rd March 1892.
- <sup>35</sup> Letter dated Dec 28 – Volskaya: F.H.L., Temp MSS, box 13, folder 13, bundle C.
- <sup>36</sup> 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1923, private collection.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Times*, 1st February 1892.
- <sup>38</sup> Russkiya Viedomosti as quoted in *The Times*, 26th February 1892.
- <sup>39</sup> The Countess was cousin to Leo Tolstoy and lived in the Winter Palace; Letter dated 8.1.92 – London, R.F.C., folder 10; Lord Salisbury was the Conservative Prime Minister.
- <sup>40</sup> See E.W. Brooks, 'Starving Russian', *Review of Reviews*, vol. 25 (May 1907), pp. 472-475; *The Literary Digest*, Vol. 34 part 4, (1907), pp.124; John O. Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters, volume 1: Friends and Relief*, (1975), pp.127-129 & pp.239-251; A. Ruth Fry, *A Quaker Adventure*, (1926); Richenda C. Scott, *Quakers in Russia*, (1964).
- <sup>41</sup> Letter dated 17.2.92 – Berlin, R.F.C. folder 10; Letter dated 22.2.92 – St. Petersburg, R.F.C., folder 10.
- <sup>42</sup> 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1932, private collection.
- <sup>43</sup> Letter dated 8.3.92 – Bolshia Gloosheetza, R.F.C. folder 10, copy letter pp.37-58.
- <sup>44</sup> 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1932, private collection.
- <sup>45</sup> Jonas Stadling, 'The Famine in Eastern Russia: Relief work of the Younger Tolstoy', *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. 46, (1893), pp.563; his host is quoted as saying "Klop are healthy; they purge the blood".
- <sup>46</sup> In January, E.W. Brooks had a meeting to discuss cooperation between the two committees. The Coleridge committee finally raised just over £2,000, the remainder being forwarded to Count Tolstoy.
- <sup>47</sup> The sanitary expedition consisted of 2 physicians, 2 surgeons and 6 'sisters of charity'; Stadling, p.561.
- <sup>48</sup> Sarátov Viestnik quoted in *The Times*, 26th February 1892.
- <sup>49</sup> Letter dated 20.3.92 – Samara (Herbert Sefton Jones) R.F.C. folder 10.
- <sup>50</sup> Letter dated 28.3.92 – Kazan, R.F.C. folder 10.
- <sup>51</sup> Letter dated 30.3.92 – Kazan, R.F.C. folder 10, copy letter pp.91-102.
- <sup>52</sup> Letter dated 31.3.92 – Village of Akozeino, R.F.C. folder 10, copy letter pp.91-102.
- <sup>53</sup> 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1932, private collection.
- <sup>54</sup> Letter dated 5.4.92 – Nijni Novgorod, R.F.C. folder 10, copy letter p.103-9.
- <sup>55</sup> Committee Letter Book, R.F.C. item 9, p.241.
- <sup>56</sup> Letter dated 3rd April, 1892, Nijni Novgorod, R.F.C. folder 10, copy letter pp.1-6.
- <sup>57</sup> Letter dated 4.4.92 – F.H.L. Temp. MSS box, folder 13.
- <sup>58</sup> Letter dated 8.4.92 – Moscow – FHL Temp MSS, Box 13, folder 13.
- <sup>59</sup> *The Times*, 6th April 1892.
- <sup>60</sup> Scott, pp.133.

- <sup>61</sup> 100 kopeks = 1 rouble; 3 kopeks is therefore less than 1 penny.
- <sup>62</sup> Letter dated 14/26th October 1892; R.F.C. folder 14; From J. Blessig, whose original intention was to raise £1-2,000 and establish a few kitchens, but in doing his accounts found that £18,200 and £22,000 worth of American flour had passed through his hands. At least half this money was received from the Friends Famine Relief Fund; double dating was used in many Russian letters as Russia still used the old *Julian* calendar until 1918.
- <sup>63</sup> See 'Shishkoff Russian Famine Fund', *Nineteenth Century Magazine*, vol. 31, (1892), pp.871-876; Blessig correspondence in R.F.C. folder 14, letter dated 5/17th October, 1892.
- <sup>64</sup> London Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1893, p.114-5.
- <sup>65</sup> 'E.W. Brooks' Russian Memoirs' MSS transcribed by Ernest C. Fry, 1922-1932, private collection.