

Red Cross Activities in the Amur Governorate General at the Late 19th to Early 20th Centuries

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Abstract. The formation and activities of the Red Cross in the Amur Governorate General, which was established in 1884, are studied on the basis of archival documents. The complex natural and climatic conditions, inadequate health systems and the high mortality rate, proximity to disadvantaged countries in epidemiological terms, as well as the difficult military and political situation in the region, all led to the need for the development of the Red Cross movement in the Russian Far East. However, the lack of attention from the Main Department of the Russian Red Cross (RRC), and especially the Far Eastern society, led to a relatively low level of activity of its local organizations. However, in this period the first community of Sisters of Mercy – in Blagoveshchensk and Khabarovsk – was created. They operated small hospitals. During military conflicts in the Far East (the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900 and the Russian-Japanese war of 1904–1905), the Red Cross sent teams to the area from European Russia. It was also a period of significant spread of epidemics. Local RCC branches as much as possible organized medical and health education, and engaged in collecting funds for the needs of the organization. These activities were not carried out on a large scale, but it was an undoubted contribution to medical and social assistance on the eastern edge of Russia.

Keywords: Russian Red Cross Society, donations, Sister of Mercy Society, Far East, Amur Governorate General

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The story of the Red Cross in the Russian Far East begins in 1870 with the creation of the administrative districts, including the Eastern Siberian Administrative District. In order to govern this enormous region more effectively, the General Governorate of Priamurye was created in 1884 with its capital at Khabarovka (Khabarovsk after 1893). This body included the Amur, Primorskaya, and Zabaikalskaya regions (until 1906) as well as the Vladivostok Military Governorate (until 1898) and Sakhalin Island. Soon after, the Russian Red Cross Society (RRCS) of the Priamurye General Governorate was created, under the leadership of the governor-general and with local branches led by governors.

The combination of harsh environmental conditions, a catastrophic shortage of doctors (due to the absence of zemstvo medicine), and an extremely underdeveloped network of medical institutions and health care services led to high levels of disease and death in the Far East. The

region's proximity to countries with high rates of epidemics contributed to the problem.

The average life expectancy of an ethnic Russian in the region was only 36 years [1, p. 10] and the statistics were even worse for the local, indigenous population, although reliable data for this period is lacking.

The Red Cross leaders at the time were apparently unconcerned with the problems occurring in the Far East. It was only during the outbreak of an epidemic that they dispatched small teams of medical workers to the region. The operation of the local branches relied on member contributions and donations, including those made by the main branch for the purpose of helping victims in the various local branches. Local branches also relied on the recruitment of new paying members and on the preparation of annual financial accounts. They were headed at first by individuals and resembled bureaucratic organizations. Military leaders usually governed the local branches.

In contrast with the other governorates, in Priamurye there was no religious order of nuns serving as nurses and there were no nurse training

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courses until the middle of the 1890's. The Red Cross leaders did not take action to create such institutions and the local public was not particularly enterprising.

The first nurse training courses were organized in Vladivostok in 1894, during the Russo-Japanese War. This was done on the suggestion of V.N. Radikov, a military medical officer from the Priamurye district. Local doctors were happy to give lessons for free [2, p. 6]. Ten people participated in the training program, and they all took their exams in the presence of the local military governor [2, p. 7].

The same year, the Blagoveshchensk local government organized a religious order of nurses. It opened the first and only Ladies' Committee in the region and was responsible for an increased level of activity for the Red Cross affairs. Through its efforts, and with the support of local authorities and citizens, the Order of Nurses of the Priamurye General Governorate was formed on the 27th of July, 1895. It consisted of four members [3, p. 40]. Mostly funded by local merchants, it later opened a admission room with four beds, [3, p. 41].

In February of 1896, through the intervention of the Priamurye Governor General, S.M. Dukhovskiy, the Russian Red Cross Society decided to allocate a sum of 1,800 rubles to the Priamurye branch for the establishment of other nursing orders in Khabarovsk. It also sent 17 experienced nurses to the region: 11 for the military medical institution and 6 as "an experienced core from which to start other nurse communities"¹ [4, p. 3]. However, by the 28th of May, 1896, only 14 nurses had arrived. They were divided: 2 stayed in the fortress, 3 were sent to Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, 2 were sent to Blagoveshchensk, and 2 were assigned to manage Khabarovsk hospital. "The remaining five", in the words of chairman of the local government, M.P. Kaufman, "created an order on the 2nd of July and have been temporarily posted to the Alexandro-Kseninsky alms-house" [4, p. 12].

It should be noted that the founding of the Khabarovsk alms-house is connected to Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, second cousin of Emperor Nicholas II. In September 1887, during a round-the-world trip as a simple naval officer, he visited the Priamurye General Governorate. That same month, while he was still 21 years old,

he donated his officer's salary to the region, which went towards the founding of the alms-house to be managed by the Priamurye Red Cross branch. In honor of the Grand Duke's engagement to Grand Duchess Ksenia Alexandrovna (the daughter of Alexander III), the institution was named the Alexandro-Kseninsky Alms-house.

In March of 1896, S.M. Dukhovskiy sent a request to Alexander Mikhailovich, asking if the donated funds be used towards the foundation of a nursing order and clinic in Khabarovsk [4, p. 7]. He also asked that the name of the order, like the alms-house, be named "Alexandro-Kseninsky", to which the duke gave his "highest permission" [4, p. 6]. In October of 1896, the opening ceremony was held [4, p. 17], and soon the order became a comfortable and well-equipped institution.

The grand duke's funds completely financed the activity of the Alexandro-Kseninsky alms-house and partially financed the order [5].

In 1900, tensions flared on the border between China and Priamurye due to the Boxer Rebellion against foreigners. Along with other European powers, Russia sent troops to help to suppress the rebellion.

In June, the army of the Priamurye Military Region was put on alert and mobilized. This posed a danger to the medical services of the region, because if military activity was greatly increased, there would be a severe reduction in local medical personnel, which was already low to begin with. The RRCS sent a request to the local Far East branches to independently organize their health care services and also to begin fundraising efforts.

One of the first to respond was the Blagoveshchensk branch, which was tasked with the most difficult responsibilities, as it was located practically within the military conflict zone. On the 1st of June, 1900, Chinese forces opened fire on Russian ships stationed on the Amur River in the Blagoveshchensk Region and the next day began bombardments of the city that lasted nearly two weeks. The admission room of the nursing order and the clinic, being situated on the banks of the Amur river, became front line treatment centers. Wounded sailors from the *Mikhail* and *Selenga* steamers were sent there [6, p. 45]. Although the clinic building was located in the line of fire, the Red Cross staff continued to help everybody

¹ Hereinafter, citations will retain the original features.

that was sent to them to the best of their ability. Although their abilities were limited, they were enhanced by local townspeople came to volunteer their services [7].

In June, 15 nurses from the Khabarovsk order and 5 from the Blagoveshchensk order were sent to the Priamurye branch field hospitals, leaving only one nurse – each to manage their own institutions.

Training courses for medics and nurses were hastily organized in Vladivostok and Nikolsk-Ussuriysk. However, almost none of the graduates of these courses were sent to the field, because the main branch did not permit the formation of a unit of medics due to the fact that such a unit had already been sent “with a sufficient number of nurses” [6, p. 23]. Undoubtedly, the nurses from the European orders had more experience and better qualifications, and the locally trained nurses were able to find employment, but such inconsistencies in the RRCS head office’s actions betrayed significant confusion in the face of emergency.

The RRCS finally began to send extensive aid to the Russian Far East only in August. On the 25th of August, after a month-long journey, the Elizaveta Fyodorovna Iverskaya Order of Medics arrived in Blagoveshchensk from Moscow. Up until this point there had been no immediate threat posed to civilians. By the end of the month, Russian forces, having cleared the banks of the Amur, made their way to the Chinese side and quickly took it under control. It was clear that the fortunes of the rebels in China had taken a turn for the worse. However, the medical aid sent to the Far East by the Red Cross would not stay there for long. They continued to send “medical personnel, medicine, hospital supplies, and on the 26th of August the steamer *Tsaritsa* arrived from Odessa” [8, p. 25]. Soon, another problem occurred – there was an excess of the Red Cross medical personnel assigned to the care of sick and wounded soldiers [9] and the main objective became their evacuation. In January of 1901 the RRCS field hospitals in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok were closed, and a part of their inventory was transferred to the local branches [10]. By May all of the Red Cross personnel had returned to European Russia.

The events of 1900, it would seem, showed that the RRCS (and other organizations) were not prepared to act decisively in the event of

military emergencies in the Russian Far East. Meanwhile, the political situation in the region remained complicated, and the lack of medical institutions and qualified personnel intensified. The nursing orders that were intended to solve this problem were active only in Khabarovsk and Blagoveshchensk. A Red Cross order was clearly needed in Vladivostok. For this reason, in January 1902 the military governor of Priamurye region, Major-General N.M. Chichagov, sent a telegram to the RRCS head office, requesting the creation of an order in Vladivostok that included medical workers for 10 surgical patients [11, p. 1]. The RRCS chairman N.I. Grodekov found himself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, he knew that opening such an institution was possible “only if we have of resources both for the realization of the plan and for unforeseen circumstances – as allotted by the head office” [11, p. 4]. Yet funding for such a project was not available from the local branches. On the other hand, as a Governor General, he understood how important this was for the region, especially considering the fact that there were no specialist surgeons in the area [11, p. 14]. Thus, in March 1902, when Chichagov was in St. Petersburg, Grodekov asked him to visit the RRCS main office to resubmit this request. However, having considered the request, the main office decided “to reject the petition, shelving the issue... until funding from the local branch was available” [11, p. 37]. In spite of the urgent necessity of expanding the Red Cross operations in the Far East, the main office dealt with the situation coldly and bureaucratically.

The outbreak of cholera in 1902 (which originated in Manchuria) proved to be a particularly trying period for Priamurye medical personnel. A sailor of the *Alexander* in Blagoveshchensk had contracted cholera and died. Soon there were 449 registered cases in the city. As was noted in the records of the local branch of the Red Cross, factors contributing to the rapid spread of the disease included “poverty and ignorance of the local population”, unsanitary conditions in their dwellings, poor quality of the water supply, and finally, a “habit of imbibing spirits in excess”. The mortality rate was extremely high, reaching 67.7% [12, p. 52]. Soon, rumors began to spread in the city that doctors were poisoning patients. Despite the fact that medical personnel were given clear instructions to “interact with patients in a calm

and humane way and to emphasize their comfort and protect them from any harmful influences”, on the 20th of June a period of unrest began, that threatened to become a serious “cholera riot”. Authorities managed to regain control of the situation quickly and doctors and nurses did their best [12, p. 56].

Outbreaks of the illness began to crop up in other parts of the region, especially Vladivostok [13]. It became clear that local resources were insufficient to fight the epidemic. The RRCS sent a 10-person unit of Evgeninsky Order nurses from St. Petersburg, which arrived in Khabarovsk on September 1. The epidemic was soon brought under control, and by the end of October four of the nurses had returned, although six stayed in the Far East at the request of the Priamurye branch.

Due to a lack of records for many of the Red Cross local branches, it is difficult to determine their exact role in fighting the spread of disease, but it is known that the Blagoveshchensk branch was very active. It organized lectures on “acquainting the public with the characteristics of cholera epidemics” and also offered first aid to patients. Four of the nurses worked selflessly in the cholera ward and the local infirmary. The Blagoveshchensk government officially expressed their gratitude and awarded them gold watches with their names as a gift of thanks [3, p. 46]. As part of their contribution in the fight against the cholera epidemic, the Alexandro-Kseninsky order in Khabarovsk sent a nurse to Nikolaevsk, who then remained in service at the city hospital [14, p. 8]. Moreover, the order took responsibility for managing the newly-arrived nurses from St. Petersburg [14, p. 9].

Soon after, on the 27th of January, 1904, the Russo-Japanese war broke out, bringing with it an increase in patriotic sentiment throughout the country. As a result, charitable activity picked up, particularly for the Red Cross. Despite many difficulties, the organization provided an invaluable service for our forces. By the end of 1900, there were 158 active RRCS clinics in the Far East and Siberia with 26,000 beds, 2 bacteriological units and 8 disinfection units. Treatment of sick and wounded soldiers was carried out mostly within the borders of the Priamurye Military district [15, p. 57] under control of the RRCS main office.

The Far East division of the organization, due to its proximity to the conflict sites, took part in

all Red Cross activities. Individuals and charitable donations played a significant role in the efforts and the Blagoveshchensk branch maintained its traditional levels of activity. In 1904, it began a 3-month course on how to care for sick and wounded soldiers, with eleven people receiving certificates. In the same year a donation drive was started to obtain supplies and beds for wounded soldiers. As a result, the branch was able to obtain 25 beds, 7 of which were obtained from local donors and the rest of which arrived with the Red Cross medical unit which was sent to the region. Moreover, the order devoted 12 nurses to support the Russian Army [3, p. 41]. Donations (to the sum of 5,500 rubles) made their way to the head office [3, p.50]. The participation of the other branches was more modest. For example, the small Nikolaevsk Committee held two lotteries and a fundraising drive, and also organized a charity event, all of which resulted in a combined total of 6,177 rubles [3, p. 5]. The Vladivostok Committee engaged in similar activities to obtain “food supplies for the local infirmary in the event of a siege of Vladivostok Fortress” [3, p. 27].

The Red Cross medical institutions and personnel spread across the Priamurye General Governorate played an important role in improving the medical services for the local population, although it should not be overestimated. In addition to treating wounded soldiers, some infirmaries also provided free treatment for the sick, for example, the Kaufman Infirmary in Vladivostok [3, p. 27]. To sum up, three Red Cross infirmaries were in operation in the city during the war. There were also hospitals and infirmaries in Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, Khabarovsk, and in the villages of Spasskoe, Razdolnoe, and Grodekovo [16, p. 169]. From the 1st of June to the 25th of September 1904 there was a temporary Red Cross infirmary in Blagoveshchensk, which offered treatment to 350 people [17, p. 149].

In sum, “during the Russo-Japanese War, the military medics and the Red Cross medics together, unlike other government entities, for the most part succeeded in carrying out their responsibilities” [15, p. 61]. However, Russia’s crushing defeat in the war proved the inability of the Far East to provide a reliable base for the Russian army in the case of emergency. This assessment also applies to the local RRCS branches and, apparently, the Red Cross management recognized this. Their

war-time organization plan testifies to this fact. The first part of the plan called for an analysis of both the central and local branches and came to the following conclusions: “poor distribution of the Red Cross resources throughout the Empire; extreme lack of resources in Siberia and the Far East; insufficient quantity of reserve medical equipment after the Chinese campaign; general unpreparedness of the Red Cross for a war in the Far East” [16, p. 167].

By the end of the war, a portion of the RRCS supplies were left in the Far East (in Vladivostok, Nikolsk-Ussuriysk and Blagoveshchensk) [18, p. 448].

In April 1906, the Red Cross established a Warehouse Council, tasked with accumulating pre-packed supplies and equipment in case of war. This was the idea of N.I. Pirogov, based on his experience in Crimea and other wars. Warehouses were established in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. Nikolsk-Ussuriysk was unable to store the RRCS supplies; therefore, the other part was transferred to Vladivostok and part of them were sold to the Chinese Eastern Railway. Vladivostok began to build warehouses with the assistance of the city council [19, p. 22]. In Khabarovsk, part of the supplies were transferred to the Alexandro-Kseninsky Order and the other part was given to the RRCS ward that had been constructed at the order [18, p. 450]. In 1908, another warehouse was built in Blagoveshchensk.

The warehouses were involved in the procurement and storage of supplies and equipment in preparation for not only military conflict, but natural disasters as well. Supplies for displaced persons, also sent to the Far East, included: “bed linens, beds, tents, and canned goods” [19, p. 23]. Aid for local physicians and social institutions was also sent. In Vladivostok, for example, institutions receiving aid included the city hospital, cholera wards, the prison hospital, the naval hospital, the sea rescue society, the workhouse for the poor, and others [20, p. 45-46]. The volume of aid sent was not very big, but it undoubtedly had a major impact on the local health care system, which needed everything it could get.

Meanwhile, despite the bitter lessons learned during the wars, relations between the head office and the Priamurye region did not change, and no changes were made to the local branches, which remained quite small. In

1908, Vladivostok had 31 regular members and 5 lifetime members [12, p. 32], while in 1909, the number of regular members had fallen to 26 [22]. The Blagoveshchensk branch was larger, with 67 members in 1908, being 47 of them regular [23]. The local branches mostly held fundraising drives, while those that had nursing orders (Khabarovsk and Blagoveshchensk) offered medical services and, when necessary, training courses.

A letter has been preserved which was sent to the RRCS leaders in 1908 by Adjutant-General Count I.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov, a governor in the Caucasus, who had served as a chairman of the RRCS during the Russo-Japanese War. He wrote about the “bureaucratic regime” and “the awful lack of coordination between the peripheral and central branches”, stressing that if the society “did not use the experiences of the previous war as an opportunity for self-improvement, it would be a grave sin”. The former chairman thought that there should be a detailed investigation into the activities of the Russian Red Cross during the war in order to learn the necessary lessons. He also suggested instituting an RRCS body of inspectors because “an active inspection of the provincial branches, on the one hand, would improve their performance and, on the other would, spark the head office’s interest in the provincial branches” [16, c. 139, 140].

Although no reply was made to his first letter, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov was persistent. After his second letter, the head office, at a meeting on October 9, 1908, formally recognized the necessity of creating RRCS inspector positions [16, p. 145].

It is unknown whether such positions were actually established; in any case, there is no archival evidence of the existence of such positions in the Priamurye General Governorate. Inspections of such remote regions were quite rare and occurred on certain occasions. One such inspection happened in July and August of 1908, when State Council member, an engineer-general, and a honorary member of the Red Cross Society, P.F. Rerberg, and a member of the RRCS senior management, Senator B.E. Ivanitsky, visited the Far East. The Red Cross governance had asked Rerberg to observe the local branches and to decide what they needed. He visited the branches in Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok,

and Harbin. It was the first official visit to the Far East made by a Red Cross representative from the capital. The distinguished guest observed the nursing orders and their associated hospitals and clinics in Blagoveshchensk and Khabarovsk, and also the RRCS supplies warehouse in Vladivostok – the only Red Cross facility in the city. What he saw during his visit, according to the report he filed upon his return to St. Petersburg, impressed him very much [24].

This period is marked by an increased activity in the local branches. In a 1909 report of the medical department of the military governor of the Priamurye region to the office of the Priamurye governor general, we find that the Red Cross hospital in Khabarovsk had 22 beds (in 1908 there were only 11) [25, p. 6]. In a report of the medical inspector of the Amur region on the 15th of November 1911, we hear of an analogous institution in Blagoveshchensk with 24 beds (and only 20 in 1908) [25, p. 34]. For the Far East, any help from the RRCS was significant, yet funding for health care was paltry. The disease rate was high, especially in the southern regions of Primorsk region bordering China, and there were periodic epidemics. The Asiatic Cholera epidemic of 1909 in the Primorsk region was particularly dangerous and affected mainly Vladivostok and its surroundings. The Chinese and Koreans were the first victims, although knowledge of the disease arose only when corpses were exhumed after the death of two Russians.

From an epidemiological perspective, Vladivostok was particularly vulnerable, not only because it was a port city, but because out of a total population of 90 thousand, 30 thousand (or one-third) were the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Japanese, and their numbers grew in the summer months. They lived in densely populated neighborhoods in the center of the city, which were overcrowded, unsanitary, and poor. It was impossible to pinpoint the origin of the disease, as the residents of these neighborhoods did not go to Russian doctors but rather to Japanese “*isi*”, who did not provide information about infectious diseases. The dead were buried improperly. As the report indicated, “most do it more simply – in a simple way put the body into a bag and throw it on the street at night”. Soon after the first cases

were reported, active measures were taken, which quickly put an end to the epidemic [25, p. 11, 12].

It is not possible to find evidence of any participation of the RRCS in the fight against this dangerous disease, and this is no coincidence. Despite the need for swift Red Cross action, the organization was much weaker here, due to the lack of nursing orders and their associated medical personnel.

One year later, in 1910, cholera made its way to the Russian Far East from China again. The epidemic began in August in the Amursk region and in September, despite preventative measures, cases were reported in Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Blagoveshchensk, and Nikolaevsk. In just the period between the 1st and 16th of October, 79 people contracted the disease and 35 of them died [26].

At the October, 20, 1910, meeting of the Vladivostok Red Cross branch, members discussed future “fight against possible cholera epidemics in Vladivostok”. However, as the report noted, “after a detailed discussion, it has become apparent that the local branches, having neither the necessary funds nor the required personnel, cannot participate actively in the fight against cholera epidemics”. Therefore, the following decision was made: only “when the city runs out of funds in its fight against epidemics, will we apply to the head office for funds and supplies for the construction of infirmaries using the supplies in the Vladivostok RRCS warehouse”. Such an infirmary had been built with 45 beds in Paris Bay [20, p. 26]. At the end of October a new threat appeared – the outbreak of plague in Manchuria. Once it became aware of the possible danger to Vladivostok, the RRCS head office sent permission to allow the construction of an infirmary for plague patients using the resources from the warehouses [20, p. 27].

Thanks to effective preventative measures on the part of the local authorities, the Far East did not experience the outbreak of plague.

Obviously, the dramatic events of 1909-1910 forced Vladivostok residents to reopen a dialogue with the Red Cross about the opening of a nursing order in the city. This time, however, the local branch had the support of a well-known political figure, who was in the city at the time – A.I. Guchkov, leader of the Octoberist Party

and member of the RRCS board². He assured Governor M.M. Manakin, who was also head of the local RRCS branch, that the RRCS would “enthusiastically find and allocate the necessary credit for construction” [20, p. 39]. However, until the outbreak of the First World War, the initiative for opening a new Red Cross medical facility in Vladivostok became lost in the bureaucratic maze.

Thus, we can conclude that Red Cross branches in the Priamurye General Governorate were not as active or developed as branches in many other regions of the Russian Empire. The governing positions of the main and local branches were primarily occupied by dignitaries who, on the one hand raised the status of these organizations and on

the other contributed to their bureaucratization. Furthermore, the financial resources at the disposal of these institutions were meager – philanthropy in the Far East, for various reasons, was not as widespread as in the European part of Russia or even Siberia, and funding from the head office, not to mention attention, was negligible. It grew, of course, in times of military conflict or epidemics, but it was temporary. Nevertheless, the local Red Cross branches made their contribution to philanthropy, medical education, and, where there were the RRCS medical facilities and nursing orders, to the medical services and social support of the region. And in a region with such unfortunate sanitary and health conditions, this support was extremely important.

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² A.I. Guchkov was in Manchuria as a RRCS representative in order to provide assistance to the organization in its fight against the plague epidemic in the Russian colonies.

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