

My Journey to the Front

At the end of 1942, four freight trains laden with newly-collected presents set off on their long journey to the Soviet battle front. Choibalsan was in charge of the leading train of the convoy. The other trains were headed by the chairman of the Presidium of the National Baga Khural G. Bumtsend, the secretary of the Party Central Committee Ch. Sürenjav, and General Ch. Mijid of the People's Volunteer Cavalry Corps. I myself took part in the delegation led by Choibalsan. This was an opportunity to learn about life in the heroic fighting units of the Soviet Army. Troops and their supplies were flowing in a constant uninterrupted convoy along the railway line towards the battle front.

These trains took several days to complete the journey. When the delegation arrived at Yaroslavskii station in Moscow, it was cordially received by some Soviet Party and government leaders. Choibalsan was housed in special accommodations down a small street called Ostrovskii. The others were put up in a hotel. Around this time, a famous officer of the civil war, Colonel-General of the Cavalry O. I. Gorodovikov,¹ held a reception for us at the Hotel Natsional where we had some close discussions. He mentioned fighting alongside Budënyi in the Civil war, and said that cavalry were needed in this war too. He presented Choibalsan with a pearl-handled hand gun and gave me another, smaller one.

After spending a few days in Moscow, the delegation split up to head out in several directions to hand over the gifts to the battling armies, divisions, units, soldiers and officers on the four battle fronts. A delegation led by Choibalsan set off to deliver some of the gifts to the Western Front. Well before our delegation had set off for that same front, the heroic Soviet army had succeeded in smashing Hitler's German forces near Moscow at a critical moment and was pursuing them westwards.

During our journey to the Western Front, the delegation came under the protection of several military units. When we had to go through the forests covered in thick snow, our transport was painted white for camouflage. There were recently liberated war-damaged towns and settlements all along the route traveled by the delegation. Large damaged enemy guns, trucks, and fragments of tanks lay scattered about. There were buildings with crumbling walls, broken stoves, and bare gardens scorched by the fires of war.

We came across signs nailed to trees on both sides of the road which marked the graves of the Fascists. When we saw them, although we felt that the enemy had got what he deserved from the defenders of the Motherland, there was also a feeling that it was the destructiveness of Hitler and his companions which was to blame for these soldiers being separated from their peaceful Motherland and forced into such a war.

¹ Oka Ivanovich Gorodovikov, an ethnic Kalmyk, was born in 1879. During the second world war, he was chiefly responsible for the formation of cavalry units. He retired in 1947 and died on February 26, 1960.

When we came across a sign showing five red stars erected at the side of the road, we knew that it marked the grave of a Soviet soldier. We wondered about which Soviet region and town he might have come from, and whose son he was, and imagined how he had heroically fought for his Motherland, and was now resting in peace. These determined people lost their precious lives in order to liberate their pristine land from the aggressive enemy. This was not only for the honest cause of the Soviet people, but was for the sake of social advancement by all peoples and races. As they are the true heroes of our time, how can History ever forget them?

As we witnessed all these things along our route following the events of a tough battle, the immeasurable loss, damage, destruction, death, and suffering experienced by the Soviet people in their struggle for victory was clearly imprinted on our minds.

The delegation continued on its journey, viewing many things along the way. We entered a forest in which there was a smallish building. This turned out to be the command headquarters of the front. Due to its fortification (it was hidden under pine needles), from the outside it could not be recognized as a building. The commanders of the front saluted in military fashion and cordially received the delegation led by the Mongolian Marshal. They invited us into their accommodation, where we had some close, friendly discussions.

The colonel-general in command at the front was I. S. Konev (later to become a marshal), the commander of the staff headquarters was Colonel-General V. D. Sokolovskii, and the representative of the Senior Command was Lieutenant-General N. A. Bulganin (later to become Marshal and Prime Minister of the Soviet Union). All of them gave us detailed information about the situation on the Western Front.

V. D. Sokolovskii was a handsome [well-built] man of about fifty, and his eyes, speech, and mannerisms led us to think he was a perfect example of an intelligent general. Choibalsan congratulated and informed them that they had been awarded the Order of the MPR by a decree of the Presidium of the Baga Khural of Mongolia. Choibalsan personally presented them with the medals. Although the front command was quite busy, they managed to treat the delegation [to a meal] and showed a film about the war. The same evening, a concert was held by the army musicians. During this performance we temporarily forgot that we had arrived at the battle front of a major war and it felt just as if we were among happy, proud people in peace time. Of course, this was not the case. It was a difficult time during an enormously severe struggle when the Soviet people had to fight as well as enjoy artistic performances and relaxation.

The delegation then went to several units of the three armies at the front commanded by Lieutenant-General I. Kh. Bagramyan, who later became a marshal, and the lieutenant-generals I. V. Boldin and N. A. Belov. While the delegation was handing over the presents and letters from the people to the several hundred soldiers and officers, the representatives found out about the battle situation.

When I visited the units at the front, they appeared similar to the ones I had come across in peace time. There were few soldiers in groups together and not many people about in general. Some had occupied their proper positions, some were engaged in battle with the enemy and some were preparing to take their turn in the tough battle. They all appeared to be strong, barrel-chested men dressed in white felt coats and gray fur hats. They were carrying automatic weapons.

One of them caught sight of us and smiled as if he were meeting his parents and family, an event which I will always remember. I sometimes wonder where he is and

what he is doing now and I wished that I could have met with him and talked. There were also some colorful officers wearing binoculars around their necks and guns on their hips who seemed to be busily rushing around the place. It was apparent that each and every man, whether soldier or officer, had a clear job to do. Whenever the signal was given, they all seemed to know how to carry out their orders.

The commanding officer, Lieutenant-General I. Kh. Bagramyan was a hugely-built man and seemed to be a wise, intelligent officer. The generals I. A. Boldin and N. A. Belov struck us as being two quiet, ordinary Russians. The Soviet army officers talked to us about the famous generals who emerged from among the Russian people to battle with foreign enemies during many periods of their history. They also told us about the People's Heroes, the October Revolution, famous generals of the civil war, and other famous people inspired by their native traditions and the fighting ability of their warriors. They now had the opportunity to take their turn to honorably fulfill the duty presented by history, by vanquishing the invading enemy. Once having liberated the Motherland they said that they had been destined by history to rescue the whole world from the danger of Fascism.

Under the cover of special protection, the delegation crossed into the line of fire and entered a fortified building. The Soviet artillery units opened heavy fire on the enemy, and we watched an aircraft bombing raid in progress. The Soviet people who manufactured those large guns and aircraft wanted to raise the strength and fighting ability of the Motherland, and they thought of ways to transmit knowledge on how to build these things to industry, which was welcomed by the workers there. In a short period of time the weapons were being mass-produced and received by the military commanders who used them to exterminate the enemy. That was how the slogan "Aim for total Victory" was realized.

Regardless of the weather, Soviet aircraft would soar into the sky and fearlessly attack the enemy, after which we watched the Fascists' aircraft catch fire and fall to the ground. On December 14-15 we visited a Soviet mortar battery. While concealed in trenches we watched the shelling of a concealed enemy hideout through binoculars. We also visited a tank unit where we saw the powerful technology being guided towards the enemy. It was exciting to witness how the able Soviet soldiers controlled their weapons and used their talent and determination when engaging the enemy in battle.

One morning, the delegation was invited into a Katyusha artillery battery where we were placed in a safe area and everyone was given a pair of binoculars. We were shown the location of the enemy's hiding place and the Katyusha missile launchers which were mounted on vehicles ready to be fired. When the Katyushas were fired towards the enemy we heard a thunderous noise with flashes of lighting and what looked like flaming missiles. Clearly, this was the weapon needed to smash the enemy.

That evening, after we had arrived at our accommodations at the front, we were resting when an officer entered and saluted Marshal Choibalsan, "The Katyusha battery which was fired in your presence at the enemy resulted in the following: We were able to strike several of the enemy's reinforced hideouts, and several dozen soldiers, machine guns and heavy artillery units were destroyed. Several Fascists were captured alive. If you wish, you may see the captured Fascists and ask them any questions." Then, a youngish Fascist soldier wearing a large torn gray coat and boots was dragged in. Choibalsan asked about him and he replied, "We are members of the Fascist SS, and we were carrying out orders from our command. We do not know what will happen to us

now." We thought that they must have been feeling despondent from the moment they were defeated near Moscow and pursued westwards.

The delegation returned to Moscow for a few days before again setting off to visit a tank unit on the Western Front. This next journey resulted from a decision taken by the MPRP Central Committee and Council of Ministers to use some of the national budget to purchase a tank column named "Revolutionary Mongolia" which was to be handed over by a delegation headed by Choibalsan. Following a reception held for the delegation at the tank unit, the tank commander and the soldiers paraded for the gathering in honor of the Mongolian nation. Each tank was clearly marked with its own name, for example "Party Central Committee," "Council of Ministers," "Sükhbaatar," "Marshal Choibalsan," "Khatanbaatar Magsarjav" and the names of the eighteen aimags. At the ceremony, Colonel A. S. Leonov, the commander-in-chief of the tank units, accepted the gift of tanks and made a speech. Choibalsan, leader of the delegation also made a speech. The commanders of the tank unit made a promise to us saying "These giant machines which all of you have presented to us will be driven into Berlin to smash the enemy."

There was a lot of news [in the press] about the visit of the representatives. All their names were published in the newspaper for the troops of the Western Front and their related units. The letters of thanks written by the officers to the Mongolian people were also printed. In addition, we brought back many letters and poems from the officers and soldiers at the front addressed to the Mongolian people, and these were published in our press time and again. The soldiers and officers of the Soviet army revealed their heart-felt feelings and the high value they placed on the genuine concern of the people in far-away Mongolia.

After Marshal Choibalsan and the delegation had returned to Moscow from the front, Soviet Marshal G. K. Zhukov went to Choibalsan's special residence to discuss the situation at the front and the progress being made there. We heard later that Zhukov had been working in Moscow following the defeat of Hitler's German forces which had been surrounding Stalingrad. After M. I. Kalinin² had received Kh. Choibalsan and G. Bumtsend, and Choibalsan had been awarded the Order of Suvorov, Kalinin said, "Well, let's have some tea. I am very fond of the tea in Moscow." Turning to Bumtsend he asked, "How many cups of tea do you drink in a day?" Bumtsend replied, "Actually we Mongols say 'How many pots of tea do you drink in a day?' Kalinin laughed heartily at this and said "Your people are really something!"

On February 2, 1943, the Mongolian delegation headed by Choibalsan was received in the Kremlin Palace by leading members of the Soviet Party and government headed by I. V. Stalin. I was present at the discussions, which lasted a few hours. During the meeting Stalin said, "It is at times of hardship that you realize the quality of your friends." He was referring to 1921 when the Soviet people offered assistance to the Mongolians who were suffering. "Now, in this difficult war-time situation, the Mongols are repaying us" he joked.

There were over forty people from the Mongolian side at the reception, including Bumtsend and Sürenjav, who had delivered gifts to the front. I assumed the task of interpreting for both sides. Although I tried to do this carefully without making any mistakes, I was scolded by Choibalsan and Sürenjav for omitting an occasional word.

² Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin (1875-1946), served as the Soviet Union's president, officially called the chairman of the presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, from 1938 to 1946.

Choibalsan later told me that while I was interpreting in Russian and Mongolian, Stalin had asked "How and where was this young man educated?"

As the reception drew to a close, waiters ran around to serve champagne, hard liquor, and food. While I was taking advantage of this opportunity to have a bit of the delicious food at one of the tables, Stalin rose and said two or three words in a slow Georgian accent which I did not hear properly. A. A. Zhdanov, a member of the Politburo of the USSR Communist Party,³ came to my assistance saying that Stalin had just said, "Hey young man, a toast to the young man who has been interpreting for us!"

Zhdanov said that I should go and touch glasses with Stalin, and asked me what kind of liquor I preferred. I told him quite truthfully that I wanted only the mildest liquor. In a panic I took the glass and went up to Stalin, splashing it on my sleeves so that hardly anything remained in my glass. Noticing this, L. P. Beria⁴ asked, "Aren't you drinking a toast to Stalin?" I was afraid and replied, "I will drink, I will drink." Beria filled my glass with hard liquor. I took it and touched glasses with Stalin. Then I drank it in one gulp. I felt something burning inside me, along with some dizziness. It seemed as if the floor of the large room was rising and the ceiling was falling. I sat down on a chair, barely able to wait for the end of the reception. But luckily the reception soon came to an end, and I went back to my room.

While Choibalsan was in Moscow, he was met by the famous Soviet actors L. N. Sverdlin, who played D. Sükhbaatar, and N. K. Cherkasov⁵ who had played the baron [von Ungern Sternberg]. The famous sculptor S. D. Merkurov⁶ came to make a bust of Choibalsan and the artist S. V. Gerasimov⁷ painted his portrait.

The delegation returned (to Mongolia) to tell the people about where they had been and the things which they had seen there. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Red Army, on February 23, 1943, new trainloads of gifts from Mongolian workers set off for the front. On this occasion, two trains were sent, accompanied by a delegation headed by the General Secretary of the Central Committee, Tsedenbal, who visited many of the units and companies at the front to present them with the gifts.

The MPRP Central Committee expressed its wish to send a group of people to take a course at the Higher Party School attached to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Bolshevik Party. It was decided that the Central Committee members N. Lkhamsüren, Ch. Lodoidamba, Sh. Luvsanvandan, Ts. Namsrai, and myself would be sent there.

In the middle of June we left Ulaanbaatar and arrived in Moscow, where we stayed in the staff accommodations at the Mongolian embassy. We made our way to the

³ Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov, born in 1896, served as Politburo member from 1939 until his death on August 31, 1948.

⁴ Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria, born in 1899 in Georgia, was at the time of Shirendev's visit the Soviet Union's Commissar of Internal Affairs. After Stalin's death, Beria was purged in July 1953 and on December 23, 1954 was executed by firing squad.

⁵ Nikolai Konstantinovich Cherkasov (1903-1966), was an actor at the Pushkin State Academy Drama Theater in Leningrad from 1933 until shortly before his death.

⁶ Sergei Dmitrievich Merkurov was born in Armenia in 1881, studied during most of the first decade of the twentieth century in Zurich, Munich, Florence and Paris. He died on June 8, 1952.

⁷ Sergei Vasil'evich Gerasimov, born in 1885, was a painter and graphic artist who received his training before the first world war at the Stroganov Arts College and the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in Moscow. He died on April 20, 1964.

College in Moscow and showed them our letter of appointment. From July 1, 1943 the Party Central Committee of the All-Union Republics of the USSR prepared lectures for the Frontier, Regional, and City Party committees. We decided to enroll in the six-month preparatory course, during which we were taught an interesting course on international relations.

The topics taught included the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, the history of the All-Union Communist Party, history of the Soviet Union, international relations from 1917 to 1934, foreign policy of the Soviet Union, world economics, political geography, the economy of the Soviet Union during the second world war, wartime propaganda, and political agitation. These courses were taught by famous academicians and corresponding members, including G. F. Aleksandrov,⁸ the philosopher M. M. Rozental, B. M. Kedorov, the academicians of USSR History B.G. Grekov and V.P. Volgin,⁹ the academician S. V. Bakhrushin,¹⁰ the historian and academician E. V. Tarle,¹¹ P. N. Pospelov, and E. M. Yaroslavskii¹² who, despite being in poor health, gave several lectures. He had been present at the trial and execution of Baron Ungern in Novosibirsk. Some famous diplomats, such as the international economist L. A. Leont'ev, gave lectures in international relations.

As there were plenty of printed lectures and books on those subjects at that college, we strove to read and study them. Leading figures in the international revolutionary movement also came to give us lectures. Among them were Palmiro Togliatti,¹³ Otto Kuusinen,¹⁴ Vasilii Kolarov (who came to our Party's Ninth Congress as a representative of the Comintern), and Dolores Ibarruri who gave several lectures in Russian on specialist subjects. The course attendees also met with and listened to the talks given by war heroes of the Motherland, generals, officers, and soldiers. Lectures on Lenin were given by the Party Central Committee staff member and close friend of Lenin, E. D. Stasova,¹⁵ and by L. A. Foteeva who worked during Lenin's time.

After we had completed our course, at our own request, we learned about the ideological work of some of the Party organizations in Moscow, the editorial work of art

⁸ The philosopher Georgii Fedorovich Aleksandrov was born in St. Petersburg in 1908. He received his doctorate in 1938 and became a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1946. He died on July 21, 1961.

⁹ Vyacheslav Petrovich Volgin (1879-1962) joined the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1930 and served as one of its vice-presidents between 1942 and 1953.

¹⁰ Sergei Vladimirovich Bakhrushin (1882-1950), a native of Moscow, graduated from Moscow University in 1904. His specialty was Russian history, and he also helped write the histories of several Asian ethnic groups, including the Yakuts, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tatars, and Komi.

¹¹ Born in Kiev in 1875, Evgenii Viktorovich Tarle graduated from Kiev University in 1896 and then moved on to Leningrad (Petrograd) University from 1903 to 1921. His main works dealt with Russian and Italian history. He died on January 5, 1955.

¹² Emel'yan Mikhailovich Yaroslavskii was born in 1878 as Minei Izrailevich Gubel'man, received a few years of college education and worked as a pharmacist and bookbinder before devoting himself to revolutionary work. After the Bolshevik victory, he spent a lifetime in the teaching of party history. He died on December 4, 1943, shortly after his meeting with Shirendev.

¹³ Togliatti (1893-1964) was the long-time leader of the Italian Communist Party.

¹⁴ Born in Finland in 1881, Otto Vil'gel'movich Kuusinen spent a lifetime in the Communist movement both in Finland and later in the Soviet Union. He died in Moscow on May 17, 1964.

¹⁵ Elena Dmitrievna Stasova (1873-1966), a native of St. Petersburg, owed her later prominence to her collaboration with Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, in Sunday workers' schools and various underground activities before 1917.

and news journals, and education at university, higher, and middle schools. During our studies there, J. Sambuu, who was our ambassador, was very kind to us and sometimes used to invite us for meals.

When we returned home in early January 1944, N. Lkhamsüren was appointed head of the ideology section of the Party Central Committee, Ts. Namsrai became manager of the publication department of the Party Central Committee and was in charge of the translations of the works of Lenin and Stalin. Sh. Luvsanvandan became manager of the Education Department of the Central Committee, and Ch. Lodoidamba was appointed as a lecturer. I remained a reviewer, as before.

Around that time, Choibalsan said that since I had been a member of the Youth League for a long time, it was now time for me to be recruited into the Party. I was recruited by the party cell attached to the government.