

# Jaroslav Hašek Behind the Lines



Translated by  
Mark Corner

Telegram: Udejte počet zajatců. Poslední telegram o velkém vítězství pod Bugulmu nejasný. Petrohradskou jízdu pošlete pod Bugur. Slan le třetí armáde. Sdělte též, kolik času oseti jste vydal propagacního časopisu v jazyce tatarském i ruském. Počítáte časopisu. Počítáte kurýra s podrobným



## **Behind the Lines**

Bugulma and Other Stories

**Jaroslav Hašek**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jaroslav Hašek** (1883–1923) was a Czech writer and one of the most important interwar authors.

At the turn of the 20th century he wandered around Europe leading a vagrant and bohemian life and became acquainted with Czech anarchists, an experience which affected his later work and thinking. Initially, he focused mainly on sketches, short travel pieces and humorous stories for magazines, most of which were written in Prague's pubs. Later he worked as an editor for several anarchist magazines.

Having voluntarily joined the army in 1915, he left for the Galician front and later joined the Czechoslovak Legion in Russia, and in 1918 the Red Army in which he became a commissar. From 1920 till his death he lived in Czechoslovakia.

He wrote about 1,200 short stories. His participation in the world war and in the Russian revolution lies at the foundation of the future direction of his work in which the grotesque often intertwines with tragedy. In his most famous novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk: and His Fortunes in the World War* (1921–23, the most translated book in Czech literature), Hašek explores the conflicts within society, while also compassionately describing the frailty of a man fighting in vain for his ideals. Employing parody and the grotesque, he addresses fundamental issues in modern philosophy and sociology as well as aesthetics and literary science, which have earned this work the reputation as “the bible of humor.” There have been several film adaptations of *The Good Soldier Švejk* as well as stage adaptations (e.g. from Bertold Brecht's).

## COMMANDING OFFICER, TOWN OF BUGULMA

It was the beginning of October, 1918. That was when the Revolutionary Military Council on the left bank of the Volga in Simbirsk gave me the news. I had been made Commanding Officer of the Town of Bugulma. I spoke with the Chairman, one Kayurov: 'Are you quite sure that Bugulma is already in our hands?'

'No specific information has been received,' was the response I got. 'I'd be surprised if it was in our hands right now, but by the time you get there I have no doubt it will be.'

'I take it that I'll have an escort?' I asked in a quiet voice. 'One other thing - how do I get to this Bugulma? I mean to say, where is it?'

'You'll have an escort, twelve men strong. As for your other question, look at a map. Do you think I've got nothing better to do than worry about where some wretched Bugulma is?'

'Just one further question, Comrade Kayurov. When will I get some money to cover my travelling and living expenses?'

My words evoked a bout of exasperated hand-waving. 'You must be out of your mind. The journey will certainly take you through several villages where you'll be given food and drink, and when you get to Bugulma you can impose a levy.'

My escort was waiting for me below in the guardhouse. Twelve stout Chuvash fellows with hardly a word of Russian, which meant that they were unable to put me in the picture as to whether they were conscripts or volunteers. From the way they looked, at once jovial and terrifying, it was a safe guess that they were volunteers, men who would stop at nothing.

When I had received my papers and a power of attorney making it crystal clear that every citizen between Simbirsk and Bugulma must cater to all my needs, I set off with my expeditionary force and we boarded a steamer which took

us by way of the Volga and its tributary the Kama as far as Chistopol.

There were no incidents in the course of our journey, save for the fact that one of my Chuvash escorts fell overboard in a drunken stupor and drowned. That left me with eleven. When we clambered off the steamer at Chistopol one of the remaining Chuvashes offered to round up some horse-drawn carts and then failed to return. So now they were down to ten. They managed to let me know that the disappearing Chuvash, must have gone to see how things were with his parents in Montazmo, about forty versts, or twenty-five miles, away.

When at last, after lengthy inquiries concerning the whereabouts of Bugulma and how to get there, I'd made a note of everything the local citizenry had to tell me, the rest of the Chuvashes secured some carts and we set off along the abysmal mud-soaked by-ways of that region towards Krachalga, Jelanovo, Moskovo, Gulokovo and Abashevo. The composition of these villages was pure Tartar, with the exception of Gulokovo, which is shared between Tartars and Cheremisses.

Seeing that there was a terrible enmity between the Chuvashes, who had adopted Christianity some fifty years earlier, and the Cheremisses, who have remained devoutly pagan to this day, Gulokovo was the scene of a minor mishap. Armed to the teeth as they inspected the village, the Chuvashes proceeded to drag before me the mayor, one Davledbai Shakir, who had in his hand a cage with three white squirrels in it. One of the Chuvashes, the one with the largest smattering of Russian, turned to me and put me in the picture:

'Chuvashes Orthodox one year, Orthodox ten years, thirty years, fifty years - Cheremisses pagan swine.'

Snatching the cage with the white squirrels out of Davledbai Shakir's hands, he went on:

‘White squirrel their god - one, two, three gods. This man priest, this man go leap with squirrels, go leap and pray to them. You now baptise him...’

So menacing was the look on the Chuvash faces that I ordered water to be brought and sprinkled it over Davledbai Shakir, quietly spouting some mumbo jumbo as I did so. Then I let him go.

My fine fellows then proceeded to skin the gods of the Cheremisses. I can assure one and all that you can make a fine soup out of a Cheremiss deity.

After that it was the turn of the local mullah, Abdullah by name, to visit me. He expressed delight at the fact that we’d eaten those squirrels. ‘Everyone must have something to believe in,’ he said, ‘but to believe in squirrels, such a thing is sheer beastliness. The way they scurry from one tree to another and make their messes when they’re in a cage - is that any way for a god to carry on?’ He brought us lavish helpings of roast mutton and three geese, assuring us that if there were to be a Cheremiss uprising during the night the Tartars would be with us to a man.

In the event nothing happened because, as Davledbai Shakir pointed out when he turned up to see us off in the morning, there are plenty of other squirrels in the forest. In the end we moved on through Abashevo and in the evening, without further mishap, we arrived in Little Pissetsnitse, a Russian village some twenty versts from Bugulma. The local inhabitants were very well informed about what was going on in Bugulma. The counter-revolutionary Whites had abandoned the town without a fight three days earlier. The Soviet army had come to a halt on the other side of the town, afraid to enter in case it was ambushed.

Inside the town no one was in control. Meanwhile the mayor and his entire council had been waiting for two days with bread and salt to welcome whoever deigned to enter.

I sent on ahead the Chuvash who was the least worst Russian speaker, and by morning we had all moved forward to Bugulma.

On the outskirts of the town we encountered a disorderly crowd of people coming to meet us. The mayor was there with a loaf of bread on a platter and a saucerful of salt.

He made a speech expressing the hope that I would have mercy on his town. It made me think of myself as Jan Žižka at the gates of Prague, especially when I noticed the schoolchildren in the procession.

I made a long speech in return thanking him, cutting a slice of bread and dosing it in salt. I made a point of saying that I had not come to mouth platitudes but with one aim in mind: Peace, Quiet and Order. I concluded proceedings with a kiss for the mayor and a handshake for the representative of the Orthodox clergy, before setting off for the town hall, where a headquarters had been assigned to me as Commanding Officer of Bugulma.

The next item of business was to have Order No. 1 posted up. It read as follows:

*Citizens!*

*I should like to thank each and every one of you for the heartfelt and sincere welcome you gave me and for your hospitality with the bread and salt. Preserve at all times these ancient Slavic customs. I have no wish to denigrate them in any way, but please bear in mind at the same time that I have been appointed Commanding Officer of this town, a position which means that I too have my obligations.*

*In the light of this fact I hereby request you, dear friends, to relinquish all your weapons at the town hall, where your Commanding Officer has his headquarters, at around noon tomorrow. It is not my wish to threaten anyone, but you will be aware of the fact that this is a town under siege.*



*I might add that I was to have imposed a levy upon this town. However, I hereby announce that no dues will have to be paid.*

*Gašek*

At noon the next day the square was overflowing with armed men. Well over a thousand of them armed with rifles. Some were even dragging a machine gun along.

The eleven of us might easily have been overwhelmed by this armed tide, but they had come only in order to hand over their weapons. They went on doing so long into the evening, while I shook each one of them by the hand and said a few friendly words.

In the morning I had Order No. 2 printed and posted up:

*Citizens!*

*I would like to thank all the inhabitants of Bugulma for the punctilious manner in which they carried out Order No. 1.*

*Gašek*

I went to my bed peacefully that day, unaware that there was a Sword of Damocles hanging over my head in the shape of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment.

As I have already pointed out, the Soviet army was positioned on the other side of Bugulma some fifty versts to the south and didn't dare to enter the town itself, fearing an ambush. In the end, however, they received an order from the Revolutionary Military Council in Simbirsk to occupy the town, come what may, and secure it as a base for the Soviet forces operating to the east of the town.

And so it came about that Comrade Yerokhimov, commander of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment, arrived that very night to occupy and subdue Bugulma, when I had already been its godfearing Commanding Officer for three

days and had been carrying out my duties to the general satisfaction of all sections of the populace.

Once the Tver Revolutionary Regiment had 'penetrated' the town, they fired salvos into the air as they passed through the streets, encountering no resistance except for my bodyguard of two Chuvashes. These were woken up while on guard duty at the door of the Commanding Officer's HQ and refused Comrade Yerokhimov entry to the town, hall when he arrived, revolver in hand, to take possession of it at the head of his regiment.

The Chuvashes were taken prisoner and Yerokhimov stormed into my office-cum-bedroom.

'Hands up,' he called out, flush with victory and with his revolver pointing right at me. I calmly did as he said.

'Who might you be, then?' the commander of the Tver Regiment asked.

'I am the Commanding Officer of Bugulma.'

'Would that be White or Soviet?'

'Soviet. May I put my hands down now?'

'You may. However, I would ask you in accordance with the rules of war to hand over your command to me without further ado. I am the one who has conquered Bugulma.'

'But I am the one who was appointed Commanding Officer,' I protested.

'To hell with your appointment. You first have to conquer the place.'

'I'll tell you what,' he added, having taken a moment to bring out his magnanimous side, 'I am prepared to make you my second-in-command. If you don't agree I'll have you shot within five minutes.'

'I've no objection to becoming your second-in-command,' I replied, and summoned my orderly. 'Vasily, put on the samovar. We will take tea with the new Commanding Officer of this town. He has just conquered Bugulma....'

*Sic transit gloria mundi.*

**SECOND-IN-COMMAND TO THE COMMANDING OFFICER, TOWN OF BUGULMA**

My first task was to free my two captured Chuvashes and then make up for sleep lost due to the coup in the town. At some time before noon I woke up to discover that all my Chuvashes had mysteriously disappeared, leaving a note stuffed into one of my boots. I could barely make it out:

*Comrade Gašek. Going seek much help here there all around. Comrade Yerkokhimov bashka-khawa (off with head).*

The second thing I discovered was that Comrade Yerokhimov had been in a sweat from early morning over the wording of his first official pronouncement to the inhabitants of Bugulma.

'Comrade Second-in-Command', he said to me, 'Do you think this will hit the mark?' He produced a piece of paper from a pile of draft orders covered in scrawl. Lines had been crossed out and new words inserted. It now read:

*To all citizens of Bugulma! This very day, following the fall of Bugulma, I have taken over as your Commanding Officer. I am hereby dismissing your former Commanding Officer from his post on grounds of incompetence and cowardice and am appointing him my second-in-command.*

*Yerokhimov, Commanding Officer of Bugulma*

'That seems to take care of everything,' I said approvingly. 'What are your plans now?'

'First of all,' he intoned solemnly, 'I shall order the mobilisation of horses. Then I shall have the mayor of the town shot. I shall take ten hostages from the bourgeoisie and hold them in prison for the duration of the Civil War. After that I shall carry out a house-to-house search of the town