

The Daily Astorian.

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ASTORIA, OREGON, SUNDAY MAY 10, 1885.

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THE CZAR OF SKOPINE.

A Russian Bank Manager Gets Away with \$8,000,000 in Eighteen Years—Astounding Disclosures of Official Corruption.

"Russia has in its service but two honest men, you and me," the Emperor Nicholas once said to his son Alexander. If such a remark were justifiable half a century ago, it would seem that the country has made but little progress in either official or business honesty, whatever it may have made in other directions. Lobbying goes on in every department of the state and permeates every branch of business. "Robbery is the rule, honesty the exception," says a recent writer on Russian affairs. "No cheating, no sales," is one of the cynical proverbs of the country; and the majority of the business people seem to hold it a fundamental rule that dishonesty is the only sure road to commercial success.

The revelations at the trial of Rykov, once manager of the defunct bank of Skopine, which took place recently at the Moscow assizes, illustrate this national dishonesty with startling emphasis. The extent of the depredations, the number of years they had been allowed to go on unchecked, the number and character of the people implicated in the robbery, the fact that the exposure was due to the efforts of an obscure newspaper and the necessarily rotten condition of a community in which such a robbery was rendered possible, all tended to give the case an almost European notoriety. The amount of the swindle perpetrated by the bank manager and his confederates was 12,000,000 roubles, or about \$8,000,000. When, after two years of legal shuffling and delay, the conspiracy was at last exposed in open court, the figures, large as they were, dropped into insignificance when compared with the social and political questions raised by this extraordinary trial.

The bank of Skopine was founded in 1863, at a time of considerable industrial activity in Russia. It was a communal bank, hence not strictly a government institution; but it was under the direct supervision of the government, being placed under the control of the ministries of the interior and finance, and obliged to render to the latter department a periodical and detailed account of its operations and its position. Rykov was appointed manager, notwithstanding the fact that he had been guilty of fraud while holding a previous appointment. The people of Skopine made a feeble protest against his appointment, but with out effect. In 1868, as the evidence showed, there was a deficit of 54,000 roubles. Being reluctant to publish this unpleasant fact to the world or impart it to the minister of finance Rykov did what, as his lawyer ingeniously put it, anybody in his place would have done—drew up a false balance sheet, and of so satisfactory a character that it drew deposits from all parts of the country. From this date the affairs of the bank went from bad to worse, and the more desperate became its condition the more brilliant grew its balance sheets. Though he was doing no legitimate banking business whatever, Rykov by offer of 7½ per cent interest on deposits from other bankers, and by paying but 5 per cent on loans, procured funds in abundance.

To show how his exceptional profits were earned, Rykov entered in the bank's books divers ingeniously contrived financial operations. There were fictitious discounts, fictitious loans, fictitious purchases and fictitious sales. An old man in the pay of the bank, so illiterate that he could hardly write his own name, signed every document in connection with the purchase of several millions' worth of imaginary securities, and this transaction, with the imaginary profits thereon always figured in the balance sheet presented to the minister and published in the Gazette. Fictitious bills with imaginary names were discounted, the manager pocketing the money. Rykov subscribed largely to schools, churches and charitable institutions, taking the money from the bank and charging it up to donors, customers. After a while even the formality of discounting bogus paper ceased to be observed. "They took money from the cash-box without counting it," said one witness, referring to Rykov's kinsmen and accomplices. "They came with a pocket-handkerchief and filled it with bank-notes and went home," testified another. Large interest was always paid depositors. And thus the swindle went on, not for weeks or months, but for fifteen long years. Everybody in Skopine knew it was a robbery; among the 6,000 customers of the bank when the crash came, not one dwelt in that town, and only nineteen were discovered in the entire province. The law places commercial banks under the immediate supervision of mayors and municipalities; it is their duty to make a monthly examination of the books, count the cash, and examine the securities. How was it, then, that for fifteen years the municipalities failed to unmask the gross frauds perpetrated by their bank manager? Simply because the officials were all privy to the frauds and participants in the plunder.

Everybody, from the town constable up to the mayor, got a share of the spoils. The policemen were in the ring; the *ispavnic*, or chief of police, was in Rykov's pay. The justices of the peace received an annual

stipend from Rykov. In fact, Rykov was the czar of Skopine by right of purchase. Men of good report were arbitrarily expelled from the city at a hint from Rykov. One contumacious inhabitant was sentenced to a term of imprisonment on a bogus charge. The police were ready at any moment to carry out Rykov's slightest behest. He lorded it over everything and everybody in the most open manner. Still, there were a few honest men in the city. One of them, M. Diakonov, denounced Rykov, and was cast into prison, ostensibly for debt, and remained there eleven months. Another was ex-mayor Leonov. Leonov wanted a monthly audit of the bank, according to law, and was fired out of office, and a more complaisant mayor chosen in his place. As far back as 1863 Leonov and a few other citizens petitioned the governor of the province for an inquiry into the affairs of the bank, setting forth their reasons for so doing. In 1874—six years later—a reply was received to the effect that the petition was not drawn up in the prescribed form, and, therefore, could not be acted upon. In 1878 an appeal of a similar nature was made to the minister of the interior. The circumlocution office again got in its work—the reply was that the document did not carry the proper stamp—29 copecks, or about 12 cents—and consequently was invalid. Then a properly stamped petition was sent, but an answer never came.

The evidence showed that the governor of the province had been bribed like all the rest. He took 20,000 roubles. The vice-governor got 100,000 roubles. The marshal of the nobility skipped out when the trial was ordered. The councilor of the provincial government, the members of the tribune and the procurator were all tarred with the same brush. The trial failed to furnish proofs equally convincing as to the implication of the bureaucracy at St. Petersburg, which was, perhaps, due to the fact that nobody dared to follow up that phase of the matter. The president of the court, the crown prosecutor and the prisoner's counsel all fought shy of it. No representative of the ministry was placed on the stand to explain how the fraud had been overlooked so long, or why petitions of Leonov and others had not been noticed. Rykov hinted that he could implicate certain high and mighty personages, if he so desired. It was shown that 1,000,000 roubles had gone to some mysterious personage in St. Petersburg, and that the emperor's adjutant-general and the prince Obolinski were largely in debt to the bank. Rykov, it was shown, had found it necessary to spend money without stint, but nobody seemed to be interested in finding out why.

The exposure and arrest of the criminals were due to the persistent efforts of Leonov and two other honest citizens and the courage of a single newspaper—the *Russian Courier*. These men were ex-members of the municipality and in good position, otherwise they would have suffered the fate of Diakonov. Finding themselves utterly unable to obtain a hearing from either the local, provincial or higher authorities, they resolved on that (in Russia) doubtful and desperate expedient—an appeal to the press. For two years they dispatched letters to various papers, not one of which ever reached its destination. The postmaster and the manager of the telegraph office were all in the pay of Rykov, and everything was intercepted that threatened his interests. It was a rule that all letters to newspapers, on any subject whatever, should be intercepted and handed to Rykov. Eventually, in 1882, these men succeeded in communicating with the newspapers, but the only paper that dared to publish the letters or notice the affairs of the bank was the *Courier*, one of the few liberal organs left, and one that has been persecuted by the government to the verge of extinction.

The publication of the letters was the death-sentence of the bank. There was an immediate run of the creditors; but the strong room, instead of containing 12,000,000 roubles, as shown in the balance-sheet, was empty and the bills were filled with bogus paper. The bank fell, and the panic and scandal caused a run on nearly every commercial bank in Russia. A few banks stood the shock, but a full dozen came down, and when their affairs were looked into they were found to be in pretty much the same condition as those of the bank of Skopine, but on a smaller scale, and the mayor of that town and several of its wealthiest inhabitants were at once arrested. In the other banks the case was equally as bad. Airloft, the manager of the bank of Orel, had appropriated as much as Rykov, his defalcations spreading over twelve years.

From the lowest office in the local and municipal governments on up to the high departments of state it is hardly an exaggeration, in face of the proven facts, to say that dishonesty is the rule and honesty the exception. The *Sovremennaya Tzestia*, a Russian paper, published in 1882 a list of the robberies known to have been committed during the previous few years by public functionaries. According to this account there were twenty-five thefts of from 20,000 to 60,000 roubles each; six ranging from 400,000 to 500,000, and six ranging from 1,000,000 to 12,000,000—in all 27,000,000 roubles or about \$18,000,000.

During Rykov's trial he protested warmly against what he termed the

injustice of the public and the press. "They say that I am a monster; that I have stolen six millions. It is a gross calumny. I swear before you, gentlemen of the jury, that I stole but one million—one million only." He protested with indignant gesture and unconscious humor. This was probably true, in the sense that he took only one million for his personal use, but to enable him to get that he had to spend the other millions of the bank as hush money. It is only in a state where free speech is suppressed and the press muzzled, and where the government and the people are alike corrupt and dishonest, that such a glaring swindle could run for years unchecked and unpunished.

To Get Rid of Malaria. What is the use of suffering from dyspepsia, nervous prostration or debility when Brown's Iron Bitters will tone you up and cast these horrors out? There is joy in every bottle of this valuable tonic. It makes bad blood good, and bids dismal people be cheerful. It brings good cheer to the dinner table, and makes the family happy. It drives away the blues, and helps you to enjoy a hearty laugh. And all the respectable druggists keep it.

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The penitentiary and insane asylum of Washington Territory are overcrowded, and branches of both institutions are talked of.

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