

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-07122-2 - Through Siberia: Volume 1  
Henry Lansdell  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

# THROUGH SIBERIA.

## CHAPTER I.

### *INTRODUCTORY.*

Object of the journey.—Interest in prisons.—Visitation of prisons in 1874.—Distribution of religious literature in Russia.—Tour round Bothnian Gulf, 1876.—To Russo-Turkish war, 1877.—To Archangel, 1878.—Origin of Siberian journey.—Alba Hellman and her correspondence.—The way opened.—Projected efforts of usefulness.—Books to be distributed.—Final resolve.

THE object that took me through Siberia was of a philanthropic and religious character; and before proceeding to a general description of the country, I should like to acquaint the reader with the circumstances that led me there. My interest in prisons dates from a visit to Newgate jail in 1867, followed by others to prisons at Winchester, Portland, Millbank, Dover, York, Exeter, Geneva, Guernsey, and Edinburgh: but this interest amounted to little more than curiosity. Two years later it took a practical turn. My summer holidays up to that time had been spent on the principle, "Play when you play, and work when you work,"—a proverb that is doubtless true, but which I had not found entirely satisfactory. I was minded,

therefore, to test another saying, that “the way to be happy is to be useful,” and in 1874 was casting about as to how the principle could be applied to a tour of five weeks through seven countries, not one of whose tongues I could speak, when the visitation of continental prisons suggested itself, and the distribution therein and elsewhere of suitable literature. The Committee of the Religious Tract Society generously placed a supply at my disposal, and in company with the Rev. J. P. Hobson, then curate of Greenwich, I started for Russia *viâ* Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, intending to return through Poland, Austria, and Prussia. We saw the prisons of Copenhagen and Stockholm, but they were well supplied with books, and needed not our help; whereas, in the old castles used as prisons at Abo and Wiborg, our papers were thankfully accepted, and in Russia quite a surprise awaited us. Without reason, I had feared that perhaps the orthodox Russians would decline to receive books from Protestants, as do the Romans. We found, however, that they would accept such books as had been approved by the censor, and accordingly we sent 2,000 pamphlets into the prisons of Petersburg, reserving a third thousand for giving away on the railway to Moscow, not knowing at that time that for such open distribution a permission is needed. I can never forget the surprise of the people and their desire to get the books. The peasants came and kissed our hands; the railway guards directed to us the attention of the station-masters, who came to receive our gifts. Priests took the books, and approved them; and many who offered money in return were puzzled to see it declined. Our stock was soon exhausted, and I determined some

*INTRODUCTORY.*

3

day to make a tour in Russia to distribute on a larger scale.

In 1876 my holiday weeks were spent in a journey across Norway and Sweden and round the Gulf of Bothnia. Twelve thousand tracts were distributed, and visits made to prisons and hospitals, those of Finland being found inadequately supplied with both Scriptures and other books. On my return I brought this before the Committee of the Bible Society, and asked for a copy of the Scriptures for every room in every prison, and for each bed in every hospital, in all Finland. This they kindly granted, so far as to offer to bear half the expense with the Finnish Bible Society ; and the plan, after some delay, was carried out. Scriptures were also to be provided, at my request, for the Finnish institutions for the deaf and dumb, and for the saloons of the steamers plying on the Scandinavian coasts.

In 1877 Roumania and the seat of the Russo-Turkish war was chosen for my holiday resort, with a view to being useful in the Russian hospitals. But I was too early, and my vacation too short ; so that after visiting, on the outward trip, some of the prisons of Austria and Hungary, I returned, doing the like through Servia, Sclavonia, the Tyrol, Basle, and Paris. The mass of the prisoners were Roman Catholics, for whom I do not remember a single case in which the Scriptures were provided. Some of the authorities, however, said they would accept them if sent, and I therefore asked the Bible Society again for a liberal grant for the prisoners, the sick, and others of the countries through which I had passed. They were willing to make the grant, but the local agents reported many difficulties, and the result fell short of my expectations.

In 1878, therefore, I resolved upon a change of tactics, to take my ammunition with me, and carry out my cherished scheme for Russia. Considerable difficulties, however, lay in the way. An Englishman, unable to speak the language, going into the interior of Russia to distribute books and pamphlets, in the year of the Berlin Congress, towards the close of the war, would certainly not have been safe. No amount of official papers and permissions would have kept him out of the clutches of ignorant officials. It seemed necessary, therefore, to take an interpreter; and as the transport of heavy luggage in Russia is slow, and my books would accompany me as personal baggage, it was clear that the cost would be a great increase to holiday expenses. A generous friend, however, at this juncture, as also subsequently, came to my aid; and in the month of June I trotted out of Petersburg with about two waggonloads of books, a companion, an interpreter, and a sufficiency of official letters. We went by rail through Moscow and Jaroslav to Vologda, and thence by steamer on the Suchona and Dwina to Archangel. We distributed everywhere, —to priests and people, in prisons, hospitals, and monasteries, and created such a stir in some of the small towns that people besieged our rooms by day, and even by night. Our travel was necessarily so quick that we could not always inform the police beforehand of what we were doing, and more than once they came (as was their duty) to arrest us; but our encounters always ended amicably, and we reached home after a happy six weeks' tour, extending over 5,500 miles, in the course of which we distributed 25,000 Scriptures and tracts. These experiences in

*INTRODUCTORY.*

5

some measure prepared me for my longer journey in 1879, the origin of which was somewhat remarkable.

When travelling round the Gulf of Bothnia in 1876, my steamer unexpectedly stayed for a day at a town on the coast of Finland. I was anxious to visit the hospital, and was inquiring about a horse, when a passenger said she had friends in the town, who, she thought, could render assistance. I went with her; and that simple incident may be said to have originated my subsequent tour through the prisons of Siberia; for it was followed by correspondence with a lady member of the family to whom I was introduced, Miss Alba Hellman, who began by modestly asking me, chiefly because I was an Englishman and the only one she knew, whether I could not do something for the welfare of the Siberian exiles. I confess that at first I thought this the most extraordinary request ever put to me, and it seemed too great an undertaking even to be thought of. Already immersed in work, regular and self-imposed, I had no time or means for such an undertaking; and if the money were forthcoming, who would go? Another question, too, arose: Would the Russian Government allow anything to be done?

The case of my Finnish correspondent, however, was a touching one. When in health she had been wont, like Elizabeth Fry, but on a smaller scale, to spend part of her time in visiting prisoners. Now, acute heart disease forbade such visits, and even compelled her to sleep in a sitting posture, so that for 2,068 nights, or nearly seven years, she never went to bed. My coming to Finland, visiting prisons, had awakened memories of her former work, and she set

herself, after my departure, to write me a letter in English. She had had only a few lessons in this language when a girl; but, possessing a Swedish and English New Testament in parallel columns, and a dictionary, she set herself, with an industry and patience almost incredible, to find clauses and expressions that conveyed her meaning in Swedish, and then to copy their English equivalents, her letter ending, for example, "Here are many faults, but I pray you have me excused." The force of her language, however, was unmistakable, thus: "You (English) have sent missionaries round the all world, to China, Persia, Palestine, Africa, the Islands of Sandwich, to many places of the Continent of Europe; but to the great, great Siberia, where so much is to do, you not have sent missionaries. Have you not a Morrison, a Moffatt, for Siberia? Pastor Lansdell, go you yourself to Siberia!"

What, then, could I say to this? To have spoken the real language of my thoughts would have been cruel. So I thought to shelve the question by returning an oracular answer, that "the letter contained much that was interesting, and that I would think the matter over." My correspondent, however, was not to be discouraged, and wrote another letter, giving further information concerning Siberia, and drawing a gloomy picture of the religious condition of the natives and exiles. Others followed, and at last I began to think that, after all, the project was not quite so unfeasible as it first appeared to be. My generous friend, who had read the letters and was interested, both urged me on and again offered help; and when it was determined that I should leave a clerical appointment I had held

## INTRODUCTORY.

7

for ten easy and happy years, I resolved, in the absence of another suitable post presenting itself, at once to "rough it" for a summer in the wilds of Asiatic Russia.

But what could I do towards the object my friend had at heart? Ignorance of the Russian language and of the Siberian dialects would prevent my speaking to the people. I might, however, visit prisons, hospitals, and mines, and at least provide them with the Scriptures in various languages, and with books, as in previous holidays. When travelling in the Russian interior in 1878, persons were met with who had never seen a complete New Testament, and I reasoned that a general distribution of such books in Siberia, whether by sale or gift, would be doubly useful, besides which I meant to be on the look-out for such other opportunities of usefulness as might present themselves and be allowed me.

But what were the books you were to give away? and how is it that you were allowed to distribute them? are questions that have often been asked with surprise. An answer to the first will prepare the way for the second. The Scriptures included the four Gospels, the Book of Psalms, and the New Testament. These were for the most part in Russian; but there were a few copies in Polish, French, German, and Tatar, with certain portions of the Old Testament for the Buriats in Mongolian, and for the Jews in Hebrew. Besides these Scriptures there were copies of the *Rooski Rabotchi*, an adapted reprint in Russian of the *British Workman*, full of pictures, and well suited to the masses; also a large well-executed engraving, with the story written around, of the parable of the Prodigal Son, together with broad-sheets suitable for hospital

walls, and thousands of Russian tracts. The Scriptures were printed for the Bible Society by the Holy Synod, and the tracts had passed the censor's hands. All was therefore in order, and before going to Archangel I had received a permanent legitimation to distribute, duly endorsed by the police.

So far, therefore, things in England looked promising for Siberia, but the way thither was by no means clear. In April, 1879, the plague was said to be raging in Russia, and towards the end of that month came one of the attempts on the late Emperor's life. This led to Petersburg being placed in a state of siege, and few of my friends felicitated me on my intention to go thither. Some thought I should not obtain the required permissions for Siberia, and advised accordingly. But having always before succeeded through the courtesy of the Russians in getting what I asked, I resolved to be deaf as an adder to everything short of a denial at the capital from the lips of the authorities, and, being thus resolved, I set out on my journey.



## CHAPTER II.

### *ACROSS EUROPE.*

Departure for Petersburg.—Official receptions.—Minister of the Interior.—Metropolitan of Moscow.—Introductions.—Books forwarded.—Departure for Moscow.—Nijni Novgorod.—Site of the fair.—Joined by interpreter.—Kasan.—Bulgarian antiquities.—Neighbouring heathen.—Idolatrous objects and practices.—Departure from Kasan.—The Volga and the Kama.—Arrival at Perm.

ON Wednesday morning, 30th April, 1879, I left London, and reached Petersburg on the following Saturday evening, to find at my hotel a pleasant welcome in the shape of an invitation to breakfast with Lord Dufferin on the Monday morning. This was due to letters with which I had been favoured from high quarters in England, and one result of which, thanks to the kindness of the British Ambassador, was an introductory letter to M. Makoff, the Minister of the Interior, which I presented to his Excellency on Tuesday. Whilst waiting in the ante-room with other suitors, there was time for cogitation as to what the answer might be. My Petersburg friends gave me small hope of success; on the contrary, one of them, high in authority, who had helped me before, had gone so far as to say, "Why, it is not likely that, with so many political prisoners therein, they will allow him to go through the prisons of Siberia now." I drew encouragement, however, from the fact that a ministerial

letter had been given me the previous year, which I thought would be registered in the archives, and, trusting there was on it nothing against me, I hoped that this would be in my favour. At length, when I was ushered into the Minister's presence, he scarcely looked at the Ambassador's letter, but referred to my having had the document the previous year, and said at once that there was no objection to my having another; upon which, flushed with success, I bowed and retired.

This emboldened me to go to another dignitary, and, having a friend to interpret, I went straight from the Minister to the new Metropolitan of Moscow, to present a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury, addressed "To the Metropolitans of the Church of Russia, or others whom it may concern." His Eminence appeared in a brown silk moiré-antique robe, glittering with jewelled decorations, and wearing as is usual the white crape hat of a metropolitan, with a diamond cross in front. He stood on little ceremony, and, almost before I had made my bow, he shook my hand, gave me a fraternal kiss on either cheek, and motioned me to a seat beside him. He then entered with zest into my scheme for distributing the Scriptures, said that the Russians had not the means to perform all they would, and commended the English for what they were doing. He asked a few questions relative to Church matters in England, regretted that we had no language in common in which we could converse, and then cordially wished me God speed.

I had thus made an excellent beginning. The next thing to be done was to get additional introductions, and this I tried to do so as to find my way amongst various classes of people. A letter from Mr. Glaisher, the