



Mikhail Soloviev

WHEN THE GODS ARE SILENT

THE REVOLUTION
& THE RED ARMY

Edition:
Reijo Varila

When the Gods are silent

Part I – The Revolution

&

Part II –The Red Army

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Layout & Cover: Books on Demand

Publisher: BoD – Books on Demand, Helsinki, Finland

Manufacturer: BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt, Germany

ISBN: 978-952-80-5980-6

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&
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Based on author's books:

“When The Gods are Silent”

“My Nine Lives in the Red Army”

Part I
The Revolution

The Family	7
The Earth Ablaze	30
On the Highroads	47
With the Red Cavalry in Ukraine	55
In the Political Training School	70
A Scout	73
The Ride	108
University	116
Lena	124
Military Correspondent	141
The Jungle	145
Cheka	160
The Voznesensky Veteran Regiment	171
Permskoe	183
Komsomolsk-on-Amur	183
The Diary of Peter Nomikoff	219
Friends Meet Again	249
Loneliness	299

The Family

Immeasurable steppe. Sunburned earth plumed with feather grass. Only the lofty burial mounds recall its past, and the old songs and legends tell of the wild scurry of horses, the dread thunder of steppe battles, and of all the centuries that have passed over its surface.

The centuries have faded into oblivion, the Scythians have died out; but the steppe remains and lives its own, distinctive life. The widely scattered villages raise their church cupolas to the sky; plaintive songs are sung at the foot of the burial mounds; in these places new legends are being born.

In the very heart of the steppe is a large village. An ordinary Russian village; broad streets overgrown with grass; low houses thatched with straw. During the early years of this century one old house, standing in a side alley, was owned by Timothy Soloviev, a heavily built, stocky man, his face covered right to the eyes with a mighty beard. He had a large family. His wife, Vera Ivanovna, a tall woman with a shy look, had brought eighteen children into the world.

Seven of them had died, but the oldest living child, Jacob, was already in his thirties. The peasants thought it unseemly for a woman to have a child after she was forty, but was it Vera Ivanovna's fault that God did not forget her and sent her infant after infant? She felt ashamed in front of her neighbours; she felt ashamed in front of her children and all the world; but now, at the age of fifty, she was carrying yet again. Her pregnancy was almost unnoticeable; she concealed her swollen belly beneath her ample skirts. To the last day she was active in the house and worked in the yard. And when, one hot summer day, her time came, she slipped into the shed in the far corner of the yard.

Before long the sound of a squawking infant came from the shed. The family's reactions were mixed. The older sons frowned and exchanged disagreeable glances. They went into the shed and surrounded their mother with a solid wall. But she lay still on the straw, afraid to look at them. She cuddled the new born child close to her, and quietly, guiltily, said,

- Let people laugh. God knows what is ordained.
- God knows all right, but you might have kept away from it,’ the oldest son, Jacob, flung at her moodily.
- Half a century, and still dropping.
- Well, am I to blame?

In her tone there was so much entreaty and appeal for sympathy that the sons looked at one another, embarrassed.

– We do not mind your having another, Mamma. Go on till you have had a couple of dozen. We are only thinking of the way folk will laugh.

Timothy Soloviev did not go to see his youngest son until late in the afternoon. He went up to his wife, bent over her, and tickled her cheeks with his beard. His face wrinkled into dozens of good-natured furrows as he glanced at the baby. He stroked his wife gently on the head.

– So we have brought another squawker into the world, Vera. God does not forget us in His mercy.

She gave him a grateful look.

– Our sons are angry, she said quietly. I am an old woman, and I am still bearing. I prayed to Saint Mihail to keep me from child, but my prayer did not reach him.

– In this matter our sons are not the law, Soloviev said angrily. God knows better than us. We will call this one Mihail. We have not had a Mihail before, have we?

In the evening Vera Ivanovna walked slowly across the yard, carrying a bundle that yelled desperately. The nineteenth child took up residence in the house.

It was an old house; it had seen many things in its time. It stood with one wall leaning against the byre, behind which extended the garden. It turned its dim little windows to the dusty village street and drew its straw thatch, riddled with mice, black with age, down over the panes. In the course of time, it had sunk a little to one side, and the earth had risen round its base; but it stood firmly, as if determined to remain for many a century yet. Like many others, it was divided into two parts, of which one was the kitchen and living room for most of the family, while the other accommodated the rest of the household. A good half of the kitchen was occupied by the great stove.

The cradle slung from the ceiling swung regularly, like a pendulum. Mihail felt the infinity of time; sometimes a cry and infant weeping came from the cradle, sometimes a contented murmur. Later the cradle was taken down, and the child went for its first painful crawl about the house. When Mihail scrambled up onto his two feet, the world was at once enlarged about him. The most prominent feature of this world was a big and funny man with a beard, which was very good to cling to. His mother had long been part of his world, but now that he stood erect, his father played more and more a part in it. Then there were others, many others, every one like the other. All of them round of face, sunburned; and they all pleasantly tickled him or threw him up in the air, up to the ceiling that was the uppermost limit of his world.

He was better acquainted with the women's faces that came within his range of vision. Especially one, with flying pigtailed. That was his sister Tatiana, five years old; she often pulled up his little shirt in all seriousness, to slap him. His other sister, Olga, did not take much notice of him, and he did not know her so well. By the time he could journey boldly from one part of the house to the other, he knew that the family consisted of his father, mother, nine brothers, and two sisters. So only twelve were left of the nineteen children. His brother Jacob, black-haired and gaunt, had a face over-grown with beard like his father, and, like his father, was gloomy and taciturn. His brother Sergei had whiskers, and was silent and smiling. The two without beard or whiskers were Simon and Dmitri. Unlike their elder brothers, they talked a lot; and Mihail could not help feeling that they argued and made a lot of noise. When he grew a little older, he noticed that Simon always won the argument. But that was only to be expected – he was the most educated member of the family and had spent three complete years at school, whereas Dmitri had an inborn dislike of all instruction.

Among all his brothers Mihail picked out Kornei. Kornei was about sixteen, the age when the village youngsters are thinking of getting married. But whenever that question came up his mother waved her hand hopelessly.

– Who is going to marry a pest?

Mihail had no idea what a pest was, but he felt insulted for Kornei, of whom he was very fond. He especially liked his eyes, which were different from all the other eyes Mihail had ever seen. He did not know that those eyes reflected the great troubles that Kornei brought on the family; they

were mischievous and bold, and expressed his constant readiness for a fight. And his father beat Kornei almost to death to punish him for his wild fights with other boys.

There was little to be said about the three middle sons, Gregory, Philip, and Taras. All three tried to behave as if they were older, and all three dreamed of the day when they would be able to grow beards. And then there were the youngest children: Ivan, Tatiana, and Olga. Ivan was only two years older than Mihail.

There was another branch of the family also living in that house. Simon was married and had a seven-year-old son named Peter.

When Vera Ivanovna first brought Mihail into the house and put him in the cradle, Simon led his son up to the cradle and said to him:

- Peter, have a look at your uncle.
- Where is my uncle?
- Why, here in the cradle.
- But how can he be my uncle when he is in a cradle? the boy protested.

And he pushed the teat angrily into his uncle's mouth.

Jacob had been married, too, but his wife had died two years after the wedding, and he had preferred to remain a widower. Sergei and Dmitri should have been married long since, but somehow, they had got past marriageable age; Sergei was twenty-nine, and Dmitri twenty-four. It was rumoured that Sergei was responsible for Natalia Somova leaving her husband and going back to her parents, who lived in another village. It was rather more than rumour that he frequently visited her village. Dmitri had a girlfriend, but he kept it a dead secret.

The inhabitants of the village could be divided into two approximately equal parts: the peasants who were already beggared, and those who were on their way to beggary. And then there were those who had grown rich, the new masters, who in times of famine bought other peasants' land from them, and then rented it back to them.

Timothy Soloviev was in the first category. Many years before Mihail's birth he had owned cattle, horses, and land; but gradually he had lost it all, till only the old house was left. Several successive crop failures had reduced

the family to a poverty that he found impossible to overcome. Moody, taciturn, he worked without respite; he had unusual physical strength, and laboured hard enough for three men. But life was even stronger, and that he could not subdue. So, he had gone off to work in the local town and had got a job on the railway. His native wit, his industry, and the humility that life had instilled in him won the notice of his superiors, and within a year he was a stoker. But the blood of centuries of husbandmen flowed in his veins, and he was drawn to the soil, to all the joys and sorrows of the hard peasant existence. For ten years he saved kopeck by kopeck, in order to redeem the land, he had sold. And he would have redeemed it, but for 1905. The wave of strikes and armed revolt that swept over Russia during that year did not pass by the town in which Timothy Soloviev was working.

Revolutionary agitators held meetings in the railway depot, calling on the workers to fight the czarist autocracy. After listening to one speaker, Soloviev pressed right up to the locomotive from which the man had been orating.

– But how about the land? Timothy asked.

– The land has got to be handed over to the peasants. We shall take it from the landowners and the wealthy class.

That was good enough. At the head of the procession that marched through the town that day strode Timothy Soloviev.

In his hands he bore a red placard with the words: ‘The land to the peasants!’

The demonstrators clashed with the police. Soloviev was beaten up, arrested, and sent back to his village, with a court order that he was not to leave it.

After that he lived the ordinary life of the poor peasant: he hired himself out to the local landowner, or took any work offered him, in order to keep out the spectre of famine that was always at the door. He was fond of his family, and sincerely attached to his wife. Only she has too many children, he thought sometimes. It was nothing for peasants to beat their wives, it rather relieved the monotony of their life. Soloviev, too, sometimes used his fists on his wife, but only when he had been seeking relief from his troubles in the tavern and had come home fuddled with cheap vodka. Then he would look around his numerous family and tell his wife:

– You have brought a fine litter of brats into the world, but there is nothing to feed them on.

She would not answer, and, irritated at her silence, he would go heavily up to her.

– Ah, you are fertile enough, you old –

The children knew that these words were always followed by a blow. They raised a desperate howl. The littlest ones rushed up to him and hung on his arms and legs. He struggled like a bear beset by dogs, roaring and dealing blows that sent the children flying against the wall.

At the noise the older brothers came in, took their father by the arms, and led him outside. He would not be seen in the house for several days. His wife took his food out to the shed, and there they had long talks. Reconciliation always took place on the first Sunday after the scene. Father and mother went off to church, and did not return till dinnertime. As he came in, Soloviev looked at his children through half-closed eyes and said with some embarrassment:

– Well, you mother's children, forgive your father; and when you grow up, do not drink vodka. It is the source of all evil, damn it!

By the time Mihail reached the critical age when his trousers were made without the humiliating slit in the seat, the family's position had improved a little. The seven older sons were all working.

In the Soloviev's' village, every Sunday there was a battle. One part of the village fought the other part. The fight was bitter, and frequently there were fatalities. But it was all ordained by unwritten peasant law, and no one imagined that a Sunday could pass without the battle for the bridge. In the middle of the village was a pond that divided it roughly into two equal parts. Across the pond ran a wooden bridge. Long before the day came, Mihail dreamed of the time when he would be allowed to run onto the bridge and strut across it, throwing out his chest and casting independent glances at the other side, where a horde of children was gathered. But that could only be when he was deemed old enough to take part in the fun. It was a fine summer morning when, at last, the older lads of his street gave him permission. Grownups were gathering at each end of the bridge, standing about in groups, husking, and chewing sunflower seeds, and laughing. The bridge was empty; no one could bring himself to be the first to step on it. The two crowds of boys, dressed in cotton shirts of various colours, hurled defiance at each other across the pond.

– You just try putting your foot on the bridge; we will give you a bath!

In answer, a stone came flying from the other side. There was a cry of pain.

– Chucking stones, are you! the leader of Mikhail's band roared, and the horde of urchins rushed onto the bridge. The others tore from the other side, and the two groups met in the centre.

Burning with ardour for the Soloviev Family, Mihail ran over the planks. He suddenly felt ablaze with hatred for those who had dared to step on the bridge from the farther side, and he did not hear the warning shout from the bank:

– Hi, you flea, come back or you will be crushed!

In any case it was too late; the fight had begun. Some snub-nosed lad in his teens gave Mihail a blow on the ear, sending him staggering. Sobbing and not bothering to wipe away his tears, he dug his fingers into his opponent's hair, and they both went rolling over the planks. The older boy was the stronger; he seated himself across Mikhail's body and was about to start pummelling, but another lad pushed him off.

– No hitting when he is down! Sobbing with excitement, Mihail sprang up again, but the same lad's heavy fist sent him to the boards. At last, he managed to keep his feet. Crying with shame, he flung himself at his enemy, beating him in the face, the chest, scratching, and even biting, which was strictly forbidden. His heart beat with joy when the other boy covered his face and lay down on the bridge to get a breather. Mihail was looking about him triumphantly for a new victim when the shout arose:

– Beat it, you kids!

The boys fled back, passing the grown-up men who were striding onto the bridge, rolling up their sleeves as they went. Among them was Kornei, but he swaggered along with his hands in his pockets. His father was standing on the bank, behaving as if completely unconcerned. But he was not there as an impartial observer. For two decades and more he had had the fame of being the best fighter in all the village. He and several others, almost as famous, regularly came in at the close of the battle for the bridge. Because of their strength they were not allowed to take part in the ordinary fighting; they could fight only their equals. However, it was a long way yet to the kill. The lads were only the advance guard of a series of fights. Mihail stood watching his brother Kornei fighting two at once. Kornei dropped to his

knees. Mikhail's heart beat anxiously. If his brother lay down, he would have to lie still to the end; such was the law.

– Hold on, Kornei! his father shouted menacingly.

– Hold on, Kornei! Mihail squealed. Kornei rose to his feet. His face was bathed in blood, his fists were covered with blood, his own and other's. He flung himself on his opponents and sent one of them flying. The second at once fell back on him, but Kornei thrust him up against the handrail and pushed him over into the pond, whence he emerged streaming with duckweed and slime.

Now at last it was the turn of the killers-six to each side. All men of mature years, all with beards, all with the reputation of first-class fighters. Timothy walked onto the bridge, calmly stroking his beard, and staring at the enemy. All the other fighters had cleared off the bridge, and only the heavy, hollow tread of the twelve men sounded menacingly.

The fight was begun and over almost in no time. They stood in two ranks facing each other. They shook hands, drew on loves. They aimed only at the chest; the belly and the face were forbidden. Even so, broken ribs were frequent. As Mihail watched, he saw his father raise his opponent up from the planks. The fight was over, for as soon as one man was felled, all his side had lost.

Late in the afternoon Timothy Soloviev went over to the other side of the pond to visit the man he had knocked down. This, too, was an immemorial tradition, a safeguard against the hatred that might otherwise have developed. Fighting on opposite sides did not prevent the older men from being good neighbours. But the old tradition was dying out, for the younger men frequently carried the fight on from the bridge into the streets. And, as Kornei was one of the chief instigators of those endless street brawls, his father often thrashed him. Old Soloviev did not realize that these fights were a necessity of Kornei's being. His youthful pride could not reconcile itself to the contempt shown for the poor peasants of the village. He had the feeling, and maybe he was right, that even the girls eyed him with contempt because his family was poor. So, he went from fight to fight, vaunting his supremacy in that at least. Gradually he became the terror of the village, everybody called him the "pest," and he was even rather proud of it.

Nineteen fourteen arrived.

One morning, when he woke up, Mihail had the feeling that there had been a sudden and complete change in the house. It was unusually quiet. His mother was standing dejectedly at the window. Ivan nudged Mihail and whispered:

– Jacob, Dmitri, Kornei, Sergei, and Simon have gone off with Father to the war.

Mihail had got it into his head that this war with the Germans that the older ones had been talking about was to take place on the bridge. He jumped down from the bunk on the stove where the younger children slept, and darted outside. He stood listening, but he could not hear any sound of fighting. They cannot have arrived yet! he thought.

His father and brothers did not return till the late afternoon. They poured into the house, unpleasantly excited, and they seemed to avoid looking at their mother. But Timothy went over to her and told her in a strange, unusual tone:

– Well, you ought to be pleased, Mother! Your goods are of the finest quality! They have taken the lot! She put her apron to her eyes, and her shoulders shook convulsively.

– A woman must weep, they say, Timothy said in a deep tone, and went out hurriedly.

Night came on. For the last time the old house wrapped all the Soloviev family in its cosy warmth. The father and mother were very late in getting to bed. Vera Ivanovna baked pasties for her sons and cut up hunks of lard. Sighing heavily and taking sidelong glances at her, Timothy packed the food into the linen bags she had made. Four of the brothers were sleeping on a pile of straw in one corner; Simon slept with his wife, behind the partition. The house was filled with the restless breathing of the sleepers, the heavy tread of the parents. Late in the night Mihail awoke from a troubled dream of dragons and fights and heard his mother quietly groaning and weeping. Women must weep, he thought, imitating his father. He wanted to speak to her in the deep voice he had heard his father use, but only a thin squeal came. No longer able to choke down the moist lump that would keep rising in his throat, he cried out through his tears:

– Mother

She hurried over to him. But Kornei sprang up from the straw and reached Mihail before her. He took the boy in his arms and laid him down beside himself on the straw. The last thing Mihail saw as he dropped off was the vague, glimmering white of the canvas bags on the bench by the wall. Five of them in a row.

The old house grew quiet and glum; it seemed to grow still older. Only when letters arrived from the brothers was there the old animation for a brief while. They had all been sent right up to the front 12 Storm of the Steppes lines. Their letters said little. As was the custom, they always began with greetings to all their relations and acquaintances, and no one must be omitted, for fear of giving offense. As the Soloviev's had many relations and acquaintances, the greetings took up the whole of the letter, and only at the end did the writer mention that he was still alive, fighting at the front, and smashing the Germans.

Kornei wrote never. He was almost illiterate, and later admitted that he found it easier to volunteer for a raid on the German trenches than to write a letter. But one day news arrived from him, too. In addition to the usual greetings and bows 'from the white face to the damp ground,' the letter informed his parents that he was wounded and, in a hospital, had been made a non-commissioned officer for his bravery, and had been awarded the Cross of St. George. That day the Soloviev's did not know whether to rejoice or lament. The mother sorrowed because her son was wounded and might die; the father reasoned that he could not be badly wounded, otherwise he would not write; and the main thing was that he had been decorated and promoted. That gave old Timothy reason to show off in the village, and he did not get such opportunities very often.

One day an unexpected blow fell. Soloviev was summoned to the local authorities' office, where the secretary informed him that his son Jacob had perished at the front 'for the faith, the Czar, and the fatherland.' He returned home carrying the official notification in hands extended before him, as if afraid to let it come too close.

Now everything went in accordance with the saying, 'Troubles never come singly.' A little later Timothy Soloviev was summoned to the office again. This time it was Sergei who had perished in some place called the Car-



The author is one of the outstanding Soviet writers who chose freedom under incredibly hard conditions. He has been in the forefront of the fight for the liberation of his country from Soviet bondage.

Born in the southern steppes of Russia in 1908, Mikhail Soloviev attended Moscow University after the Revolution and was for several years on the editorial staff of the government newspaper, Izvestia. During World War II he served in the Soviet Army, was wounded, taken prisoner by the Germans, and escaped. Under an assumed name he fought behind the German lines, joining many of his countrymen in the struggle to free their land from both Hitler and Stalin.

At the end of the war, in 1945, the NKGB-soviet Foreign Secret Police launched a hunt for Soloviev, but he was saved from forcible repatriation by the intercession of a high American official in Austria. and by the friendly aid of some American officers who hid him in an ancient jail. There he began writing *When the Gods Are Silent*.

From 1946 to 1950, while in Salzburg, Austria, he published *The Flames*, an anti-Communist newspaper. In 1948 the Soviet authorities again demanded his arrest, but their designs were frustrated through the intervention of Senator Vandenberg and the U. S. Commander in Chief in Austria. Mr Soloviev moved to USA in 1951 where he died in 1979.

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