

Maid of Baikal Introduction

Hello, my name is Preston Fleming. I am an American novelist and recently published my sixth novel under the title, MAID OF BAIKAL: A Novel of the Russian Civil War I am speaking to you today at the request of my good friend, Maxim Efimov, who thought that MAID OF BAIKAL might interest his Russian audience.

To introduce the novel to you, I thought it best address some basic questions that readers might want to ask.

Q. FIRST, WHAT IS THE STORY ABOUT?

A. Imagine this: What if a Siberian Joan of Arc had rescued the White Armies at a critical point during the Russian Civil War?

MAID OF BAIKAL offers an alternative outcome to that war through the main character of Zhanna Dorokhina, a young woman from the shores of Siberia's Lake Baikal. Like the historical Joan of Arc in fifteenth-century France, Zhanna displays a charisma and unusual military skill that gain her command of an army.

Then, after overcoming a series of deadly challenges, Zhanna leads her fellow Siberians to victory over the Red Army. It's an inspiring story of a young woman who presses on, despite overwhelming odds, out of devotion to God and country.

Q. WHY SHOULD A RUSSIAN READER BE INTERESTED IN A STORY ABOUT RUSSIA WRITTEN BY AN AMERICAN?

Several reasons, I think. First, as an outsider, I am free to consider the events of 1918 to 1920 without being a slave to conventional wisdom.

Second, because in 1918 America sent some 8,000 troops to Siberia to help guard the Trans-Siberian Railroad. And sent another 5,000 troops to help guard ports in Northern Russia. America also supplied hundreds of thousands of tons of weapons and other goods to the White Armies from warehouses in Russia that were intended for the Imperial Russian Armies in World War One.

And third, because the American people have always had an interest in fostering a free, prosperous and democratic Russia.

Q. WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS BOOK FROM OTHERS ABOUT THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR?

MAID OF BAIKAL is an alternative historical novel. That is, the novel is historically accurate in most every respect, but certain events are altered to create a different historical outcome.

Nearly all of the characters in MAID OF BAIKAL are actual historical figures. And I've done my best to portray them as fairly and sympathetically as I could.

Q. WHICH HISTORICAL EVENTS DID YOU CHANGE?

Most important, I think, are the adjustments I made to certain events on the Urals Front in April and May of 1919.

These changes, and the modified behaviors of Admiral Kolchak and his staff, due to Zhanna's influence, then create a cascade of events that lead to a White victory.

Q. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE WOULD HAVE BEEN REQUIRED FOR THE WHITES TO WIN THE CIVIL WAR?

In my view, the key factor was that the White Forces, and particularly Admiral Kolchak's government at Omsk, were not worthy of winning.

Kolchak showed poor military leadership, incompetent governance of the territory under his control, and a fatal shortness of vision. The Siberian people, who were demoralized after years of war and hardship, deserved better leadership.

My novel shows how, despite their shortcomings, Admiral Kolchak and the White Forces could have beaten the Bolsheviks, if they had been willing to make the sacrifices necessary to deserve victory.

Q. HOW COULD ADMIRAL KOLCHAK AND HIS MEN HAVE MADE THEMSELVES WORTHY OF WINNING?

Let me give you an example of how this actually happened once before. In 1428, during the Hundred Years War, English invaders occupied nearly all of France.

The uncrowned French King, the Dauphin Charles, was a weak and vacillating ruler. The French armies, and most of the French people, felt defeated and lacked the will to resist the English conquerors.

Then, as if out of nowhere, a teenage girl named Joan of Arc arrived at the Dauphin's court, claiming that, if Charles followed her advice, which she received in visions directly from God, she would lead the French to victory over the English.

And in the course of one year, Joan and her troops drove the English from their strongholds along the River Loire, Charles was crowned King, and the French people regained their fighting spirit. Nearly all English troops were expelled by the end of Charles's reign.

MAID OF BAIKAL tells a similar story of a teenage girl from Lake Baikal who travels to Omsk, somehow persuades Admiral Kolchak to send her to the Urals Front, and wields her charismatic influence to transform Admiral Kolchak and his inner circle into men worthy of leading a free and democratic Russia.

Q. HOW SIMILAR IS THE FICTIONAL ZHANNA DOROKHINA TO THE HISTORICAL JOAN OF ARC?

Fortunately, a detailed historical record exists of Joan of Arc's life. I patterned the character and life events of the fictional Zhanna as closely as possible after the French Joan. The account of Joan's final year on earth is truly one of the most inspirational stories to be found anywhere. My aim was to capture the same drama in my fictional account of the Russian Zhanna's final year.

In fact, I found many parallels between the French situation in 1428 and that of Siberia in 1918. Like the indecisive Dauphin, Admiral Kolchak seemed completely out of his element as commander-in-chief of ground forces and head of state, despite his earlier successes as a naval officer.

Unlike the Hundred Years War, however, the Russian Civil War took place in a much more complex environment than that of 1428 France, with many more forces at work. Not least of these were Russia's former allies in the war against Germany, who intervened at various times and places to assist the Whites, with mixed results.

The Americans and British alone supplied hundreds of thousands of tons of arms and supplies to the Siberian Armies. And diplomatic recognition was dangled before the Omsk Regime for months.

But recognition never came, largely because of Kolchak's image abroad as a brutal dictator bent on restoring power to the wealthy and powerful at the expense of ordinary Russians.

In MAID OF BAIKAL, young Zhanna succeeds in changing Allied attitudes toward the Kolchak regime, both by nudging Kolchak and his advisors toward fairness and reform, and by helping him show a more attractive face to the world. Then, as the Siberians achieve success on the battlefield, they also receive the international recognition and foreign military aid that they need to continue the war.

Q. THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR WAS A CONFLICT FOUGHT BY RUSSIANS ON RUSSIAN SOIL. WHY GIVE SO MUCH ATTENTION TO THE ALLIED INTERVENTION?

Today, when many Americans still harbor old suspicions about Russian motives, I wanted to call my readers' attention to a time before the Bolshevik Revolution, when Russia, America, Great Britain and France were allies. A time when Americans and their leaders supported the cause of freedom and prosperity for all Russians.

I wanted my readers to imagine how relations between Russia and the West might have been different, had Admiral Kolchak and the White Forces defeated the Red Army, and in so doing, had saved the world from nearly a century of Bolshevism.

Q. WHERE CAN I FIND A COPY OF THE NOVEL?

MAID OF BAIKAL is available as a downloadable e-book, in English, from Amazon.com. The price is quite low, as I have published the e-book independently or the major publishing houses.

The MAID OF BAIKAL e-book includes three custom maps, a dozen photographs of characters who are actual historical figures, and a list of musical themes for each chapter from Russian composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Q. WHEN WILL A RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE EDITION OF MAID OF BAIKAL BECOME AVAILABLE?

I would be delighted to work with a Russian publisher to make MAID OF BAIKAL available in the Russian language. If you like the novel, please spread the word among those who might help to make this happen. And don't forget to post a reader review on Amazon.com to share your unique perspective as a Russian reader.

Q. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF YOUR PERSONAL CONNECTION TO RUSSIA?

My grandparents emigrated to America before the First World War: from the Baltic region on my mother's side, and from eastern Ukraine on my father's side.

I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, an industrial city in America's Midwest, among families that came from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the Baltics, Armenia, Georgia and all over Eastern Europe. I began studying Russian language and culture as a teenager and, many years later, traveled often on business to the Russian Far East. Though I have not been back to Russia in recent years, I hope to visit again one day soon.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

I welcome your questions and comments.

If you would like to contact me, please do so through the Contacts section of my website, at prestonfleming.com, or by email, at preston@prestonfleming.com.

I hope you enjoy reading MAID OF BAIKAL!