

On the Hills of Manchuria (Na Sopkah Manchzhurii)

Written by bluesever

Sunday, 23 November 2014 21:07 -

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On the Hills of Manchuria is among the most popular Russian historic melodies, and is widely known abroad as well, having gained the reputation of a “Russian national waltz”. A few decades past its actual creation it was already very often (if not always) labeled as “old-time waltz” on Soviet records, which suggested a kind of ancient folk tune. In fact, this waltz is neither folk nor (even nowadays) very ancient.

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It was composed by **Ilya Shatrov**, a veteran of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904/05, who was the bandmaster of the Mokshan 214th Infantry Regiment.



Ilya Shatrov

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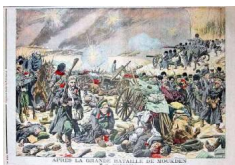
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The Russo-Japanese War (8 February 1904 – 5 September 1905) was *"the first great war of the 20th century."* It grew out of rival imperial ambitions of the Russian Empire and the Empire of Japan over Manchuria and Korea. The major theatres of operations were Southern Manchuria, specifically the area around the Liaodong Peninsula and Mukden; and the seas around Korea, Japan, and the Yellow Sea.



Battlefields in the Russo-Japanese War

The Battle of Mukden (Manchuria) was the final land battle and took place in February-early March, 1905. Casualties were exceptionally heavy (the Russians lost 89,000 out of 330,000, and the Japanese, 71,000 out of 270,000 men).



After battle of Mukden

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In that battle the Mokshansky Infantry Regiment was encircled by Japanese forces for 11 days, during which it sustained considerable casualties. Shatrov was one of those who succeeded in their break-through. The legend says it was Shatrov with his band who encouraged the Russians for this last break-through on February 27th – the band played battle tunes thus raising the soldiers' morale, and they broke through the encirclement.



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All seven musicians who survived this battle were awarded the highest honors in the Russian army: the cross of St. George. They also received silver trumpets, and Shatrov received an additional military decoration.



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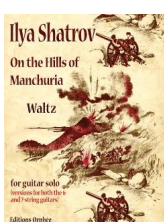
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On returning from war in 1906, the Mokshansky regiment was stationed in the town of Samara, where the young bandmaster made the acquaintance of a local music shop owner, one Oskar Knaube (1866-1920), who helped the composer to publish his work. Knaube himself was a composer and publisher of popular music, and in a short time managed to acquire the rights to this waltz. On the Hills of Manchuria achieved colossal success soon after it was composed in 1906, and Knaube boasted of having published some 82 different editions of the song. It was also recorded on gramophone and set in Pianola rolls. The original long title, *The Mokshansky Regiment on the Hills of Manchuria*, could not be set across the label of the records, so it was shortened to the variant of the name with which the song is known today.



Ilya Shatrov

Recordings of the waltz brought great fortunes to gramophone companies, but hardly anything to the composer. So Shatrov, with the same courage that he displayed at the battlefield, filed a lawsuit against the gramophone companies to re-claim a share of the profits, and, after long proceedings, won the first such lawsuit in Russian history.



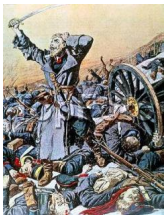
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Guitar transcription

A short time after its publication, descriptive lyrics were written for the song, further enabling its wide dissemination by making it available to singers. Actually, there are several sets of lyrics to the song, composed at different times during the ensuing 108 years since its composition, always reflecting a sense of national pride in the magnificent accomplishments of its armed-forces, even though the original song was a commemoration of one of its most spectacular failures.



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The early versions of the lyrics do naturally reflect the events of the 1904/05 war, mourning the loss of the heroes and turning the song into a dirge (not without a decadent scent) with an appeal for revenge. Such is the first known version, which is commonly attributed to **Stepan “Skitaletz” (The Wanderer) Petrov.**

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