

## The Anti-Bolshevik Movement in the Ural Cossack Host: a Brief Historical Essay.

The “White Guard” Almanac, No. 8. Posev, 2005, pp. 149-152 .

The Ural Cossacks began their fight against Bolshevism immediately upon the October 1917 coup. At least three Ural Cossack officers actively participated in the October and November 1917 battles in Moscow.

In addition in late 1917 and early 1918, there were repeated collisions between Ural Cossack *eshelons*<sup>1</sup> returning from the front to their native villages and the Bolsheviks, including the Ural units of the cavalry brigade under the command of Major-General Borodin, in November 1917 near Voronezh. The Bolsheviks in this action included at least an infantry division, with armoured cars and artillery. These clashes occurred because of the refusal of the *Uraltsy* to disarm at the request of the Soviet authorities. At the Voronezh battle the Bolsheviks were defeated, and they would have lost their guns if not for the armoured vehicles covering them. The losses of the Bolsheviks who fled from the field are not known, whereas this first major conflict cost the *Uraltsy* several dozen dead and wounded. After this, Borodin’s brigade moved almost unhindered to the Yaik<sup>2</sup>. Near Saratov the Bolsheviks decided to give decisive battle with the Cossacks but Borodin, seeing that the Cossacks were unequal in strength, ordered the trains to be unloaded and his men marched through the steppe instead. While the Cossacks were making this detour movement of Saratov the Bolsheviks in the city flew into a panic, according to the reports of the Cossack scouts. The Red commanders had decided that the Cossacks must have conceived some trick to capture Saratov and fled, leaving their units to the mercy of fate. The mood of the Red forces was such that, according to the scouts, any simple approach by the Cossacks would seem the rest flee the city too. But Borodin had no intention of the Cossacks taking Saratov, as he knew that that though they were prepared to fight they all had as their primary goal getting home. Borodin also hoped that there would no full-scale war with the Bolsheviks, because he felt their power would fail in two or three months anyway.

No less outstanding was the 5th Ural Horse Regiment’s journey from the front to the Yaik, under the command of Colonel V.S. Tolstov. The Bolsheviks also tried repeatedly to remove this unit’s weapons, but Tolstov foiled them each time. A radical attempt at disarmament of the regiment was made by the Bolsheviks in the Astrakhan region, placing a large force, including artillery, in its path. Having carried out reconnaissance on the day before, Tolstov sent the Cossacks to the rear and flanks of the Reds, who were trusting in their numerical and technical superiority. The result was a “disarmament about face”: the Bolsheviks fled and lost their 4-gun battery. So

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<sup>1</sup> In this context an *eshelon* is a train carrying troops.

<sup>2</sup> An old name for the Urals River. The name was officially changed after the Pugachev Revolt in 1775, which had been started among the Yaik Cossacks.



the *Uraltsy* collected up the artillery, which would be invaluable to the Army in the future, as revenge for when their guns were taken off them by Catherine the Great after the Pugachev Revolt.

However, other regiments were disarmed during their return home, unable to resist the superior forces of the enemy. This was to complicate the Cossacks' ability to fight the Bolsheviks. As often as not, weapons had to be taken back later in battle.

Up until the end of February 1918 the Bolsheviks took no military action against the Ural Cossacks. This was due to the reluctance of the Soviet leadership to open a new front, until it was finished with Kornilov, Dutov and Semenov. So in late 1917 and early 1918 the Bolsheviks tried to force the Ural Cossacks to recognize their power by negotiation. The latter deliberately delayed, preparing for armed struggle. They could not yet directly oppose the Bolsheviks because of their lack of weapons.

The Ural Host was less subject to Bolshevik influences than the other Cossack Hosts. Partly it was because of the strong "Old Believer" traditions in the army, and on the other hand, the very way of life in the Ural Cossack army. According to the memoirs of General Borodin, who became the Ural Cossacks' representative in Denikin's army in March 1919, among the Cossacks were those who "paying homage to the revolutionary tradition", pinned a piece of red cloth to their chest and walked home from the front, cigarette in mouth. However, they were not awaited by a gentle reception – as they had expected – but by a formidable father, and especially mother. They would not allow their son to enter his home until he threw away his cigarette and tore the red rag from his chest. The authority of the mother, according to Borodin, was so strong among the Ural people that after such a greeting almost all of them completely forgot their revolutionary enthusiasm.

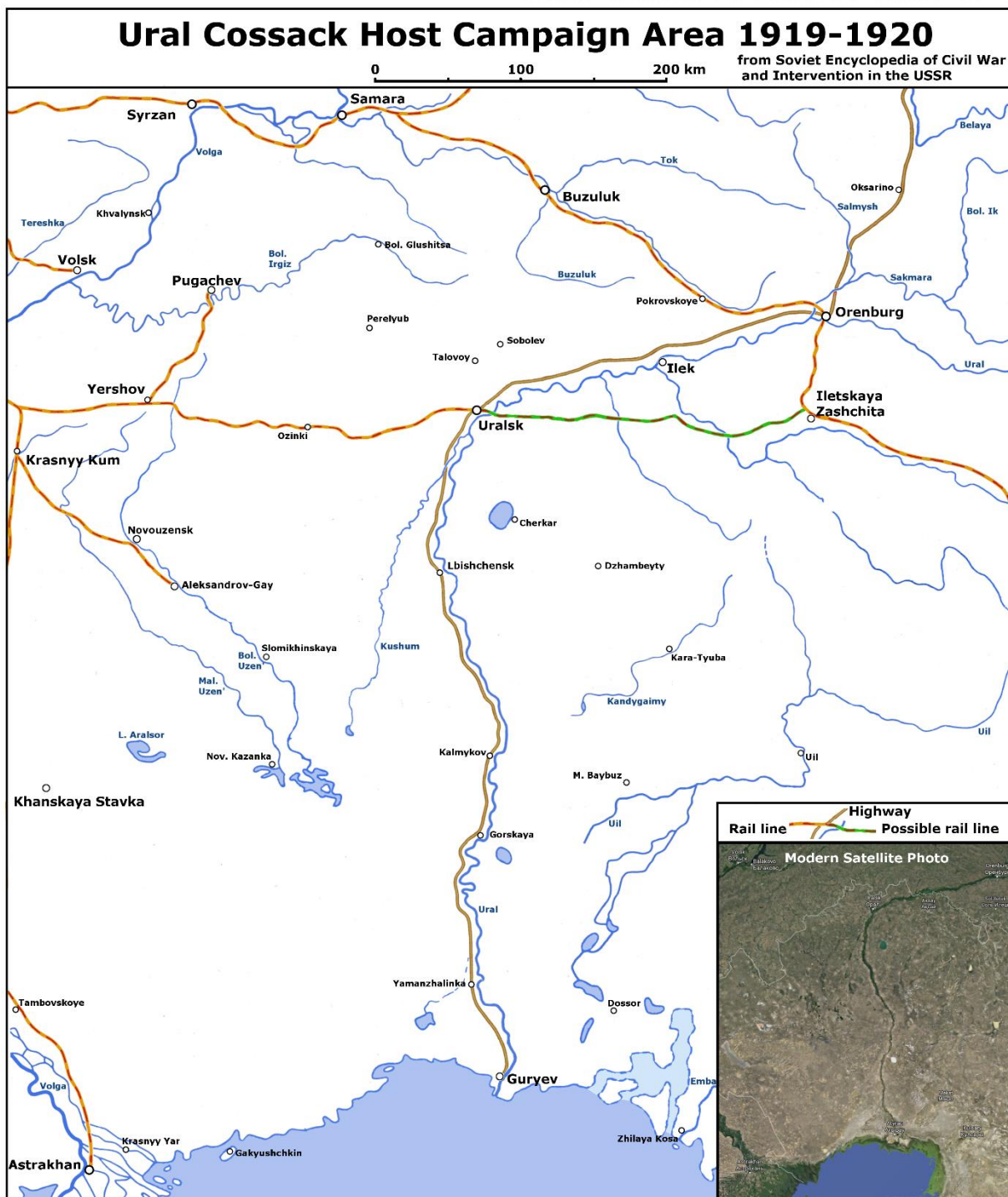
As they gradually grew stronger, the Reds began to issue ultimatums to the *Uraltsy*. If the central Soviet government was in no hurry for an armed invasion – wanting to prepare for it systematically – Bolsheviks like Antonov from Saratov and Zwilling in Orenburg provoked a conflict. Surprisingly, but true: on the eve of the start of active hostilities against the Ural Cossacks, while Antonov and Zwilling threatened to stop the negotiations, the Host managed to receive no less than 3 million roubles from the central Soviet authorities. At the same time, two military delegations that were negotiating with the Bolsheviks in Samara and Saratov were arrested.

The beginning of active hostilities between the Ural Cossacks and the Bolsheviks took place at the end of February 1918. A large Red Guard detachment arrived in Ilets town from Orenburg. Their commissar demanded that the Cossacks immediately recognise the Soviet government, pay an indemnity and surrender their weapons. When they refused, repression followed. Respected Cossacks were arrested and sentenced to be shot. Alongside this the Red Guard, reinforced by the Bolshevik *inogorodnie*<sup>3</sup> of Ilets, began a violent and rampant looting of the local population.

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<sup>3</sup> Outsiders, i.e. Non-Cossacks





On the third day of Bolshevik rule the Cossacks, having received support from neighbouring villages, completely destroyed the Red garrison – which, according to various sources, ranged from 600 to 1,200 bayonets with 5 to 8 machine guns.

The Saratov and Orenburg Bolsheviks presented the *Uraltzy* with a final ultimatum to recognize their power and threatened total extermination otherwise, including the use of chemical weapons. The Ural Cossacks responded to this with a decisive refusal, officially calling the Soviet power as “bandits”, and declaring that they would fight it to the last drop of blood.



The Bolsheviks were not slow in replying and at the end of April 1918 units of the Red Army, including Chapaev, moved on Uralsk. The few Cossack units created by that time, and militia groups assembled by the separate villages, provided the enemy with desperate resistance – inflicting heavy losses and seizing rich trophies. For example the capture of the first Soviet airplane on this front by the Cossacks belongs to the period of the first assault on Uralsk. However, the forces were unequal: the Cossacks were poorly armed and out-numbered by the Bolsheviks, who threw more and more units into battle. Finally, by the end of June 1918, the front approached Uralsk itself, the capture of which the commissars promised the Red Army would bring an end to the Civil War.

Now though the Cossacks were able to strengthen the city with the help of weapons sent by the KOMUCH in Samara. In addition, the peasants of the neighbouring provinces aided the Ural Cossacks in defending their capital. They sent units to Uralsk, which later merged into whole regiments. So from the peasants of the Samara province the 33rd Nikolaevsk Regiment was subsequently created, and from the peasants of the Saratov province the Pozdnyakovsky regiment, named after its commander. The Kirgiz population also no longer stood aside and provided the Cossacks with significant material assistance to protect Uralsk. All this, added to the resolute attitude of the city's defenders, made it possible to deflect the first assault of the city in June. During the attack, there was a head-on battle called the "attack of the old men" which, in many ways, turned the tide: Cossacks of non-military age organised themselves and – armed themselves with anything, from lances and sabres, even chains – charged the advancing enemy on horseback. Despite great losses during the attack, the old Cossacks crushed the enemy. At this time, the Red attacks from other direction also broke on the stubbornness of the defenders, and the Bolsheviks fled.

The Cossacks, and supporting peasants pursued the Reds to the border of the Ural Host, and in certain areas went beyond it, such in in the Nikolaevsk district of Samara province. However, on the whole the Host Government was against the large-scale participation of the Ural Cossacks in the war outside the Ural region. The exception to this rule, which was to cause the Ural people in general and the military government in particular trouble, was the participation of two horse regiments alongside KOMUCH and their neighbours in Orenburg during the acquisition of the Iletska region and Orenburg.

Until mid-August 1918 the Bolsheviks made no serious attempts to attack the Urals. In turn the Ural Host Congress took the wrong position: as long as the Bolsheviks do not touch us, we will not touch them. This meant that KOMUCH forces did not have the strength to develop their successes on the Middle Volga. Eventually the Bolsheviks recovered and struck a simultaneous blow against KOMUCH and the Ural Cossacks. The Urals had to repel enemy attacks not only towards the Ural River area, but also at Guryev. In the latter area the Red Volga-Caspian Flotilla took an active part, landing assault forces in the Cossacks' rear and shelling their positions with



gunfire. The Bolshevik forces included foreign mercenaries, and a large number of armoured vehicles and planes.

Thanks to the weapons received from KOMUCH, several Cossack ages<sup>4</sup> could be recruited, from which new regiments were created and others replenished. Having exhausted the enemy in defensive battles, the Urals again drove them out to their borders. But again, the Ural Host Congress repeated the mistake of not helping KOMUCH, against whom the Reds had concentrated the majority of their forces at that time. After retaking Kazan, and most of the cities downstream taken earlier by the Whites, the Red command released sizeable forces for a new offensive against the Ural Cossacks.

In October 1918, fierce fighting began at the approaches to Uralsk. From Talovoy V.I. Chapaev, one of the best red commanders on the Eastern Front, broke through towards the Cossack capital. But instead of taking possession of Uralsk, he was defeated by the Urals below Talovoy and fled shamefully. By the end of October 1918, the same fate had befallen two other groups that came close to the Cossack capital. As a result of these successful operations, the Cossacks captured huge numbers of trophies. However, due to the short-sighted policy of the Ural Host Congress, the Urals would still not help the defeated troops of the People's Army. As a result, after the withdrawal of the KOMUCH to Ufa and the liquidation of the Izhevsk front, the Communists were able to gather all their forces into a strike force and pounce on the hated Ural Army.

A new large-scale offensive, which became in many ways fatal for the Ural Cossacks as a whole, began in mid-December 1918. The Bolsheviks created a huge numerical and technical superiority over the Ural Cossacks, and attacked Uralsk, Ilets town, Slamikhinskaya and Guryev. The Cossacks lacked weapons and ammunition, and so they turned to Kolchak for help. The latter ordered organised the transportation of the required material to the *Uralsy*, and in January 1919 it had reached the border of the Ural Cossack Host. The Bolsheviks, learning about this transport, took measures to intercept it. To prevent the Reds doing this, the Ural command sent its best division from the front to meet it, weakening the defence of Uralsk. It turned out that the transport had already slipped through the danger zone and did not need additional escorts, but the weakening of the Uralsk garrison was a fatal mistake. After fierce fighting, Uralsk fell on 24 January 1919. Immediately after this, two attempts were made to take it back. During one of them, the Cossacks even drove the Reds out of the capital. However, help came to the Bolsheviks, and the Cossacks had indulged in careless fun in the city – the Reds counterattacked and knocked them back out. Earlier, Ilets town had fallen, and now the entire north of the Ural Host lands were in Bolshevik hands.

Although the Bolshevik offensive against Guryev was defeated and the troops landed repelled, the Urals' situation became very difficult. Seeing the inability of the Host

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<sup>4</sup> Troops were called up in years. Younger men just come of military age were found to be more reliable in the Cossack armies, not yet disillusioned like the *frontoviki*.



Congress to fight the Communists effectively, the Cossacks lost confidence in it and began to leave their regiments in large numbers and go home. Additionally, the loss of Uralsk – for which so much blood had been shed – broke the Cossacks morally. The demoralisation was such that there were almost no combat-ready units left at the front. We can see a similarity here with the Don and Orenburg Cossacks, who also showed discouragement and a loss of combat capability. However, unlike them, the Ural Cossacks simply dispersed without expressing any support for Soviet power.

By the beginning of March 1919 the Reds had captured more than half of the territory of the Ural Cossack Host, including the village of Slamikhinskaya. The *Uraltzy* faced the immediate threat of being pushed back to the lower reaches of the Urals, where there was no food supply. If this happened, they could expect starvation, because tens of thousands of civilians had left with the remnants of the retreating Cossack units. With the abandonment of each settlement, the food situation progressively deteriorated. The Host Congress was unable to do anything to remedy the situation and in the spring of 1919 considered the option of withdrawing what remained of the army and refugees to Fort Alexander.

This did not suit the Cossacks of the combat-ready units. Soon after the abandonment of Uralsk, they began to talk about the need to transfer power into the reliable hands of a firm and authoritative ataman. In early March 1919, the Host Congress gave power to Colonel V.S. Tolstov, whose candidacy was supported by the majority of Cossacks. When elected, Tolstov set a condition: the right to unquestioningly dispose of the life of each Cossack. The ataman's elections were held at a critical moment for the Ural Cossacks: the front had rolled back to the village of Mergenevo. The Bolsheviks sent a delegation there, to agitate and complete the demoralisation of the remaining capable units, offering to conclude a "peace". However Tolstov went to Mergenevo in person and had the Red delegation, and a few Cossack traitors who were negotiating with them, shot.

After that Tolstov created a real miracle with the *Uraltzy*: by the end of March 1919 instead of microscopic units that barely had a thousand bayonets and sabres in total, the Independent Ural Army comprised at least 17,000 men. Not only that, but the army had a high morale. Tolstov's work did not come at the cost of a slow down in hostilities: in some month and a half the *Uraltzy* not only regained their lost territory, but also captured the border areas of the Samara and Saratov provinces, almost completely defeating the Red 4th Army. The Urals 1st Partisan Regiment alone took 10,000 Red Army men captive. A serious defeat was inflicted by the Urals at the beginning of April 1919 on the Chapaev division defending Lbishchensk, which was then withdrawn for reorganisation. Eventually, the Cossacks of the north revolted and threw the enemy out of their villages. The advance of the Urals Army was so rapid that the Reds did not have time to evacuate the Uralsk garrison: 3,000 men, with artillery, machine guns, several armoured cars and an armoured train. The Communists had also mobilised another thousand men from the city, mostly workers.



Now Tolstov made a fatal mistake, drawing almost all of his forces around Uralsk, instead of leaving flying squads to blockade of the city and to keeping the main part of the army helping Kolchak. He thought that his army would easily take its capital. But he miscalculated. The Reds, using a talented engineer D.M. Karbyshev, erected powerful fortifications around Uralsk, which is located conveniently for the defence in a position that dominates the area. So it was not possible to capture the Cossack capital with a lightning attack. Tolstov ordered a proper assault on Uralsk to be prepared. In spite of this, he failed to prepare for it correctly. The Cossacks had no decent weapons to fight the enemy's armoured vehicles. Additionally, it was found that there was a catastrophic lack of officers in the overgrown army, and the situation was such that non-commissioned Cossacks had to be given authority. In battle, this had a negative effect, because ordinary Cossacks often refused to carry out orders of NCO officers, and would gather and decide whether to do or not do what "Mitrich" said. Colonel Chernyaev, who was in charge of the assault troops, was also not up to par. Thus the Reds managed to repel all the Cossack attacks and hung on until in July 1919, when reinforcements approached in the form of the same Chapaev division, transferred from the Kolchak front. By that time the Uralsk garrison only mustered 400 people and had almost run out of ammunition.

After the relief of Uralsk, the Reds transferred additional forces against the Independent Ural Army. Inflicting heavy losses on the Reds, defending every inch of their native land, the *Uraltzy* retreated down the Ural River. By early September 1919, the front was already near the village of Sakharnuyo. Further retreat downstream for the Cossacks would mean going to areas where there was no fodder, which meant they would lose their horses. In these circumstances, the command of the Independent Ural Army decided to conduct a special operation: in a surprise attack a mounted group of four regiments defeated the Reds garrison in Lbishchensk, capturing huge warehouses with weapons and ammunition and killing the famous Red KomDiv Chapaev.

After that the front again rolled back to Uralsk, which was once again blockaded by the Cossacks. However, this success was frustrated by the mass surrender of the Orenburg Cossacks that occurred at the same time. In October 1919 the command of the Independent Ural Army launched an operation against the Red garrison of Uralsk, of the same type as the one that it carried out the month before against Lbishchensk. It was almost successful, but was thwarted by the fact that the four Cossack regiments that had approached Uralsk did not wait for the approach of the group from the Iletsk Corps. So, seeing a large inequality in strength, the operation was postponed.

Then the typhoid rampant among the Cossacks became an epidemic and completely devastated the regiments. It was impossible to prevent, as medical assistance from Denikin came too late. As a result, in November 1919 the regiments decreased to the size of sotnias. The Independent Ural Army lost its combat capability, and its remnants fell back to Guryev by the end of 1919.



The Red Command presented an ultimatum for the surrender of the Independent Ural Army in exchange for the life of its ranks. This ultimatum was rejected because of the hatred and mistrust the Cossacks had of the Communists. After that, from January to March 1920, they were forced to retreat to Fort Alexander, from where Denikin promised to evacuate them by sea. However, only a quarter of the group of refugees and army ranks, totalling up to 17,500 people, reached their destination. The rest died during the brutal blizzards, attacks from the Kirghiz, and of cold, frost and famine. Many of the survivors had severe frostbite and needed amputation. Due to the collapse of Denikin's front, only a small part of the *Uralsy* could be evacuated. A large number, demoralised by very tough transition to Fort Alexander, refused to follow Ataman Tolstov and surrendered at the approach of the Red [naval] squadron. They were placed in cavalry units, from where they deserted on the Western front that year<sup>5</sup> and continued their struggle against Bolshevism. On the Ural Host territory individual anti-Bolshevik detachments continued fighting until May 1920. The possibility for further struggle was undermined though by the typhoid epidemic and Cossack genocide, as a result of which the Cossack population was reduced to 2.5% of the former Host.

It should be noted that from the very beginning the Ural Cossacks fought almost without exception with their own resources against Bolshevism, without having sufficient weapons, cartridges, shells or medicine. They satisfied most of their needs by taking it from the Reds and were left to themselves most of the time. The assistance that came from Kolchak and Denikin was insufficient. And, despite this, they held on to the last person. If all the other Cossacks and representatives of the anti-Bolshevik forces had fought in the same way, who knows how the Civil War would have ended.

The Tolstov group, which numbered less than 200 men together with refugees, made its way through the Kirgiz lands and went to Persia. From there, a significant part of it moved to the Far East, where it took part in the final battles of General M.K. Diterikhs against the Communists. After the evacuation to Korea and China, most of the *Uralsy* moved in the 1920s to Australia, where their descendants live today. The Ural Cossack Army flags, are kept in the Orthodox churches of Australia.

## Place Names

Some places in the next are currently known by different names:

Fort Alexander  
Guryev  
Iletsk  
Lbishchensk  
Slamihinskaya  
Uralsk

Fort Shevchenko, above Aktau  
Atyrau  
Sol-Iletsk  
Chapaev  
Zhalpaktal  
Oral

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<sup>5</sup> Presumably to the Poles.

