



*With the White Army at the Gates of St Petersburg Richard Clarke presents a scenario for Triumph of the Will*

The tale of the White movement in North-West Russia is a peculiar one. Unlike the forces of Deniken in the South or Kolchak in the East those in the North West were never large in numbers, never conquered swathes of territory, but were to come the closest to achieving what could have been a political knock-out blow to the Red cause; the capture of the Imperial Russian Capital, St Petersburg.

Often in politics we discover that perception is more important than the truth, and in a civil war, surely the ultimate manifestation of the political struggle, this effect is heightened proportionately. When General Yudenich's forces stood before St Petersburg they were faced with the military reality that even if they could take the city they would have found it impossible to hold. But military reality in a civil war is a moveable feast. Whilst the loss of the old capital may not have been an immediate death blow to the Red movement, the propaganda effect amongst those who wavered between both camps - namely the vast majority of the population - could have been immense. As Lockett states succinctly in his book *White Generals*, "in a war waged by minorities the conviction of the indifferent might lead to victory".

Indeed, whilst Lenin had planned to evacuate the city Trotsky had argued successfully, even supported in his argument by his arch-political rival Stalin, that to do so would be to hand the Whites a propaganda victory of staggering proportions. However I am running ahead of myself.

#### **Origin of the Species**

The White movement in North West Russia began in the same way that parallel organisations

emerged elsewhere. The utter eradication of the world that Russia's upper classes and religiously devout had known and the oppression that accompanied that were key to why men rallied to the White standard after the Bolshevik revolution. To do so was dangerous, both for individuals and those associated with them, but for many the realities of Bolshevik rule were so repugnant that they were left with little or, in the case of the former social elites, no choice.

Unlike Southern Russia, where Kornilov's fledgling movement was hounded to pillar to post by Red forces determined to crush any opposition, in the North West the movement found immediate sanctuary. First from the German forces occupying the Baltic States and then from the forces of the newly independent Estonia.

To say that the area was a seething morass of political unrest may be a cliché, however it is to understate matters. The White movement that was sheltered by the Estonians disapproved of the very existence of the Baltic states which, they believed, were an indivisible part of Russia. The Estonians were well aware of this, and unimpressed by it, however after an unpleasant period of Red occupation in 1918 they saw the White forces as a potential ally to keep out any future Red incursions.

Then there were the Baltic Germans and their Freikorps allies. Neither were averse to fighting the Communists, both groups were ultra-conservative at heart and sympathised with the Whites. However they tended to be kept busy arguing with the Latvians about who should be running the country, and Lithuania was a strong supporter of the indigenous Lettish population. Even so the Germans and the White Russians actively discussed a policy of mutual military assistance, and some White Russians chose to link themselves to the German cause rather than that of Yudenich's White forces in the region.

Naturally the Entente powers were there, with the British their representative in the region. Their view was that the Germans should go home and leave the Baltic States to independence. However they recognised that in keeping out the Reds the Germans can be useful. However they didn't want the Whites talking to the Germans. To stop that dialogue they agreed to supply the White movement with weapons and equipment, however they didn't want the Whites posing a threat to the Latvians and the Estonians, so they agreed to supply them too.

And this is without mentioning the Ingermannlanders who wanted independence for that coastal area of Russia between Estonian and St Petersburg and were prepared to fight to get it. These chaps were supported and equipped by the Estonians, but hated by the White Russians who wouldn't even talk to them, let alone co-operate with them militarily. And I've probably missed out a whole second tier of likes and dislikes. All we can say for sure is that whilst none of this lot liked each other, they all HATED the Reds.



Anyway, in a nutshell, by May 1919 about 17,000 armed Whites were in Estonia and getting fed up with their hosts who, in turn, were getting fed up with them. General Yudenich, a commander who made a name for himself in both the Russo-Turkish and Great Wars, decided that then was the time to launch an offensive against the Reds.

His immediate objective was not to threaten St Petersburg directly, but simply to buy himself some elbow room on Russian soil. On May the 13<sup>th</sup> he began the offensive that took Yamburg and Gdov. Success there was followed by a further advance southwards that seized Pskov.

In the topsy-turvy world of the Russian Civil War it was the fall of Pskov, furthest south and away from St Petersburg that rattled the cage of the Bolshevik government. Pskov was a nodal point on the rail network and from there the lines ran directly north-east towards to the old Imperial city and also to the north to Narva on the Estonian border and near the White Army's main deployment. In a panic the Reds sent a hard man to hold the city; Stalin.

As a person everything about Stalin repels me. As a historian I love him, he's so utterly predictable. Unlike Monty Pythons' Spanish Inquisition Stalin has only one weapon; fear. And he never shirks from deploying it.

In St Petersburg he immediately set about purging the ranks of the Red forces of "counter-revolutionary elements". A wave of oppression swept through the city which, far from strengthening resolve, convinced the population at large that the Whites were on the doorstep and the place was about to fall. Elements of the Red Army began to desert to fill the ranks of the White Regiments, and two forts on the western approaches to the city, Krasnaya Gorka and Seraya Loshad, even went over en masse to the Whites, declaring their new allegiance by bombarding the Red Fleet in Kronstadt. The fleet answered back in kind, but were dissuaded from leaving port after the Cruiser Oleg was sunk by a British torpedo boat on blockade duty.

Stalin committed troops to retake the forts that had now been reinforced by the enthusiastic but naive Ingermanlanders. After several days hard fighting the garrisons withdrew leaving Stalin to claim a "huge victory". True to form he celebrated by executing 67 officers from the Kronstadt garrison, despite their having remained loyally at their posts throughout the whole affair. Stalin had done what he did best, create a crisis and then resolve it in the most vicious manner. To everyone's great relief he now left the city to return to Moscow.

In fact the whole affair was much ado about nothing. The Whites, as already stated, were simply not in a position to attack St Petersburg. Whilst their strength had increased to 25,000, largely due to Red deserters avoiding Stalin's purge, they could not equip anything like those numbers. Indeed they were now talking to von der Goltz's Baltic Germans (see the 2005 Christmas Cracker) in the hope of getting assistance from them.

It strikes me that this was an unlikely source of help as the Germans had enough on their plate

attempting to carve out a new Teutonic Kingdom of their own. It may well have been a calculated political move to get help elsewhere, namely Britain.

General Sir Hugh Gough, head of the Allied Military Mission to the Baltic States, was by now extremely fed up with the continuing German presence in the region. In order to counter any expansion of their influence Gough promised the White Russians support in the form of weapons, supplies, tanks and aircraft. This would allow Yudenich's forces to commence their attack on St Petersburg.

There is, and has always been, a doubt in my mind about Gough's motivation in providing support for the White movement. It is tempting to think that he just wanted them out of the Baltic states - which after all was his area of responsibility. However this is in no way supported by his subsequent actions or those of the British volunteers who came to the area and were intimately involved in the subsequent operations. Indeed it was often said that the British advisers ended up fighting with more phlegm and vigour than their Russian comrades. As we saw at Poltava (Summer Special 2006) this may be more of a comment on the psyche of the Russian aristocrat than anything else.

Suffice to say that the promised supplies arrived in August, the first tranche landing in Estonia on the 6<sup>th</sup> of that month, somewhat later than had originally been promised much to the chagrin of the Whites and the annoyance of Gough. The latter, however, treated the arrival as an opportunity to knock some shape into the region, beginning a whirlwind campaign of tough diplomacy. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August he summoned a meeting of Yudenich's Political Council and had them informed that they had forty minutes in which to form a government. What was more, that government was to make its first policy decision to formally recognise Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian independence. If they couldn't manage that then all deals were off and they'd get none of the goodies that had just arrived.

The last demand was hard to swallow for a group that was seeking to restore Russia to her former borders, and by the 14<sup>th</sup> of August Gough had to threaten to remove Yudenich from power in order to finally get an agreement that was acceptable to all parties. Three days later Gough proved that he was keeping faith with the now compliant Whites.

On the night of the 17<sup>th</sup> of August eight British torpedo boats entered Kronstadt harbour under

cover of a night time bombing raid that was launched by the RAF flying from a secret airfield deep in the Finnish forests. The battleships Petropavolsky and Andrey Perovzanny were sunk along with two other ships. The Red Fleet, previously capable of interfering with any White advance towards St Petersburg, was now neutralised.

Despite the arrival of the supplies all was not well in the White camp. The Red Seventh Army had whittled away at White gains, retaking Pskov and Yamburg during the summer. The deserters were now heading north, and what was more Estonia was now openly in conflict with the Baltic Germans and, suspecting that the Whites were supporting von der Goltz (which some rogue elements under Colonel Prince Bermond-Avalov were) they decided to expel the Army of North West Russia from their soil.



Yudenich was left with little choice. By now it was autumn and his men would soon need winter quarters. The advance on St Petersburg had to begin. Now however, unlike May, he was well equipped. Hopes were high, especially so when six British tanks arrived at Narva with volunteer crews ready to do more than instruct.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October Pskov and Yamburg were retaken by the Whites. The main thrust now took the Narva - St Petersburg railway line as its axis of advance. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October the lead elements reached Gatchina, just twenty-two miles from the old capital, where Trotsky, freshly arrived from Moscow, was doing all he could to shore up the front. To no avail. The Imperial park and residence fell to the Whites.

Now Trotsky attempted to shake the lack-lustre 7<sup>th</sup> Red Army into life. It was his belief that long periods of inactivity had dulled the formation.

“For a revolutionary army, which needs constant charges of enthusiasm, marking time almost always ends in mishap, and often in disaster. The Seventh army was no exception”.

Trotsky needed desperately to rejuvenate the formation if Petrograd, as the Bolsheviks chose to name the city, was to be held. Trotsky was later to write:

“In Petrograd I found the leaders in a state of utmost demoralization. Everything was slipping. The troops were rolling back and breaking up into separate units. The commanding officers looked to the communists, the communists to Zinoviev [Chairman of the Council of Commissars of the Petrograd Workers' Commune, essentially a Red Gauleiter. Ed.], and Zinoviev was the very centre of utter confusion.”

“Everyone expected an early surrender of the city to the Whites, and so people were afraid of becoming too conspicuous. But as soon as the masses began to feel that Petrograd was not to be surrendered, and, if necessary, would be defended from within, in the streets and squares the spirit changed at once. The more courageous and self-sacrificing lifted up their heads.”

Trotsky called for honesty amongst his commanders - he wanted to know the true situation not politically motivated half-truths. He used his own ultra-loyal railway troops, his Red Sotnia, to bolster up morale among the defenders, spreading them in penny packets amongst the defences to spread the word of the change in attitude. Trotsky himself supervised the construction of barricades moving through the city on horseback.



At Tsarskoe Selo, home of the Alexander Palace where the Tsar had first been held prisoner in 1917, fresh defences were organised, resulting in tough fighting on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of October, the breakthrough coming with the deployment of three British tanks. By the 20<sup>th</sup> of October the Whites had reached the Pulkovo Heights on the

very outskirts of the city. From there the Imperial capital could be seen sprawled out beneath them, the gilded dome of St Isaac's cathedral clearly in sight, and trains steaming in and out of the city clearly visible.

Worryingly visible. Yudenich had some days previously ordered that the railway was to be cut at Tosno, thereby isolating the city and cutting off any assistance it could receive. Critically the order had been ignored, with the commander concerned convinced that St Petersburg would fall and wishing to be there at its liberation.

Now, with fresh enthusiasm and reinforcements from the 15<sup>th</sup> Red Army beginning to arrive from the Polish frontier the Red Army found renewed self-belief. Galvanised by dynamic and very personal leadership from a man whose methods were the juxtaposition of Stalin's blundering incompetence they were drawing a line that Yudenich was not strong enough to cross. In constant action for ten days the Whites were universally exhausted. They had fought day and night on a diet of promises, and now, with no reserves, they were frostbitten and on the point of collapse.

Desperately Yudenich sent an envoy to Finland in the hope of support from that quarter. Mannerheim approved, but he was now out of office and in Paris. The Finnish Diet refused to move. It was the last straw. Emasculated the Whites could only gaze down on the gleaming domes of Peter the Great's capital and wonder at what might have been.

By the 24<sup>th</sup> of October the Pulkovo Heights were abandoned under pressure from fresh Red attacks. On the 27<sup>th</sup> Gatchina was in the front line, under attack from three sides. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November the town was abandoned, on the 7<sup>th</sup> Gdov and by the 14<sup>th</sup> Narva, the White starting point, had fallen to the Bolsheviks. Typhus was abroad amongst the remnants of the Whites, and what remained of the Army of North West Russia disintegrated as it crossed the Estonian border as fugitives, disarmed and left to rot in refugee camps.

The domed churches of St Petersburg epitomised the struggle of the White movement throughout Russia. At times possible success was so tangible that it could be seen, but ultimately was to prove illusive due to internal divisions and lack of collective action.

For the Reds their success at what was soon to be renamed Leningrad was also a microcosm of

their overall performance. When poorly led division and failure were all too typical. When well led, and utilising the internal lines of communication, they could successfully outmanoeuvre and outfight the Whites. Unity of purpose won the day under the strong and resolute leadership of Leon Trotsky, the man whom I consider was the ultimate architect of Red victory. Not that it did him much good.

The following scenario has been designed to reflect the fighting north of Gatchina around the town of Tsarskoe Selo where three British tanks and their Anglo-Russian crews spearheaded the attack that allowed the breakthrough to the Pulkovo Heights; the high-water mark of the North West Russian Army.

### **White Briefing**

You are General Jaroslavytzy, commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps of the Army of North West Russia. Despite strong resistance from the Reds our forces are continuing to make progress towards St Petersburg. Our objective now is to crush the resistance that seems to have hardened to the south of Tsarskoe Selo. Your men are tired, but we have no reserves to take their place, you must fight on for victory and Holy Mother Russia. In one respect we are fortunate. We have three British tanks to support our advance, make good use of these as the Reds have no answer to them.

Your force is as follows:

General Jaroslavytzy - Measured Commander

3<sup>rd</sup> Talabsky Regiment - 4 companies, each of 8 figures, drilled. Two MG platoons.

Semyanovsky Regiment - 4 companies, each of 8 figures, drilled. One MG platoon.

Tank Push Battalion - 2 companies, each of 10 figures, regular, aggressive.

Swedish Volunteer Company - 10 figures, regular, aggressive.

Tank detachment:

Tanks: "First Aid"  
"Captain Cromie"  
"Brown Bear"

### **Red Briefing**

Comrade! Petrograd, birthplace of the revolution is under threat. You, ComBrig Anton Podvoyski, are heading the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 6<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division, 7<sup>th</sup> Red Army. You have received clear instructions personally from Comrade

Trotsky - you must not retreat one step in your defence of Petrograd, the soldiers of the Red Army must hold the White counter-revolutionaries here at Tsarkoe Selo.

Your Brigade has deployed around the villages to the south of the old Imperial palaces. Your orders are simple; stop the enemy. No withdrawal is possible.

Your force is as follows:

ComBrig Podvoyski - Political Commander

49<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment, 3 battalions, each of 3 companies of 7 figures, drilled.  
Two Machine Gun platoons.  
One commissar.

50<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment, 3 battalions, each of 3 companies of 7 figures, drilled.  
Two Machine Gun platoons.  
One commissar.

One battery of 76mm artillery, 2 models, 3 crew per gun.

### **Umpire's Notes**

The accompanying map shows the area in 1917. It is October so the dotted areas which represent crop growing land will be hard ground. The lined area to the south west of Perelsino is marsh and is impassable to tanks, as are the blue drainage ditches and streams. Tanks operating on the roads will ignore double 1 to 3 on the breakdown roll.

The Reds have only just had the benefit of Trotsky's morale lifting intervention and the status of their troops is still questionable. Once the Red player has deployed the umpire, or Red player, will dice to see which two battalions are to be designated LMF. Once this has been done the Whites may make a Political attack.

The Reds begin the game in shell scrapes as far south as the northernmost end of Kandakopshino with their one artillery battery anywhere north of the line Kaprousi to Kochelevo, the Whites start on the southern table edge and in Ontolovo.

On the fifth turn, or fourth turn of the reinforcements card the Whites will receive reinforcements in the form of the Vyatsky Regiment. This force, with four companies of eight figures, drilled, and two MG Platoons will arrive on the south eastern corner of the table.

The Whites win if they open a viable route off the northern table edge. They are not obliged to destroy all Red opposition to achieve this. The Reds will be aware that they will lose if this is the case and must react to shut off any route in order to win themselves.

#### Historical Outcome.

The Whites had to fight hard to break through at Tsarkoe Selo but did so thanks to the British tanks. These were split up in action, "First Aid" (so called as it was the first British aid to reach the North West Army) attacked Kiskisari and advanced to within 500 yards of Tsarskoe Selo before oil pressure problems forced it to withdraw to Perelesino to rectify that. After running repairs it went on to attack Kaproussi. "Captain Cromie" passed through Kiskisari where it shot up Red troops retiring on Perelisino and then pressed on to Katlino. "Brown Bear" had early mechanical problems but fixed these to advance on the right flank, shooting up Red positions in front of Kiskisari before shelling Koshelevo and setting it on fire.

Thanks to the actions of the tanks the outnumbered White forces were able to press on and break through the Red positions, albeit in an uncoordinated fashion.

The scenario is based heavily on the accounts of Colonel Hope-Carson DSO MC, who commanded the tank mission and was involved on the front line of this battle. His

comprehensive account of this campaign was published in eight parts in the Royal Tank Corps Journal in 1920. I am extremely grateful to the staff of the Royal Tank Museum at Bovington who happily photo-copied the entire series, and much more, while I was using their library for research.

