

# First campaign against Uralsk of the "Red Army of the Saratov Soviet"

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*Map of the Campaign. (There is an appendix to help relate names to a modern map)*

At the end of March 1918, the Saratov Soviet received an order from Sovnarkom about organizing forces to fight the Ural Cossacks, who on March 29 had arrested the Urals Soviet and created a Military government. Each of the counties [*uezds*] where there were formations of the Red Army were to send 150 Red Army soldiers to Saratov, which would have given a total of 1,350 men. The provincial centre itself planned to send a battalion of 600 to 1,000 bayonets, a flying squad of 150 men with 10 machine guns and an artillery battery with crew. In total, about 3,200 men, with 42 machine guns, 4 field and 2 howitzer guns were to set off. In addition, at the insistence of Moscow, Tambov agreed to put in one battalion with two guns and 12 machine guns, and promised 500 soldiers with the armoured car Penza.

On April 14, the "army" from Saratov moved to the Pokrovsk to Uralsk railway line. Its composition was the following: the Saratov detachment (three companies of the 1st Saratov Regiment, a flying detachment, two cavalry squads, four guns and 30 machine guns, 5 airplanes, one armoured vehicle); the Tambov Detachment (450 bayonets, 50 sabres, with two guns and 12 crew); the Serdovsk Detachment (50 people and a team of 18 mounted orderlies). In total – 670 bayonets, 268 sabres, 6 guns, 42 machine gun, 5 planes and one armoured vehicle.

The headquarters of the "Army" was located at Ershov station. There, and at the nearby Altata station, they were organised into combat units, now including the armed forces previously involved in the fighting at Nikolayevsk (under Demidkin and Chapayev) and Novouzensk (under Sapozhkov) of Samara Province. Small subdivisions from other places in the Saratov Volga region also arrived.

At the end of April the troops of the "Red Army of the Saratov Soviet" took their initial positions prior to the beginning of hostilities. According to various sources they consisted of 3,200 to 3,600 infantry and from 150 to 575 cavalry. There were 18 guns,



from 92 to 110 machine guns, an armoured car, an armoured train and 5 airplanes. Their commander was I. Zaghumenny, and B. I. Moldovsky was appointed his chief of staff.

On May 4, at 2 a.m., the Red units launched their attack from the region of Ozinki station.

The Soviet troops used the proven tactics of the "Railway War". But the *Uraltsy* Cossacks had dismantled a significant section of the track from Ozinki to Semiglavvy Mar, so the troops went along the ruined line on foot without the train. The aim was to capture Semiglavvy Mar, quickly restore the line and using the armoured train continue the offensive.

On the right flank was a detachment from Novouzensk, followed by some men from Nikolayevsk under Demidkin. On the left was a detachment under Chapayev. In reserve, at a distance of 4 to 6 km, spanning the same width, were the Saratov and Tambov detachments. Artillery and machine guns were in the centre. This formation provided quick readiness for combat, but the off-road speed of the formations was not more than 2 or 3 km per hour, and the movement had slowed down by morning. The initiative was taken by V.I. Chapayev: with his detachment, he broke away from the square and went to Semiglavvy Mar into the rear of the Cossacks. The *Uraltsy* hastily retreated, without having time to damage the railway bridge across the ravine near the station. On the same day, by noon, the *Chapayevtsy* took the Karepanov farm, a dozen kilometres to the east. Two attacks by Cossacks tried to regain it, but were unsuccessful.

In the evening, the *Uraltsy* surrounded a detachment from Novouzensk and broke through their defences. In the darkness the Red fighters panicked and opened fire indiscriminately, including at their own side. They were once again rescued by Chapayev. Being several kilometres from the scene of the combat, he put a line of machine guns in front of his position, and with other fighters made a five-kilometre night march, attacking the enemy. The Cossacks retreated, losing about 20 men killed. The losses of the Red Army were about 50 killed and 20 wounded.

The next day, leaving a garrison in Semiglavvy Mar under the command of O. M. Sheveliev, the "Red Army of the Saratov Soviet" continued their offensive. It advanced six hours to the next station, of Shipovo. On the right flank were the men from Novouzensk, on the left was Chapayev, in the centre was the Demidkin detachment. To the rear of the forward group at a distance of 4 to 6 km the Saratov detachment covered them. The Cossacks did not accept battle and withdrew to Derkul station.

The Reds lingered for a day in Shipovo. They waited for a train bringing ammunition and rested. Meanwhile, the *Uraltsy* pulled up reserves: two sotnias of the 1st Training Horse Regiment from the Urals Horse *Divizion*, a foot *druzhina* [militia] and a gun. The foot unit was moved to Shipovo station, and the remaining units, under the general command of Colonel S.G. Kurin, headed north of the railway line with the aim of striking the rear of the advancing Red Army.



On the morning of 6 May, leaving the Tambov detachment in Shipovo, the Reds launched an attack on Derkul station and the nearby village of Zeleniy. Approximately 10 kilometres from Shipovo, the Red Army troops met the Cossack foot unit, dug at the heights of Derkul. The *druzhinniki*, consisting mainly of Cossack-*frontoviki* of nearby villages, fought desperately, allowing their families to collect their belongings and leave their homes. Colonel Kurin assisted them from the flanks and the rear. However, according to an eyewitness, “attacking, the Cossacks had only lances and whips in their hands, there were few sabres, and fewer rifles”. The *Uraltsy* signalled an attack, with whooping and whistling, turning into a *lava* [traditional Cossack formation]. Finally, at 6 o'clock in the evening, the Cossacks left their positions, and retreated to the next station, Peremetnaya. Up to 60 Red Army men died in this action.

Exhausted, the Red Army men, having posted a ring of guards, settled down for the night. Their night passed quietly, which you cannot say for the Shipovo garrison. At dawn on May 7, some Cossack cavalry passed by Shipovo, sowing panic among the sleeping soldiers. Standing by the ammunition train, and having time to jump on it, the volunteers immediately left in the direction of Derkul which was under the protection of the main forces. Having arrived there, the fugitives related the capture of Shipovo (which was not true) and about the movement of the enemy on Semiglavvy Mar. The picture drawn was most unpromising. It turned out that the "Red Army" was surrounded and cut off from Saratov. At an urgent meeting of detachment leaders *komandarm* Zaghumenny proposed two alternative plans of departure – by foot to Nikolayevsk [to the south-west] or follow the railway to Ozinki. The first case would mean abandoning the ammunition and armoured train, in the other case the retreat via Shipovo station would mean fighting through. It was decided to use all the available equipment and weapons. By the evening of the same day, the *Uraltsy* made sure that Derkul and Zeleniy were completely surrounded.

In the morning of 8 May the detachment commanders were ordered to depart. The armoured train and Demidkin and Saratov detachments moved in the front. The left flank was guarded by the Novouzensk men, and the right flank of the rear guard was entrusted to Chapayev. At the end of the day they reached Shipovo, and, believing that the station is occupied by the *Uraltsy*, fired from the armoured train.

Further retreat was suspended until the whole situation was clarified. The actions of the Shipovo fighters showed the unreliability of rumours about the success of the enemy. In the meantime, the "Army" began to dig in and build obstacles.

The situation, meanwhile, was not in the Reds' favour. It turned out that on 6 May, one of Colonel Kurin's horse units had attacked Semiglavvy Mar. The Red Army soldiers fought back, but at a later meeting decided to leave for Ozinki. The commander of the garrison O. M. Sheveliev complied with the general decision and ordered the retreat. Moreover, having arrived in Ozinki, the soldiers gathered for another meeting, with participation of the local garrison, decided “to retreat to Altata, to rest there before going on Semiglavvy Mar”.

Information about this became known to the command of the "Army" only on 9 May, delivered by air reconnaissance. The chief of staff of the "Army" Moldovsky and



Commissar Usanov immediately flew to Altata. They had to force the retreating fighters to return to Semiglavy Mar. Having clarified the circumstances of the retreat, Moldovan arrested Sheveliev, and the unit was ordered to set out at 10 o'clock in the morning on 10 May.

But at the appointed time the unit did not leave, instead gathering for a meeting. A decree was prepared: "We demand the release of Sheveliev, and the arrest and shooting of Moldovsky and Usanov for arresting our commander". In the evening, the detainees were released, and the volunteers expressed their readiness to march, provided there was a promise not to arrest Sheveliev again.

On 11 and 12 May, these troops successively occupied Dem'yas and Chalyklu stations. But it was too late: not waiting for assistance, the main group had already left Shipovo. On 13 May all the detachments of the "Red Army of the Saratov Soviet" finally united in Ozinki.

The first campaign to Uralsk ended in complete failure. The period of volunteer soldiers was ending, and with it the tactics of "railway war", which was justified only when actions were deployed along the railway lines by independent detachments having an extremely limited amount of artillery. But with the creation of [formal] regiments and divisions and the formation of batteries and *divizioni* [i.e. artillery battalions], and also the move of the enemy to organising field defences around occupied cities and individual settlements, the railway tactics no longer corresponded to the formations opposing them and the tasks facing them.

## **Appendix on Place Names**

A lot of the stations have different names from the town that they are in.

Altata station is in modern Dergachi

Derkul station is not in the modern town of Derkul, but near Usikhino

Ershov is sometimes Yershov

Peremetnaya station is in modern Kalininskoye

Pokrovsk is now called Engels

Shipovo station is in modern Taskala

Zeleniy is likely near modern Kalininskoye

