

<snipped Part I, being pages outlining the events of the Polish War as concerned the cavalry armies>

II – The Bolshevik Cavalry

Strength - Organisation

Up to June 1919 the Bolshevik army only disposed of regiments of divisional cavalry; but at that date, in order to oppose the audacious raids of Mamontow, who had twice pierced the front and opened for Denikin the road to Voronège and Orel, Trotski decided on the creation of a large cavalry body.

He pushed very actively for its organisation and in August of the same year two cavalry corps (Boudeny and Doumenko) entered action, broke in their turn Denikin's front and threw his units in disorder back to the Caucasus.

In May 1920, the red cavalry was composed of:

1) Three large units of cavalry:

- the Cavalry Army of Boudeny (five divisions of cavalry on which four were organic, plus the 9th cavalry division);
- 3rd Caucasian Cavalry Corps (Gaia Cavalry Corps: two divisions of cavalry);
- Jloba Cavalry Corps (three divisions of cavalry).

2) The divisions of cavalry or mixed groups operating independently or in an Army (six divisions of cavalry).

3) The regiments or groups of divisional cavalry (strength of forty regiments)

In total: 17 organised cavalry divisions and 40 divisional regiments.

A) Composition of the large units

1) The Cavalry Army of Boudeny consists of:

1 Headquarters and its guard (300 chosen communists, well mounted and armed);

4 cavalry divisions, plus the 9th CD, plus 1 reserve brigade with the role of mobile depot:

Specialist troops – 3 aviation squadrons (18 craft), wireless posts, some cars and motorbikes, armoured trains, armoured cars, some canons on armoured trucks)

The Cavalry Army is a force of:

15,000 horsemen
60 canons
300 to 350 machine-guns
4 armoured trains

2) The Cavalry Corps consists of:

1 Headquarters;
3 cavalry divisions;
Specialist troops as for Boudeny

Being a total of:

9,000 sabres or carbines
36 canons
200 to 250 machine-guns

3) A cavalry division is composed of three brigades, each comprising:

1 staff;



- 2 cavalry regiments (4 squadrons, 1 MG squadron, 1 technical squadron);
- 1 battery of 4 guns (250 C a gun¹);
- 1 supply section;
- 1 administration section;
- 1 health section;
- 1 combat train;
- 1 technical squadron (in some units)
- 1 cyclist company (in some units)

A cavalry division is a force of:

- 3,000 sabres or carbines;
- 12 canons
- 72 machine-guns
- 400 carts

B) Troops

1) The officer cadre is made up for the most part (90%) of officers or NCOs of the former army. They perform their military duty by way of professional duty or ambition;

2) The soldiers, are made up of very diverse elements, comprising:

- Former cavalry soldiers won to the communist cause;
- Cossacks, always ready to desert (eg, the 1st Brigade of Don Cossacks)

They are in general disciplined;

3) Arms:

- Sabre, carbine (or rifle without bayonet);

- Revolver for the NCOs (no lance);

- Machine-gun (Lewis or Maxim) carried on a cart with the crew (4 men). This forms the core of the very mobile combat groups. Its protection is assured by 3 or 4 horsemen.

- 76mm canon: crew on horseback;

4) Mounts of the cavalry are rustic and mixed.

The horses of the cossack units are good, but those of the other units which are provided by purchase, exchange or requisition in the countryside are of very mediocre worth.

5) Dress and equipment are in general in a satisfactory state and clearly superior to those of the other arms.

6) Ammunition supply appeared to be sufficient during the course of these operations [ie Polish war]; consumption remained limited, as the actions were never of a long duration.

C) General principles of the cavalry in action

1) *Marches* – Strategic movement of the large cavalry units was always made by road.

Leaving the Caucasus on 24 March, Boudeny's army attacked in the Ukraine on 23 May, having covered 1,200 kilometres in 64 days.

Marches distant from the enemy were made by division – 50 to 80 kilometres between divisions. They were made in a standard manner:

Start at 0400. Long stop for several hours in the middle of the stage. Arrival at cantonment at 2000. Exclusively made at the walk.

Average stage was 30 kilometres. One day of rest after 3 of marching.

2) *Approach* – Each division received a zone of action. It advanced in articulated² formation. Each brigade was covered by units deployed by groups of three. The battery of the brigade marched in the vanguard.

The main body followed some 500 to 1,000 metres behind the vanguard.



3) *Attack* – Against positions held by infantry: patrols and skirmishers determined the points held by the infantry. Automatically, the first units dismounted three-quarters of their effectives and engaged the enemy with fire (carbine, MG, canon). Whilst this display fixed the defender, the other units infiltrated into the gaps, either on foot or mounted, looking to use their firepower on the rear of the resistance with the menace of this generally sufficient to make it fall.

Against cavalry: as a rule, Russian cavalry did not seek combat with the sword. It endeavoured to draw the adversary into a zone where it would find itself under machine-gun fire.

III Methods

The use of the Bolshevik cavalry in 1920 was characterised by:

- 1) Strategically – the intensive use of the movement capacity of the cavalry, to form large masses of manoeuvre that the Russian command used first on one front and then on another to help look for decisive results.
- 2) Tactically – the combination of fire and movement in order to, on one hand fix the enemy in place, and on the other to move on his communications and break the resistance either by outflanking or by infiltrating the interior of the position.
- 3) Flexibility of the combat technique, the almost complete predominance of firepower over the sabre.

The Bolshevik cavalry enjoyed the primary role in the campaign against the Poles. It obtained decisive results.

The operations on the Russian front in 1920 took place in particular conditions to which the Bolshevik command had been able to adapt the organisation and use of its cavalry.

What initially struck one about these operations was the disproportion between the extent of the theatre and the effectives who were engaged in it by the two adversaries. On a front almost 1,000 kilometres in length, the Bolsheviks were able to put into the line in the second phase [ie late June-July] , 33 infantry divisions and 9 cavalry divisions, whereas the Poles could only oppose them with a maximum of 22 divisions of infantry and 1 division of cavalry. In these conditions the front could not be continuous. It necessarily contained wings and wide gaps. Even in the occupied portions, the density of occupation could only be very weak at certain points.

The Polish command, by deploying almost all its forces in positions without depth, denied itself the possibilities of manoeuvre which would have been given them by strong reserves.

The Bolshevik cavalry had a good time attacking such deployments. It had naturally used its capacity for movement to flank the front via the wings or through the gaps. It had even been able to break the front by attacking the points held weakly just using firepower. Once the flank was turned or broken, it found itself in the open, since the enemy had no reserves with which to oppose it. It was able, by moving onto the communication lines of the enemy, to rapidly exploit the initial success and collapse all resistance.

The precariousness of communications and the available means of transportation in the Russo-Polish theatre also had a particular character. The two armies had a road network that was not very dense and doubtless in a bad state. The rail network was still more spread out. The moving material (cars and train engines) was greatly reduced. The armies were only able, for strategic as well as tactical movement, to count on the legs of their infantry and above all of their cavalry. The use of cavalry took, in these conditions, a prime importance and explains how the Bolshevik command had been able to generate such great profit from their crushing superiority that was given by its large cavalry units whereas the Poles were only able to oppose them with squadrons.

Finally, the Bolshevik and Polish armies during the 1920 campaign, had had material (artillery, aviation, engineering) inferior in quantity and quality to those of the armies that were engaged on the Western Front, and to that which will be available in a future conflict of normally equipped nations. The extent of the front and the lack of means had not allowed firepower to take the dominance that it has taken and will take more and more in battle. Indeed, it is precisely the development of firepower that limits in modern war the



occasions where cavalry can be employed in action and limits the conditions of its use. This factor also allows one to understand why the Bolshevik cavalry increased its role and was able to have such effect.

In summary, on one hand the extent of the fronts with regard to the effectives employed and on the other the lack of material means, notably firepower means, and the scarcity of communications equipment at the front gave a special character to the Russo-Polish war in 1920, particularly favourable to the employment of cavalry.

<snipped page long discussion about whether these features will appear in the West in the future>



¹ 250 *C par pièce* – no idea what this means

² *articulé* which is pretty much identical, in all its meanings, to the English “articulated”

