

The Railway Troops of Russia

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3.1. Railway War

Wars and military conflicts in the last quarter of the 19th – early 20th centuries had an exceptional role for the railways, both in their preparation and continuation. The tasks assigned to railways during military operations did not undergo significant changes over several decades and was thoroughly studied by specialists.

However, at the beginning of the civil war that unfolded on the territory of the former Russian Empire, unusual and peculiar ways to use railways arose for solving the problems of the armed struggle. This was due to the peculiarities of the situation and the complexity and dangers which required the central bodies of the new government to take emergency measures. Indeed, the armed uprising in Petrograd on 25 October 1917 and the overthrow of the Provisional Government, led to the establishment of Soviet power in a significant portion of the country's territory, but the process of "Sovietisation" was carried out very unevenly.

In Moscow, the transfer of power to the Soviets took place only on 2 November 1917. In Perm, Vyatka, Vladivostok and some other cities, in the second half of November. In Irkutsk in December 1917. A complex and contradictory situation developed in the south of the country.

Moreover, after the October Revolution the forces of the overthrown political classes started to unite for an armed struggle against Soviet power.

The list of problems that the Soviet government had to face was supplemented by:

- The devastation of the railways, which threatened to paralyze the entire economic life of the country. It was aggravated by the huge army of demobilised soldiers pouring onto the railways from the front, trying to get home as quickly as possible. And worsened more by the disorganising effect on railways workers of violent skirmishes, which from time to time broke out between the supporters of the revolution and its opponents;
- The threat of famine, acquiring (against the background of the growing rebellion of A.I. Dutov¹, whose detachments at any moment could cut the routes of food supplies from Siberia) a more and more ominous outlook;
- The refusal of the headquarters of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief to carry out the decisions of the Soviet government and, in particular, to appeal to the German command with a proposal for an armistice;
- The disagreement of local authorities in some regions of the country to recognize the Soviet government and direct appeals by a number of Cossack atamans and former leaders of the old army to fight the Soviet regime, which resulted in the open formation of units of White Guard in the Don, South Urals and North Caucasus;
- The growing national separatist movements, which intensified their activities after the II Congress of Soviets proclaimed the right of nations to self-determination. As a result, in November 1917, the Transcaucasian Commissariat was formed, the Kuban Regional Government was created, the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) was formed and the independence of Finland was proclaimed. The Moldavian People's Republic appeared in December. At the same time, there was a deterioration in relations with the Central Rada, which – without stopping negotiations with the Council of People's Commissars² – was engaged in the elimination of the Soviets on the territory of Ukraine; carried out the disarmament of revolutionary military units and detachments of the Red Guard; and who supported Atamans Kaledin³ and Dutov, allowing passage through the territory of the Ukrainian National Republic of counter-revolutionary units to the Don;

¹ Ataman Dutov was the leader of the Orenburg Cossack Host.

² That is, Lenin's government.

³ Ataman Kaledin was the leader of the Don Cossack Host.



- Finally, the appearance by the end of 1917 of a real threat of armed hostilities from Germany and the Allies.

To survive these conditions, the new government had to solve a number of priority tasks, the most important of which were: the expansion and consolidation of its bridgeheads in the largest possible territory of the country; the isolation and liquidation of centres of counterrevolutionary activities; and the return of at least minimal order to the railways.

The simplest and at the same time effective way to solve them was the rapid seizure by special detachments (sent from revolutionary centres) of the large cities, the junction railway stations, and the economically, politically and militarily important regions of Russia, in order to eliminate counter-revolutionary activities in them and establish Soviet power. In a situation characterised by the absence of continuous front lines, the initial disunity and small number of counter-revolutionary formations, and the insignificant distance of the intended targets from the railways, such actions seemed quite feasible.

Of course, the most suitable means of enabling the revolutionary detachments to fulfil these missions was rail transport, which also allowed the use of armoured trains and to control and coordinate actions using the railway telephone and telegraph systems. This created the conditions for the Railway War – a special type of combat operations deployed along the main railways, in which trains served as a means of manoeuvre, permanent deployment and a supply base for the armed formations.

Before the railway war broke out, rail transport, both in peacetime and in wartime, was used for military purposes, mainly for the transportation of troops and military cargo. A separate train for a military unit following the railroad to its destination was created for the period of troop transportation and, as a rule, was not intended for solving combat missions along the route. With the beginning of a railway war, the situation changes utterly – the train and carriages in it are transformed into the main operating base, serving to solve a certain range of combat missions. A group of such, plus armoured trains, operating under a single command, became a formation capable of independently achieving goals.

The methods of railway warfare, originally adopted by units of Red Guard, were subsequently used by all participants in the hostilities.

Using these methods, the first major operations of the civil war were carried out – among which, the defeat of Kaledin's troops is of particular interest. By the time the revolutionary formations began fighting, the volunteer detachments of General M.V. Alekseev, together with Cossack units, captured Rostov and Taganrog and were preparing for a further offensive.

V.A. Antonov-Ovseenko, who took over the general leadership of the operation on 11 December 1917, formed the field headquarters of the South Russian Revolutionary Front for the fight against counter-revolution. This headquarters developed a plan that provided for the seizure of a number of important railway junctions and lines in southern Russia with the aim of separating the anti-Soviet forces of the Ukraine and the Don.

The South Russian Revolutionary Front's offensive began at the end of December 1917. Acting in separate detachments along the railways, they captured Taganrog on 28 January 1918, Rostov on 23 February and Novocherkassk on 25 February. By the end of February, Kaledin's troops were defeated.

The remnants of the Cossack troops (1,500 men, 5 guns and 40 machine guns) retreated to the Salsk steppes. The Volunteer Army (about 4,621 men) led by Kornilov, retreated to the Kuban – making the so-called First Kuban, or Ice, Campaign.

Almost simultaneously with the defeat of the counter-revolutionary formations on the Don, the Soviet government took active steps aimed at breaking the troops of the Ukrainian National Republic. First of all, on 11-12 December 1917, in Kharkov, with the organising participation of the Bolshevik Party, the 1st All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets was held, at which the Central Rada was outlawed and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR) was formed. Then Antonov-Ovseenko turned to the Revolutionary Military Soviets of the Romanian and Southwestern Fronts of the old army with a request to help in the fight against the troops of the UNR.



M.A. Muravyev was appointed commander-in-chief of the troops operating against the Central Rada. Using the methods characteristic of a railway war, the formations led by him defeated the Ukrainian units and captured Kiev on 26 January (8 February)⁴.

At the end of December 1917, S. D. Pavlov's detachment and Red Guards from Samara, Yekaterinburg, Perm, Ufa and some other cities acted in the same way. They, in cooperation with the insurgent workers of Orenburg, managed to defeat the enemy and capture the city on 18 January 1918. The surviving troops of Ataman Dutov withdrew to the Turgay steppe.

In the battles around Orenburg, the detachment of the recent *frontovik* V.K. Blucher operated successfully. The detachment was distinguished by a special structure of trains and tactics. In particular, the locomotive was in the middle of the train, and flatbed carriages barricaded with bales of cotton were at the head and tail, behind which were guns and machine guns. Having located Dutov's men, the reconnaissance train immediately entered battle. Then the trains with the main forces approached. This is how battles were fought near the villages of Donguzskaya and Pavlovskaya, as well as in a number of places along the road to Buzuluk.

In December 1917 to January 1918, the cadet rebellion in Irkutsk was suppressed and all local counter-revolutionary governments were liquidated. The remnants of the Cossack detachments of Atamans G.M. Semenov and I. Kalmykov fled to the territory of Manchuria.

In the first half of February 1918, detachments of Latvian riflemen, revolutionary sailors and Red Guard under the command of I.I. Vatsetis and I.P. Pavlunovski, frequently using operational and tactical methods of railway warfare, defeated the 1st Polish Legion Corps in Belarus of General I. R. Dovbor-Musnitskiy⁵ and pushed them back to Bobruisk and Slutsk.

However, when talking of the scale of the railway war, it should be noted that in 79 cities out of 97 the new power was established peacefully.

If we analyse the peculiarities of tactics inherent in a railway war, we can see that they were largely determined by the military and political significance of the particular railway lines; the composition, weapons, morale and psychological qualities and training of the troops; the outline of the railway network; and some other factors.

Usually an operation during the railway war developed like this. On the most important railway lines, from a military or political point of view, an accumulation of trains with armed detachments was organised, which attacked with speed to capture the junction railway stations. Most often these stations were located in *guberniya*⁶, less often in *uyezd*⁷ cities.

The mastery of a large railway junction with developed track facilities made it possible to concentrate a significant number of trains and control an entire railway line. In addition, in the railway workshops and depots it was possible to equip new armoured trains and armoured platforms, and to repair rolling stock.

Of no small importance were the capital station buildings. If necessary these allowed a transition to defence, with the rapid transformation of the railway station into a fortified area.

In the initial stages of the railway war, the seizure of the railway junction and the adjacent settlement took place as follows. An armoured train moving ahead of the unit trains⁸ fired at the station. As the unit trains approached, the fighters disembarked from the carriages and, deploying to attack on foot in one or two lines of riflemen, seized the station buildings and then fought in the streets.

This was done, as a rule, using all available forces. No reserves were formed. No combat planning was carried out. Written orders for the commanders were not used.

Often the Red Guard detachments' attack was accompanied by an uprising in the local population. Such demonstrations were noted when the revolutionary columns approached Kiev, when they took Rostov,

⁴ This time is the switch from Old Style (Julian) to New Style (Gregorian) calendar by the Soviets.

⁵ Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki had refused to disband the Polish corps.

⁶ Roughly Province

⁷ Roughly District

⁸ English doesn't really have a word for the Russian *eshalon*, a specifically military train. I shall call them "unit trains" because they carried armed men, and to distinguish them from armoured trains and purely transport trains.



Konotop, Taganrog, Poltava and some other settlements. They greatly facilitated the task of the attackers, reducing the time of the overall operation, and cutting losses.

With the growth of combat experience and the increase in forces and means involved in the fighting, the tactics of the railway war underwent changes.

Reconnaissance gradually became more important to support combat operations. However, it was carried out solely along the railway lines, with the help of locomotives, armoured platforms and railcars. Although such methods made it possible to survey large sections of railway lines quickly, they did not always provide sufficiently complete information on the area under observation – the composition, plans and nature of enemy actions.

Much more attention began to be paid to the protection of tactically important areas. True, for a long time it was limited only to the sending of detachments to bridges and the like, important in operational and tactical terms, and to the nearby railway junctions.

The tactics to capture large railway junctions also underwent significant changes. Simultaneously with the reconnaissance along the railway line, infantry and light artillery pieces were now unloaded at a junction, several kilometres away from the railway junction which was to be taken. The commanders followed the detachments, directing their subordinates through horse and foot messengers. If movement on dirt roads was required, peasant carts were used. Ambushes and night combat became common .

However, the characteristic features of a railway war remained unchanged: such as the absence of continuous fronts; relatively small forces and assets involved in hostilities; actions taking place mainly along rail lines or an insignificant distance from them; and the use of unit trains and armoured trains to attack the enemy, to pursue, or to retreat in the face of superior enemy forces.

The quality of the forces in the battles had a great influence on the course of the railway war. Usually, a unit train had Red Guard detachments formed from factory workers, as well as units of the old army, among which were former military railroad workers. The Red Guards were distinguished by their ideological conviction, high fighting spirit and decisiveness of actions, but these qualities of the Red Guard detachments were reduced by their low combined arms training.

The servicemen of the units of the old army were much better trained, had combat experience, but did not always demonstrate a high level of combat stability. One of the features of the military formations of this period of the civil war was the absence of a rigid organisation and staff structure. These units were distinguished by a high turnover and were replenished with local proletarian and semi-proletarian elements.

As a rule units during the railway war were formed around a more or less stable core, made up around a detachment authorized by the centre. This detachment was the most organized, had armoured trains, and maintained a fairly high level of discipline. Making full use of the powers provided by the centre and his own strong-willed qualities, as a rule the detachment commander controlled the actions of a significant portion of the unit trains on a particular rail line. However, it was not always possible to coordinate military operations simultaneously on several lines.

Over time the optimal composition and number of formations that operated during the railway war were worked out. According to some researchers, the detachment of A.V. Polupanov was highly typical for that time: it fought in the Ukraine at the beginning of 1918 and had about 250 men. On the whole, "columns" of up to 7 to 10 thousand people, created from separate detachments and operating in converging directions, might be involved in an operation to defeat one or another hotbed of counter-revolution.

Logistic support for the detachments was via the warehouses of the old army located at the junction stations, local requisitions and trophies captured from the enemy. During the railway war, wheeled transport was never used for rear area supply.

Combat showed that how the Red Guard detachments, units of the old army and the former military railroad workers serving with them, behaved in action were largely determined by the combat, morale and psychological qualities of their enemy.

Very often, especially in the initial period of the railway war, the Red Guard detachments were opposed by formations hastily put together by local authorities who opposed Soviet power. Their combat effectiveness, as a rule, was low. In Ukraine, for example, the UNR units operating against the Red Guards detachments not only didn't offer vigorous resistance, but even went over to the Red Guards in large numbers. The low level of



morale and psychological stability of the participants in these clashes led to the situation that “the mere fact of shelling the station, the depot alone, made an amazing impression. As soon as one side realised the other side had the advantage they fell back without resistance, destroyed the tracks and went to the next railway junction. ... If forces were equal ... hot, short and decisive battles broke out”.

However, the revolutionary detachments had another enemy. On the Don and in the North Caucasus there were frequent clashes with detachments of the emerging White Guards. Despite their small numbers, these units offered resolute and stubborn resistance to the Red Guards.

It was not easy for the revolutionary detachments when they met with regular military units. In clashes with the German occupation forces in Ukraine, the latter preferred bold and decisive manoeuvring along dirt roads, bypassing railway junctions in order to reach their enemy's flank and rear. Units of the Czechoslovak Corps strove to act in a similar way. “As soon as a clash with red detachments began,” as an eyewitness describes one of the combat episodes of the railway war that took place near the Miass station, “the Czechs immediately disembarked from their carriages, drove the trains 80 km to the rear and fought our trains in a field war.”

The outline of the railway network had a significant impact on the features of operational and tactical actions during the railway war. The capture of a railway junctions located a particular way in the network, made it possible to bypass the enemy and suddenly appear in his rear. A typical case occurred at the beginning of 1918, when several detachments of White Guards seized Gukovo station in the Donbas, and managed to get behind the Red Guards who were based at Zverevo station.

At the height of the railway war (January–February 1918), revolutionary detachments were able to carry out several operations on multiple railway lines, despite the difficulty in achieving such co-ordination in the prevailing conditions.

So Red Guard trains were able to attack Rostov from different directions: the detachments of G.K. Petrov from Voronezh, Yu.V. Sablin from Kupyansk, R.F. Sivers from Kharkov, while simultaneously parts of the Caucasian Front advanced from the south and Taganrog Bay was blocked by the revolutionary ships of the Black Sea Fleet. Another successful mission was the co-ordinated offensive of the trains units of R.I. Berzin from Gomel to Bakhmach, P.V. Egorov from Poltava and the 2nd Guards Corps from Zhytomyr, against Kiev on 26 January (8 February) 1918.

The local population exerted some influence on the course of hostilities during the railway war. As already noted, the capture of a number of large cities was accompanied by uprisings of some of their inhabitants. Of course, this greatly facilitated the task of the Red Guard detachments.

Local railroad workers also played an important role. Generally lower and middle-level railway employees supported the Red Guard detachments. The Chelyabinsk railroad workers took an active part in the fight against Dutov's Cossacks. In the course of hostilities with UNR units, the Kiev railway workers provided significant assistance to the Red Guard detachments. Workers and employees of the Polesian railways did everything possible to assist the detachments of I.I. Vatsetis and I.P. Pavlunovsky in the fight against the Dovbor-Musnitski's legionnaires.

There were counter-examples: with the help of railway workers, the White Guard units managed to get into the rear of the Red Guards in January 1918 in the Donbass. Nevertheless in the overwhelming majority of cases, the sympathies of ordinary railroad workers were on the side of the Red Guard detachments.

The role of the local population should not be exaggerated however. The high manoeuvrability of the forces and means in a railway war and the relatively short time it took to seize railway junctions and settlements, significantly reduced the influence of local residents on the course of hostilities.

Thinking of railway warfare as a specific type of combat operations, it can be seen that some inherent features significantly influence the results of operations. These include, first of all, a high degree of dependence of the results on the type and technical situation of the railway network, rolling stock, and the availability of fuel and water supplies for locomotives.

How serious the influence of these factors was can be judged by this example: just to maintain one steam locomotive with a four-axle tender under steam for a day, needs about 10 tons of water and 7 cubic metres of firewood or 3.3 tons of coal. In addition, on a monthly basis, each steam locomotive needed a flush repair of the boiler, which could only be carried out using the stationary repair base. It is easy to imagine what difficulties had to be overcome to support the actions of dozens of unit trains and armoured trains in a mobile



war! Therefore, fuel and water supplies sometimes played a decisive role in planning the scale and timing of certain operations.

In many cases, even when the intended operation was carried out successfully for one of the sides, it was far from always able to achieve a complete defeat of the enemy. Often, as soon as the position of any of the participants in the operation became critical, that command, together with the headquarters and the most prepared units, could escape from the prevailing enemy along local roads. Moreover, the movement away from the rail lines made it almost certainly possible to avoid pursuit. Thus Kornilov managed to leave Rostov with his best units, and Petliura left Kiev similarly.

The railway war was also characterized by a high accident rate caused by an insufficient technical training and skill and the relatively small number of military railway workers among them. This led to numerous casualties in crashes and accidents on the railways.

In the end, the growth in numbers and resources involved in the armed struggle, the inability to ensure the secrecy of the movement of a significant number of unit trains and armoured trains, their high vulnerability to artillery and enemy aircraft, and the limited area of fire destruction of the artillery of armoured trains and armoured platforms to a relatively narrow strip along the railways, was to cause a change in tactics. These factors, as well as the possibility in the event of timely detection of the movement of enemy trains, to paralyse movement on a particular line by destroying large artificial structures (such as bridges), began to complicate the conduct of operations using railway warfare methods more and more – making them less and less effective.

Thus the methods of railway war were widely used only in the initial period of the civil war. With the growth of the size of armies and the scale of the armed struggle, troops gradually switched to roads, and the methods of railway war begin to acquire a secondary and then auxiliary character. In the second half of 1918, the railway war lost its significance.

However, later on, both during the civil war and in a number of armed clashes on the territory of other countries (for example, in Germany when the Reichswehr forces suppressed the uprising in Leipzig in 1923), a participant in a conflict who controlled the railway network and was forced to solve the problem of suppressing pockets of resistance located near junction railway stations in a limited time, often resorted to the methods of railway war to achieve their goals.

In this way we can see that railway warfare was a special type of combat operations carried out along railway lines, based on the use of railways and rolling stock as the main means of manoeuvring, with the permanent deployment and support of military formations. The railway war arose in a specific military-political situation that developed on the territory of Russia after the October Revolution and demanded that the new government take urgent measures to strengthen its position.

The key factors that contributed to the fact that the hostilities in the initial period of the civil war took the form of a railway war were: the initial disunity and small number of military formations involved in hostilities; the lack of solid front lines; and that the areas of hostilities were near railways. The main operational-tactical methods of railway warfare were used by all participants in the initial stage of the civil war.

At the same time, as the conditions for the conduct of hostilities change, and the forces and means involved in armed struggle multiply, they lose their significance. However, in those cases when the developing situation allowed the opposing sides to effectively use the methods of railway war, they have been used more than once both during the civil war and in other wars and military conflicts.

