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The Yekaterinoslav Campaign

When Russian officers began to return home from captivity in the summer of 1918, to the Ukraine newly formed by the Germans, it seemed to them a paradise. White bread! Sugar! Sausage! In any quantity and quite inexpensive.

Our company travelled by steamboat from Kiev to Yekaterinoslav, as trains were not yet running regularly. In Yekaterinoslav we found ourselves in the Austrian zone of occupation. We were impressed by the exceptional correctness of the Austrian army. Not the slightest victorious arrogance in the behaviour of the soldiers and officers in the streets. When I checked in at the Austrian commandant's office, the military clerk who received me was reprimanded by his superiors for daring to sit in my presence without asking my permission.

"A Russian officer, even if he is only a demobilized soldier of the hostile army, is still an officer, and a lower rank must treat him with respect," the Austrian Hauptmann shouted furiously, moustache bristling.

The city institutions acted and governed in the name of Hetman Skoropadski. In the offices, however, there sat mostly ex-tsarist officials, most of whom were local natives. Among them there were many who in peacetime liked to flaunt their Ukrainophilism. As part of this, a Ukrainisation of the state apparatus began, and on orders from Kiev there was an experiment with the drawing up of papers in "the native language". Of course, it was both comedy and tragedy at the same time. Sometimes some "good pan"¹⁴ Samoilovich or Kovoshenko would be sitting at the table with big drops of sweat dripping down his nose onto the paper in front of him.

"I wish dogs would eat you all, with your Ukrainisation," grumbled the hapless gentleman. "I have business to attend to, not trifles. The paper would have been ready long ago in Russian, but nothing comes out in this damned language."

By the way, I personally did suffer from this Ukrainisation. Having graduated from the gymnasium¹⁵ in Lomza¹⁶ and knowing Polish tolerably, I quickly found a way out: I took Polish words, added Ukrainian endings to them and glued everything together into ordinary Russian expressions. All the officials, especially the most "sensitive" ones, came to me for help. The director himself marvelled at my linguistic ingenuity and sometimes laughed until he cried.

"I don't understand. By golly, it's impossible to understand a damn thing. There is no doubt that it is written in Ukrainian."

The new republic began to organize its armed forces, and in Yekaterinoslav the formation of the 8th Ukrainian corps began. True, only officers were entered into it, as the Germans did not yet trust their puppet ally. Still, in the evenings there were military men, dressed in uniforms somewhat different from the old Russian uniforms, flitting along Catherine's Avenue.

Yekaterinoslav was a major centre, and in peacetime it housed a decent garrison: two infantry regiments, an artillery brigade, a howitzer battalion, and division headquarters. So in the summer of 1918 the city was overcrowded with the officers who had been left behind. Some of them joined the 8th Ukrainian Corps, which had just begun to form; many rushed to enrol at the Mining Institute and the newly opened Yekaterinoslav University; some joined the civil service, but the majority just hung around, eating up their military savings or staying with their relatives. In the streets we sometimes came across young men dressed in old Russian uniforms with shoulder straps¹⁷, and with tricolour squares on their sleeves. These were officers of the Volunteer Army returning from the Don and Kuban. The news they brought from there was of an extremely disappointing nature. The demobilised officers were aware that while the war was still continuing on the West European front, the Russian question remained unsolved; they were waiting for the

¹⁴ "Pan" was historically applied to landowners and brought back by the Ukrainians, meaning "gentleman".

¹⁵ High school.

¹⁶ Łomża is well inside Poland, by any definition.

¹⁷ Shoulder straps were the first thing to go in revolutionary armies, so wearing them strongly indicated a Tsarist leaning – or at least a non-revolutionary one.



Allied victory and were somehow confident that the British and French would be the first to restore the Russian armed forces.

And in general, as the summer sun shone over Yekaterinoslav, and Austrian patrols were walking along the streets and the markets were overflowing with food, life in the city went happily on. Restaurants of all kinds, cabarets, cinemas, and clubs were in full swing.

But soon this idyll came to an end. In September, despite the strict Austrian censorship, news of some British successes in Syria flashed through the newspapers. Then came the breakthrough on the Salonika front and the surrender of Bulgaria. Officers of the occupying troops stopped showing themselves in the streets or walked with their noses visibly down, and the German and Austrian units hurriedly moved westward through the city. In the second half of October came the long-awaited news of the German defeat in France and the impending surrender of Germany.

A page of world history was being turned. Since the Ukrainian movement had been held mainly with the help of the Austro-Germans, now, after the deafening collapse of the Central Powers, the entire political situation in southern Russia was also changing. Everyone was waiting for the appearance of a strong Anglo-French squadron in the Black Sea with a large allied landing force. Everyone was convinced that in the shortest possible time a new Russian armed force would begin to form, which, with the help of our allies, would set about restoring the Russian state.

The chances of the Volunteer Army rose rapidly. In this connection, Hetman Skoropadski abruptly changed his orientation and set a course for rapprochement with the command of the Armed Forces of Southern Russia¹⁸, that is, with General Denikin. There was talk of a federal unification of the Ukraine with Russia, and the Russian language was resurrected in the institutions.

Following this, it was decided to call up all former Russian officers for active service, and to begin the formation of a volunteer brigade in the city. Thanks to the above measures, the 8th Ukrainian Corps was able to assemble an armed force of about two thousand men. The corps was commanded by General Vasilchenko, acting under the authorization of Hetman Skoropadski. But the mood of the mobilised officers was definitely patriotically Russian, which excluded any separatism.

The two largest barracks in Yekaterinoslav, those of the Simferopol and Feodosiya regiments, were located on the "mountain", not far from the buildings of the Mining Institute. So that part of town became a sort of armed camp, upon which all the local authorities acting on behalf of the Hetman, came to rely.

But then the extreme left Ukrainian nationalists, the Petliurists, who had been subdued under the Austro-German occupation, rose up. While they had no roots in the city, the entire rural semi-intelligentsia was on their side. Taking advantage of this, the Petliurists formed several armed detachments in the surrounding area, quietly entered Yekaterinoslav, and smashed all the State Guard stations in the lower part of the city. Due to an inexcusable oversight of our command, the Guard was not supported by the 8th Ukrainian Corps and so a part were killed by the Petliurists, and the rest dispersed. After that the city was divided into two zones: on the "mountain" the officers' detachments had the advantage, and in the lower part of the city, where the railroad station was and where the bridge across the Dnieper joined, the residents found themselves in the hands of the Petliurists.

Noticing the precariousness of our position, the leading Petliurist, Pan Gorobets (under the old regime he had used his "katsap"¹⁹ surname of Vorob'ev) gave the commander of the 8th Ukrainian corps, General Vasilchenko, an ultimatum to lay down their arms. Having been rebuffed, the belligerent Vorob'ev-Gorobets ordered his "armies" to attack the Volunteer squad, which occupied the advanced position. The officer detachments, from the upper part of the city, repulsed the Petliurists, and we had the opportunity to throw them out of Yekaterinoslav. But at this point Austro-German garrison intervened. It rolled out its artillery and, under the pretext wanting to avoid street fighting in the midst of a civilian population, demanded General Vasilchenko suspend hostilities.

¹⁸ The AFSR was still a couple of months off being formed at this time. Denikin still commanded the Volunteer Army.

¹⁹ A derogatory name for Russians used by Ukrainians.



So although the Petliurists were unsuccessful and had suffered losses (we had none), the situation of the officer's detachments, called the 8th Ukrainian Corps, was not good. We were cut off from the world and surrounded by the peasant element, in which Petliura's agitators operated freely. A decision had to be made.

As the traditions of 1917 had not yet been eliminated, General Vasilchenko convened a meeting of the entire corps to discuss the situation. Colonel Konovalov (later General Quartermaster General of the Volunteer Army) and some other officers began to argue fervently for leaving Yekaterinoslav with arms in hand and for joining the Volunteer Army. Despite the fierce opposition of the Ukrainophile minority (the author of these lines was nearly bayoneted by one in opposition), the vast majority were in favour of accepting Colonel Konovalov's plan.

The march from the city, if memory serves me correctly, took place on 24 or 25 November 1918. At about 1 a.m. the gates of the Feodosiya and Simferopol barracks swung open and units of officers in combat gear headed out into the street and toward the steppe. The night was frosty and the wind was blowing hard.

Of the two thousand men in the Corps, slightly more than half were present. The infantry was from the Simferopol and Feodosiya regiments, totalling some 400 men, plus 250 in the Volunteer Squad. The artillery (nominally the 43rd, 44th and 45th regiments) had 4 light field guns and 150 men. The cavalry was the Novorossiysk Dragoon Regiment, of 170 men in 3 squadrons. There was an Armour Battalion with four combat vehicles and 60 men. The staff and signals (telegraph) numbered 40 people. For a total of 1,050. Thus, despite the impressive name of a "corps", we were a very modest unit – a battalion, a squadron and battery.

Due to the snow drifts that we encountered on the road, the armour battalion had to abandon its vehicles by the third crossing²⁰ and turned into a reconnaissance team.

The next morning the Petliurists did not risk pursuing us, having satisfied themselves by shooting a few officers from among those who remained in the city. But an order was given "to all the Ukrainian armies" to stop us and not allow us to join the Volunteer Army.

Since the city of Yekaterinoslav is located on the right bank of the Dnieper, in order to join the anti-Bolshevik Armed Forces of Southern Russia, we first of all had to cross this broad river²¹, swollen from the autumn rains. Initially our detachment moved southward. On the second days march from Yekaterinoslav, for the first time we encountered Petliurists from Aleksandrovsk, who had been sent to meet us. The fight lasted only a few minutes: the Petliurists fled, leaving a number of dead, and we gained a couple of machine guns and over 100 prisoners, whom we released the next day.

General Vasilchenko did not consider a river crossing in the area of Aleksandrovsk to be feasible and ordered the detachment south, into Kherson province. The biggest confrontation with the Petliurists was in the Blagoveshchenka-Vorontsovka area. The Petliurists made a night attack on our rear guard (one platoon of the Volunteer Squad) positioned by us in Blagoveshchenka, and it suffered heavy losses. The next morning General Vasilchenko launched a counterattack, as a result of which the Petliurists had to leave Blagoveshchenka. They could leave unhindered though, because fortunately for them our cavalry (the Novorossiysk Dragoons) had been sent out the day before to seize the Dnieper crossings, so did not take part in the battle and could not pursue the enemy.

At the same time a detachment of 60 scouts out sent by General Vasilchenko (the former Armour Battalion which had abandoned its vehicles) occupied the station of Apostolovo and ambushed some Petliurists on the way to support those at Blagoveshchenka. Two trainloads of Ukrainian nationalists, approaching the station, were taken under machine-gun fire and almost completely destroyed.

Nevertheless, since our losses were quite significant, General Vasilchenko decided to immediately continue moving south, despite the snowstorm raging in the steppe. Despite having absolutely nothing to eat our detachment passed through the entirely deserted Vorontsovka at night and then by forced march for 20

²⁰ Possibly the thirds day's march.

²¹ And broad rivers in Russia really are broad – the Dnieper at Yekaterinoslav is 500 metres wide at its narrowest.



hours without a single stop made the transition of 60 km to the nearest overnight shelter. But that had given us full freedom of manoeuvre and we were able to fulfil our objective – crossing the Dnieper.

Our last battle in this campaign took place near the Bizyukov Monastery, where the Petliurists again tried to capture our rear guard by surprise, which we had left in a roadside estate. But the valiant “armoured cars” that we left in the rear guard fiercely repelled the Petliurists and simultaneously sent a mounted scout to the detachment headquarters to notify it of the attack. General Vasilchenko deployed all available forces and moved to the rescue. When our first shrapnel exploded over the enemy’s line, the Petliurists stopped their attack on the estate with the “armoured cars” and began to change direction. Our infantry attack followed swiftly. In a few minutes later the enemy wavered and, pursued by the Novorossiysk Dragoons, made a disorderly flight. The field was covered with corpses, but even more so with boots – discarded so as to run faster. Our losses were not high: in the armoured cars Ensign Zherebets was killed and Captain Gausman was wounded; among the advancing infantrymen there were several wounded, including Major-General Porfiri Grigorievich Kislyi, chief of the corps staff.

After this action, the Petliurists no longer dared engage us in battle and as we approached, they hurriedly retreated. They did not even risk attacking us at our crossing of the Dnieper, which we made on the Berislav-Kakhovka pontoon bridge, at the same point where six months before the valiant Drozdovtzi had crossed the river.

We passed through the Northern Taurida without any adventures and by mid-December, having crossed over the notorious “Perekop rampart,” we entered the Crimea and camped out near Dzhankoy station. At Christmas our entire detachment (except for the Novorossiysk Dragoons and part of the artillery, left behind at Perekop) was transferred to Simferopol, where we celebrated the holiday.

The addition of our detachment to the Volunteer Army greatly changed the military situation in Crimea and North Taurida. The local units of the Armed Forces of Southern Russia were still mostly in the stage of formation. Before our arrival the only force in the Crimea considered combat-ready was the Simferopol Officer Regiment, which then numbered no more than 200 bayonets, and Alexeevsk Military School, of even more modest size. So the arrival of the Yekaterinoslav detachment, a force of about 950 men, with a four-gun battery and a cavalry unit of 170 sabres, changed the whole military situation and made the position of the Volunteer Army in that section of the front more stable for some time. Under the cover we provided, a new “western” sector of the armed forces began to organise, which later grew into a 15,000 strong corps and occupied the right bank of Little Russia²², up to Proskurov.

A characteristic feature of the Yekaterinoslav detachment was that, being composed almost exclusively of men born in the so-called Ukraine, it was steeped in Russian patriotism, and its first strikes were directed against those who wished to dismember Russia.

This is the best refutation of the numerous assertions that the entire Ukraine stood behind Petliura and that the movement he led had a national character. In 1918-1920 the Ukrainian nationalists²³ were not a nation, but only a party. The second Ukrainian party was us – the supporters of an unbreakable bond with Russia. The third party was the Communists.

The supporters of Russia had every chance to win. Why didn’t they win? That is another question, irrelevant to today’s topic.

The command of the Volunteer Army (at that time commanded by General Wrangel) understood the military and political significance of the Yekaterinoslav campaign and awarded the its participants a special decoration – a cross on the national ribbon – as a reward²⁴ for their bravery and loyalty to all-Russian ideals.

²² Little Russia is a historical Russian term for the Ukraine, and its usage here is a repudiation of the separatist tendencies of the Ukraine.

²³ He uses the rather more derogatory “chauvinists”.

