

## Fighting in the Verkhotur'ye Area in 1918

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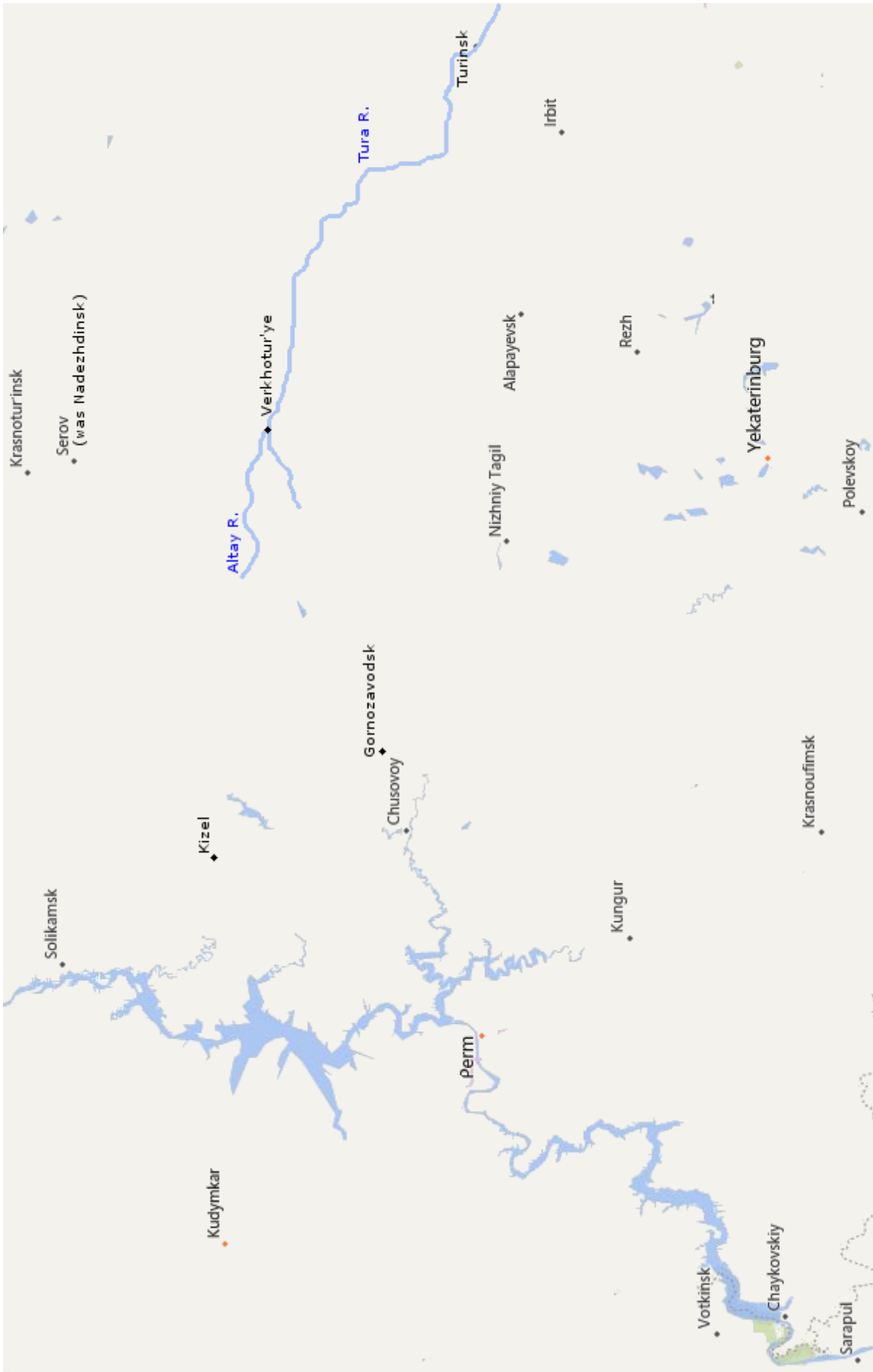
At the end of September 1918, White Guard units came close to the borders of Verkhotur'ye district. The White attack on Perm from Yekaterinburg did not give decent results, so the command of the Siberian Army tried to use a roundabout manoeuvre against the left flank of the Red 3rd Army. Verkhotur'ye turned into an important strategic point, the capture of which opened up a way for the Whites to Perm via Kizel and Solikamsk.

On 28 September, the city of Alapayevsk was taken by Whites. There, by order of the Siberian Army Command, the Northern Right-Flank Group was formed under the command of Staff Captain N. Kazagranti, which included units from the 18th Tobol, the 19th Petropavlovsk and the 16th Ishim Siberian Infantry Regiments. Its task was to circumvent the Red Kushva Group to the north, where parts of the Combined Ural (later the 29th) Rifle Division under the command of M. Vasilyev were defending, and continue the offensive along the Gornozavodsk railway to Chusovoy and Perm, and also to establish control over the Bogoslovsky Mountain District, where there were enterprises manufacturing military products such as the Nadezhdinsk Steel Works, which produced artillery shells.

The attack was carried out towards Verkhotur'ye via Irbit, while part of the 16th Ishim Regiment under the command of Second Lieutenant I.S. Shneura moved along the Ture River towards the city of Turinsk. which manufactured military products, and in particular contained the Nadezhdinsk steel-smelting plant, which produced artillery shells.

As they headed to Irbit, the White offensive was opposed by Red Guards under the command of Ershov, the former military commissar of the Verkhotur'ye district. On 3 October, in a battle near the village of Izmodenovo, the Ershov unit was defeated. The treason of one of the Red commanders, Tsepelev, played an important role in this. He was a former officer of the Tsarist army, who had been arrested in the Toporkovskoy volost during the peasant uprising in the summer of 1918. In Verkhotur'ye he was released, for unknown reasons, and assigned to form a detachment into which he had recruited a mostly "fluctuating element". Tsepelev was sent at the head of this unit to Verkhotur'ye to help Ershov, where during the battle he attacked the Red headquarters from the rear. In this clash, Ershov was wounded, captured by Whites and executed. The remnants of his squad began to retreat to Verkhotur'ye. On 6 October, the Kazagranti column reached the Tagil River [near Nizhni Tagil].





The White detachment on the Ture River was opposed by Red Guards under the command of Volkov, chief of the district police – numbering about 150 men and 30 horsemen, in the summer of 1918 they had engaged in the suppression of peasant uprisings in the district. The first clash with the advanced detachments of the advancing White Army occurred near the village of Motorina, 45 km from Turinsk. Volkov's detachment, being too small, was forced to retreat to the village of Sankino, where on 6 October it was surrounded by the Whites. The situation was very difficult. Six Red Guards – two cavalymen and four infantrymen with a machine gun – crossed the Ture and fired on the Whites from the flank. Thanks to this manoeuvre, the detachment managed to extricate themselves from the encirclement. Fighting defensively, Volkov began to retreat in the direction of Verkhotur'ye. From 7 to 9 October fighting continued near the villages of Sidnevo and Bolotovo, on 10 October Merkushino was taken by the attackers. From there the Volkov detachment went to Putimka and Glazunovka villages.

In the area of Putimka and Glazunovka, where the crossing of the river Ture was located, the remnants of the Ershov and Volkov detachments – with individual units of the Combined Urals Infantry Division that arrived – fought bitter battles on 11 and 12 October to protect Verkhotur'ye. A detachment of workers from the Sosvinsky plant came, armed with several machine guns and a three-inch cannon. The Red command concentrated part of the forces at the edge of the forest on Pushkareva Gora, while the rest of the soldiers took up defensive positions near the village of Putimka. Not far from the headquarters, located in a two-story house, they installed a cannon, and on the bell tower of the chapel, which stood on the edge of the village, was placed a machine gun. The White Guards approached Pushkareva Gora from two sides, along the Merkushino and Irbit roads. At the fork in the road, they met and, after regrouping as common forces, launched an attack.

The first fight for Putimka began at 10 am on 11 October. After an artillery preparation, and under the cover of machine guns, the White Guards attacked from the road over an open field in tight chains [i.e. lines of men]. The Reds could not be removed from their positions, even though at the end of the day the Whites introduced reserves into the battle. During the night the Red Army men established guard posts around Putimka and Glazunovka, to ensure the protection of the transport and ammunition.

On the morning of 12 October, the battle resumed. Now the Whites were no longer in the open. Masking themselves behind bushes and hillocks they accumulated in the woods, and tried to take the defenders in a pincer movement, but their flank attacks did not have any success either. Having large reserves, the Whites, with the help of local guides, directed part of their forces around the Chyernoy River. The position of the Reds became more and more difficult – even the detachment of sailors who arrived at the battlefield could not fix it. Without fighting, they were forced back to Verkhotur'ye, where strong defensive positions had been prepared in the area of the railway bridge across the Tura River and along the Aktay River. In order to avoid encirclement, the Red Guards who had fought at Putimka and Glazunovka, were also forced there.





A combatant from the Volkov detachment who fought at Putimka, Alexander Semyonovich Laptev, recalls: “They decided to give fight near Putimka, as the place was convenient. The roads from the Krasnaya Gora and Prokopyevskaya Salda converged there. The position on the Torgovoy Mountain and Pushkareva was advantageous. The left flank was covered by the Tura, the right flank was a dense forest. We dug trenches and set machine guns. Guns were installed near Putimki. A special squad hid in the grove near the junction of the roads. They were to hit the Whites from the rear while they were attacking. Even though we were retreating, the mood was cheerful: at last we had raised our weapons on the bourgeoisie! The White's cavalry patrol stumbled upon our pickets and rode off towards the Krasnaya Gora. Soon guns began to shoot from there. But the shells fell behind our positions, bursting in Putimka. The residents there began to panic. And the Whites, under the artillery cover, went on the attack. We beat them off with rifle and machine-gun fire. Then the enemy's guns started to fall on our trenches. And Whites went on the attack again. Some of our men faltered. However, it wasn't yet the whole army. They were volunteers, and many of them had never smelled gunpowder before. A few began to leave, but majority stayed. The idea was to lure the whites closer, where it was easier to hit them from the ambush. But it didn't happen as planned. The guns firing put several shells into the forest where the ambush was. We left the forest and attacked the Whites, but not at the desired moment. It should have knocked out the White attack in an instant, but instead a long battle ensued. The Kolchakites had more men, and weapons too. The Red Guards fought steadfastly, and it became hand-to-hand. Many whites were laid low, but the Reds themselves became fewer and fewer. They began to move back to Putimka. The sailor Georgiy Igoshev was in the detachment. He put a machine gun on the chapel in Putimka and kept the whites at bay to the last minute. He wanted to retreat on a cart with the machine gun, but they wounded him. So Igoshev lay down in the middle of the street with a machine gun and fought to the end. When the cartridges ran out, the whites jumped and lifted him on their bayonets. Anyone they got to, even the wounded, they bayoneted. Those who retreated to Verkhotur'ye, gathered behind the Tura bridge. It was decided to stay there. But that is another story. This was how the civil war began for me – the first battles for the young Soviet power.”

The retreat of the Reds was conducted bypassing the city along the Irbit and then Romanov highways. The Red Army men went around Verkhotur'ye from the east and north sides. Their withdrawal took place in an organised manner, most likely they managed to break away from the Whites, who entered the city only late on 13 October.

Before leaving the city, the Red Army shot its hostages held in the Verkhotur'ye prison on 12 October. It is not known whether this step was coordinated with representatives of the Uezd [county] Soviet, who had already left the city by this time, or whether this was an initiative of the Red Army men themselves. Nineteen among the list of people shot includes: Boris Nikolayevich Mikhailov (officer), Yakov Evfimovich Lepikhin (officer), Zoya Pavlovna Ivanova (girl student), Boris Vyacheslavovich Sakharov (technician), Kazimir Feliksovich Budzyansky (technician), Yakov Georgievich Opekin (monk), Theodont Polikarpovich Dukov (peasant), Kazimir Vasilyevich Shangin (?) (peasant), Alexander Vasilyevich Smit (technician), Grigory Nikolaevich



Rozhkov (39, peasant), Konstantin Afanasyevich Druzhinin (peasant), Alexander Silverstovich Trubin (peasant), Pavel Mikhailovich Karpov (peasant), Andrey Bryannikov (23, peasant), Kmit (POW), Vasily Kozlov (47, burgher of Ekaterinburg), Prokopy Kuznetsov (25), Yevfmiy Golubev (23, peasant) Cosmas Andrianovich Krasnopsterov (peasant).

The shot were buried in the city cemetery in a common mass grave. The burial was attended by the senior priest of the Verkhotur'ye Nicholas Monastery, Archimandrite Xenophon, with lamentations in all the city churches and the [womans] Pokrovsky Monastery. Also among the shot in the memoirs of contemporaries are mentioned Bednyagin (Verkhotur'ye merchant), Vyborov, Mukhlynin (merchant), Zhernakov, Erdyakov, Chestyulin and others – but where they were executed and buried there is no information.

The Red Guards retreated to prearranged positions at the mouth of the river Aktay. The trenches and dugouts were located on the western (right) bank, with the White units on the opposite bank. Here, the White offensive was delayed for almost a month, as battles with varying success continued throughout October and November 1918. The defence was held here by units of the 1st Mountain, Volyn, 17th Petrograd, and Kamyshlov regiments.

In these actions a detachment of Chinese volunteers was particularly distinguished, and they should be discussed in more detail. During the First World War, the Tsarist government bought in a large number of workers from China and Korea who were supposed to work in Russia at industrial enterprises which had been reduced by mobilisation. In the Urals there were mainly Chinese, who worked in various factories, mines, forest sites, and construction. The Chinese workers had to live and work in even worse conditions than the Russians. This aroused their indignation and unrest and strikes were frequent. Their situation deteriorated especially in 1917-1918, when the Russian economy was in deep crisis. Military service for many foreign workers was the only way to ensure their existence, which the Soviet government decided to use, attracting them to serve in the Red Army.

Chinese international detachments were among the first to be formed in the Urals. The most famous of them appeared at the end of July 1918 in the city of Alapayevsk, where many Chinese workers were concentrated at that time. It was replenished later with their co-nationals from Perm, Kizel, Chusovoy, Nadezhdinsk among others. With time it became a regiment, commanded by Zhen Fucheng with Jin Chenxiao as his assistant. This regiment became part of the Combined Urals Division (the 29th Rifle Division from November 1918) under the command of M. Vasiliev.

Some biographical data about Zhen Fuchen can be found in the obituary published in the Ural Worker newspaper on 14 December, 1918. He was an officer, who had held the post of Chinese consul in Harbin, was well aware of Russian ways and during the revolutionary events in Russia was the Commissioner for the affairs of Chinese workers in Perm and Vyatskaya provinces, living in Alapayevsk. At the start of the



civil war, when the White Army was approaching the Urals, the local authorities found themselves in a difficult position. Pavlov appealed to Zhen Fuchen, as a former officer and sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, to organize a volunteer detachment from the Chinese to serve in the Red Army. The conditions of service were quite attractive, as the Chinese enjoyed all the rights and privileges that the Red Army men and their families relied on. This allowed him, in short order, to form an international Chinese unit. According to some sources, in the summer of 1918 the detachment took part in the suppression of peasant uprisings in the Verkhotur'ye district, alongside local Red Guard detachments.

After the capture of Alapayevsk by the Whites, the Chinese fought near Nizhniy Tagil. In the second half of October, the Chinese battalion joined the 3rd Brigade of the Combined Urals Division and was transferred to Verkhotur'ye, where it took part in the battles at the mouth of the Aktay River, which continued throughout October and November 1918, seeking to break through to the lower Tura and Kushva. On October 29, the division commander reported to the 3rd Army headquarters:

“In the vicinity of Verkhotur'ye today, the Chinese battalion crossed the Aktay river, knocked the enemy out of two rows of trenches and threw them back to Verkhotur'ye. The retreat of the white gangs occurred in complete disarray, during which they suffered serious losses. It was not possible to develop the attack further because of the slow transfer of reserves across the bridge of the Aktay River, which the enemy kept under artillery fire constantly. At about 1600 hours., the enemy switched to a counterattack from Lyalya station, as a result of which the Chinese were threatened with being cut off, and so they had to retreat again to the right bank of the Aktay River. In this battle we captured prisoners and a lot of equipment.”

In mid-November, the Chinese battalion was replenished with new volunteer units and transformed into a regiment. The report of the commander of the 29th Rifle Division of 26 November 1918, testifies to the brilliant combat qualities of the regiment. It noted: “In the last battles in the Verkhotur'ye area, the Chinese regiment showed particular stubbornness. Often there were cases when this regiment was clamped into the iron ring of the enemy's chains, but thanks to its stamina, organisation, revolutionary discipline and the command staff, each time it fought its way out with fire and bayonets and slowly retreated to new positions. Thus, all the efforts of the enemy, who were attempting to seize Vyva station and the Nizhneturinsky plant, in order to create an direct threat to the key to our rear, Goroblagodatskaya station [in Kushva], were smashed against the resistance of the Chinese regiment. In battle, they are fearless, courageous in cold blood. The more difficult the situation, the stronger their combat discipline. There are often cases when panicked men who begin to retire, without a command, are immediately shot by their comrades. They have a motto: "One for all, all for one." In three to four days of continuous battles, the Chinese regiment has lost 40–50%, and for command staff, the loss is 60–70%. Such a huge percentage by itself alone shows that the regiment is, for every second of its time, only after an even more intense battle, in which the enemy suffers losses several times larger. Based



on the above, I am happy to give the Chinese regiment and its commanders the deep gratitude of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. ”

The fighting near Verkhotur'ye took place with varying success. The Reds tried several times to go on the offensive to recapture the city. Artillery and armoured trains were used by both sides. However, at the end of November, the Kazagrundi column, having received reinforcements, itself switched to offensive actions. On 25 November it managed to knock the Reds out of the Aktay positions and forced them to retreat towards Kushva. On 29 November, in the area of Vyya station, the Whites threw up to four regiments into battle. At the station at that time there was a battalion of the Kamyshlov Regiment, two battalions of the Chinese regiment and a detachment of sailors. During the two-day battle, the Reds were clamped in a vice, and then, breaking through the encirclement, retreated to the villages of Zhelezianka and Malaya Mennaya. In these battles, the 3rd brigade of the 29th Division (1st Kamyshlov, 5th Volyn and 17th Petrograd Regiments) was defeated, the Chinese regiment was almost completely destroyed. The commissar of the 3rd brigade, M. Bochkarev, and the Chinese commander, Zhen Fuchen, were killed; the commander of the Kamyshlov regiment, B. Shwel'nis, shot himself. On 3 December, the Reds evacuated Kushva and began to retreat towards Perm.

### **My notes:**

After the battle at Vyya only a handful of Chinese escaped and were sent to Chusovoy for reformation. They were added to some local Chinese imported for rail work, and sent to Perm in early December, where they were made up into a battalion. In late December 1918, that battalion led fierce street battles in the vicinity of Perm II station, where some were captured. The remnants were merged into a company, replenished with new fighters and soon re-entered the battle at Troitsa (on the river just east of Perm). There more than 200 were killed.

After the destruction of the 225th Chinese International Regiment at Troitsa information about Chinese formations in the Urals ceases. It seems likely that units were still formed, but no longer the large formations of the early war.

