

## A Brief History of the NDA

### Formation

The Russian People's Volunteer Army, known after its Russian initials as the NDA, was the armed wing of the Russian Political Committee, the RPK. This organisation claimed political leadership for all White Russian interests in Poland.

The RPK was headed by Boris Savinkov, who was one of the most outrageous men in an outrageous time. He was a former revolutionary, who had turned against the Bolsheviks. This background tended to endear him to the Poles – after all Piłsudski had too been a Marxist – and made him much more flexible when dealing with non-Russian former subjects of the Tsar. The RPK was therefore, while hardly trusted, allowed some freedom of movement in 1920 Poland.

In practice the standard White Russian feuding continued as usual, even within the RPK. Outside it the tolerance of Polish separatism and a former revolutionary past made Savinkov the subject of great mistrust to the White old-guard, who remained monarchist and Great Russian expansionist. First amongst these was General P.V. Glazenapp, a former member of the North-Western Army but in mid-1920 Wrangel's representative in Poland. He opposed the formation of the NDA and was politically opposed to an independent Poland. After causing too much grief he was replaced by General B. S. Peremykin: who turned out to be basically like minded. The Wrangel Whites therefore continued to recruit in direct competition with the NDA.

In mid-1920 the recruiting began, concentrating on the following main sources:

- A combination of ex-Iudenich forces, former Reds and Cossacks interned in Polish camps such as the 4,000 near Kalish and 1,000 near Ostrava.
- Bulak-Bulakhovich's "People's Army of Belorussia", 1,500–2,000 strong at the time.
- A "Peasants' Brigade" of 500 men under Colonel I.A. Lokhvitskii (a.k.a. "Ataman Iskra"). They had started as a partisan unit sent into the Ukraine by General Wrangel.
- A Cossack brigade under Captain I. Iakolev, who had arrived in Poland with the White forces of General Bredov (these were formerly part of the AFSR, but had been cut off with the retreat following the Battle of Orel).
- Another Cossack brigade, under Captain A. Salnikov.

(At least one Red Cossack brigade deserted *en masse* from the Soviet 1<sup>st</sup> Horse Army of Semon Budenny early in their 1920 campaign, and had fought alongside the Poles since. Presumably it then went on to fight for the NDA or Peremykin, but I have not been able to identify which one it was.)

There were also attempts to recruit outside Poland from:

- Russians in Latvia and Estonia, captured from the Reds or left over from the White armies and Freikorps – in particular a group of 3,000 men sent from Estonia via Latvia under Count K.K. Pahlen.
- Men still in German internment from WWI.

During the crisis of mid-1920 the Poles had wanted every man they could field in the fray, and the various armed components of the Ukrainian, Russian and Cossack forces had fought alongside the Polish Army. As the campaign drew to a close, however, the pressure was off and the Russians could begin to organise themselves.

By November 1920 the non-Polish forces in Poland had formed into three main groups. The NDA were in the Pripet Marshes area, in Turov (100 kilometres east of Pinsk). They were under the command of the adventurer Stanislav Bulak-Bulakhovich because he supplied the most men and was the best soldier – certainly not because of any political faith that Savinkov or the RPK had in him.



The NDA forces, perhaps as many as 20,000 men, were far from united politically. The RPK was democratically minded and prepared to accept Polish separatism. Many NDA members remained monarchist at heart, and opposed to any dismemberment of the former Empire. Bulak-Bulakhovich himself was inclined to Belorussian nationalism. Worst of all a large number, starting from the top, were basically adventurers, in it for what they could gain.

Further south were the Ukrainian forces of Petliura, and the pro-Wrangel forces under Peremykin, now termed the “Third Russian Army”.

### The NDA’s Belorussian Campaign

As the war between Poland and the Soviets drew to a conclusion with the Polish victories on the Vistula and Niemen, it became clear that the Poles would seek a peace treaty.

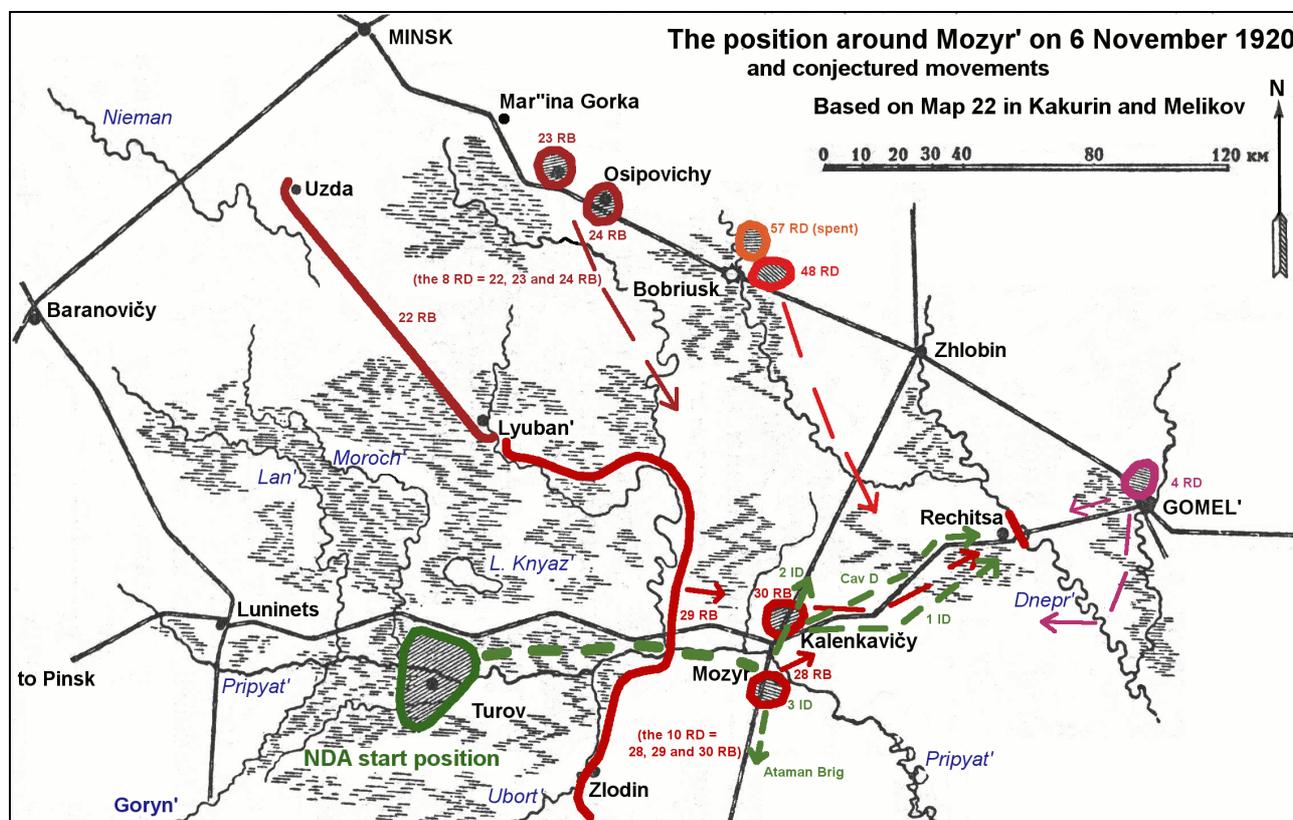
However the Soviet Army was clearly discouraged by its defeat and as General Wrangel continued his break-out from the Crimea, the non-Polish anti-Soviet forces were prepared to fight on. They also hoped for a anti-Bolshevik risings to aid them (something unlikely to happen while they were fighting with the Poles).

In the end the terms of the Polish-Soviet armistice were that all non-Polish forces in Poland were to be disarmed by 7 November. The NDA was not prepared to submit to this, so attacked into Russia.

The main thrust of the army was led by Balakhovich in person: this was spearheaded by the 1<sup>st</sup> Division and most of the Cavalry Division, heading towards Mozyr’ and Kalenkavičy. (These were for the most part Balakhovich’s former Belorussian Army units). Behind him followed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in reserve.

On the left wing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division under Mikosha, accompanied by the Lancer Regiment and the Native Cavalry, had Zhlobin as its aim.

On the right wing the Ataman Cossack Brigade acted as flank cover, heading south towards Yel’sk.



It started well enough. On 10 November Mozyr’ fell, along with many prisoners taken from the Red 10<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division guarding it<sup>1</sup>. These and local recruits were pressed into new units of a Belorussian Army under the command of Iosef Bulak-Balakhovich.<sup>2</sup>



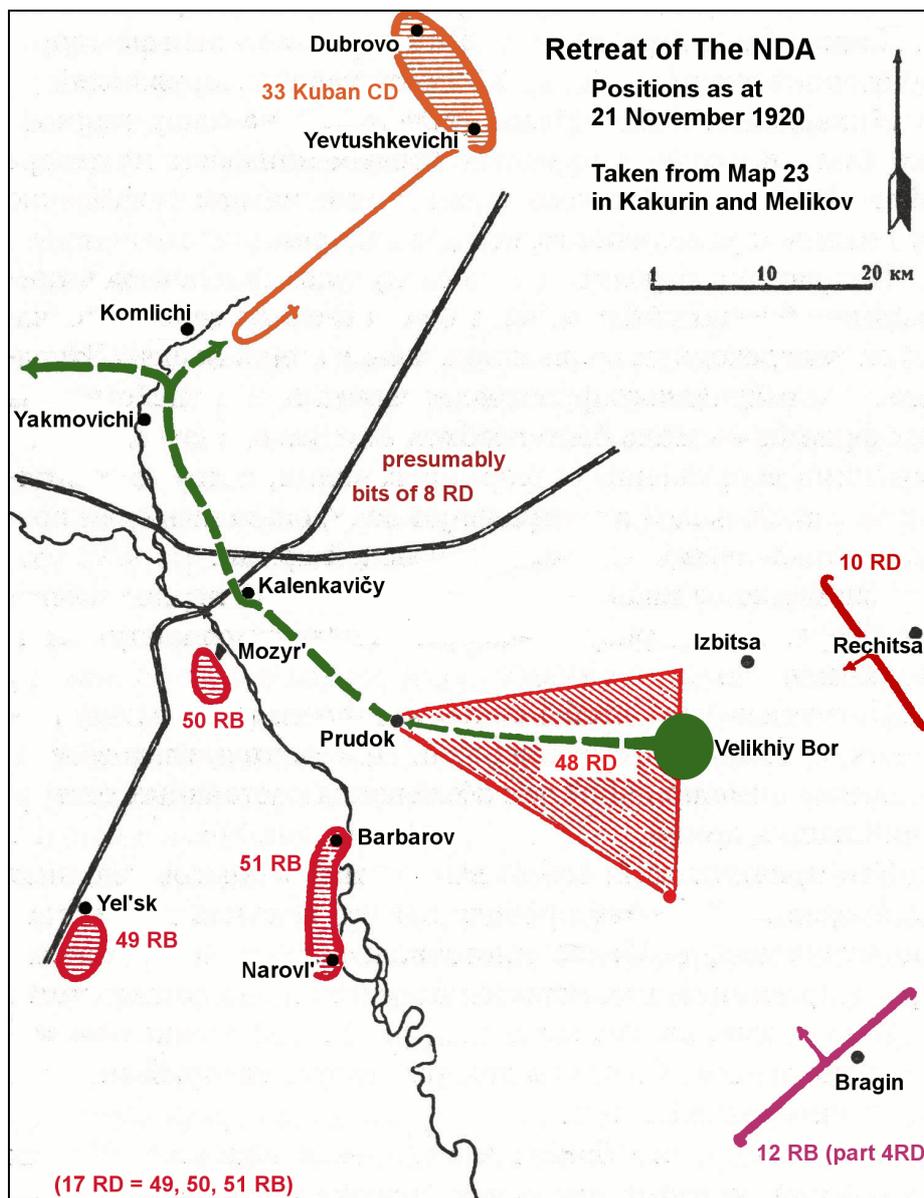
But six years of being in the front line of war had taken their toll, and there were never enough recruits, nor did enough Red Army units desert. Moreover NDA discipline was poor, and pogroms and looting all too frequent. The various elements, never particularly harmonious, fell out over political issues. The most important sticking point being Balakhovich's proclamation of an independent Belorussia, which was anathema to most Russians such as Savinkov and the RPK.

Kalenkavičy, just north of Mozyr' was a tougher nut and was captured, lost, recaptured and lost over the next days. Eventually on 14 November it was secured, and the Mikosha group was now free to push on towards Zhlobin.

The bulk of the army were ordered to attack towards Gomel'. As a first stage, on 15 November Colonels Matv'ev and Pavlovskii were ordered to attack Rechitsa in separate columns. It was defended by the Soviet 10<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division, recently pushed out of the Mozyr'– Kalenkavičy area.

The cavalry under Pavlovskii arrived first, while the infantry under Matv'ev came more slowly. The fighting for the bridge over the Dnepr at Rechitsa was intense, with the Soviets employing two armoured trains. Eventually Balakhovich arrived too, with his personal sotnia and a few more infantry.

By 16 November the attack of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division northwards, which had failed to make it much more than 30 kilometres north of Kalenkavičy, was already being pushed back by the Soviet 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division.



Likewise the attack on Rechitsa was failing, and to make matters worse the Soviets were encircling the NDA. The Soviet 48<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division had marched south-east from Bobruisk and was now attempting to get in behind the main drive. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Kuban Cavalry Division was coming from the north, having just been transferred to the 16<sup>th</sup> Army.

Meanwhile the Soviet 17<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division was moving from the south and was about to attack Mozyr'. The NDA reserves in that city were panicked but the Reds' 150 km march had however tired them and they were unable to press home the advantage of their position.

While actual battle losses of the NDA up to this point were relatively light, the weight of enemy numbers was clearly too much. Balakhovich ordered a retreat. He was successfully able to evade any substantive combat during this time, which meant taking a detour around Mozyr'.

The Soviets chose not to pursue into the large no-man's-land between the Polish and Soviet armies, presumably not wishing to cause trouble with the formal peace negotiations still taking place in Riga. The Whites were therefore able to regain Poland without severe losses. By the start of December the last elements had straggled back in Poland.

## Conclusion

Although it seems a quixotic gesture, the Belorussian campaign did pit quite a few experienced Whites – perhaps as many as 20,000 – up against a dislocated and demoralised Red Army. The fact that the Ukrainian Nationalists and other Whites in Poland were also continuing to fight on suggests that there was a generally agreed chance of success. Certainly the Soviets took the threat seriously, throwing as many men as they could to ensure its immediate liquidation.

The failure was political as much as military. Basically the population did not rise up to throw off the Bolsheviks, which was always the requisite for success. The lack of agreement in the NDA/RPK leadership did not exactly inspire confidence that – even if there had been popular support – any sustainable campaign could have been conducted.

## Sources

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<sup>1</sup> Łatyszonek gives two brigades of the 8<sup>th</sup> RD and one brigade and the cavalry regiment of the 10<sup>th</sup> RD in Mozyr', whereas Kakurin and Melikov, as can be seen on their map, have the 10<sup>th</sup> RD centred on Mozyr' and the 8<sup>th</sup> RD further north.

<sup>2</sup> 1,000 men in three days, according to Łatyszonek.

