

The offensive of the North-Western Corps in the Spring and Summer of 1919

This is just the military events of the operation.

The General Situation in the Spring of 1919

The situation was not favourable for the Bolsheviks in north-western Russia at the time. The Red Army had been forced out of Estonia and most of Latvia. The Royal Navy was in control of the Baltic (with some French aid around Latvia).

The rural areas were dissatisfied with Bolshevik power, and the Pskov area in particular was in more or less permanent revolt.

The 7th Army, covering the approaches to Petrograd, was in very poor condition: morale was low from the previous failures, the men poorly supplied and hungry and the units were not given priority in terms of supplying reliable commissars and political workers.

The Whites had had a lot of success with partisan raids from January up to April 1919, and the situation seemed promising militarily. In any event an attack was required because the political situation was not good for the Whites, and it was imperative that they no longer were based in Estonian territory. They also needed to show that they were a genuine military threat – the Estonians, in particular, tended to see them as a reactionary and ineffective paper army.

Position of Petrograd

Petrograd city was starving, and much of the population had left. The Red Terror was in full swing.

The Olonets Volunteer Army was advancing in Eastern Karelia and there were concerns on the Soviet side that Finland would enter the war.

On 2 May 1919 the city was declared under martial law. A "Workers' Defence Committee" was formed in the city and power transferred to "emergency political troikas" created in each district. The city was divided into four "combat areas" as part of the "Region of internal defence of the city of Petrograd", under V. S. Shatov, member of the Revolutionary Military Council of the 7th Army.

Many of the most reliable part of the working population of Petrograd had already been mobilised and sent to the Southern and Eastern fronts of the civil war, or to collect food to feed the starving city. However from the end of May, when the situation became alarming, until the middle of June, 15,000 new bayonets were mobilised from workers and communists. The remaining men of the population were put into work regiments and sent to build fortifications around the city.

Aims of the Offensive

The plan was that after the breakthrough of the Soviet front, Gdov was to be captured, the Plyussa and Luga rivers crossed and the Soviet forces in Yamburg¹ encircled. The Petrograd highway and the Yamburg-Gatchina railway were to be cut.

The Estonian army would support the attack on land, and the fleets of Great Britain and Estonia along the coast.

While some Whites wanted to attack Petrograd directly, the planning for the operation by General Rodzianko,² had less dramatic aims. He primarily wanted to establish the NW Corps on Russian soil, and considered that gaining Pskov and Novgorod provinces would boost the army, whereas Petrograd would require feeding and contained a lot of hostile elements.

The Estonians agreed with the plan, which promised to remove the White Russians from their soil, regardless of whether they won or lost. They half-heartedly promised their support.

¹ Modern Kingisepp.

² Soon to take over command of the Corps from Colonel Dzerozhinsky, who many considered to be too passive (and also, of course, of lower rank).

Rodzianko was assisted by Colonel Vetrenko and Lieutenant Vidyakin, chief of staff of the 2nd brigade.

Troops of the Northern Corps and the Estonian Army

All the Northern Corps were concentrated south of Narva, except one battalion of the Talabski Regiment, as the Estonians wished to operate separately towards Pskov.

- The detachment tasked with capturing Gdov consisted of the Baltic Regiment and its cavalry squadron and Bulak-Balakhovich's partisan detachment and cavalry regiment.
- Colonel Vetrenko had a detachment tasked with occupying the crossings on the river, which consisted of the Volyn regiment, the Talabski Regiment and 2 guns.
- Count I.K. Palen's detachment was directed to Polyta and Gavrilovskaya. It consisted of the Ostrovsky regiment, Colonel Bibikov's detachment and 2 guns.
- Colonel Georga's detachment was supposed to take possession of the railroad and Nizy station and consisted of the Officer company and the Revel regiment.
- Lieutenant Danilov's partisan detachment of (about 250 men) was sent into the rear of the location of the Red troops dressed in Red Army uniforms and were to occupy key transport interchanges before the start of the general offensive.

The total number of White armed forces barely exceeded 3,000 bayonets and sabres, from a total army of some 5,500 people men. The corps had 6 guns and 30 machine guns.

The Estonian 1st Division, under General A.I. Tenisson, was located on the coast of the Gulf of Finland north of Narva. It was planned that an assault force of 400 men from it would land in Kopor'e Bay for a supporting strike on the village of Kotly. The division otherwise did not take part in the fighting, advancing behind the units of the Northern Corps, providing cover in the rear areas along the coast. Having reached the Luga river it began to build defensive structures on its left bank.

The Estonian 2nd Division, under Colonel Puskar, with 4,000 odd men was located in the area of Lake Pskov.

While heavily outnumbered in total, the Whites were able to gather a sizeable superiority of forces at the point of attack.

The Red Army

At the time of the Northern Corps' offensive, the Red 7th Army had three divisions with a total number of about 23,500 men, along a front of about 600 kilometres, from Lake Onega to Lake Peipus. It was divided into three combat sectors, one per division: in the north between the Onega and Ladoga lakes, was the Mezhozerny [Interlake] Sector; on the isthmus between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland was the Karelian Sector and from the Gulf of Finland to the city of Gdov was the Narva Sector.

The Soviet command was expecting an attack from Finland, and since they were already fighting with the so-called Olonets Volunteer Army, most attention was paid to the Karelian and Mezhozerny Sectors. The Narva Sector had only the 6th Rifle Division, KomDiv Freyman, and the 2nd Brigade and some of the 3rd Brigade of the 19th Rifle Division. Over a front of about 100 kilometres, the Reds had forces of about 2,700 men, with 12 light and 6 heavy guns.

South of the 7th Army, from Pskov to Gdov, was the Red Estonian Division, formed from ethnic Estonians, and the 15th Army, the former "Army of Soviet Latvia", with a total nearing 35,000 bayonets and sabres. Recently defeated, this army was losing men to desertion at a phenomenal rate.³

³ The Soviet plan to use largely native Estonians to invade Estonia, and native Latvians to invade Latvia – to show the comradely solidarity of those countries with Soviet Russia – had backfired tremendously. Once the campaigns stopped being walk-overs, both the Army of Soviet Estonia and the Army of Soviet Latvia started to lose huge numbers and their quality dropped alarmingly.

Shortly after defeating the NW Corps offensive the Soviets reformed both divisions, and sent them to the south, where desertion was no longer the same issue.

Start of the NW Corps Offensive

On the night of 12-13 May, Lieutenant Danilov's detachment, as well as other sabotage and reconnaissance detachments, secretly crossed the front line. They managed to undermine the Narva–Gdov railway in several places, which reduced the range of two Soviet armoured trains and potentially cut off their retreat.

Danilov's detachment as well as various incidents of disruption, occupied the village of Popkova Gora, where the local command of the 7th Army of the Red Army was located. The commander of the sector, KomBrig of the 3rd Brigade of the 19th Rifle Division, a former Tsarist General, was captured. He was later hanged by the Whites for treason.

General A.P. Rodzianko personally led the offensive, which initially went mostly to plan. Parts of the Northern Corps, after forcing the Plyussa River on the left flank of the Red 6th Division, quickly advanced behind enemy lines, meeting no resistance. Colonel Vetrenko's two regiments forced marched to the crossings of the Luga River near the villages of Bol'shoi Sabsk and Lychno [Porech'e?] and then towards Veimarn railway station. Colonel Count I.K. Palen advanced with his units north of there and towards Kili-Makli, north-east of Yamburg.

By 15 May, the whole area between the Plyussa and Luga rivers was occupied by the Northern Corps. The Red 6th Division units lost connection with their HQ, and the demoralised units retreated erratically. Some of the central units of the division were threatened with encirclement.

On 16 May Veimarn station was taken, and on 17 May, Yamburg also fell. A large amount of military equipment and food were captured, as it could not be evacuated in time. The local population supported the Whites, harassing Red units, damaging military property and carried out various acts of sabotage.

On the northern flank of the 6th Division, action commenced on 15 May, with an Estonian naval landing at the mouth of the Luga River, near Ostroviya. The villages of Kuzemkino and Poluch'e were then taken.

Meanwhile further south, Bulak-Balakhovich's detachment were operating. He had initially attacked Skam'ya, just at the top of Lake Peipus [Russian Chudskoye]. The Reds there were ill-prepared and he made easy progress. He took Gdov on 15 May. As the Reds evacuated their Peipus Flotilla from Gdov, two steamships – the *Olga* and *Ermak* – went over to the Whites.

Heading towards Pskov, Bulak-Balakhovich reached the Zhelcha River to find the Reds defending the far bank, having destroyed the bridges. He then received orders to transfer the Baltic Regiment to Count Palen's group near Yamburg, so there was no further action in that sector for some days.

However, White units continued to advance along the Baltic Railway. On 18 May they managed to capture Vruda and the Soviet armoured train stationed there. On 20 May, first Volosovo and then Kikerino fell.

During this time the Whites were substantially reinforced by Red units crossing over. The most famous was the defection of the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Petrograd Special Brigade, which included a core of men from the old Semenovskii Life Guard Regiment.

However by this point the Red Army was also losing its disorientation from the initial attacks and starting to defend with more determination in places, aided by the arrival of fresh reinforcements.

Estonian Offensive

A state of siege was declared in the province and city of Pskov, and volunteer detachments of communists and workers sent to the front. However, some commanders and two regiments of the 1st Estonian Soviet Division defected during the night of 24 May. The Estonian 2nd Division, armed with full information about the enemy positions attacked at Izborsk. It was faced by elements of the 10th Rifle Division – about 500 bayonets in the 5th Rifle Regiment, about 300 in the 6th Estonian Soviet Regiment and about 450 men in the Pskov Communist Battalion.

To make matters worse, there was an uprising in the Red rear, with many deserters taking part, which blocked all rail transport. Then on 25 May half of the 6th Estonian Soviet Regiment defected. The remaining units began to retreat to Pskov. The remaining Soviet Estonian units took to open requisitioning and looting, which enraged the local population.



Fighting for the city was brief. There was limited shelling and some skirmishes with armoured cars for a few hours. During the night of 25/26 May what remained of the Red Army left the city, retreating to Ostrov, Porkhov and Dno. Companies and battalions of the 10th Division continued to cross to the Whites.

Reinforcements of the 88th and 89th Rifle Regiments started to arrive, but the Soviet forces remained on the defensive.

On 29 May Bulak-Balakhovich arrived in Pskov.

By 5 June, the Reds in the Pskov sector held the line Tureya – Zamushki – [Pererosten'](#) – Gostibitsy and Gorka, along the Keb' River from the village of Klin to the mouth, along the Cheryokha and Velikaya rivers to Kriukovo and Sidorovo.

On 11 June, Soviet troops took the village of Feofilova Pustyn', but at the same time they were forced to retreat from their positions on the Keb' and Velikaya rivers.

Fort Krasnaya Gorka

On 13 June several former Tsarist officers organised for the surrender of the fort of Krasnaya Gorka, and called on the Red fleet to join them. Only the patrol boat *Kitoboi* [Whaler] did so.

The Red Fleet immediately sent two battleships, with supports, to shell the rebellious fort. Under their fire the rebels in the fort fled on land. A Soviet landing party then secured the fort on 14 June. The Reds were unable to pursue properly, due to the Royal Navy, and indeed the Cruiser *Oleg* was sunk by a torpedo from a British CMB.

Like-minded commanders in the neighbouring forts were unable to persuade enough of the garrisons to go over, and similar large-scale defections were prevented.

The rebellion was premature, in that the Whites were unable to seize the forts during the time they were vulnerable. This led to much greater political attention being given to them, and the ChEKa clearing out unreliable commanders – and this extended into Petrograd itself.⁴ The forts were later significant impediments to Yudenich's drive on Petrograd.

Stalling of the Offensive

It took until 24 May, with the arrival of reinforcements, for the Reds to start to stabilise their front. At that time the new "Combined Baltic Division" held a line through [Dolgovo](#) – [Gotobuzha](#) – Voronino – Antashi; and the 6th Division held Antashi – Ozhogino – Gorki – Pul'evo – Donets – Bol'shaya Divenka.

By the end of May, quality reinforcements began to arrive on the front line, with strong units of communists, Petrograd workers, etc. On 1 June they even attempted a counter-attack, but it was not successful, as the regular Red Army units were still tired and demoralised.

The NW Corps now had serious issues of its own. Never very well supplied, their massively extended lines made the situation much worse. The length of the front made covering it very difficult with their small forces, and they had no reserves with which to rotate the men at the front, who were now becoming exhausted.

Unable to feed their own men properly, they considered the task of feeding Petrograd to be beyond them, which was another reason for halting their advance.

⁴ Soviet-era sources talk of a large conspiracy, the "National Centre". While this organisation existed, the scope and influence it had are vastly less than the ChEKa's paranoid fantasies. White sources only mention them to talk about how useless the anti-Bolshevik organisations were in Petrograd and Moscow.

Certainly there were a large number of former officers in Petrograd who opposed the Soviets, and many of them would have kept weapons to defend themselves. However that does not mean that they were all organised and ready to rise at any time – all the braver and more politically motivated officers had long since left to join the White armies or fled overseas.

Be that as it may, the ChEKa did organise a very large scale operation and arrested thousands of suspects. Many no doubt "confessed" to being in the National Centre, given the ChEKa's methods of gaining information.

In June and July 1919 the Corps was reorganised as the North-Western Army⁵ (NWA), under the command of General Yudenich . This placed all the “White” units in the North-West of Russia into a common front against Bolshevism.⁶ On 30 June it had 763 officers with 13,962 bayonets in the infantry and 487 sabres in the cavalry.

By mid-July 1919, the front stretched from the Gulf of Finland to the Kudeb River (a tributary of the Velikaya). The Red 7th Army had about 23,000 men in this area, the NWA about 17,000.

Counter-offensive of the Red Army

The offensive of the Soviet troops was scheduled for 1 August 1919. At that time, the balance of power was as follows:

On the Narva sector:

- The Red Army "Northern Group" of the 7th Army, including 2nd and 6th Divisions, had a total of 23,400 bayonets, 600 sabres, 438 machine guns and 101 guns;
- The 1st Corps of the NWA had 12,500 bayonets, 300 sabres, 51 machine guns, 46 light and 14 heavy guns.
- On the left bank of the Luga River was the 1st Estonian Division of 6,000 bayonets.

On the Pskov sector:

- The Red Army "Southern Group" of the 7th Army and the right flank of the 15th Army – under the command of A.I. Kork – had 25,600 bayonets and sabres, 699 machine guns, 103 guns.
- The 2nd Corps of the NWA had about 3,500 bayonets.
- The 2nd Estonian Division had about 6,000 bayonets.

The Red plan was that the units in the Narva sector would take Yamburg and advance to a line of the Kopenskoye Lake – Babinskoye Lake – Yamburg – the Luga – the Saba – Lake Syabero. Meanwhile the units in the Pskov sector should prevent an advance of the Whites from Pskov to Luga, and then, together with the units of the 15th Army, take Pskov and clear the area east of Lake Peipus and Pskov of the Whites.

The offensive began on the appointed date on the Narva sector. The fighting was stubborn and fierce, but the Soviets were prepared to take the losses. Using their superiority in numbers, they managed to capture the city of Yamburg on 5 August. However, the offensive was not decisive. The Whites were able to withdraw their units in good order to the left bank of the Luga and hold there, together with the 1st Estonian Division. The front stabilised along the river and then that sector was relatively calm.

The offensive did not begin in the south until 15 August. The Red 10th Infantry Division managed to successfully advance towards the city of Izborsk , threatening the 2nd Estonian Division, south of Pskov. The Estonians retired to the left bank of the Velikaya River to eliminate the danger of encirclement. This exposed the right flank of the NWA's 2nd Corps in the Pskov area.

After some prolonged combats, Red troops captured Pskov on 26 August.

Again the Whites were able to retreat in good order, and they established a line behind the Zhelcha Rivers.

Bulak-Balakhovich Interlude

⁵ There was a fortnight when it was the “Northern Army”, but this clashed with the unit of the same name in Murmansk and Archangel under General Miller.

⁶ At this stage the Whites were still fruitlessly attempting to persuade Bemondt-Avalov in Latvia to join with Yudenich. While Bemondt claimed to be fighting the Bolsheviks – solely in order to keep the Allies off his back – it is clear that he had thrown his lot in with the Freikorps, and never once intended to join Yudenich.

Bemondt wasn't really even in charge of the “Western Volunteer Army” – he was merely a public face to cover von der Goltz's ambitions.

Despite this many publications still insist on including Bemondt's WVA in with the NWA, giving an entirely false impression of the actual situation.

One reason for the fall of Pskov was that the Bulak-Balakhovich, never very prone to obeying orders or retraining his men from arbitrary behaviour, over-stepped the limits acceptable to Yudenich – who sent an expedition to arrest him. Bulak-Balakhovich fled to the relative safety of the Estonians, leaving his men behind. Some of his staff were arrested, although later released.

While this did not affect the numbers of Whites in the Pskov area greatly, it did take away one of their better commanders and distract one of their most effective units.

Outcome

The Northern Corps attack showed the Soviets that the 7th Army was in a very poor state. The poor quality of its commanders, many of whom defected, and the lack of motivation in the rank and file were made obvious. Strenuous attempts were made to rectify the problems before the next offensive.

After the North-Western Corps was defeated in mid-July 1919, the Petrograd Workers' Defence Committee was disbanded and a Petrograd Fortified Region, with a radius of 15 kilometres, was formed instead. The command of the "fortified area" was transferred to the 7th Army, whose headquarters moved from Novgorod to Petrograd. This allowed for much better liaison between the army and the city defences.

The NW Corps offensive achieved its main aims. Although the Red counter-attack gained back a lot of the territory, the White Army was able to remain outside Estonian soil, which reduced the political issues it faced considerably.

The NWA also quadrupled its strength due to defectors, volunteers and mobilisations in the recaptured areas. However, the quality fell as a result, as the volunteers of the early stages were diluted by less willing soldiers. The rear and staff also grew excessively, employing officers who should have been at the front.

It also drew British attention to the fact that it might be able to successfully attack Petrograd. Hence substantial British aid – which, however, came with political strings attached – was to soon arrive. That allowed for a later offensive, this time aimed at Petrograd. The lack of Estonian and Finnish support doomed that to failure, but the Spring offensive did at least make it feasible.