

Get Chapaev!

Sergey Balmasov

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What do we know about the life and death of Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev – a man who has become a true idol for the older generation? What his commissar, Dmitry Furmanov, said in his book, and, perhaps what everyone saw in the film of his name. However, both of these sources were far from the truth. The destruction of the legendary Red hero V.I. Chapaev – alongside his headquarters and a significant part of the 25th Infantry Division, invincible destroyers of the famous *Kappelevtsy* – is one of the most outstanding and amazing victories of the White Guard over the Bolsheviks. Until now, this special operation, which should go down in the history of military art, has not been studied. What actually happened on that far day, 5 September 1919, and how a large Red detachment led by Chapaev was destroyed, is today's tale.

Retreat

It was August 1919. On the Ural front the Cossacks, fighting desperately, retreated under the powerful onslaught of the Red 4th and 11th Armies. The Soviet command paid special attention to this front, realizing that Kolchak and Denikin could most easily communicate through the lands of the Ural Cossack Host, and that the Ural Cossacks could keep under constant threat the connection between Soviet Russia and Red Turkestan (a region that was strategically important, as it represented not only a grain breadbasket capable of feeding a large army, but also a territory rich in oil).

Ural Cossacks

At this time, the Ural Cossacks were in a difficult situation: most of their territory was under Soviet occupation and was being stripped of food: an epidemic of typhoid fever raged among both the general population and the army, every day removing dozens of irreplaceable fighters; it lacked officers; there was a catastrophic shortage of weapons, uniforms, cartridges, shells, medicines and medical personnel. The Ural Cossacks largely had to obtain *materiel* in battle, since there was almost no help from Kolchak or Denikin.

At this time, the Bolsheviks had pushed the White line to behind Sakhariuyu village¹, beyond which began the sandy poorly-fertile lower reaches of the Ural River, where there was nothing to feed the horses. A little further and the Cossacks will lose their horses, their main weapon ...

¹ Modern Sakharnaya, I think, which is a tiny village between Kalenoe and Lbishenskoye (which is not the Lbishchensk of this essay).



The "Adventure"

In order to find a way out of the grim situation, the ataman of the *Uralsy*, Lieutenant-General V.S. Tolstov, convened a “*krug*”² of officers from the *sotniks*³ up to corps commanders.

At it the older commanders, led by General Titruyev, called for carrying out the conventional form of attack, proposing to put all the Ural cavalry units, some 3,000 sabres, into three *lava*⁴ and attack the well-fortified Sakhariuyu village with a garrison of 15,000 Red infantry, with a large number of machine guns and artillery pieces. Such an attack across a flat, steppe-like plateau would have been clear suicide and the plan of the “old men” was rejected.

They accepted instead the plan proposed by the “youth”, which the “old men” called the “adventure”. According to this, a small but well-armed detachment of the best fighters on the most hardy horses, were to slip through the Red lines, without combat, and penetrate deep to the rear. Keeping hidden, it was to approach Lbishchensk⁵ *stanitsa*, currently occupied by the Reds, attack and capture in with a sudden attack, and so by cut off the Red troops from their base and forcing them to withdraw.

Around this time Cossack patrols caught two Red orderlies with secret documents, from which showed that Lbishchensk contained the headquarters of the entire Chapaev group, including their weapon and ammunition depots – such that ammunition for two rifle divisions were there – and gave the number of Red forces defending it. According to Dmitry Furmanov, the Commissar of the 25th Rifle Division, "the Cossacks knew all this and took it into account during their, undoubtedly, talented raid ... They pinned their hopes on the operation, which was very powerful, and therefore put their most experienced military leaders at the head of it."

The White special detachment included Cossacks of the 1st Division of the 1st Ural Corps, under Colonel T.I. Sladkov, and the peasants⁶ of Lieutenant-Colonel F.F. Poznyakov. At the head of the 1,192 men, with 9 machine-guns⁷ and 2 guns, was General, N.N. Borodin. On the march, they were ordered to take food for a week and extra cartridges, having declined a supply column to increase their speed of movement.

The detachment's task was practically impossible: Lbishchensk was guarded by up to 4,000 bayonets and sabres with a large number of machine guns, and two Red airplanes patrolled the area around the village in the afternoon. This made it

² A *krug* was the Cossack parliament.

³ A *sotnik* commanded a *sotnia* (squadron, company), so these were quite junior officers.

⁴ The traditional form of Cossack attack, basically a free-flowing somewhat dispersed charge.

⁵ Lbishchensk is now called Chapaev (and even has a statue of the man in the town centre).

⁶ Non-Cossack Russians really. It was commanded by experienced officers and had a good reputation. This was an infantry unit, but presumably they mounted for this operation.

⁷ Presumably some or all *tachankas*.



necessary to march about 150 kilometres – across bare steppe – only by night, since day-time movement would not go unnoticed by the Red pilots. This being the case, any further conduct of the operation became meaningless, since its success depended entirely on surprise.

The Special Detachment sets off

On August 31, at nightfall, the picked White detachment left the village of Kalenoye heading west into the steppe. For the whole raid, both Cossacks and officers were forbidden to make noise, talk loudly, or smoke. Naturally, bonfires were not even considered, so there was no hot food. The refusal of the usual rules of Cossack fighting – dashing mounted attacks with whistling and whooping and naked swords – were not understood at all. Some of the participants grumbled: "Well, what kind of war is this, we sneak about at night like thieves!"

Moving all night at high speed, the Cossacks stayed as far as possible in the steppes so that the Reds would not notice their manoeuvre. In the afternoon, the detachment had a five hour rest, after which, entering the Kushum lowland, where it changed its direction of movement to be parallel to the Ural River, some 50-60 kilometres away.

It was an exhausting trip. On 1 September 1, the detachment spent all day in the steppes in the heat, being in a swampy lowland – as leaving it was bound to be spotted by the enemy. The location of the special detachment went unnoticed by the Red pilots, despite flying very close by. When airplanes appeared in the sky, General Borodin ordered the horses to be driven away into the reeds, the tachankas and guns were to be covered with branches and armfuls of grass, and troops were to lie down. There was no certainty that the pilots wouldn't notice them, but they didn't have any choice, and at nightfall the Cossacks sped up their march to get away from that dangerous place.

By evening, on the 3rd day of the journey, Borodin's detachment cut the Lbishchensk-Slomikhinsk road, with Lbishchensk 12 kilometres away. To avoid discovery, the Cossacks occupied a hollow not far from the village itself and sent patrols in all directions for reconnaissance and to take prisoner some "talkers". *Praporshchik* Portnov's squad attacked a Red grain convoy, taking some prisoner. The squads' captives were taken back to the main detachment, where they were interrogated and it was found out that Chapaev was in Lbishchensk. One Red Army soldier volunteered to indicate where he stayed. It was decided to remain in the hollow for the day, in order to prepare and to rest after a hard march, but also to wait until the anxiety in the town from the results of the patrolling settled down.

On September 4, reinforced patrols were sent to Lbishchensk with the task of not letting anyone in or out, but not getting too close so as to alert the enemy. In all ten Reds, were intercepted, and no-one was missed.



The First Miscalculations of the Reds

As it turned out though, Red foragers had noticed the patrols, but Chapaev didn't attach much importance to it. He and divisional commissar Baturin just laughed at the fact that "they are heading into the steppes". According to Red intelligence, there were fewer and fewer fighters left in the ranks of the Whites, and they were moving towards the Caspian. They could not believe that the Whites would venture such a bold raid, and be able to slip through the dense lines of Red troops unnoticed. Even when the attack made on the grain convoy was reported, Chapaev did not see any danger in it. He thought that this was just stragglers separated from their units. By his order, on 4 September 1919, reconnaissance was made – both cavalry patrols and two airplanes swept the area, but found nothing suspicious.

The calculations of the White commanders turned out to be correct: none of the Red could believe that the White detachment was located close to Lbishchensk, under the nose of the Bolsheviki! On the other hand, it shows not just the wisdom of the commanders of the detachment, who chose such a good place to lie low, but also the negligent performance of their duties by the Red scouting: it's hard to believe that the cavalry scouts did not run into the Cossacks and the pilots could fail to notice them from above!

When discussing the plan for the capture of Lbishchensk, it was decided to take Chapaev alive, and the platoon of *Podkhorunzhy* Belonozhkin was given this role. This unit was faced with a difficult and dangerous task – to go with the first chain in the attack on Lbishchensk and, having reached it, avoid anyone else to dash, along with the Red Army man who had volunteered to show them Chapaev's apartment, and grab the Red division commander. *Esaul* Faddeev offered more a risky but more sure plan to catch Chapaev; the special platoon would ride quickly through the streets of Lbishchensk, dismount near Chapaev's house, cordon it off it, and take the big man while he slept. This plan was rejected because of the fear that the bulk of the men and horses would be killed.

Capture of Lbishchensk

At 10 o'clock in the evening on 4 September 1919 the detachment headed for Lbishchensk. Before leaving, Colonel Sladkov addressed the fighters with a parting message, asking them to fight for one another in the battle, and once in the village to refrain from looting and not to disperse, as that could spell ruin for the operation. He also reminded them that Lbishchensk contained the Ural Cossacks' worst enemy – Chapaev, ruthless killer of prisoners – who had escaped from their hands twice, in October 1918 and April 1919, but this third time he must be eliminated. After that they read a prayer together and they moved off.

They moved to three kilometres outside the village and lay down, waiting for dawn. The plan had Poznyakov's soldiers attacking the middle of the village, which stretched along the Ural River, while most of the Cossacks were to act on the flanks, and a reserve of 300 Cossacks was kept back. Before the attack, grenades were



handed out to those assaulting, sotnia commanders received their orders: after taking the village, the sotnias were to be divided into platoons, with each platoon having one side of a street to clear, with a small reserve in case of unexpected counterattacks. The enemy did not suspect anything, the village was quiet apart from a dog barking. At 3 o'clock in the morning, still in the darkness, the White chains moved forward. Scouts going ahead captured the Red sentries. The outskirts of the village were occupied without a shot being fired and the detachment began to line up in the streets. At that moment a rifle shot rang out – it was the a Red sentry in the mill who had noticed the White approach. He immediately ran away.

The "cleaning" of Lbishchensk began. According to a participant of the battle, *Esaul Faddeev*, "yard by yard, house after house were 'cleared' by platoons. Those who surrendered peacefully were sent to the rear. Those that resisted could expect to be blown up by a grenade or cut down by a sword." Grenades flew through the windows of the houses which fired at the Whites, but most of the Reds were caught unawares and surrendered without resistance.

In one house six regimental commissars were captured. A participant described the "... One has a twitchy jaw. They are pale. The two Russians keep themselves calmer, but they still had a doomed look in their eyes. They look at Borodin with dismay. Their trembling hands reach for the visors. They salute. It looks ridiculous. There are red stars with a sickle and a hammer on their caps, there are no shoulder straps on the overcoats."

There were so many prisoners that at first they were shot, fearing an uprising on their part. Then they were driven into a huge crowd. The detachment, having seized the stanitsa, began to converge on its centre. Wild panic began among the Reds –they jumped out the windows onto the street in their underwear and rushed around willy-nilly, not knowing where to run, as shots and noise were heard from all sides. Those who managed to seize weapons, fired randomly in different directions, but the Whites took few casualties from them – the Red Army men mostly hit each other.

How died Chapaev

The platoon dedicated to capturing Chapaev broke through to his apartment, which was the headquarters. The Red Army prisoner had not deceived the Cossacks. But now Belonzhokin, the commander of the special platoon, made a mistake: he did not cordon off the house, but took his men straight into the courtyard of the headquarters.

There, the Cossacks saw a seated horse at the entrance to the house, which someone behind the door was holding there for some reason. There was no reply to Belonzhokin's orders for those who were in the house to leave. Then there was a shot from a dormer window. The frightened horse went sideways and dragged the Red soldier holding it from behind the door. Apparently this was Chapaev's personal orderly, Peter Isaev, but all the Cossacks ran towards him, thinking it was Chapaev. Now a second man ran out of the house towards the gate. Belonzhokin shot him in the arm with his rifle. This was Chapaev. In the ensuing confusion, with almost the



entire platoon occupied by the other soldier, he managed to escape through the gate. Only two typists were found in the house.

According to the later testimony of prisoners what happened now was that Chapaev rallied some of the panicked Red Army men who were fleeing towards the river, gathering a hundred men with machine guns around him, and led a counter-attack on the Belonozhkin squadron – who had no machine guns and had to retire. Having removed the special platoon from their headquarters, the Reds set up behind its walls and began to fire out. According to the prisoners, during the short battle with the special platoon, Chapaev took a second wound, to his stomach. This injury turned out to be so severe that he could no longer command in battle and was taken down to the Ural on planks. *Sotnik V. Novikov*, who was watching the Ural, saw someone being transported across the Ural from the centre of Lbishchensk just before the battle ended. Eyewitnesses maintain that Chapaev died on the Asian side of the river from his stomach wound.

Party Committee Resistance

Esaul Faddeev noticed a group of Reds appear on the river bank, counter-attack the Whites and then entrench themselves in the headquarters. This group covered the Chapaev crossing, trying at all costs to detain the Whites, whose main forces had still not even approached the centre of Lbishchensk, and so Chapaev slipped out. The defence of the headquarters was headed by its chief, 23-year-old Nochkov, a former officer of the Tsarist army. The men in the headquarters were able to prevent all the Cossack attempts to capture the centre of Lbishchensk by brutal machine-gun and rifle fire. The headquarters was positioned so that all the approaches to the village centre could be shot at from it.

After several unsuccessful attacks, the Cossacks and soldiers began to accumulate behind the walls of the neighbouring houses. The Reds recovered, began to defend themselves even more stubbornly, and even made several attempts to counterattack the Whites. According to eyewitnesses, the shooting was so loud no one could hear commands.

Now some of the Communists and soldiers of the Red escort (firing squad) unit led by Commissar Baturin, who had nothing to lose, occupied the party committee [building?] on the outskirts of the village with a machine gun, fighting off the Cossacks, and were able to cover Chapaev's headquarters from that side. On the third side the high bank of the river flowing past making it inaccessible. The situation was so serious that a Cossack sotnia, previously blocking the road out of Lbishchensk, were called into the village and attacked the party committee [building] several times, but were forced back, unable to withstand the volume of fire.

Red Headquarters Taken

Now *Khorunzhy Safarov*, seeing the delay at the headquarters, leapt on the tachanka some 50 paces from him, hoping to suppress the resistance with machine-gun fire. He



could not even turn around, but was killed outright: all the horses and everyone else on it were wounded. One of the wounded stayed in the cart under a shower of red bullets. Cossacks tried to help him, running out from around the corners of the houses, but they suffered the same fate. Seeing this, General Borodin led his headquarters to his rescue. The houses had almost been cleared of Red soldiers, but one man who had managed to remain hidden, on seeing the general's shoulderboards shining in the morning sun, shot his rifle at him. The bullet hit Borodin in the head. This happened when the Reds had no hope of retaining the *stanitsa*.

Colonel Sladkov, took command of the special squadron. He ordered a machine-gun unit to take the house where Commissar Baturin was holding out, and then seize the Red headquarters. While some Cossacks distracted the Reds, leading an exchange of fire, others took two Lewis machine guns and climbed onto the top of a higher neighbouring house. After some half a minute, the resistance at the party committee [building] was broken: the Cossack machine guns riddled the roof of the house, killing most of the defenders. Now the Cossacks pulled up their artillery. The remaining Reds could not endure its fire and fled to the Ural River. The headquarters was taken. The wounded Nochkov was left behind: he was later found under a bench and killed.

The Losses of the *Chapaevtsy*

For a long time the Reds would not know about the catastrophe in Lbishchensk, continuing to send carts through it to Sakhariuyu, which would invariably be intercepted by the White Guards. During this time, it was possible to surround and eliminate the unsuspecting Red garrisons not only of Sakhariuyu, but also of Uralsk, thereby causing the collapse of the entire Soviet Turkestan front ... The only major omission of the organizers of the Lbishchensk raid was that they did not promptly transfer a detachment to the other side of the Ural, to pursue and destroy all the fugitives. A chase was sent after the few who had crossed the river, but they were not caught.

By 10 o'clock on 5 September organized resistance of the Reds in Lbishchensk was over, and by 12 o'clock fighting had stopped completely. In the village area up to 1,500 dead Reds were counted and 800 were taken prisoner. Many drowned or were killed while crossing the Ural or in the flight afterwards. Over the next two days of the Cossacks' stay in Lbishchensk, about a hundred more were pulled out of their hiding places in attics, cellars, and hay stacks. The population turned them all in. P.S. Baturin, commissar of the 25th Division, who replaced Furmanov, hid under the furnace in one of the huts, but the lady of the house ratted him out. According to the most modest calculations, the Reds lost at least 2,500 dead and prisoners in the fighting at Lbishchensk. The total loss for the Whites during this operation amounted to 118 people – 24 killed and 94 wounded. The most serious loss for the Cossacks was the death of the valiant General Borodin.



Knowing nothing of the battle that had taken place, soon big carts, logistic units, staff workers, a class of red *kursanty*⁸, and a punitive "special purpose detachment"⁹, sadly "made famous" for their de-Cossackisation, came to the village. Totally surprised, they were so confused that they did not even have time to offer resistance and all were immediately captured. The *kursanty* and the "special purpose squad" were almost entirely killed by sabres.

The trophies taken in Lbishchensk turned out to be huge. Ammunitions, food, equipment for two divisions, a radio station, machine guns, cinema equipment, even four airplanes were seized. Indeed on the same day, one more was added to these four – the Red pilot, not knowing what had happened, landed in Lbishchensk. There were other trophies. Colonel Izergin tells about them: "In Lbishchensk, Chapaev's headquarters were not without comforts and the pleasant passing of time: among the prisoners – or trophies – there were a large number of typists and stenographers." And there were curiosities. Pogodaev describes one of them: "A Cossack – Kuzma Minovskov – rode up to Myakushkin. Instead of his cap he was wearing a pilot's helmet on his head, and five Orders of the Red Banner decorated his chest from one shoulder to the other. "What the hell, what kind of fancy dress is this Kuzma? You're wearing Red Orders?!" Myakushkin asked him menacingly. "Yes, I took the rubber cap from the Soviet pilot, and we found these orders at Chapayev's headquarters. There are several boxes there ... Guys just took what they wanted ... The prisoners say that Chapaev had asked for more good Red soldiers, and he didn't have time to distribute them – we came ... and won them in a fair fight? They were for Peter and Markarka¹⁰, and now Cossack Kuzma Potapovich Minovskov wears them ... You don't wait to be rewarded – you reward yourself " – replied the soldier. Nikolay marvelled at the inexhaustible cheerfulness of his Cossack and let him go ... "

Furmanov's wrote that the reasons for the stunning defeat were that Chapaev took the most "vigilant fighters of the revolution" – the Red *kursanty* – from guard duty, that during the battle in Lbishchensk the people in the *stanitsa* raised a revolt at the most inappropriate time for the Bolsheviks, and that the warehouses and institutions were captured immediately. No document can be found to back up Furmanov. Firstly, it was impossible to put the *kursanty* on guard, as they were not in Lbishchensk on 4 September, they only arrived when everything was over. Secondly, only children, decrepit old men and women were still living in Lbishchensk, as all the men were in the White ranks. Thirdly, the captives taken the day before gave away where the Red guard posts were and where the most important points in the town were located. The reasons for the complete success of the White can be put down to the high professionalism of the White Guard command and officers, the dedication and heroism of the rank and file, and the carelessness of Chapaev himself.

Now about the "discrepancies" of the film and the book "Chapaev." This article is based on archival materials. "Why then was it necessary to deceive the people about

⁸ Effectively officer cadets.

⁹ ChON

¹⁰ Generic Russians, I think.



the fate of Chapaev?", the reader will ask. The answer is simple. Such a hero, according to the Soviet authorities, must die as a hero. You couldn't write that he was almost captured while he slept and was then taken out of battle in a helpless state and died from a wound to the stomach. That was too ugly. Plus there was a party order: put Chapaev in the most heroic light! For this they invented a non-existent White armoured car, at which he allegedly threw grenades from his headquarters. If there was an armoured car in the White detachments then it would have been immediately spotted, since engine noise in the night silence can be heard for many kilometres on the steppe!

Conclusions

What was the significance of the Lbishchensk operation? First, it showed that the actions of a relatively small number of special forces in a single strike, which took a total of five days, can negate two months of effort by the enemy many times over. Secondly, results were achieved that are difficult to accomplish while conducting military operations "as usual": the headquarters of the entire military group of the Red Army of the Turkestan Front was destroyed, the remaining Red units were left unconnected and their morale broke, which forced them to flee to Uralsk. As a result, the Reds were thrown back to the lines they had been at in July 1919, when they began their offensive against the Urals.

The moral significance for the Cossacks of destroying by their own hands Chapaev, the man who boasted of crushing the *Uraltsy* in every encounter (in fact, not one Cossack regiment was defeated by him), was truly enormous. It showed that even the best Red leaders could be beaten.

However, the White Guards were prevented from repeating a similar operation against Uralsk by inconsistent actions between their commanders, a catastrophic epidemic of typhoid among the men and a sharp increase in Red forces on the Turkestan Front, which only took three months to recover, thanks to the collapse of Kolchak's army.

