

Mounted Attacks of the Ural Cossacks against Bolshevik Armoured Cars in 1918

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Studying the documents of the struggle of the *Uralsy* against Bolshevism, the author of this article was able to familiarize himself with many feats of the Cossacks, but two of them deserve special attention. In their own way, they are unique and, perhaps, they are the only ones of their kind in military history – these are successful examples of cavalry attacks on armoured vehicles, namely on armoured cars.

The first case occurred while the Cossacks were defending Uralsk in 1918. At that time, units of the Red 4th Army were battling small Cossack *druzhini*,¹ aiming to take the capital of the Ural Cossack Host, Uralsk. The strategic position of the Host was extremely unfavourable: it stretched for almost 1,000 kilometres along the Ural River. The Ural Host, from the Caspian Sea to Ilets'k town, is a sparse chain of villages and farms without fortifications, and was under the threat of constant attack from Astrakhan, Samara, Saratov and Turkestan. Thus, the Cossacks were initially deprived of the opportunity to gather their forces into a single strike force, and the Bolsheviks took advantage of this, constantly kept the Host in suspense where the blows would strike. The territory of the host did not have any industry, which would allow them to produce military equipment, and the available stocks of weapons were small. Therefore, they had to repel the Bolsheviks man-to-man. Often armed only with swords and lances, the Cossack troops defended their capital heroically.

The Red command initially, unlike the majority of White commanders, gave the Urals region great importance. They placed large forces against the Cossacks large forces that had not only machine guns and artillery, but included armoured trains, airplanes, and armoured cars. The *Uralsy*, tired from the world war, had no such support (the only Cossack armoured car "Zmey Gorynych"² was destroyed by a direct hit by a large shell during the June 1918 assault on Uralsk). The Cossacks, in spite of the large numerical superiority of the enemy, bravely repelled the attacks of the Bolshevik cavalry and infantry, supported by artillery. But often when a Bolshevik armoured car appeared the Cossacks – who had no means of fighting armoured vehicles, not even primitive ones like grenades – would lose their nerve, and there were cases when entire regiments of the Ural and Orenburg Cossacks left their positions in a panic.

¹ Local militia units.

² The Serpent Gorynych is a creature from Russian mythology.



With the support of aviation and armoured vehicles by 27 June 1918 the Reds were nearing Uralsk. The Cossack population helped the White fighters at the front as much as they could: women, children and people over mobilisation age brought food, ammunition and water to the front line, and helped the wounded back. On this hot day, a group of old people from the village of Krugloyadernaya were bringing the Cossacks of the 1st Training Foot Regiment water in a large barrel. When they went to the front line, they armed themselves with whatever they could: this one took an old sword, perhaps from Pugachev's time, this one a lance or whip, this one a chain, this one just a stone in a bag.

Having reached the location of the regiment, they found themselves in the heat of a battle. In the midst of it, they saw that a red armoured car was approaching them. Old people unfamiliar with this military novelty – they were Cossacks who had fought against the Turks and Central Asians in the previous century – began to question the young Cossacks about what was coming. The youngsters answered that it was an armoured car with machine guns, which was almost impossible to defeat.

In response, the old men silently unleashed their horses from their barrel of water, mounted them, took their simple weapons and with a yelling and whistling, as in any Cossack cavalry attack, rushed in what looked like a suicide attack on the armoured car. But the incredible happened. Protected by thick armour plates, the Red armoured car apparently did not expect that the Cossack cavalry could challenge it, and so were going to certain death. The machine gunner sitting in the vehicle probably did not come to his senses quickly enough from the amazement caused by such boldness of the Cossacks, and when he did it was already too late: the Cossacks were already close to the armoured car and inaccessible to machine gun fire. One of the Cossacks struck the machine gunner with a spear through a window, but he himself fell badly wounded by a shot of another crew member.

At this time, another Cossack, having jumped off his horse, tied a rope to the car, and tried to drag it back to the regiment. Obviously the prospect of being captured by the cavalry was not to the liking of the vehicle's driver, and he set off in the opposite direction to the elderly Cossacks. Unable to stay on his horse the owner of the rope fell but did not release it from his hands, trying to stop the armoured car. He couldn't fight the powerful machine and was dragged along behind the vehicle, not wanting to part with his booty or his good rope. He almost made it to the Red lines and it was only with great difficulty was able to escape death.

Despite the fact that the attempt to seize the armoured car failed, yet they a victory of sorts: forcing it to withdraw with disgrace from the front line, with a loss in his crew, which dented the Reds attack on Uralsk that day, and undermined the morale of the Bolsheviks on that section of the front.

Another mounted attack on a Red armoured car occurred during the September 1918 battles near the village of Rastyapino, in the Nikolaevsk district of Samara Province.



After the Cossacks fought off the Red attack on Uralsk in June 1918 and threw the enemy back to the city of Nikolaevsk, the Bolsheviks brought up reinforcements from Central Russia, and renewed their attack against the Cossacks. The village of Rasyapino, defended by the 1st Ural Training Cavalry Regiment, was at the forefront of the Bolshevik offensive. A Red division, reinforced by armoured vehicles and with powerful artillery support, acted against the Cossacks in this sector. Despite the inequality in forces, the Cossacks bravely fought off all the attacks of the Red cavalry and infantry, and their Cossack battery of two guns successfully opposed the enemy artillery.

However at one point, the Reds came so close to the battery that there was a threat it might be seized, and so the regiment commander gave the order to move the battery to another position. When the guns were limbered up, a Red armoured car came up to the front of the regiment along the Cossack trenches, spraying them with machine gun fire and heading straight for the currently defenceless battery. In the situation, the Cossacks were going to have to abandon an entire ammunition case, and panic started in the Cossack chains³. It seemed that soon flight would begin, in which carts, guns, and machine guns would be left behind, which could easily end in a complete rout.

But at this critical moment of the battle "... a small cheer sounded and three Cossacks attacked the car, with the "armoured *muzhik*"⁴ Ananichev ahead of them. With a lance at the ready, bare headed, he galloped on his nag, and behind – trying not to overtake him – three Cossacks with bare swords were riding. What happened next no one could explain, but the car stopped and the entire crew jumped out of it and ran off. The attackers did not pursue. They rode up to the stationary car and began to ride around it helplessly, not knowing what to do. Then, removing the rifles, one after another they began to put bullets into the engine. The motor stopped and they turned back, of course unable to take the car with them. In this way the "armoured man" defeated the armoured car, although according to all the standards of the war, such an attack should have ended in the death of Ananichev and his Cossacks. This episode made it possible for the Cossacks to regroup and they retreated in an organised manner.

It is necessary to say a little about the hero of this attack, the "armoured *muzhik* " Ananichev. By origin he was a peasant of the Samara province, who opposed the arbitrariness of the Bolsheviks, in his village in particular and in the country in general. For his bravery in action, Ananichev was promoted to the Cossacks and received the nickname from them "armoured *muzhik*" for his courage, composure and steadfastness, which he showed in every combat with the Reds and for the fact that the enemy always spared him. For example, having once gone on reconnaissance with two other Cossacks he came across a 40 man Red squad, which he cunningly persuaded were surrounded by a great force of White Guards, and so took them captive.

³ A "chain" is a line of troops.

⁴ A *muzhik* is a peasant, but has strong overtones of manliness.



Despite the fact that he was assigned to a Cossack *sotnia*, he was always in every battle and often acted independently, at his own discretion directing the so-called "heroes" – the bravest and most selfless Cossacks of the regiment. After this attack, the Cossack officers asked Ananichev, how he managed to defeat the armoured car. To this he quite seriously replied: "How? I prayed, so it happened." And this answer was typical for the "armoured *muzhik*", and explained his many feats.

These cases of successful cavalry attacks on armoured vehicles belonging to 1918 may be the only cases in which people have defeated them without the specialised weapons required to do so. Attacks of this kind can perhaps be classified as "psychic", since their success was explained by not only the great personal courage of the Cossacks, but also by the inability of the Red crews to keep their morale against people who undertook insanely brave, indeed suicidal, attacks on armoured vehicles – which on the face were securely protected by armour from the Cossacks' lances and sabres. To make such an attack is only possible when a person is firmly convinced that he is on the side of truth. These episodes of the struggle on the Ural Cossack army front, on the whole characterise the entire army, readily accepting death "for one another".

It is quite possible that in the future other similar mounted attacks by *Uraltsy* or other Cossacks on Bolshevik armoured vehicles will be found. These episodes allow us to draw conclusions, not only about the courage and dedication of the Ural Cossacks, but also speak for the fact that the Red troops were well armed, in contrast to the *Uraltsy*. This convincingly refutes the line of Soviet historians with their "ragged and unclothed" Red Army and the "armed-to-the-teeth" White Army. In addition, the active use of armoured vehicles on the Ural Cossack Army front by the Bolsheviks shows that the Red command gave the fight against it higher attention, reasonably fearing for their communications between Astrakhan, Tsaritsyn and the northern Caucasus, as well as with Turkestan, which speaks about the special importance of the struggle of the Ural Cossacks during the Civil War.

