

## Hostilities on the Eastern Front of the Civil War, 10-15 November 1918

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*The article analyses the course of the offensive operation carried out in November 1918 by anti-Soviet troops on the Eastern Front of the Civil War. The result of these hostilities was the suspension of the Red 1st and 5th Armies' offensive on Ufa, and a pause for the units of the Whites' Samara Group, tired by continuous fighting.*

*S. N. Voitsekhovskiy, V. O. Kappel', Bugul'ma, Ik River, Samara Group, concentration, outflank, flank attack, defeat.*

In October 1918 the soldiers of the former People's Army of the Samara anti-Soviet government (the Committee of Members of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, generally known as КОМУЧ), which had rolled back from the Volga under pressure from the Red Army, were defending the foothills of the Urals in the Ufa area.

On the northern sector of the front, near Bugul'ma, were units of the Colonel Vladimir Oskarovich Kappel's Simbirsk Group (Samara, Simbirsk and Kazan Brigades, Orenburg Cossack and attached Bashkir detachments). The southern sector (Buguruslan, Belebey) was defended by some small Russian units and the Czechoslovak Legion, who by this time had lost their fighting spirit and wanted to move to the rear. All these units were organisationally united into the Samara Group, the headquarters of which was located in Ufa. From the end of September, they had become part of the Western Front, created at the Ufa State Conference, generally known as the Ufa Directory.

The units of the Red 1st Army (Buguruslan) and 5th Army (Bugul'ma) were operating against the Whites. The 5th Army had been formed into two columns: the right, or right-bank (previously operating near Kazan on the right bank of the Volga), was transformed in early November into the 27th Rifle Division, and the left (left-bank), reorganized into the 26th Rifle Division.

In early October the Soviet Eastern Front command showed its dissatisfaction with the fact that the 5th Army right-bank group, whose task was to capture Bugul'ma, was moving forward too slowly, holding back the 1st Army, which was advancing towards Belebey, often meeting no resistance from the enemy. The Front noted:

The inaction of the said group has a harmful effect on the success of the 1st Army, whose left flank is still tied down by the passivity of the 5th Army's Right Group.

However, the failures of the Right Group were caused by the effective combat organisation of the detachments defending Bugul'ma, led by Colonel Kappel'. Despite the fact that part of the 1st Army (for example, the 20th Penza Division) was also sent against him, he was able to hold back the Red troops, which, according to the most conservative estimates, exceeded his numbers threefold.

The enemy, retreating in front of the front of the 5th Army, launched fierce counterattacks, and tried to hold on to advantageous lines.

However, on 16 October, while Kappel' was away, Bugul'ma was abandoned, and Kappel's men retreated to the east. Having retreated beyond the Ik River, the units of the Simbirsk Group took up defensive positions. The forward infantry units stopped in the villages of Yaprykovo and Moskovo, keeping watch over and guarding the river. The cavalry was concentrated in two groups: near the village of Bairyaki, having patrols to the north and west, and in the village of Trukmenevo,<sup>1</sup> with patrols to Akbash, the Bugul'ma to Belebey road and along the Ik River to the south.

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<sup>1</sup> Now a northern suburb of Oktyabrsky



This defensive line was held by Kappel's men for at least two weeks. The troops slowly conceded their position, fighting all the way, relying on the next natural obstacle on the way of the Reds – the Usen' River. A Soviet soldier wrote:

The Whites did not retreat a single step without fighting. We took every inch of land only after fierce combat.

The testimonies of the Whites are identical. They reflect the tactics that were carried out under Kappel's leadership.

Inch by inch we defended and regained the land that had already been won back from the damned internationalists. Clinging to every hill, river and forest to gain the time the departing convoys needed. We prevented encirclements and flank moves. We broke out of a ring of enemies that were about to close. We stayed in combat for weeks, without sleep and rest. <... >

We carried out all the wounded from the hellish battles. And at the same time, not once did we lose heart, falter or run... <... >

That was how Kappel's followers were on the sad path of retreat along, following the Volga to Bugul'ma railway, to Ufa and further east...

Wide manoeuvres and quick strikes led to varying successes for the opponents. However, despite occasional victories, in general the situation on the sector facing Kappel' caused concern in the command.

Izhevsk was captured by the Red Army on 7 November 1918 and fierce fighting took place for Birsks, which worsened the situation around Bugul'ma for the Whites. Additional difficulties arose at the front due to the instability and weak discipline of the Czechoslovak units, which moved steadily eastwards and thus allowed the Soviet troops to pose a threat to the left flank of the Simbirsk Group.

Having familiarized himself with the state of affairs at the front, the new commander of the Samara Group, Major General Sergei Nikolaevich Voitsekhovskiy, immediately began to plan an offensive. His plan was based on the haphazard nature of the Soviet advance, which alternated pressure on the Whites in different directions. When pressure increased on the Czech troops in the Belebey area, the Reds weakened it towards Kappel' around Bugul'ma, and *vice versa*. In early November the units under Kappel' were in a difficult situation. The Soviet troops had bypassed their left flank, and a threatening situation developed: a further advance by the Reds could interrupt the sole line of retreat to Ufa. The chief of staff of the White Samara Group, General S.A. Shchepikhin, asserted:

Be that as it may, all things considered we have a tragic situation, and we cannot exclude the danger that Chishmy<sup>2</sup> is occupied by the Reds before Kappel'.

Taking advantage of the relative calm in the Belebey area, General Voitsekhovskiy decided to support the Simbirsk Group. There is no doubt that Kappel' also took part in the preparation of this action.

A plan for a joint operation was developed to destroy the Red Army troops bypassing Kappel's left flank, the 27th Division of the Red 5th Army. According to Kappel' himself,

The purpose of these battles was to stop the advance of our enemy, defeat it and push it beyond the Ik River, rather than create a more advantageous position for us.

For this purpose, seven Czech battalions were involved, thrown from Belebey to the right flank of the enemy.

Thanks to General Voitsekhovskiy's energy and influence on the Czechoslovaks, as commander of the "Samara" army group, it was possible to persuade the Czechoslovak units to take part with Kappel' in a general counter-manoeuve towards Bugul'ma direction

Voitsekhovskiy had to break stubborn reluctance by the Czechoslovak commanders to participate in the operation. At a military council he convened, in response to the objections put forward, Voitsekhovskiy:

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<sup>2</sup> A junction of the Volga to Bugul'ma and Samara to Zlatoust railway lines.

... stated with emphasised persistence that he had not summoned everyone for reports and explanations, but for a personal transmission of the tasks that had to be performed.

As Voitsekhovskiy and Kappel' agreed, the operation was carried out by the forces of both groups operating in front of Ufa. The Czechoslovak troops were supposed to strike at the right flank and rear of the Reds from the south through the Verkhne Troitskiy plant while Kappel', still conducting a defence on the railway line, was to gather the strongest possible shock detachment, flank the Reds to the north and act against their left flank. The difficulty of concentrating troops to fulfil this task was due to the Reds' activity facing Kappel's Simbirsk Group. On 4 November a detachment of Orenburg Cossacks under the command of Captain Shein received an order to stubbornly defend the village of Bishkurazovo, an important point covering the concentration behind the right flank, from where the strike group would start its counteroffensive. The Cossacks held back the pressure of the Reds at Bishkurazovo for the whole day, and in the evening they forced the enemy to retreat, thereby ensuring successful preparation for the upcoming operation and earning Kappel's gratitude.

General Voitsekhovskiy asked the Front Chief of Staff, General M.K. Diterikhs, for reinforcements for the Simbirsk Group. Voitsekhovskiy ordered that the engineer company of the Samara Brigade be urgently replenished, which was not an easy task due to the acute shortage of trained men. To reinforce the group, Colonel Rumsza's 1st Polish Regiment, Colonel Naumov's Orenburg Cossack Regiment and an English naval gun were allocated. The British were sent to the Western Front to commemorate the beginning of Allied assistance to the Directory. In order to create a bridgehead for the offensive being prepared, units of the Simbirsk Group captured the village of Starye Kandry on 6 November.

According to Soviet sources, the operation began on 9 November:

On 9 November the enemy went on the offensive against the 5th Army and in front of the Penza Division [2, c. 63].

However documents from Kappel's headquarters, as well as memoirs of his colleagues, show that the Whites' major offensive started the next day. An operational report from Kappel's headquarters of 10 p.m. on November 10 has:

Today, Colonel Kappel's units went on the offensive and knocked the enemy out of its positions.

The correctness of this dating is confirmed by other documents.

The operation began on 10 November and lasted about five days. Due to its suddenness, it was accompanied by considerable success. The advancing Soviet troops were attacked on both flanks.

In some places, the White Guards managed to stop our advancing units. In one November day, taking advantage of fog, the White Guards fell on the regiments of the 1st Brigade.

During this manoeuvre, the Czech detachments covered considerable distances and outstripped the Reds, coming out on their flank from the south. The units of the 1st Brigade of the 27th Division had not been provided with proper reconnaissance and protection, so the arrival of the Czechoslovak troops came as a stunning blow.

The Reds were drawn into a trap, apparently unaware about the danger from Belebey.

Having thrown back the Soviets, the Czechoslovaks occupied the Verkhne Troitskiy plant, together with the villages of Abdulino and Kulbaevo. The Reds were pushed back to the Ik River and hastily began crossing to the left bank.

However, the centre was broken, which created considerable confusion among the enemy, especially since the bridge over the Ik River collapsed. A situation was created where the Red Army was in a hurry to somehow get back across the river.



Due to the fact that the bridge over the Ik was destroyed, the Red Army dragged their guns on their hands, while standing in the icy water. Following the Reds, the Czechoslovaks crossed, occupying the village of Pokrovskoe<sup>3</sup> on the left bank of the Ik River. The enemy moved west, to Bugul'ma.

Acting in concert with the Czechs, the left flank of the Soviet 27th Division was attacked by Kappel's troops from the north. On 10 November Colonel Kappel's units went on the offensive and began to push the enemy from the lines it occupied. Fierce battles unfolded for the possession of a number of villages: Nikolaevka<sup>4</sup> (2 km south of Yumadybash), Bikmetovo, Aleksandrovka (2 km west of Starye Kandry), St. Kandry, Ermukametovo, Kandry-Kul' and Kandry-Kutuy. The Polish units attacked Verkhniy and Nizhniy Sardyk, the battle for which continued throughout the day.

The writer A.S. Serafimovich, who visited Red Army units fighting on the Ik River in November, then published several articles in the newspaper *Pravda* under the heading "Impressions". One of those articles was devoted to the hostilities that took place at the front at this time. Serafimovich also stated that the beginning of the offensive was 9 November.

On 9 November Kappel' attacked our left flank along the Ik River with superior forces. The Red Army fought fiercely. We attacked eight times. The rear was immediately overflowing with the wounded. The enemy did not spare their shells

According to Serafimovich, the Soviet newspapers were at the time hurrying to publish reports about the capture of Belebey and, in an effort to achieve that result, the Red command removed some of the forces from the left flank and transferred them to Belebey. This transfer played a role in the defeat of the Reds, contributing to their vulnerability. "The weakened left flank began to give way".

During the day Kappel's men captured about 200 prisoners, more than 10 machine guns, a Red sapper company's train, a lot of weapons and other trophies. However, the documents show that on the Reds' left flank that the resistance turned out to be quite serious. The enemy counterattacked from the village of Novogeorgievsk towards Kandry-Kul' and Aleksandrovka. This circumstance prompted Kappel' to suspend the offensive along the Volga to Bugul'ma railway and the Ufa road and regroup. Before the regrouping was complete, the unit commanders were ordered to move forward cavalry detachments with small infantry units.

As a result of strong resistance by the enemy near the village of Nikolaevka, which is west of the village of Yumadybash, where Germans, Hungarian and Latvian detachments were located, as well as due to the great resistance at Verkh. and Nizh. Sardyk, I have ordered our offensive along the railway line and the highway to be suspended for today. I am transferring part of my forces to the right flank in order to strengthen it and break the enemy resistance.

That evening Kappel's troops reached the villages of Aleksandrovka, Starye Kandry, Kandry-Kul' and Kandry station. The regrouping was carried out during the night of 10/11 November. The Samara Brigade, with the 3rd Bashkir Regiment, was sent behind the right flank in order to bypass the enemy. That brigade made a night march from the group's left flank in difficult conditions, travelling more than 60 km.

The next day the Simbirsk Group fell on the Soviet troops with all its might. Simultaneously with the attack along the entire front, a flank encirclement – much loved by Kappel' – was carried out.

While the enemy was being crushed along the front by our army, Colonel Kappel' threw strong and active cavalry units around the pressed left flank.

The Samara brigade, reinforced by a detachment of Orenburg Cossacks:

... reached the enemy rear and dealt it a crushing blow.

The fighting took place around the villages of Temenyakovo, Agirtamak and Raimanovo.

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<sup>3</sup> Pokrovsko-Urustamaskoe.

<sup>4</sup> Urdyak Nikolayevka.

Serafimovich depicted the sudden and swift attack as follows, thickening the colours with pictures of atrocities attributed to the Cossacks:

Continuing to smash from the front, the enemy threw a large body of cavalry into a deep bypass of the pressed left flank. The Cossacks fell like an avalanche on the deep rear, cut into the wagon train and mercilessly began to cut down the unarmed wagon guards. They forced us to undress beforehand so as not to bloody or spoil our clothes; took away boots, overcoats, jackets, trousers, and blouses; and then smashed our heads with sabres.

Something indescribable happened.

Two and four wheel carts, people, horses – all rushed in a merciless stream – ramming, breaking, crushing each other and everything in the way.

Terrible words swept through: “by-passed”, “sold out”... “treason!”

The entire left flank ran towards Bugul'ma. A catastrophic defeat loomed.

At the same time, the right flank of the 27th Rifle Division continued to be pressed by the Czechoslovak battalions. A large number of Soviet troops were under the threat of isolation from their main forces and complete destruction. To urgently correct the situation, the Soviet command moved units of its 26th Division to the front. An attempt was made to counterattack. However, the White troops defeated the attempts at vengeance, after heavy fighting, and in the following days continued their successful offensive.

In Kappel's Kappel, the second brigade of the 27th division was defeated:

... and after their defeat by the Poles, some of the brigade's units that were in Bikmetovo village were captured, while others fled in the direction of Tuymazy station

The Simbirsk Group managed to push the Reds across the Ik River. The units of the Soviet 27th Division, which suffered significant losses, quickly retreated. Kappel's HQ intelligence department reported that, according to prisoner testimony, losses in the enemy regiments reached up to two-thirds of their personnel. In the same reconnaissance report, of 15 November, it was reported that the enemy in front of the group, had been encircled and outflanked, defeated and had fled in complete disorder to the west, towards Apsalamovo, and to the northwest, towards Chekan.

The Red column, badly battered, rolled back without delay to Bugul'ma.

The British took an active part in the fighting:

The English artillerymen and armoured train, selflessly moved far ahead and brought disorder into the ranks of the enemy with their accurate fire.

During the battle they were surrounded and threatened with capture by the enemy, but continued to fire until the arrival of units from the Simbirsk Group. Only the decisive actions of Kappel's troops, who received an order to rescue the artillerymen, saved the Allies from captivity, and the White command from a diplomatic conflict with Britain. The Samara Group's chief of staff, General Shchepikhin, recalled the episode:

I hastily telegraphed Kappel' to protect the British and send a Czech repair train to repair the bridge ... Everything was done accurately and quickly.

The defeat of the Soviet units was severe. The Reds, in one White analysis:

... outflanked on both sides, fled after some stubborn fighting in the centre, abandoning their machine guns. They reached Bugul'ma only due to the favourable terrain conditions and the fact that there was a lot of space to retreat in.

According to Serafimovich:

Our left flank no longer existed – it was completely defeated and scattered.

The reasons for the defeat of the right flank, where the Czechoslovak legionnaires were operating, were analysed by the Soviet historian G. H. Eikhe, a participant in the military operations around Ufa. He devoted a few lines in one of his books to a description of the events in the area of the Verkhne Troitskiy plant.

The 27th Rifle Division, advancing eastwards along the above-mentioned railway, was quickly attacked by significant White forces from the south in the flank and rear. The division was thrown back to the northwest with heavy losses. The enemy's success was explained by the fact that, advancing along the northern edge of the Z. V. Troitskiy forest, the division's right flank was not operationally secured. The enemy took advantage of that circumstance.

Advancing from the south from the Z. V. Troitskiy area, it hit the flank and rear of the 27th Rifle Division and was able to inflict powerful and telling blows on the division's units.

The retreat of the Red 5th Army and 20th Penza Division of the 1st Army to Bugul'ma forced the Soviet command to transfer reserves to that front and suspend the 1st Army's offensive – it had previously been tasked with capturing Belebey by 16 November.

The defeat inflicted on the Bolsheviks in the operation just mentioned allowed the Samara Group to stop its retreat, using the line of the Ik River to stabilise from Bugul'ma to Abdulino station. That line was about 200 kilometres away from the Volga River.

After the operation, on 19 November, Kappel' expressed his gratitude to his subordinate soldiers and commanders of the Simbirsk Group, not forgetting to note the work of each unit. For his successful conduct of the operation, he was promoted to major general by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, General V. G. Boldyrev, as the single exception to the rule adopted by the Directory that officers would not be promoted during the Civil War.

However, due to the small size of the White forces, as well as due to the wide scale of the areas in which military operations unfolded, the Soviets were pushed back, but not fully defeated. Kappel' failed to intercept the retreating Red columns. This was also due to the withdrawal of the Czechoslovak units from the front, who refused to continue fighting when a continuation of the offensive might have led to the Whites capturing Bugul'ma.

The situation facing the 5th Army was unfavourable. The enemy, having withdrawn some of his forces from the Ekaterinburg area, attacked along the Ufa to Bugul'ma railway and pushed our 5th Army units to behind the Ik River, and the left flank to the village of N. Karakashly.

The introduction of the Red 26th Division into the battle line led to the return of the Whites to defensive positions on the right, eastern bank of the Ik River. Thus, due to a number of circumstances, the command of the Samara Group was unable to complete the successful operation and take full advantage of its results.

However, publishing about the events of November 1918 in the *Pravda* – in a story that does not fully disclose the results of the enemy's offensive, but claimed that the Reds retreated only to take a breather and prepare for new battles – Serafimovich gives a short, but vivid and very flattering description of Colonel Kappel' from the point of view of his opposition:

The title of "little Mackensen"<sup>5</sup> was given to Colonel Kappel', a specialist in encirclement and breakthroughs. It was he who, when the Red Army was fighting near Kazan, had made the famous 180-mile detour near Sviyazhsk and began to tear up the bridges in our army's rear, threatening it with complete defeat. But he had broken too far from his bases and was repulsed.

Little Mackensen – a specialist in encirclement and breakthroughs – this praise from the mouth of the enemy was remembered by Kappel's comrades-in-arms and, decades later, they proudly said that even the enemy paid tribute to the leadership talent of their legendary commander.

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<sup>5</sup> After the German WWI General, August von Mackensen, who gave the Russian army such a terrible time in Poland.