

# The Yuryuzan Raid of Division Commander Henrikh Eikhe

R. A. Badikov

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Information about the author: Roman Badikov is a postgraduate student of the South Urals State University (National Research University) in Chelyabinsk. E-mail: badikov.roman@gmail.com.

Summary: In this article the author attempts to study one of the most notable Red Army offensive operations of the Civil War in the Urals territory – the raid in June-July 1919 by two brigade tactical groups of the 26th Rifle Division (5th Army of the Eastern Front) under Division Commander Heinrich Eikhe into the rear of Admiral A. V. Kolchak's Western Army.

Keywords: Civil War; Red Army; 5th Army; Yuryuzan raid; Henrikh Eikhe; M. N. Tukhachevski; Western Army.

A prominent Bolshevik commander and military figure, Henrikh Khristoforovich Eikhe<sup>1</sup> (1893-1968) is one of the least known and least researched historical figures of the “Red” camp of the Russian Civil War. While a close comrade-in-arms of V. K. Blucher, M. N. Tukhachevski, I. D. Kashirin, V. K. Putna, K. A. Neyman and Y. P. Gaylit, he never shared with them the glory and wide fame, which those representatives of the epic “heroes of the Civil War” were surrounded by in the memory of descendants.

Among the most notable episodes of Eikhe's activity during the Civil War, we must first of all mention the so-called “Yuryuzan campaign” – a highly daring raid (even by the standards of manoeuvre in the Civil War) by units of the 26th Rifle Division from the 5th Army (commanded by Tukhachevski). This raid led Eikhe into the rear of Admiral Kolchak's Western Army (commanded by General K. V. Sakharov). In many respects, thanks to this complex offensive operation, Eikhe gained great personal fame in the Eastern Front of the Red Army while still a *NachDiv*.<sup>2</sup>

Eikhe's raid, initiated by Tukhachevski in late June-early July 1919, formed the basis of the original plan for the Zlatoust Operation (24 June-13 July 1919), the success of which allowed the 5th Army to cross the Ural Mountains, liberate a significant part of the Southern Urals and seize Zlatoust – “the key to the plains of Western Siberia”, as the historian N. E. Kakurin called it. To this day the Yuryuzan Campaign is considered by researchers of the war as one of the brightest and most heroic episodes of the Civil War in the Urals in 1919 (although with some claim to excessive glorification). It is not by chance that in the Soviet period it represented a popular subject of fiction, being associated primarily with the names of Tukhachevski (as the planner) and Eikhe (as the direct executor of the concept).

To some extent, it was literary writers (A. I. Aldan-Semënov, M. S. Grossman, M. I. Tikhomirov, L. I. Rakovskiy, R. B. Gul', etc.) who included the raid in their works and brought out the personality of Eikhe in the plots. In 1970s through to the 1990s, the military commander's personality went beyond the limits of purely historical research, endowing it for a time with the quality of a personified property of the general public, albeit in the form of an artistic, heroic image.

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<sup>1</sup> He was born in Latvia as Johans Indriķis Mārtiņš Ēķis, or Johann Heinrich Martin Eiche in the German. However he seems to have dropped the Johans, and as he is famous for his time in Russia his name his name appears in a variety of transliterations: I favour Henrikh Eikhe, but Wikipedia has him as Genrich Eiche, for example. PW.

<sup>2</sup> Short for Head of a Division, and equivalent to the title *KomDiv* (Division Commander) which replaced it soon afterwards. PW.

The desire to organise a raid by Eikhe's 26th Infantry Division into the enemy's deep rear was dictated by the peculiarities of the situation the 5th Army faced on the Eastern Front once it had mastered the Ufa-Birsk region. Having reached the foothills of the Urals, Tukhachevski's forces encountered the Karatau mountain range, which was impassable to large bodies of troops. According to the White command, it would act as a key barrier to the progress of the Red Army forces towards Zlatoust. The high ridge was crossed only by two transport routes (the Birsk to Satka road and the Ufa to Zlatoust railway line), both lying in narrow mountain passes. A frontal attack (especially when advancing along the railway line, which was straddled by the Western Army's 1st Volga Corps) had no real prospects and threatened to result in heavy losses for the Reds. Yet the Red Command had ordered the capture of Zlatoust by June as the main priority for the 5th Army.

Anticipating the emergence of a critical situation, Tukhachevski had already by 22 May 1919, in a conversation with the assistant commander of his Eastern Front's Southern Group, F. F. Novitski, pointed out the expediency of deploying an oblique blow towards Zlatoust: "... not from Ufa,<sup>3</sup> but from halfway between Birsk and Krasnoufimsk along the river valley." Putting forward this proposal, the commander meant to use for the offensive the difficult defile of the mountainous Yuryuzan River, which crosses the Karatau almost parallel to, but south of, the Birsk – Satka road. This concept best suited the terrain, because, as the military theorist S. M. Belitski<sup>4</sup> rightly stated, "only movement along the Yuryuzan River saves the troops from the need to take the mountain ranges head-on."

Our study of later documents has shown that the plan for the raid was boiled down to the idea of a flank bypass through the valley of the Yuryuzan River by units of the 26th Rifle Division (two brigades) onto the positions of the 1st Volga Corps (in the area of the Asha-Balashovo railway station) with the subsequent interception of its rear communications and the main supply route of the Asha-Balashovo – Zlatoust railway line. As a result of this bold manoeuvre, the goal of operational encirclement of the corps was achieved by blocking its forces with two strike groups of the 5th Army – from the front (a task force<sup>5</sup> under I. N. Gavrilov) and to the rear (the 1st and 2nd Brigades under Eikhe). Assessing the prospects of the upcoming operation in a conversation with the commander of the Eastern Front, S. S. Kamenev, on 13 June 1919, Tukhachevski stressed:

I believe that the offensive along the Yuryuzan River valley is quite secure. Kappel's Corps<sup>6</sup> is not worth an egg, and we will catch him in the Zlatoust – Balashovo area.

Tukhachevski attributed a fundamental role in his calculations to the factor of surprise. Indeed, this study has found that the Western Army had discarded the possibility of the Reds using the wild, inaccessible valley of the mountainous Yuryuzan River to launch an operation, especially as the two brigade tactical groups of the 26th RD were to take artillery and wagons. Despite this, the raid into the White rear should still be characterised as an extremely risky and somewhat "adventurous" undertaking. Eikhe rightly emphasised later

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<sup>3</sup> Along the railway line, with the prospect of a bloody assault on the positions of the 1st Volga Corps.

<sup>4</sup> Belitski was assistant chief of staff of the 26th Infantry Division at this time, and was Eikhe's close assistant in the development of operational plans and combat decisions.

<sup>5</sup> The task force included the 3rd Brigade of the 26th Rifle Division and I.D. Kashirin's independent cavalry brigade. The operational plan asked the group to carry out a demonstration frontal offensive along the Ufa – Zlatoust rail line in order to tie down the 1st Volga Corps in the Asha-Balashovo area.

<sup>6</sup> The 1st Volga Corps was under the command of General V. O. Kappel.

After all, while we crawled as one long snake through the Yuryuzan gorges, we could have been taken with bare hands. The regiments had no line of sight and no way to fire back – not even a single battalion could be deployed in combat order there.

In order to realise such a bold, and at the same time dangerous, plan Tukhachevski certainly needed a steady unit and a tough, proactive commander with a developed military intellect.

In this context, Tukhachevski's choice of the veterans of the 26th Rifle Division, headed by the talented *NachDiv* Eikhe, well-known for his firm discipline, should be regarded as an act of fundamental importance. It is noticeable that the commander did not choose units from the neighbouring 27th Rifle Division (*NachDiv* A. V. Pavlov), although its location in the second week of June was more helpful when considering an offensive along the Yuryuzan River gorge.

On the contrary, Tukhachevski made a complex regrouping of troops on the left wing of the 5th Army. He instructed Eikhe on 14 June 1919 to hurriedly transfer the infantry of the 26th Division, "to the Yavgil'dino area, to replace units of the 27th Division there," thereby transferring the Yuryuzan operational area from Pavlov's forces to the 1st and 2nd Brigades of Eikhe's Division. This allows us to conclude that Tukhachevski had a high degree of confidence in Eikhe and his subordinates. In addition to the commander's personal abilities, it was also probably of great importance that *NachDiv-26* had had experience of the successful implementation of a rapid offensive and retreating manoeuvres in difficult situations (in particular, the march from the Cherdakly railway station to Bugulma in 1918 and from Lyakhovo village to Aksenovo railway station in 1919), of which Tukhachevski was well aware.

The Army commander had complete confidence in the success of the upcoming Yuryuzan raid by Eikhe, which was reflected in a telegram from M. M. Lashevich, a member of the Eastern Front RMS,<sup>7</sup> to the Central Committee of the RCP(b)<sup>8</sup> of 19 June 1919:

With the occupation of Yavgil'dino we will ... threaten ... Zlatoust. Tukhachevski vouches that Zlatoust will be taken in the next week and a half or two weeks.

Only during the actual implementation of the operation would it become obvious that the 5th Army commander had not taken into account the complexity of the arrangement of forces and means in the rear of the White Western Army. The task of dealing with the consequences of that major omission would fall to *NachDiv* Eikhe.

Turning to the question of Eikhe's command work in the operation, we note that his familiarisation with the plan for the raid took place in conditions very symptomatic of the Russian Civil War. In an effort to avoid any possible leak of information, Tukhachevski informed his division commander of the operational plan only hours before its implementation, probably only on 23 June, having personally left Bugulma with I.N. Smirnov (5th Army RMS) for the 26th RD HQ in Yavgil'dino.

The Army commander's plan may have been a surprise for *Nachdiv* Eikhe, but that did not prevent him from taking an active and direct part in its development. The final version of the operational plan provided that:

The 26th Division, having vigorously crossed the Ufa River and thrown back the enemy, will head to the Abdullino – Maga [River] line. Then decisively developing the success and reaching for extreme speed of movement, it will advance to the Kropachevo – Mursalimkino area, to hit the rear of the enemy troops.

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<sup>7</sup> Every Soviet Front and Army had a Revolutionary Military Soviet (RMS) made up of the commander and two commissars. PW.

<sup>8</sup> The Bolshevik Party's central committee. PW.

The first part of the plan was implemented by Eikhe on the night of 23/24 June 1919. Under his direct leadership, the 1st and 2nd brigades of the division managed to rapidly force the Ufa River near Aydos,<sup>9</sup> throwing back units of the Whites' 6th Ural Mountain Rifles and the 11th Urals Division to the north, and enter the gorge of the Yuryuzan River. That success was aided by the personal decision of the *NachDiv* to undertake fake crossings, near Kaganskiy<sup>10</sup> (2nd brigade) and Turaevo<sup>11</sup> (226th Rifle Regiment of the 1st brigade), as noted by the historian Kakurin. This made it possible to mislead the enemy command as to the real crossing point. The result was a dispersal of White forces along the river (with a loss of operational density) and a shifting of the centre of gravity of their efforts to the demonstration crossing at Kaganskiy.

For Eikhe the most difficult phase of the raid came at dawn on 27 June, when he led the raiding party<sup>12</sup> from Abdullino and moved eastward along the gorge of the Yuryuzan River. From that moment the success of the operation was determined solely by the speed of movement of the division's column. The terrain conditions were not at all favourable to the achievement of that goal.<sup>13</sup> Goncharov, the division's military commissar and a close comrade of Eikhe, recalled that in the valley:

The roads were on rocks washed at by water, which threatened the artillery with disaster. There were no decent roads of any considerable length: only forest paths and cuttings. The steepness of some of the climbs was such that the guns slipped off, threatening to roll back down. ... In some places the path was interrupted by cliffs, forming a chasm.

So Eikhe faced not only the task of ensuring the highest possible speed of movement, but also the related problems of adapting the Red Army to the conditions of the mountainous terrain and engineering problems of the Yuryuzan gorge.

An additional burden of responsibility on the commander was the time allotted by Tukhachevski to traverse the Yuryuzan to reach the Ufa Plateau. In agreement with the *NachDiv*, he had set 1 July as a tentative date for the raid's arrival in the rear of the 1st Volga Corps. Consequently, the Reds had to overcome the 120 km section of the river (from Abdullino to Akhunovo) in only three days, which could be made only at the cost of extraordinary efforts and great sacrifices.

Considering this, Eikhe's exceptional rigidity towards the troops under him – in the interests of the highest possible pace for the march – seems a quite natural response. Paying tribute to the military commander's harshness, Belitski later emphasised that:

*NachDiv-26* hounded his units forward for three days with exceptional persistence, without overnight stays, giving them only long halts.

The replacement of proper overnight stays with 2-4 hour breaks was only one of many "authoritative" decisions Eikhe made – among which we will mention a ban on lighting fires and a refusal to set up a camp.

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<sup>9</sup> This village no longer exists. It was located on the eastern bank of the Ufa River, 2- 3 km west of the village of Novoyansaitovo in the Karaidel District of Bashkortostan.

<sup>10</sup> This village no longer exists. It was located on the western bank of the Ufa River, 3-5 km southeast of Karaidel.

<sup>11</sup> This village no longer exists. It was located on the western bank of the Ufa River, 3 km southwest of Khoroshayevo.

<sup>12</sup> The 26th RD raiding party was the 226th, 227th and 228th Rifle Regiments of the 1st Brigade; the 229th, 230th, and 231st Rifle Regiments of the 2nd Brigade; the 2nd Cavalry Regiment; and the 3rd, 4th, and 7th Light Batteries. Their total combat strength was to 3,500 bayonets, 300 sabres, 82 machine guns, and 12 guns.

<sup>13</sup> This is noted in the testimonies of various participants, and by visual inspection by the author in 2016.

The extraordinary measures resorted to by the young Red Commander, we have been convinced, had a positive result. The average daily march distance made by the column along the river valley reached a record for the Eastern Front of 34 kilometres. This allowed the 26th RD raid party to keep to Tukhachevski's planned tough pace for the offensive and to cross the 120 km<sup>14</sup> in three days. Eikhe wrote in the late 1920s:

Thanks to the secrecy and speed of movement, the exit of both brigades on to the Ufa Plateau was a complete surprise to the enemy.

The correctness of that statement by the military commander is confirmed, among other things, by the testimonies of the enemy soldiers captured during the raid. They show that the Whites predicted the main blow of the 5th Army would be along the railway line, that is, in the area occupied by Gavrilov's frontal demonstration group.

Contrary to expectations, the breakthrough into the rear of the Western Army brought about unforeseen difficulties for the Red group. On 1 July, near Akhunovo and Arkaulovo,<sup>15</sup> its vanguard encountered the Whites' 45th Siberian Regiment of the 12th Ural Division, which had been withdrawn for reformation, which had gone unnoticed by Red intelligence. That regiment was defeated, but from questioning of the prisoners (up to 300 men) *NachDiv* Eikhe was able to establish that the Western Army had the fresh 2nd Ufa Corps (commanded by General S. N. Voytsekhovski) in reserve in the Yuryuzan area.

So, after traversing the Yuryuzan River gorge, the brigades of the 26th RD did not enter an operational space, as Tukhachevski had initially assumed, but had unexpectedly moved into the centre of an enemy corps – the presence of which on the Ufa Plateau had not been revealed by the 5th Army intelligence. This new destructive factor threatened to disrupt the entire plan of the operation and put in doubt the very existence of Eikhe's forces. He later recalled:

I had no doubt that, within a short time, the White-Guard Corps would fall on our two brigades with all its might. ... We would have to fight hard battles unsupported.

Despite the high combat effectiveness of Voytsekhovski corps, with its numerical and territorial superiority,<sup>16</sup> Eikhe managed to avoid an almost inevitable defeat. Moreover, during the following week (1-7 July) his troops, operating along the border of Ufa province, in the triangle of Akhunovo – Nasibash – Kropachevo station, inflicted a decisive defeat on the core of the 2nd Ufa Corps – the 4th Ufa and 12th Ural Rifle Divisions.

Of major importance in this was the masterly manoeuvring of his troops by the division commander, most of the time under the threat of encirclement in the absence of flanks secured by neighbours. His organisation of mobile "nomadic" centres of tactical resistance and the constant modification of their operational deployment and alignment is one of the key decisions that ensured the "salvation" of the threatened operation. The tactics of mobile active defence on rough terrain, which Eikhe adhered to during this period, allowed his group to parry the initial White offensive and to win a number of isolated local victories. By 5-6 July the prerequisites for a general transition of the raid group to a further offensive had been created.

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<sup>14</sup> These are the distances in the literature. According to the author's calculations, however, Eikhe's group would have travelled at least 150 km along the Yuryuzan River valley.

<sup>15</sup> At the time called Munayevo.

<sup>16</sup> According to the commander of the Western Army, General Sakharov:

Despite the incomplete state of readiness of the Ufa Corps, conditions were still favourable for us, since that corps occupied a concentrated position. Its units were rested, replenished and equipped.

Speaking about the origins of such a dramatic turning point, it is necessary to pay special attention to the fact that *NachDiv* Eikhe gained by a fatal mistake of General Voytsekhovski, who, probably underestimating the potential of the Red raiding group, introduced the units of the 4th and 12th Infantry Divisions into the battle piecemeal and isolated. Having thus dismembered his generally impressive force,<sup>17</sup> he unwittingly allowed Eikhe to defeat them separately.

It is also important to point out that the Red commander was operating without the division's staff and field command apparatus, which had remained in Abdullino. For the period of the operation Eikhe entrusted the function of supporting his own command activities to Belitski, the division's assistant chief of staff, who was probably the only "staffer" he took on the raid, and the field headquarters of the 1st Brigade.

Unlike General Voytsekhovski, Eikhe sought not to fragment but to mass the forces and means at his disposal. Having exhausted the White units with a manoeuvre defence, he regrouped the 1st and 2nd Brigades into a single strike fist and on 5-6 July launched an active offensive to the east from the area of the village of Nasibash. Here, in order to maximise the rate of advance, the commander once again used the tactics of strikes by "rolls", which he had tried in May 1919 (near Buguruslan and Bugulma) and which we have discussed in a previous article.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to this localised operation the resistance of the 2nd Ufa Corps was finally broken.

By the end of 8 July the 26th RD pushed back units of the 8th Kama Infantry Division and, in accordance with Tukhachevski's instructions, fought for and captured the area of the Suleya railway station, thus advancing to the boundary of the Ay River, on the close approaches to Zlatoust. The capture of that city by the Reds from that moment became merely a question of time. According to the historian L. M. Spirin it was, "the blow from six Soviet regiments<sup>19</sup> in the White's flank of the White ... in the general area of Suleya" was decided the battle for the Ufa Plateau in favour of the 5th Army, and in general the success of the Zlatoust operation.

Nevertheless, it should be concluded that Eikhe had still failed to realise his intended operational objective (blocking the communications of the 1st Volga Corps). The week's delay, caused by the confrontation between the brigades of his raid group and Voytsekhovski's corps, allowed General Kappel's Volga Corps to start an organised withdrawal from the Asha-Balashovo area to Zlatoust on 6 July 1919, having avoided the operational encirclement envisaged by Tukhachevski.

At the same time Eikhe's raid reached its territorial, rather than operational, objective – the elimination of the Western Army's defensive line, which covered the mining and factory zone of the Southern Urals. Thus, in an order of 22 June 1920, the 5th Army RMS, noted the significance of Eikhe's Yuryuzan operation, defining it as, "deciding the fate of Zlatoust, and with it the whole Urals," and referred to it as, "the largest and riskiest operation undertaken by the 5th Army." It is quite natural that for its arduous raid through mountainous terrain and participation in the capture of Zlatoust (13 July 1919) that the 26th RD was given the honorary title of "Zlatoust".

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<sup>17</sup> Let us note the superiority of the main strike forces of the Corps (the 4th and 12th Infantry Divisions), which Eikhe encountered during the raid. On 25 June 1919, those divisions had 4,550 bayonets, 700 sabres, 22 guns, and 80 machine guns (as calculated by: G.H. Eikhe, *Тактические поучения Гражданской войны*, (*Tactical Lessons of the Civil War*), 1931). In addition, the White 15th and 18th Orenburg Cossack Regiments also took part in the battles (*A Brief Historical Sketch of the 26th Zlatoust Rifle Division, Krasnoyarsk*).

<sup>18</sup> Бадиков Р.А. В тени М.В. Фрунзе и В.И. Чапаева: деятельность Г.Х. Эйхе в апреле—июне 1919 г. // Российская история. 2016. № 3. С. 120, 121. (R.A. Badikov. *In the Shadow of M.V. Frunze and V.I. Chapayev: G.Kh. Eikhe's Activities in April—June 1919* // Russian History. 2016. № 3. pp. 120, 121)

<sup>19</sup> According to Eikhe, the division's strike "fist", after regrouping was more formidable, and included the forces of seven infantry regiments and two cavalry regiments. At the same time, Tukhachevski recommended that Eikhe deploy a group for an attack on Suleya Station "numbering at least eight regiments...".



In memory of these events the collective of the city's armaments-workers presented to the heroes of the Zlatoust operation, *KommandArm* Tukhachevski and *NachDiv* Eikhe, an award of inscribed sabres. His weapon, it has been established, survived Eikhe's first arrest in 1923 (for economic abuses by the board of the Russian Commercial and Industrial Bank) and were kept by the former military commander until 1938, when it was confiscated by internal affairs officers after his second arrest (in the fabricated case of his participation in the "Latvian counter-revolutionary nationalist organisation" and espionage for foreign intelligence). In the mid-1960s, the fate of Eikhe's sabre became the subject of a special study by researchers at the Zlatoust Museum of Local History.

The experience of the Yuryuzan raid, which formed the core of the Zlatoust operation, once more demonstrated that the ability to implement bold manoeuvre decisions was the greatest strength of commander Eikhe's operational thinking. It is no accident that his actions of this type were regarded as good examples of military-theoretical actions by his former subordinate Belitski, in his major work *Strategic Reserves*. Belitski wrote in 1930:

Is it possible to demand forced marches in modern conditions? This must be answered in the absolute affirmative. During the civil war on the Eastern Front, in July 1919, the 26th Division marched 165 km in 4 days with the vanguard in combat.

It is worth singling out Eikhe's characteristic adherence to the fundamentals of the art of war – the principle of local victory – which was clearly demonstrated in the course of the operation under consideration. Due to the use of manoeuvre and a skilful concentration of forces and means in separate, local tactical actions, *NachDiv-26* managed to achieve a number of victories of local importance. Thanks to this, at the raid's critical moment he was able to stop the onslaught of the Voytsekhovski's larger corps. Thus Eikhe was able to fundamentally change the operational and tactical situation that was initially so unfavourable for him. The threat of defeat of Eikhe's raid group on the Ufa Plateau was thus nullified, which ensured the success of Tukhachevski's subsequent offensive on Zlatoust.

In addition, it should be noted that one of the more important results of the raid, as our study has showed, was the capture of 3,497 White soldiers by Eikhe's division during the period from 28 June to 15 July 1919. These facts allow us to confidently attribute this combat episode as one of the most significant pages of Eikhe's military leadership during the Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

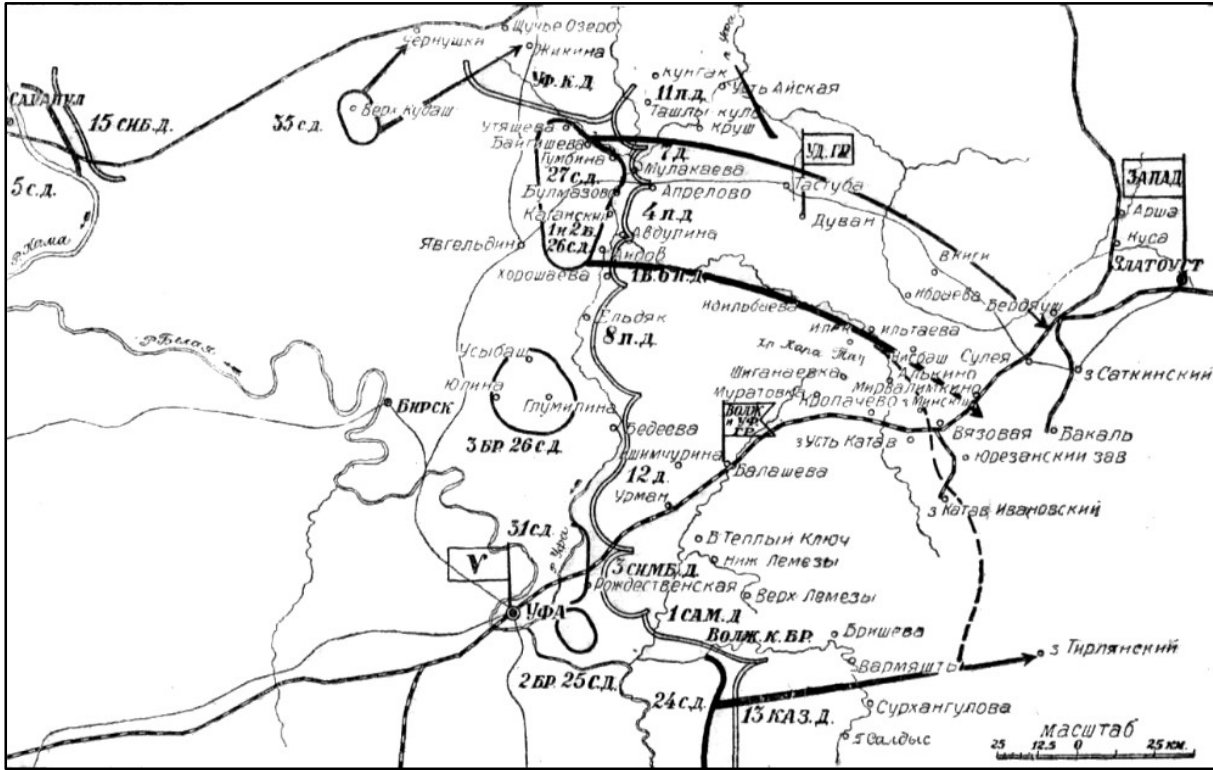
The memory of Eikhe's Yuryuzan raid (the "heroic march") is still alive today, thanks to the efforts of local reconstructions by military history enthusiasts.

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<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, a number of modern researchers, in particular A. R. Zayets, are making attempts to "debunk the myth" about Eikhe's activities during the raid (Заяц А. К 90-летию Златоустовской операции, Военный историк. 2009. № 3. С. 3—4. A. Zayets, *On the 90th Anniversary of the Zlatoust Operation*, Military Historian. 2009. № 3. P. 3-4). One can only express regret that the historian's argument is based on erroneous information, does not take into account previously published research on the topic, and is not free from a certain bias.

Note that the account given in this article chooses to ignore that the 26th RD was freed from its dangerous position not only due to the ability of Eikhe but also to the arrival, on July 5, of the 27th RD which arrived at Nasibash from the north, having made its own strike into the rear. PW

The plan for the Zlatoust Operation:





The map of the Zlatoust Operation from the *Encyclopaedia of Civil War and Intervention in the USSR*.

The Yuryuzan strike is in red.

