

# The military functions of the state security organs of the Urals during the civil war

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Any war is an emergency. People at that time are revealed from the most unexpected angles, and institutions perform unusual functions for them. It happened thus in the Civil War. The relationship between the state security agencies and the army is an interesting topic. In modern historiography, as a rule, the Cheka is considered as a punitive structure. However, in their activities they performed various functions, including military ones.

Throughout the entire period, the problem of the presence of weapons among the population was of pressing concern to the Soviet authorities. They could be used for armed struggle with the new government. In this regard, the issue of the registration of weapons was assigned to the competence of the state security agencies. The Perm Cheka between 22 February and 1 May 1918 issued 14,996 permits for carrying weapons. Anyone carrying a weapon without permission was fined, and the weapon was taken. From March 16 to May 1, 1918, the Perm Chekists fined six people, and the weapons found during the searches were confiscated. From 14 March to 1 May, there were 35 such cases (16.3% of all searches). Generally, guns and revolvers with cartridges were found, but in one case, a three-inch shell in a private apartment. In the second half of 1918, the employees of the counter-intelligence sub-department confiscated five hunting guns, five rifles, 1,000 cartridges and eight bombs.

The situation was alarming for the leadership of the country. On 19 May 1919 - the Council of Labour and Defence (STO), as the highest authority, entrusted F.E. Dzerzhinsky<sup>1</sup> "to remove from the country those weapons that ... are not for military needs ...". On 11 June, the STO adopted a resolution aimed at removing weapons. According to the decree of the Central Executive Committee of 20 June, the Cheka was given the authority to shoot persons hiding weapons "for counter-revolutionary purposes"

The seizure of weapons was carried out as part of the fight against desertion. The order of the Cheka of 1 April 1921 demanded that the Cheka conduct mass searches of the population to search for weapons and hiding bandits. In December of the same year, in the Kungur district, the presidiums of the district executive committee, the committee of the RCP(b)<sup>2</sup> and the political bureau created a troika for combating desertion and collecting weapons. The result of its activity was the withdrawal of 270 rifles, 1,300 cartridges, 245 shovels, 30 bombs and two dismantled machine guns. The number of convictions from state security bodies for this crime did not correspond to the prevalence of the phenomenon. For the 1 July 1921 to 1 March 1922 period, the Perm GubChK<sup>3</sup> condemned 50 people for this crime, which amounted to 5.12% of all convictions.

A significant problem requiring resolution was the suppression of peasant uprisings. They were caused by a general deterioration in the quality of life and the internal policies of Soviet power. In 1918 the Cheka detachments – which were not regular formations – served as

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<sup>1</sup> Head of the Cheka

<sup>2</sup> The Bolshevik Party

<sup>3</sup> The *Guberniya* Cheka, a *guberniya* being a large administrative region – literally, a governorate



internal troops. Thus, on 27 June, the Shlykovskoye Uprising began in the Okhansk district. The reason was the actions of the *prodotryad*<sup>4</sup>. The squad from Okhansk was under the guidance of the chairman of the *uezd*<sup>5</sup> Cheka, S. Bolotov.

Internal troops were created as part of the formation of the Cheka system. On 25 July 1918, J.H. Peters approved the "Regulations on the Armed Forces of the Cheka", with the head of the Cheka appointed head of the forces. Initially, the troops were formed on a voluntary and class basis. In the summer of 1918 the 38th Ural and 57th Orenburg Cheka battalions were organised. The battalion at the Perm GubChK was created on 23 September 1918.

The participation of the Cheka detachments in military operations against Kolchak's army shows that they fulfilled the function of protecting the Soviet system. The company of the Special Battalion of the Perm GubChK, numbering 103 men, from the Cordon-Kungur *Uezd* fought against the troops of Kolchak. After the first battle, it was defeated, and its remnants merged into various military units.

The "Regulations on the Armed Forces of the Cheka" (March 1919) clarified their tasks – the implementation of the orders of the Cheka and gubChK. The total number of troops of the Cheka was set at 30,000 people. One third of them were used at the front as prescribed by the RVS. The consent of the headquarters of the Cheka forces was required before sending troops to the front. The resolution of the Defence Council of 28 May 1919 gave to the Cheka command of all auxiliary units<sup>6</sup>, which became known as the troops of the VOKhR, with the exception of the railway and border guard troops. Their total number increased by four times. The commander of the troops was appointed by agreement of the Revolutionary Military Council of the RSFSR and the Cheka – the principle of dual subordination of the troops had appeared. The *Gubernia* Cheka was allocated a battalion, which remained subordinate to the head of the VOKhR military sector.

After the liberation of the Perm province from the Whites, an expeditionary detachment of gubChK was sent to the north. In November 1919 around Troitsko-Pechorsk and Yaksha it encountered the troops of General E.K. Miller. The military operations on the Cherdyn Front, which continued until March 1920, were attended by regular units of the 33rd brigade of the VOKhR troops.

The subordination and the name of the Cheka troops were changed several times afterwards, but their functions remained the same – protecting the security of the state from internal enemies. By order of 21 April 1920, the Cheka troops were transferred to the NKVD. On 24 February 1920, the Priuralsky sector of the VOKhR troops was created, which included Perm, Yekaterinburg and other provinces. The Perm GubChK had at its disposal the 22nd battalion of the VOKhR, consisting of 631 men. By order of the STO of 1 September 1920, the internal troops were removed from the jurisdiction of the Cheka, and now called troops of the VNUS. This was a reflection of the struggle between the Cheka and the NKVD for control of the punitive functions.

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<sup>4</sup> A food requisitioning squad, which was the usual cause of peasant uprest.

<sup>5</sup> An *uezd* was a medium sized administrative region, usually translated as county.

<sup>6</sup> All internal security forces, and command was not vested in the Cheka, but the NKVD, of which the Cheka was a part.



Suppression of the uprisings against Soviet power from 1919 to 1921. was already part of the VOKhR-VNUS role. Thus, the uprising in Kungur county (October to November 1920) began with the attack of 200 deserters on the Tisovsky Volost Istpolkom [executive committee]. Chazov, the Commissioner of the Special Department of the Perm GubChK and the authorized politician of the county politburo Likhachev, with a detachment of 50 people, left for the 61st junction. There they were met by evacuees from Molebka village, communists and members of the executive committee. The uprising was led by Captain Nikiforov, Colonel Arkhipov and Captain Cheremisinov. Suppression was carried out by units of the 33rd brigade of the VOKHR troops.

The difficult situation in the Urals in 1920 and 1921. led to the use of intelligence by the territorial units of the Cheka. In March and April 1921, in connection with preparations for a planned uprising, Cherdyn County Politburo sent an agent for reconnaissance to the Upper Volyn region of Usolsky County. Greater attention was paid to the work of these secret officers and informants. In July 1921, the Usolsk politburo expelled the "bad influences" of a gang based in the Yusvinskaya and Krokhalievskoy volosts, and the Osa politburo dealt with small groups of armed deserters in Zavodomi-Khaylovskoy, Kambarskoy and Rozhdestvenskoy volosts.

Thus, the performance of military functions by the state security agencies during the Civil War took place in relation to an active and armed non-systemic opposition. At the beginning of their activity the Chekists, as a rule, reacted to the events that had already occurred and the situation as it had developed, but from 1921 more effective use of secret officers and informants led to the fulfilment of a preventive function. This showed the increased professionalism of the security officers.

Despite its formal subordination to the NKVD, the Cheka played the role of a separate Commissariat. The contradiction between its official status and the actual state of affairs was the main reason for the departments' struggle for control over its activities. This situation was reflected in the confrontation with the NKVD over the subordination of the internal armed forces, which is an indication of the strength of the Cheka.

Parallelism in the activities of emergency commissions and military bodies was manifested both at the level of legislative acts and in practice. Its reasons were both the objective processes of the collapse of the state system, civil war, and the clash of interests of departments and the desire of the Cheka to become the "third force in the Soviet state." Parallelism was an indicator of the weakness of the institutions of the security and punitive system, which included the armed forces. The consequences of this situation was an irrational waste of forces, money, time and resources on rivalry and struggle, and on the other hand, some improvement in the work of all participants in the process due to competitiveness. This is reflected at the regional level.

Thus, the performance of additional state, including military, functions by state security agencies (Cheka) is an indicator of their extraordinary nature during the Civil War.

