

Fortified Areas in the Civil War

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For a long time, great importance in wars has been given to fortifying the field (fortification). This has been done differently. During World War I (1914–1918), they began using a new form of fortification, the fortified area (FA) representing sectors or zones of terrain which have been engineer organized and readied for protracted and stubborn defense by specially assigned troop formations independently or in co-operation with the field troops.

At the start of the Civil War, the Red Army basically established zones, areas and defensive centers which were poorly organized in engineer terms. They were defended by field troops, In the second half of 1918 the Red Army High Command in a report to V.I. Lenin established the necessity of organizing fortified areas (FA) on certain operational sectors (fronts)¹ and from the spring of 1919, began their planned organization. As a total during the war, some 45 fortified areas were established and these, as a rule, were named after the cities in which their main bases were located. These included: Petrograd, Velikiye Luki, Gomel, Dvinsk (Western Front); Vyatka, Simbirsk, Samara, Kazan, Orenburg, Uralsk (Eastern Front): the Kursk, Voronezh, Tambov, Tula, Kozlovsk, Kamyshin, Yelets (Southern Front) and others.²

The fortified areas were organized by a decision of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR) and more rarely by the RVS [revolutionary military council] of the fronts and armies. The most important of these in operational-strategic terms were established by a decree of the Worker and Peasant Defense Council headed by V.I. Lenin. Vladimir Ilich was constantly concerned for recruiting leading personnel for the fortified areas, with the manning of them, the supply of military equipment, and supervised their combat activities. At council sessions prominent party and state figures gave information on the questions concerning the fortified areas, In particular, at one of these held on 15 August 1919, F.E. Dzerzhinskiy made a proposal to turn over 50 percent of the special auxiliary troop formations to the FAs.³

Up to mid 1919, the fortified areas were directly under the Red Army Inspector of Engineers, and the chiefs of the engineers of the fronts and armies. The FA departments organized in the same year under the RVSR Field Staff and the front and army staffs played a substantial role in improving leadership of their combat activities.⁴ The staff of the Eastern Front and then the other fronts worked out proposals on the administration of the FA in peacetime, wartime and in a state of siege.⁵

The fortified areas were prepared and occupied by special formations. They were entrusted with various tasks, the main ones being: covering the approaches to the nation's political and industrial centers; holding important lines and cities until the arrival of the field troops; supporting the flanks and rear of the armies (fronts); preparing forming-up lines (areas) for an offensive, including for the field troops. For example, the instructions of the Eastern Front RVS of 17 May 1919 stated that "the overall aim of the Eastern Fronts fortified areas is the establishing of a strong defensive line along the line of Vyatka, Kazan, Simbirsk, Samara, Saratov." Along with this, the personnel of the fortified areas was given the task of working among the local population to explain Soviet policy as well as the nature and goals of the Civil War.⁶

The organization and establishment of the fortified areas were determined by the RVSR Order No 220 of 13 November 1918 and in accord with this these were usually to be based upon one or two rifle brigades and more rarely a division or regiment. With forces available, the FAs in addition were to include: up to a battalion of heavy artillery, from 6 to 20 light artillery batteries, armored units and subunits (armored trains, armored vehicles and armored maintenance vehicles), from a cavalry squadron to a regiment, one or two air wings, anti-aircraft weapons, searchlights, barrage balloons, river combat vessels and so forth.⁷ The fortified areas, as a rule, were divided into sectors and then sections. Each sector covered on important axis. Certain FAs were immediately split up into sections. Strong-points and centers of resistance were established within the sectors and



sections.

The fortified areas were headed by military councils consisting of three men, one of whom, the commandant, was appointed by the Red Army Command. The two others were selected by the local authorities and then approved by the RVS of the Republic or fronts. In individual, most important FAs, for example, in the Petrograd, military councils were also found in the sectors. Red Army commanders were usually appointed the commandants of the fortified areas.⁸

The FAs were manned by mobilizing the population of the frontline zone as well as from local patrol teams, detachments of *Vsevobuch* and Cheka teams as well as reserve units of the military districts. Under the conditions of the shortage of time, their core was usually organized around units and formations of field troops. For example, in the summer of 1918, the Samara FA included the 210th Rifle Regiment named for V.I. Lenin. It supported the defenses on a crucial sector. The battle order stated: "A steadfast unit, the 210th Regiment named for V.I. Lenin, is to defend the sector of Kamenny Brod, Dergachi, Berezovyy Gay, Sukhaya, Vayzokvka."⁹

Having received the task of preparing the defenses, the military council of a fortified area, with active involvement of representatives from the front's (army's) engineer troops, conducted reconnaissance of the field, took a decision, worked out a plan and began to carry out engineer work.

The plan usually set out: the grouping of forces (including the boundaries of the defensive sectors and sections, the areas for establishing strongpoints and centers of resistance), the tasks for the troops, the nature of the engineer organization of the field, the procedure and sequence of engineer work, the organizing of reconnaissance, co-operation, air defense and so forth.

The troop grouping of a fortified area was established proceeding from the received task, the available forces, the possible variations of enemy actions and the terrain conditions. The defensive sector was usually occupied by brigade (regiment), a section by a regiment (battalion) and a strongpoint by a battalion (company or platoon).

The battle order as a rule, was formed up in a single echelon with the assigning of reserves (from one-fifth to one-third of the available forces) and reinforced by cavalry and armored sub units. In individual instances reserves were not established in the regiments and companies. For example, in the Voronezh FA these were found only in the brigades and battalions.¹⁰

The maximum possible densities of forces were established on the defensive axes. However, in a majority of instances these were only 80-130 bayonets and sabers and 0.8 of a gun per kilometer of front. On the secondary axes the densities were as much as half of that, particularly in terms of artillery.

The nature of the engineer organization of the terrain, the procedure and frequency of engineer work were regulated by the Directive of the Commander-in-Chief of the Republic Armed Forces of 12 July 1919 as well as by the instructions of the front commanders. At the same time, consideration was given to the situational conditions. In some instances, for example, a system of semicircular defensive structures enclosed the defended object and in others surrounded them completely (Eastern Front). Here ordinarily three positions were built: the forward, main and running along the outskirts of towns and population points the defense of which was part of the task of the FA. On the most important axes, strongpoints were established with all-round defences and centers of resistance and within these permanent stone-earthen and log-earthen defensive structures were built, wire and other obstacles were set up. In the spaces between the strongpoints, field-type structures were created. Additional defensive positions and lines of trenches were prepared in the sectors and sections. Towns and large population points were adapted for street fighting.¹¹

The leadership over the construction of the fortified areas and responsibility for the safekeeping of defensive structures were entrusted to the front and army chiefs of engineers. Engineer work was carried out by the forces of the FA troops and by the local population. Military field construction



organizations erected the permanent defensive structures around the most important installations. For example, the Military Field Construction Organization of the Simbirsk FA established a strong defensive zone around the town and this played an important role in defending the approaches to it as well as in defending the railroad bridge over the Volga, the cartridge plant and other facilities.¹² The military field construction organizations Nos. 1 and 6 headed by the engineer D.M. Karbyshev also did very effective work.¹³

In planning the defenses, great attention was paid to reconnaissance and this was conducted by different methods, including with the aid of the local population. Each company was to organize reconnaissance directly ahead of its battle position and on the flanks. Reconnaissance parties reinforced with cavalry subunits were sent out longer distances (up to 25–30 km).

Anti-aircraft guns, searchlights as well as aircraft were employed for air defense, usually of large cities. For example, in mid 1919, a fighter from the Dvinsk FA engaged three enemy airplanes. He forced two of them to turn back while one landed in the position of our fortified area.¹⁴

The combat activities of the fortified areas to a greater or lesser degree reflected the questions of organizing anti-tank defences. For combating enemy tanks on the Southern and Western Fronts, for example, duty guns were assigned. At times, the probable tank approaches to our positions were mined. The White Guard Command, having learned of the preparation of antitank measures by the Soviet troops and particularly the mining of the terrain, often refused further utilization of tanks in the fighting on these axes.¹⁵

The defensive plans of the FA envisaged measures to organize co-operation between the rifle and artillery units, the air and armoured sub-units. Nevertheless, these were not fully carried out. For example, the methods of employing the services and combat arms were poorly worked out in the course of repelling an enemy offensive depending upon the various possible versions of enemy actions.

An analysis of the documents shows that not all the fortified areas had to fight. Those FA which participated in fighting can conditionally be divided into two groups. The first was made up of the fortified areas combating the interventionists and White Guards solely on the approaches to their main defensive lines (for example, Samara and Gomel);¹⁶ and the other was those defending every inch of the occupied positions (for Petrograd and Kursk).

With the announcing of the state of siege, the FA rifle sub units and units took up the combat sections assigned to them. A portion of the defensive positions was often left for the field troops.

The fighting against the advancing enemy on the distant approaches to the FA was initiated by the reconnaissance parties which at times were able to temporarily hold up the advance of the enemy forces.¹⁷ Then the artillery opened fire. Particular attention was given to hitting the main enemy groupings advancing along roads, on approaches and directly ahead of the forward defensive edge. The main efforts were concentrated on holding the defensive positions. Thus, stubborn fighting went on on the Kursk axes for more than 2 months, from the middle of the summer until the start of the autumn of 1919. This was particularly fierce in the defense of Kursk with the city being held by units of the FA under the command of M.S. Svechnikov together with the field troops. For an entire day, two regiments from the southern sector of this FA drove off continuous attacks by eight White Guard officer regiments from the I Army Corps. Only the arrival of enemy armored vehicles on the flanks of the defenders forced them to retreat behind the Seym River, where new fighting resumed with the previous intensity.¹⁸ The men of the Voronezh and many other FAs courageously fought the White Guards.

The fortified areas played a major role in the fighting for Petrograd, Orenburg and Uralsk. Along with active fighting they constituted regular troop units and subunits for the operational army and sent draft of reinforcements to the front. In addition, many fortified areas, particularly the Petrograd, supported the going over of the field troops to the offensive. For example, when in mid October 1919, a portion of the positions on the Gatchina defensive sector ended up in the hands of



Yudenich, the 7th Army (commander S.D. Kharlamov), supported by the Petrograd workers, halted the further enemy advance and then, relying on the Petrograd FA and its fortifications, went over to the offensive, defeated the White Guards and pushed them into Estonian territory.¹⁹

The FA troops had to fight the armed forces of the domestic and foreign counter-revolution under various conditions. They successfully fought in any season, during the day and at night, they stubbornly defended the occupied positions, they fought in an encirclement, they launched counter-attacks and counter-strikes and together with the field troops went over to the offensive. There were also serious shortcomings in the fighting by certain fortified areas, particularly on the Southern Front (Tambov and other FAs).²⁰ The main reason for this was that both the personnel and the engineer structures could not be readied sufficiently in the short period of time for repelling the superior enemy forces. However, as a whole, during the years of the Civil War, the fortified areas made a worth contribution to the victory of the Red Army. With assaults on the FAs, the enemy suffered significantly higher losses in comparison with fighting under ordinary conditions. For this reason, the White Guards, as a rule, did not undertake frontal attacks on the positions of the fortified areas but tried to outflank them.

The best results in the fighting of the FA formations, units and subunits were achieved with well-organized co-operation with the field troops. In the aim of maintaining close co-operation, liaison officers were sent to the army and front staffs. In turn, the very existence of the fortified areas strengthened the morale of the field troop personnel. As a whole, the methods of the combat employment of the fortified areas and the tasks carried out by them in armed combat against the interventionists and White Guards were significantly broader and more diverse than in World War One.

The local party and soviet bodies carried out great work aimed at increasing, the battle worthiness of the fortified area troops. Under their leadership many FAs were turned into unassailable fortresses on which the crack interventionist and White Guard troops foundered.

The experience of the combat employment of the fortified areas in the Civil War served as a basis for improving their organisation and methods of combat. This played an important role during the years of the Great Patriotic War in increasing the strength of defenses on a number of sectors of the front. It has not lost its importance today.

Notes

Vsevobuch is short for Vseobshchee Voennoe Obuchenie Trudiashchikh (All-round Military Training of the Workers) and was a system of giving workers military training on the job. In practice the units mobilised to defend a city were probably largely ChON.

References in original:

Notes 1 is from Directives of the Red Army High Command

Notes 2 and 19 are from the Encyclopaedia of Civil War and Intervention.

Note 3 is the Central Party Archives

Notes 4 to 18 and 20 are from the Red Army Central Archives.

