

The case of the Surrender of Tambov

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Translation notes: I have omitted all citations to the original documents in the article. I have also not worried too much about getting exact party positions correct, especially the distinction between councils, soviets and committees. Uses of “province” are for gubernia, “district” are for uezd, “region” for raion.

In publications on the history of the civil war during the Soviet period, the fact of the surrender of Tambov to the White Cossacks of the 4th Don Cavalry Corps of Lieutenant-General K.K. Mamontov on 18 August 1919 was never hushed up, but it was never widely publicised. The objective reasons for the fall of Tambov were comprehensively considered, but factors of a subjective nature were less studied.

On 22 August 1919, the third day after the White Cossacks had left the city, at a meeting of the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Defence of the Republic, the issue of appointing an investigation into the surrender of Tambov was discussed (reported by the Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Soviet (hereafter - RMS) of the Republic E.M. Sklyanski. The investigation took 10 days. A commission of inquiry by a special group of the RMS of the Southern Front immediately left for Tambov to investigate the case on the spot. After a thorough investigation and questioning of a number of witnesses, it presented its conclusion to the visiting session of the Revolutionary Military Tribunal (hereinafter referred to as the RMT) of the Republic. At that session a decision was made to bring to justice the entire composition of the Soviet of the Tambov fortified region and a number of other people.

The Tambov fortified area was established by the resolution of the RMS of the Republic on 28 June 1919. It was formed within the boundaries of Kuksovo – Seleznya – Rudnevo – Bokino – Lyada – Lesnaya Tulinovka. According to the Regulations on Fortified Areas, a soviet of the Tambov fortified area, made up of a commander and two soviet members, had full military and civilian power. The commander of the fortified area was entrusted with the role of bringing Tambov and local area into a state of full readiness for defence and to ensure the combat effectiveness of all units that made up the forces of the fortified area. The military soviet was directly subordinate to the RMS of the Southern Front, and the commander of the region was directly subordinate to the commander of the Southern Front. The soviet of the fortified area was located in Tambov at 32 Lermontovskaya St. Tambov had been under martial law since 3 July.

The case of the surrender of the provincial centre was heard in Tambov on 11 September 1919 at a meeting of the visiting session of the RMT at the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic consisting of chairman A.Ya. Anski, assisted by F.M. Nakhinson and V.K. Lindemann.

The main accused were: K.V. Redzko (commander of the Tambov fortified area), M.D. Chichkanov and G.M. Shidarev (members of the fortified area's soviet); S.I. Protopopov (head of internal security for Tambov), I.P. Lerhe (commander of the 55th Armoured Detachment) and



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F.N. Dubovitski (commander of a Tambov Province ChON battalion). Another main defendant was N.P. Orlovski (chairman of the Tambov Provincial Committee of the Party) but due to his absence from Tambov the hearing of his case was postponed (and with him the case of F.N. Dubovitski).

The indictment against the soviet of the fortified area had six main points: 1) a failure to take appropriate measures to defend the immediate approaches to the city – the Tambov railway junction, the city itself and the warehouses located in it; 2) a failure to take effective measures to "compel" units that did not comply with the order to restore the situation created by the breakthrough near the village of Rudnevo; 3) a failure to take decisive measures to suppress the panic that gripped the city and parts of the garrison by the evening of 17 August; 4) not concentrating a solid and centralised command in their hands, allowing both interference in the operational actions by unauthorized people and actually transferring operational units to D.P. Sokolov, commander of the 4th Separate Brigade; 5) the premature, indiscriminate abandonment of Tambov, which led to a complete disorganisation of the forces remaining at the disposal of the soviet, and kept parts of the garrison from any contact with the enemy for a long time; 6) a rejection of "the heroic proposal" by V.N. Zarubaev, chief of staff of the fortified area, for a prolonged defence of the city.

Earlier, a telegram from Commander-in-Chief S.S. Kamenev and members of the RMS of the Republic of 9 September, sent to the military soviets of fortified areas, spoke of omissions of the soviet of the Tambov fortified area: 1) a complete failure to take measures to stop the panic that began in the area, 2) a failure to take measures to clear the area of unarmed soldiers, among whom panic began immediately when the enemy approached 3) complete confusion after the first failure on the line of battle, 4) the withdrawal of all units from the area more than a day before the enemy occupied it, 5) a complete failure to take any measures for the immediate reverse takeover of the city, although such an opportunity was quite achievable. On the last point, the Commander-in-Chief pointed out, "that in literally in all the cities occupied by Mamontov, the Cossack gangs immediately got drunk and in that state carried out atrocities. At that moment, even a small number of boys could have driven the bandits out of the city, capturing a good half of them".

Each point of the accusation was thoroughly reviewed. The public trial lasted for half a day, from 12:00 to 24:00, with a two-hour break from 18.30 to 20.30. A number of witnesses (32) went before the Revolutionary Tribunal, mainly commanders and commissars of units, who had been entrusted with the defence of the city. At midnight, the last words of the accused were heard. None of the accused who appeared pleaded guilty to the charges.

Among the final words of the accused, the most convincing was those of K.V. Redzko, commander of the fortified area. Analysing the charges against him, he noted: "It would have been more than pointless to give Tambov up to be shelled, and with that the extermination of all the Communists and Soviet workers, of whom we already have a shortage". The provincial military commissar G.M. Shidarev said, in agreement, "It was clear to me that we would not be able to hold the city, but would only increase the amount of damage the enemy could do."

The decision to leave Tambov was made at a meeting of the soviet on 18 August at 03:15 after the commander's report on the state of the city's defence. In that report, Redzko noted that enemy patrols, approaching the city from the area of the Akhlebinovskaya wood, the railway station and



the Morshanskaya road, were already shelling the city. Units of the 4th Brigade were in panic and were no longer combat ready, according to the brigade commander's report. Crowds of upset and unarmed people were pouring into the city from their positions, spreading panic, and causing indiscriminate shooting in the city. The commander had at his disposal a combined regiment of *kursanty*, the 31st Battalion of internal security¹ forces and a platoon of artillery, but the soldiers of these infantry units scattered, taking advantage of the darkness – and their abandonment of the city further demoralized the remaining personnel and made it impossible to take the carts out of the city. The military soviet decided to immediately begin a systematic withdrawal across the bridge on the Tsna River using the Rasskazovskaya road – the only route left open by the enemy. A rear guard was left at the western edge of the forest. The organisation and cover of the withdrawal were entrusted to the brigade commander of the 4th Separate Brigade by the fortified area soviet.

After the last words of the accused, the tribunal retired to deliberate on a verdict. At 05:25 on 12 September the verdict was pronounced.

The visiting session of the RMT ruled that the commander and members of the soviet of the Tambov fortified area did not properly fulfil the task entrusted to them and did not do their assigned roles. However they noted to the RMS of the Southern Front, "that they did not show in their actions any malicious intent or irresponsible attitude to the problems they faced. Noting their great services to the proletarian revolution, that possible use of them at another post might be appropriate, corresponding to their strengths and abilities".

The former commander of the 4th Separate Rifle Brigade, D.P. Sokolov, was found guilty of treason, "shown by his crossing of sides after the entry of the Mamontov gangs into the city on 18 August," and outlawed.

The head of Tambov internal security, S.I. Protopopov, was sentenced to deprivation of the right to hold a post in the Red Army for six months from the date of the announcement of the verdict. A mitigating circumstance of his guilt was recognized to be that, "according to all the information of the investigation, he is a person completely unsuitable for such a position."

The commander of the 55th Armoured Detachment, I.P. Lerche, was found guilty of issuing an unwarranted order to the armoured car "Communist" (a number of documents indicate the "Avenger") to open machine-gun fire in the city on the houses of Sovetskaya Street, which intensified the panic, and the unwarranted withdrawal of the armoured detachment to Morshansk. The visiting RMT session indicated that Lerche deserved capital punishment, but took into account his explanations and sentenced him to a penal battalion for 5 years. It was announced that the verdict was final and not subject to appeal.

In passing such "lenient" sentences against the perpetrators of the unsuccessfully organised defence of the city, the chairman of the Provincial Party Committee, N.P. Orlovski, played an important part. The archives of the Tambov Provincial Committee of the Party has correspondence between Orlovski, who was sent to Moscow, and his deputy A.A. Koton, about negotiations with

¹ внутренней охраны in the article, presumably VOKhR.



members of the Central Committee on commutation of sentences in connection with the surrender of the city.

Thus, in a telegram of 9 September 1919, Orlovski reported: "I have just finished my second conversation with Krestinski [Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party]. The Central Committee court decided to carry on. However, full guarantees are given that it will not turn to reprisals. The Central Committee will keep in touch with Tambov continuously and monitor progress. My stay in Moscow is absolutely necessary until all questions about Tambov have been resolved ". Orlovski also achieved the transfer of 200 million rubles to Tambov to eliminate the consequences of the White Cossack raid.

One of the main reasons for the failed defence of Tambov, its organizers alleged, was the lack of proper leadership from the headquarters of the Southern Front, which until very late in the piece considered the breakthrough of Mamontov's cavalry as a "trifling accident". Two days before the Cossacks' capture of Tambov on Friday 15 August, M.D. Chichkanov, chairman of the Provincial Executive Committee, along with V.N. Podbelski, specially authorized representative of the Central Committee of the Party and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and People's Commissar of Posts and Telegraphs, went to see Kozlov to clarify issues related to the defence of the city. The RMS of the Southern Front assured them that Tambov was not in real danger and the evacuation of Soviet institutions (started on 14 August) should be suspended. In the event of an immediate threat to the city, they promised to direct the 56th Rifle Division from Kirsanov to help.

The confusing instructions of the headquarters of the Southern Front were also taken into account when passing the verdicts, as evidenced by the recording of negotiations by telegram of the chairman of the RMT of the Republic, B.V. Legrand, with the chairman of the visiting session of the tribunal A.Ya. Anskiy on 9 September: "In the present case, special tact should be shown, remembering that the accused may be responsible not for the general shortcomings of the front, but only for their personal mistakes".

The records of questioning by the Soviet Party leadership during the investigation clearly indicate the subjective factors that led to failures in the defence of Tambov: 1) the lack of a unified leadership in the actions of the soviet of the fortified area; 2) the intervention of the Provincial Committee of the Party and the Central Committee agent V.N. Podbelski in arranging military issues; 3) the lack of a clear delineation of functions between members of the soviet; 4) the combining of the posts of Chairman of the Provincial Executive Committee and the military committee with the duties of members of the soviet of the fortified area; 5) a "general laxity, unpreparedness, indiscipline and purely Tambov sloppiness and casualness".

The following facts can be cited to prove the last point. On 6 July the Provincial Committee announced the mobilization of Communists – former officers, non-commissioned officers and military officials – on their own initiative, much earlier than the appearance of an order on the general civil mobilisation of these military posts. Those mobilised were sent to Tambov from all districts within 24 hours, but there they "hung around with nothing to do, they were not given command positions or were forced into companies running errands, or to put up posters".



After the Mamontov raid, a burned down warehouse was found in Tambov, with 50 machine guns and several boxes of rifles, which everyone had forgotten during a time of a catastrophic shortage of weapons.

According to the statement of the chairman of the Tambov District Committee of the Party, Ya.L. Smolenski, some of the railway workers had offered their services to protect the approaches to Tambov, but the military organisation did not have weapons at its disposal, and "it was impossible to call the working masses to fight with sticks against bayonets and sabres".

Head of the Provincial criminal investigation department, K.N. Nikolaev, reported on a rather extravagant measure taken by him in the last minutes before evacuation from Tambov: on the evening of 17 August he gathered the local criminal "authorities" into his department and, under the threat of harsh reprisals against them, ordered them to notify criminals of a prohibition to participate in the plundering of property of townspeople or any Soviet institutions after the arrival of the Cossacks in the city. This measure, according to him, turned out to be so effective that the thieves not only themselves did not take part in the pogroms, but under the threat of punishment warned off other citizens who seemed to fancy someone else's property.

After the surrender of Tambov, the Provincial Party-Soviet leadership, with the armoured detachment, went to Morshansk, and the remaining military forces, together with the headquarters of the fortified area and the district-city leadership, went to Platonovka station. A day earlier, the families of the Tambov Communists had been evacuated by train to Penza. At a meeting of the Presidium of the Provincial Executive Committee on 20 August it was proposed to the Morshansk District Food Committee to urgently give the peasants one pound of salt per eater to prevent the growth of anti-Soviet sentiments, and similarly to the urban population, by category. The Provincial Committee of the Party was located in the hotel "Rus" in Morshansk, and on 19 August it held the first meeting as a body. On 22 August the Provincial Committee left its place of stay and returned to Tambov.

Before the White Cossack raid, the Tambov city Party organization had 879 members (including 98 women), of which 185 were members of the railways. After re-registration in September 1919, 677 people were in it. Previously the Red Army units had 578 Communists, but after re-registration only 233.

After sentencing K.V. Redzko continued to hold command posts in the Red Army, and headed the Tambov provincial police force. G.M. Shidarev served for another year as the Tambov Provincial Military Commissar, then was transferred to the same position in the Yekaterinoslav province. N.P. Orlovski, after a business trip to Moscow, did not return to Tambov; he worked as chairman of the Nizhny Novgorod Provincial Soviet People's Court. According to unverified data, D.P. Sokolov was soon hacked to death by Reds in fighting near Voronezh. The life of I.P. Lerche was cut short during the period of political repression.

The activity of the soviet of the Tambov fortified region deserves attention as the first experience of the formation of an emergency authority in the city. In extreme conditions, the soviet failed to cope with the combined role of military and civilian dictatorship. Lack of single person command, no clear delineation of functions, and an inconsistency of actions of its members led to the failure of the defence of the provincial centre.

