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### **Analysis of the Tactics of the Red Army in the Kurgan-Petropavlovsk Offensive on 1919**

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*The article is devoted to the tactical actions of the Red Army during the Kurgan-Petropavlovsk offensive of 1919. The author reveals the main elements of combat, and also shows solutions of non-standard situations by commanders of the army of the Soviet Republic. It analyses the tactics of using cavalry raids, the movement of infantry on carts, the tactics of rolling, movement in a square, night and "psychic"<sup>1</sup> attacks. Particularly noted is the widespread use of personal initiative by lower and middle level commanders, as well as the importance of propaganda and agitation. In general, in the 1919 Kurgan-Petropavlovsk Operation, the commanders of the Red Army demonstrated effective techniques, often innovative for their era, which later entered the textbooks of military art.*

The Petropavlovsk offensive of 1919 provided a turning point in the battles on the Eastern Front and marked the beginning of the defeat of Kolchak's forces. In its course the Red Army not only had to make maximum use of the available experience (first of all, from World War I), but also develop new tactical methods

In this context we note that the middle command staff in the Red 5th and 3rd Armies were filled by Red Army soldiers, as well as by former non-commissioned officers and officers of the of the old army. Commanders at battalion, regiment, and brigade level, as well as heads of divisions came from former officers who had had experience in the Russian-German war. Ideas, techniques and skills developed during the imperialist war were to form the basis of the tactics of the Red units, replacing the peacetime training. However, in the new environment of the civil war these bearers of the tactical ideas and skills of the imperialist war found themselves in conditions of marching, manoeuvring and fighting that they had never seen. The old experience was undoubtedly valuable, but not always and not everywhere applicable. The material means remained the same, but the supply and abundance of them in the Red Army had changed. The tasks and aims of the war were different as well, and so was the enemy. In the search for methods and ways of action on the battlefield a very important role was played by purely occasional, subjective decisions, based on the views, knowledge and skills of the commander who had to fulfil his orders. And it was these decisions that significantly enriched military science. Let us consider examples of the use of tactical techniques by Red Army commanders during the fighting for the Southern Trans-Urals.

In the Petukhov offensive (10-31 August 1919), the Red Army army had to cover considerable distances from the Ural Mountains to the Tobol River. To speed up the taking of strategic objectives, cavalry raids were used. Making transitions of 60 and 70 km per day, the composite cavalry detachment of N.D. Tomin passed into the rear of Kolchak's forces and occupied Kurgan. However, the lack of both divisional and separate cavalry units in M.N. Tukhachevski's 5th Army units negatively effected the pursuit of Kolchak units retreating to the Tobol River. The lack of cavalry could only be replaced by infantry units. For that reason peasant wagons were used to more rapidly advance infantry units. Thanks to the use of these carts in 1919 the Eastern front was able to move more than 15 km a day. Such a speed of movement was a record for that time: even in the 1920s. The average pace of an infantry offensive varied from 3-5 to 5-15 km per day. The rate of

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense "psychic" means using psychological methods, and in particular attacking in lines without firing and un-nerving the enemy.



advance of advancing or retreating troops in modern warfare also varies from 5 to 15 km if we are talking about large strategic formations.

The unusual length of the front, compared with the norm (20 to 30 km for an infantry division) led, on the one hand, to a cordon arrangement of the troops, or on the other hand an unusually sparse arrangement of units. The troops were divided into a number of small independent columns, which acted primarily on the communication routes. Direct targets for the offensive and defense were settlements. A typical Red column was usually a regiment (less often a brigade), moving along one road. Such a fragmentation of columns created a wide manoeuvring ability with an equally wide initiative for individual commanders. And tactically the Reds had a significant advantage over the Whites.

Having overcome considerable distances by marching and coming to the river line the Reds began to actively scout for crossings. In particular, here military ingenuity and personal tactical initiative showed on the part of the commander of the 43rd Regiment of the 5th Rifle Division, V. I. Chuikov. Disguised as a lieutenant and playing the drunken officer he, with an orderly, rode on horseback along the White positions on the enemy's bank of the Tobol River. This reconnaissance gave everything that was needed for the attack: the exact location of enemy positions, places to cross the Tobol, hidden approaches to the trenches with a favorable line for the deployment of our troops, and the behavior of the enemy's soldiers and officers. As a result of well-established reconnaissance, the Red command knew the entire operational situation at the front. Compared to this the White reconnaissance was shown up. While stationed at the Tobol River they were unaware of the impending Red attack. It should be noted that all kinds of reconnaissance activities were used by the opposing sides. The best results were achieved by interviewing prisoners. Army reconnaissance with horse patrols made up for the deficiencies in security. A marching column always had a mounted or foot reconnaissance party ahead, which performed the task of protection and reconnaissance at the same time.

After forcing the Tobol on 20 August 1919, the Red Army continued its offensive eastward. On 23 August the commander of the 242nd Regiment, S. S. Vostretsov, applied some bold personal initiative. In the battle for the village of Medvezhye, a Red Guard intercepted a messenger with orders from the commander of the 46th Regiment to the commander of the 3rd Battalion. The battalion was ambushed. The commander of the 242nd Regiment, Vostretsov, disguised in officer's uniform, met the White Captain with 12 officers and demanded that they surrender their weapons. The Captain himself announced to the battalion their surrender, and the soldiers laid down their arms. As a result, the 3rd Battalion of the 46th Regiment was taken prisoner, with 277 men, 12 officers and 3 cadets. For his resourcefulness S.S. Vostretsov was awarded a gold watch with the inscription "To the Honest Soldier of the RKKA<sup>2</sup> from the VTsIK<sup>3</sup>.

As you know, in September 1919 the Kolchakists managed to organize their last major offensive, which required a readjustment of the Red Army's tactics. At the second stage of the Kurgan-Petropavlovsk operation, during the Kurgan defensive operation (1 September – 13 October 1919) its units used tactics of rolls. For example, during persistent battles for the village of Butyrino, the commander of the first brigade of the 27th Rifle Division, G.D. Khakhanyan, when retreating to the village of Chastoozerye, according to the recollections of artilleryman N. Krasnopolsky, applied the tactics of this kind of retreat from positions in full view of the enemy. Withdrawing by "rolling" meant that an infantry battalion and an artillery platoon were used to cover the brigade. The first

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<sup>2</sup> The Workers and Peasants Red Army.

<sup>3</sup> All-Russian Central Executive Committee.



platoon of each company covered the brigade with a machine gun to hold off enemy cavalry, while the second platoon with the machine gun withdrew and took up positions, after which the first platoon, under the cover of its fire, would withdraw. This allowed the first platoon to leave the battle with minimal casualties.

Unconventional tactical techniques were also used during artillery combat. So, in the zone of action of the 2nd Brigade of the 26th Infantry Division on 17 September, during the battle for the village of Pesyanoye there was a unique use of artillery. In the course of a fierce battle the 7th "Lenin" Battery, which had been firing incessantly, ran out of HE fragmentation shells. Battalion commander V.P. Serebryakov decided to fire incendiary shells. The result of firing incendiary shells at infantry was sensational. The shells sprayed molten jets of burning mass in all directions. It was impossible to extinguish when it hit the body and clothing. After receiving a severe shock to their morale, the Whites retreated to their original lines. In the 1920s an example of an unusual military solution was described in the journal *Red Artillery*. It was also included in textbooks on the history of Russian artillery.

In general, however, the artillery during the operation was usually distributed out to the units, with the duties of "escort artillery". In this capacity it rendered many services to the Reds, often assisting the infantry in difficult cases. Artillery manoeuvring was not seen during the operation. But during the preparatory period, during the forcing of the Tobol River, the units of the 26th Division, as the strike force, was significantly reinforced by it. The heavy artillery not just of the 26th Division, but also the 5th, was used to create an independent artillery unit. The artillery's tasks were somewhat complicated. The troops did not create fortifications and were not buried in the ground. Two or four guns were taken to an open position, attached to a regiment, and shot the enemy's chains at almost point-blank range, and the infantry quickly completed their attack. In cases where the Whites were entrenched and behind wire, the matter was decided by manoeuvre rather than by the use of artillery. As a result, Red artillery proved remarkably resilient. Remaining in position in the most dangerous situations, it boldly took on the enemy with buckshot. Moreover, during the operation the Reds did not lose a single gun

As for the Red infantry, in the field, when there were no natural shelters, the tactic of forming in a square was used. Thus, on 9 September, while leaving an encirclement, the regiments of the 1st Brigade of the 5th Division in the village of Lopatki were attacked by the 2nd and 5th Orenburg Cossack Regiments. Bypassing the Reds, the Cossacks blocked the road. Kombrig A. Ya. Sazontov decided to line the regiments in a square around the carts and ordered them to turn off the road into the open fields. Making the 7 km to the nearest woods, the Reds repulsed ten mounted attacks. As a result, the 1st Brigade reached Lopatki village.

As for the organization of communications between the Reds and their rear, during the operation the 5th Army's communications was undoubtedly better than that of the Whites. The signals troops selflessly fulfilled their duty. The staff of the 5th Army never once complained about the unclear situation, even in difficult parts of the front. Wire communications often reached to regiments and was duplicated by riders. Brigade and division headquarters always communicated by telegraph. This greatly facilitated communication at the front, making it possible to direct troops from the rear. In general, communication for the conditions of that time was excellent. So, on 3 September in the battle for the village of Novotroitskoye, the 2nd Brigade of the 27th Division was organised so all the company commanders, their assistants, the commanders of the machine-gun crews and the machine-gun platoon leaders moved on horseback. This gave exceptional maneuverability and allowed uninterrupted control of the battle. Telephonists unwound wires on horseback, staying close to the commanders. Other telephonists removed the wires where they were no longer needed.



Against such a well-organized onslaught from three Red regiments, the White regiment was unable to defend the village.

Nevertheless, the large gaps between the independent columns made it extremely difficult for the Reds to communicate at the front. It was maintained solely by messengers and dispatches. The column leaders in most cases did not know the situation in the neighboring areas and were left to their own devices. Such a situation was a prerequisite for the formation of a special type of leader – independent, relying only on himself and his troops, full of initiative and able to make a quick decision. Such leaders found the correct solution in the most difficult circumstances, knowing that there was no one to help them.

One of these leaders was Ya. P. Gailit, commander of the 1st Brigade of the 26th Rifle Division. On 25 September the 1st Brigade attacked the village of Salamatnoye. As Gailit later recalled: "...the weather was overcast all day, it rained, and the twilight changed to darkness faster than I expected. The chains only managed to go 1.5-2 km before it got so dark that all control was completely impossible. The chains broke up and then got in clumps and soon came to a very dense brush and got mixed up and the leaders lost control." Despite the fact that the operation seemed a failure, Gailit did not give up. After learning from his guide the exact distance in paces from the road bend to the village of Salamatnoye, he gave the order for the battery to open fire. The information received from the guide gave him an opportunity to cover the enemy with artillery fire. While under the cover from the batteries, the Red company and mounted scouts entered the streets of the village. At the same time, through a narrow defile between the marshes, five companies of the 228th regiment attacked. Much of the credit for this belonged to the platoon leader of the 4th company, P. A. Kuznetsov, who was able to restore order by skillfully placing pickets to monitor the village during the confusion that occurred during the night. Although the regimental machine-gun team and four companies of the 228th Regiment were never able to reach the attack line, the part of the force that reached the village stormed it without much difficulty. The village of Salomatnoye was taken. We captured 209 prisoners of war and 1 officer, as well as some trophies – several machine-guns, cartridges, 6 telephone sets with 16 brand-new Japanese telephone sets, a field kitchen, three English light 3-inch guns with shells, 3 carts of cartridges and 1 cart of uniforms. Thus, thanks to the resourcefulness and determination of the brigade commander, the 1st Brigade of the 26th Infantry Division emerged from a seemingly hopeless situation with honour. The success was achieved with just artillery and under difficult night-time conditions.

And another interesting tactical move. On 27 September in the area of the 3rd Brigade, 30th Infantry Division of the 3rd Army, the Red Infantry used the tactic of a psychic attack. Due to limited ammunition, two battalions of the 263rd Regiment attacked the village of Maray without firing a shot. Under enemy fire, the Red Army marched 3 km across completely open terrain, keeping their line as if on parade. Not willing to accept a bayonet fight, the Whites withdrew.

From 1 to 14 October there was a temporary lull at the front. According to intelligence data, the enemy sought to use the time to bring in reinforcements, tidy up their units and prepare for active operations. The Red troops were also working hard. Commanders received replenishment, distributed recruits, clothed and armed fighters. Firearms and tactical training sessions were conducted with the new recruits.

During the third phase of the Kurgan-Petropavlovsk offensive (14 October – 4 November 1919), the special influence of the political situation on the course of military operations was fully revealed. "Decomposition" of the enemy by propaganda was also used in the First World War, but did not achieve the same results as in the Civil War. The fate of the 308th Regiment is interesting in this



respect. The regiment was almost entirely captured in the vicinity of Ekaterininskoye. Having taken out the command and commissar staff, the Whites sent it to another section of the front. However, a month later the regiment returned to the Reds almost in its entirety, crossing the front together with four Cossack regiments, which had previously taken them prisoner. As it turned out, the Cossacks had fallen under the influence of the Reds' agitation and voluntarily went over to their side themselves, surrendering their weapons, including 46 machine guns.

Based on the studied material, we can identify the main features of the tactics Red Army commanders on the battlefields of the Southern Trans-Ural. These include the use of cavalry raids, the movement of infantry on carts, the tactics of rolling, movement in square, night and psychic attacks. Particularly noteworthy is the widespread use private initiative of lower and middle commanders, as well as the importance of propaganda and agitation. On the whole, in the Kurgan-Petropavlovsk operation of 1919 the commanders of the Red Army demonstrated effective, often innovative techniques for their era, which subsequently entered the textbooks of military art.

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