

## Armoured vehicles in the offensive against Petrograd ("Operation White Sword") in 1919.

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This is taken from <http://northwestarmy.ru/tanki-i-bronemashiny-v-severo-zapadnoj-armii/>

On 6 August 1919, Yudenich's Northwest Army (NWA) received four British MK-V tanks and a British tank detachment of 48 men under the command of Lt-Colonel Hope Carson when they landed in Tallinn. A month later two more British tanks arrived.

The tanks in the NWA were named *First Aid*, *Captain Cromie*, *Brown Bear*, *White Soldier*, *Volunteer* and *Liberation*. The name *First Aid* was suggested by Yudenich himself, who met the tanks at the port of Tallinn; *Captain Cromie* was named after the British submariner who fought in the Baltic and was killed during the storming of the British Embassy by the Bolsheviks in 1918. All of the six tanks were armed with a 37 mm cannon and two 7.62 mm machine guns (one pointed backwards). They had all come from Western Front of WWI and were worn out – their reliability was extremely poor even for that time, and their speed did not exceed 8 kph. As the NWA soldiers joked, "their tanks were of the very first type – from Philip of Macedon's time".

An "Independent Tank *Divizion* of the North-Western Army" was formed, which enrolled many naval officers, for which reason the *divizion* was sometimes called "Naval". The Russian officers of the *divizion* were formally in British military service. The British tank officers, under the leadership of Lt-Colonel Carson, trained the Russians in using the tanks in a short period of time. As of October 1919 there were 56 officers in the *divizion*.

In addition to the *divizion* a "Tank Shock Battalion" was created – a special infantry unit to accompany the British tanks in battle. The battalion had two companies of 200 men each and was commanded by Colonel Khomutov.

The commander of the Tank *Divizion* was Captain Paul Ottonovich Shishko – a valiant naval officer, who had fought in the Japanese and World Wars. In the autumn of 1917, as commander of the destroyer *Gavriil*, he led the Revel<sup>1</sup> Naval Battalion of Death, which defended the Orissar Dam against the Germans.

The British tanks first went into action south of Gdov on 11 September 1919, in the first phase of the future "Operation White Sword" against Petrograd. The crews were mixed Anglo-Russian. The Tank Shock Battalion also participated in the fighting, taking the role of an assault squad. After two weeks of fighting the battalion was taken to Narva, to repair equipment and rest the crews – the conditions of fighting were considered hellish. Although three tanks were shot up in those battles, the Yudenich Army considered their debut to be a success.

On 28 September 1919 the 2nd Corps of the NWA advanced with the 1st and part of the 3rd Divisions towards Luga and Strugi Belye<sup>2</sup>, beginning the first phase of the "White Sword" operation on Petrograd. It involved 8,000 bayonets, 100 sabres, 24 guns and three British tanks. On that day the regiments of Prince Dolgoruky's 4th Division, supported by two tanks, launched an attack on Strugi Belye. The appearance of the tanks stunned the Red Army and they abandoned their positions. However, further use of the equipment in that area was impossible because of the poor state of the roads.

On 11 October 1919 the NWA launched a general assault on Yamburg<sup>3</sup>. Three tanks took part in the four-hour battle for the possession of that town: *Captain Cromie*, *First Aid* and *Brown Bear*. However the tanks could not proceed further, as the retreating Reds blew up the bridges over the Luga River. It was not until 17 October, after a new crossing had been made, that the whole tank *divizion* could be transported by railway to Gatchina, which had been liberated the day before.

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian name for Tallinn.

<sup>2</sup> Now known as Strugi Krasnye.

<sup>3</sup> Now called Kingisepp.

From 19 to 25 October the tank *division* once more took part in the fighting, assisting the troops attacking Tsarskoye Selo: "White Sword" then called for an attack on Petrograd itself. *First Aid* conducted the first night tank battle in the history of the Russian army.

On 24 October three tanks, supported by infantry and heavy fire from White batteries, attacked Red positions near the village of Novoye Katlino. Under the cannon and machine-gun fire, the tanks moved slowly towards Tsarskoye Selo. Two vehicles went ahead about 200 metres apart, and one 100 metres behind them. The Red *kursanty*, unable to withstand the tanks, retreated under the protection of their own artillery towards the village of Perelesino. The Soviet 15th Rifle Regiment, which had occupied positions near the village of Kiskary, fled towards Tsarskoye Selo. On the outskirts of Tsarskoye Selo, halted by heavy Red artillery fire, the attack was stifled. A Latvian battery, hidden in a grove near the village of Krasnaya Slobodka, opened direct fire on the tanks. *White Soldier* tank was hit, followed by another. The third vehicle managed to retreat behind Perelesino. The Red *kursanty*, having moved on to a counterattack, after persistent resistance from the crews seized both of the knocked-out tanks. On 25 October Naval Lieutenant Bystroumov, with a tank landing force of volunteers, managed to restore the situation in that sector and they evacuated the damaged tanks to the rear.

The NWA Petrograd attack in 1919 also included two<sup>4</sup> French FT-17 Renaults armed with Hotchkiss 7.92 mm machine guns. This was due to French pressure on the Finns. Finland, having only recently acquired the tanks, was very reluctant to send them to fight the "Bolshevik infestation".

The FT-17s arrived on 17 October 1919 at Tallinn, and drove themselves to Narva by 20 October. There mixed Franco-Russian crews, under the command of French Lieutenant D'Arsier, were formed. By 23 October the tanks had managed to move 130 km under their own power and entered into action as a part of General Permikin's strike group. They succeeded in eliminating a Red break-through at the village of Kipenya on the left flank of the NWA. The "Renos" also took part in the attack on Gatchina on 24-25 October. The North-Westerners called them "baby tanks" or, in French, "*bébés*".

There were also armoured cars that NWA had captured in its attacks on Petrograd.

At the end of July 1919, near the village of Killi (10 km NE of Yamburg), the 5th Livonian Division seized an armoured car from Reds. It was a heavy armoured car of the Garford type made at the Putilov plant, armed with a 3-inch gun and three Maxim machine guns.

Yudenich also had a Fiat Izhora, armed with two Maxim machine guns in turrets. Called "Russia" it belonged to Duke Lieven's Division. During the final stage of the fighting, in the retreat from Petrograd, its participation enabled the heavily reduced Volyn regiment to retake the positions lost the day before near the village of Lukovo from the Reds, capturing prisoners and machine-guns. But as soon as the armoured unit retired, the situation changed back in favour of the Reds.

The Russian units were assisted in the fighting by the Estonians, whose ranks included the armoured car "Estonia", a makeshift armoured vehicle with protection from gun shields and machine guns.

After the North-Western Army retreated behind the Estonian border, all six of the British tanks were taken to Tallinn. Two vehicles were handed over to Latvia and four to Estonia. The French FT-17 Renaults were sent back to Finland in April 1920.

For the Baltic republics these six British tanks were a serious morale boost. By 1940, the extremely worn-out vehicles had been written off and in storage. But in July 1941, when the Red Army defended Tallinn, they were repaired, armed with Maxim machine guns and sent into battle against the advancing Germans, for one more time.

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<sup>4</sup> Some sources say three.

Quotes from various sources about the battles where British tanks were involved on the North-West Front in Operation White Sword

Aleksandr Kuprin, at the time editor of the NW newspaper *Prinevsky Kray*, in *The Dome of St Isaac of Dalmatia*:

"...The *kursanty* fought desperately. They threw themselves at the White tanks with their bare hands, grabbed at them and died in their dozens. The Red bosses had deceived them with assurances that the tanks were fake: "wood, painted to match the colour of steel armour".

C. Rabinovich, in his *History of the Civil War*:

"The Finnish *kursanty*, the best representatives of the Finnish Red Guards who had come over to us after the defeat of the revolution in Finland, showed unprecedented firmness. When the White Army first used English tanks near Petrograd, causing panic in the young Red Army men, the Finnish cadets rushed to bayonet attack against the tanks. In the village of Koshelevo, a platoon of cadets captured one tank, but before it could be withdrawn, it was destroyed. There was a case when the cadets managed to wrestle a machine gun from a tank. The command even had to forbid the cadets to engage in single combat with tanks by special order. Even the Whites had to acknowledge in their newspapers the unprecedented exploits of the *kursanty*".

Lev Trotsky, the leader of the defence of Petrograd, described the events in a similar way:

"...the Moscow and Petersburg *kursanty* did not spare themselves. They attacked under machine gun fire and rushed the tanks, with revolvers in hand. The White staff wrote of the 'heroic madness' of the Reds."

There is no explanation for the irrational heroism in the Soviet sources. It is strange that *kursanty* – people who were supposed to know about military affairs – ran at the tanks. It seems likely that they really were convinced that the Whites only had "wooden tanks". It is unlikely, however, that such a strategy can be justified.

The Soviet book *History of the Latvian Rifles* describes a battle with tanks in the following way:

"In the evening of 25 October the White command threw crack infantry and two tanks against the 5th Special Latvian Regiment with the intention to drive it out of the village of Bolshoi Koshelevo. The escorting infantry came under gun and machine gun fire, while the tanks came under artillery fire. The first tank hit by artillery stopped and a driver got out in order to repair it, but he was hit by a well-aimed bullet. The second tank, under a barrage of artillery and machine gun fire, turned back. Assistant regiment commander B. Pavar wrote in his memoirs:

'When we – commanders and a group of fighters led by the commander and commissar of the regiment – came close to the tank that we hit we noted that its tracks were damaged and saw the dead tank driver in British uniform. Shooting up this first tank dissipated the rumours about the invulnerability of tanks that had spread among soldiers of our and neighbouring regiments.'

The White Guard tank hit by the Latvian riflemen was visited by representatives of the Petrograd High Command. It was sent to Petrograd and displayed in one of the city squares.<sup>5</sup> The surviving White Guard tank and infantry withdrew to the village of Bolshoye Katlino, not far from the positions of the 5th Latvian Regiment. There the tank *division* and the Semenovski Guards Regiment began to prepare for a new attack. The 5th Regiment once again removed the Semenovski regiment and three tanks from the village of B. Katlino ..."

Other Soviet source gives the following details:

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<sup>5</sup> Not, in fact, true.

"At the end of October 1919 the fighting was especially fierce near Ontolovo. The Whites were defending the northern outskirts of that village. When our units attacked, they were flanked by tanks. Slowly the armoured "Ricardo" tanks crawled out from behind the forest and opened fire on our infantry, trying to flank them. The crews of the tanks were British. The White Guards hoped that the sudden appearance of the tanks would confuse our men and give them an opportunity to defeat us. In fact it turned out not to be so. Our men now knew well enough that a tank is terrible only for a coward and a panic-monger. They now knew how to fight against them. Seeing the movement of the tank the *kursanty* rushed with bundles of grenades towards the front tank, called *Brown Bear*. They were followed by other fighters. The White tanks found themselves attacked by our infantry. And such was the impulse of the fighters, so great was their will to win, that the tanks retreated before that heroic onslaught ..."

P. Krasnov in his book *To Understand and to Forgive* wrote:

"A young commissar from the *kursanty*, Abrasha Goldschmit, rode along the highway. He had been sent from Moscow to lead the artillery.

'What happened?' Fyodor Mikhailovich asked. 'How's it going?'

'Oh, what happened! What's up? We had to leave, that's it is! Your gunners, Comrade, are withdrawing. They're clearing out of Tsarskoye Selo. Oh ... and what's going to happen! Just a bunch of workers ... they're not soldiers! The "Trotsky" Red *kursanty* attacked the tank. And what happened!.. Oh ... well, what happened? Of course, they were killed ... Oh ... And what does Comrade Trotsky say? They have tanks, tanks, tanks ... And we have nothing but commissars ...'

'Well,' said Fyodor Mikhailovich, 'we have to go.'

'Where to?' Blagoveshchensky asked, unskilfully getting on his horse.

'To Tsarskoye.'

'How? What...?'

'We must stop the madmen and turn them around to fight.'

'And you think I should go too?'

'You? What for?'

'But I'm the commissar.'

'Well, that's your business.'

Fyodor Mikhailovich got on the shaggy-haired horse and rode briskly along the highway.

On the slope of the hills, near the old white church, the corpses of the Red *kursanty* named after Trotsky were lying ragged on the ruffled autumn grass. Dressed in red Cossack coats and white-faced horned hats, they seemed more like wax figures than human. The buffoonish attire did not do justice to the majestic peace of their death ..."