

## The Moscow Campaign<sup>1</sup>

The end of the Second Kuban Campaign marked the beginning of new fighting in the Donbas region. Operations continued for several months, from January to May 1919, at the end of which the Armed Forces of Southern Russia (AFSR) finally gained access to the “wide Moscow road”.

On 20 June (3 July) 1919 General A. I. Denikin, while in liberated Tsaritsyn, issued the so-called “Moscow Directive”. By the start of the campaign, the AFSR were on a line Ekaterinoslav – Kharkov – Tsaritsyn,<sup>2</sup> occupied in June 1919. Strategically, the directive envisaged a main strike on the converging directions towards the centres of Kursk and Voronezh, covered to the west by movement along the Dnieper and towards the Desna.

Psychologically, it posed a stark question to the known issue of the wavering Cossacks about going beyond the Cossack regions. In the minds of the soldiers, it was supposed to awaken the desire for the ultimate, distant, cherished goal. “Moscow” was, of course, a symbol. Everyone dreamed of “going to Moscow”, and everyone was given that hope.<sup>3</sup>

The campaign for Moscow did not receive support from everyone. Among the opponents of the Moscow Directive were the commander of the Caucasian Army, General P. N. Wrangel, and the commander of the Don Army, General V. I. Sidorin. Wrangel thought it necessary to strike the main blow across the Urals to join forces with A. V. Kolchak's armies. Later, he described the directive as “militarily illiterate” and “a death sentence for the armies of southern Russia.” Sidorin proposed first to secure the rear, “gain a foothold on the Don”, and prepare an appropriate base for an offensive on Moscow.

Denikin himself later wrote about the significance of the directive in the context of 1919:

The directive ... was later, in the days of our failures, condemned for its excessive optimism. Yes, without closing my eyes to the great difficulties that lay ahead, I was optimistic at the time. And this feeling gripped the entire South – the population and the armies. This feeling found an echo there, in the north, behind the front line, among the masses, still oppressed by the Bolshevik yoke and eagerly, joyfully awaiting deliverance. The “Cassandras” fell silent then. Optimism was based on reality: never before had Soviet power been in a more difficult position and experienced greater anxiety.

The Moscow campaign was linked to the growth of mass anti-Bolshevik resistance in the areas adjacent to the front, and with it the numerical growth of the ranks of the AFSR. The White regiments received large reinforcements from volunteers, conscripts and prisoners:

We occupied vast areas because it was only by pursuing the enemy – not giving him time to recover and regroup – did we have a chance of breaking the resistance of forces that outnumbered us. We tore the most fertile regions away from Soviet power, depriving it of grain, huge quantities of military supplies and inexhaustible sources of army reinforcements. Our strength lay in the momentum generated by our victories, in our manoeuvres and in the inertia of our steady advance. Exhausted by numerous mobilisations, the North Caucasus could no longer adequately feed the army, and only new areas and a new influx of manpower could save it from decline.

The offensive developed rapidly. On 3 (16) July, after two days of fighting, General Bredov's group took Poltava, and units of the 5th Cavalry Corps, led by General Yuzefovich, liberated the Poltava and Chernigov provinces, reaching Novhorod-Sivers'kyi and Bryansk. General Schilling's group advanced on Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa. Odesa was taken in August, and soon the whole of southern Ukraine was in the hands of the Whites.

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<sup>1</sup> Often called the “March on Moscow”. I have not used that term as much of this section is involved in the retreat.

<sup>2</sup> Modern Dnipro – Kharkiv – Volgograd.

<sup>3</sup> This and following quoted passages are from Denikin, A. I. “The Armed Forces of Southern Russia // The White Cause: the March on Moscow”, Moscow, 1996.



One of the most significant episodes of the Moscow campaign was the famous raid by General K. K. Mamontov's 4th Don Corps in August 1919. The corps, specially created as a strike force to break through the front and operate behind enemy lines, included the best Cossack units that had been through the battles of 1918-1919 near Tsaritsyn and Voronezh. After thorough preparation, the corps was able to carry out a deep cavalry raid, which resulted in the destruction of warehouses and bridges, the disruption of communications across the entire Southern Front of the Reds, and the capture of hundreds of Red Army soldiers. During this raid, local and city self-government bodies were restored throughout the region. In Eletsk, Tambov, Voronezh and other settlements, self-defence units were formed, captured weapons were distributed to local peasants and subsequently used by participants in the Tambov uprising of 1920-1921, known as the "Antonovshchina".

The main thrust of the summer-autumn offensive of 1919 was led by the 1st Corps of the Volunteer Army under the command of General A. P. Kutepov, which included the Markov units alongside other "coloured" units (Kornilov, Drozdovskiy, Alekseev). It was here, on this front, that the Volunteer Army achieved its greatest successes by the beginning of October. On 17 (30) September, General Shkuro's Cossacks took Voronezh, and on 1 (14) October, units of the Kornilov Division occupied Orël. Kornilov cavalry managed to reach Mtsensk, and General Alekseev's Partisan Regiment, having occupied Novost, entered the Tula province. No other White Army came so close to the Bolshevik capital during the entire civil war. Moscow was no more than 250 kilometres away.

October 1919 became the turning point for the White movement in the south and, in effect, for the entire civil war in Russia. The thousand-kilometre front of the Southwestern Army, advancing on Moscow, was broken at its very peak, in the Orël area. Starting in mid-October, the Southwestern Front units faced growing resistance from the Red Army, which significantly outnumbered the White regiments, exhausted from intense fighting.

On 28 September (11 October), the Red Southern Front launched a counteroffensive. The units of the 1st Corps under the command of General A. P. Kutepov steadfastly withstood the attacks for two weeks. However, Shkuro and Mamontov's cavalry could not withstand Budënniy's cavalry offensive. On 11 (24) October, Voronezh was abandoned. On 7 (20) October, having lost almost half of their soldiers in bloody fighting, the units of Kornilov Shock Division left Orël. On 21 October (3 November) the Markov units left Livny, and on 24 October (6 November) the Drozdovskiy units withdrew from Bryansk. The retreat to the south began, ending in March 1920 with the evacuation to Crimea.

The section "The Moscow Campaign" is taken from V. E. Pavlov's book "The Markovtsy in battles and campaigns for Russia in the liberation war of 1917-1920".

The chapters published here cover the period of the summer-autumn offensive from the moment of the publication of the Moscow Directive until October. They describe the period of the formation of the Markov units into a division, the capture of the city of Livny and the fighting for Eletsk, as well as the autumn-winter retreat of units to the south and the defeat of the Markov Division at Alekseevo-Leonovo in the Donbass.



# The Moscow Campaign

V. E. Pavlov

## To Moscow

On 19 June (2 July), General Denikin issued his “Moscow Directive,” which included:

With the aim of seizing the heart of Russia, Moscow, I order: ... General May-Mayevskiy to advance on Moscow in the direction Kursk – Orël – Tula.

The time of the transition to the offensive was not indicated.

By now it was the end of August, and the Volunteer Corps was fighting in the same places, while the Caucasian Volunteer Army was advancing north of Tsaritsyn. On the left flank Odessa was taken on 10 (23) August and then Kiev on the 17th, so that the front stretched to the Polish border. True, the blow of the Red 13th and 14th Armies had been halted in the Volunteer Corps’ sector. By the end of August the Volunteer Corps’ front had lengthened significantly, not only to the west but also to the east: a strip of about 50 km width was added on both sides of the Valuyki – Eletsk line.

With the liquidation of the Kupyansk breakthrough, it seemed that opportunities had opened up to go over to the offensive. This is how the *Markovtsy* judged it: one week of complete rest was enough for them to burn with a desire to go forward. The 1st Regiment now numbered around 1,800 bayonets. On the 1st Division’s front, from Korocha to Oboyan, there were now the 1st Markov, the Black Sea Horse, the 1st Kornilov, the Kabardins, the 2nd Kornilov, and the Markov Engineer Company, with the reserve being the 2nd Markov. To the division’s right was a special detachment with the Composite Rifle Regiment and to its left was the 3rd Division.

There were other grounds for starting the offensive: winter was coming, the enemy had been weakened but, most importantly, it was getting stronger again. There was talk of the “Red fortress of Kursk” with trenches and wire. Of course, the *Markovtsy* had no doubt that a plan of attack was being worked out at HQ, although they themselves did not notice any of those preparations.

The 1st Division’s Chief of Staff, Colonel Bitenbinder, wrote:

While we were developing a plan for an attack on the fortified position of Kursk, General Kutepov arrived, clutched his head and categorically forbade the attack. We were to wait for the arrival of the heavy artillery, for it was impossible to even think of attacking Kursk’s fortifications without it.

Timanovskiy decided to take Kursk by surprise attack, taking personal responsibility. He did not have a high opinion of the morale of those defending the city and trusted his *Kornilovtsy* and *Markovtsy*. He even said:

I am even pleased that the attack will be carried out without General Kutepov’s consent. At least Dostavalov<sup>4</sup> will not know the time of the start of the attack.

And so the offensive began on 1 (14) September. Although for the *Markovtsy* it was really on 31 August (13 September), when the 1st Regiment moved north in a surprise attack, driving the Reds out of Tolstoe and occupying Kholodnoe<sup>5</sup> after a long battle. A foot scouts *komand*<sup>6</sup> drove the enemy out of Kholan'. The regiment lost around 80 men during the day.

The 1st Regiment’s strength was also reduced by 40-50 officers at that time. They were sent with Colonel Naumov to Kharkov to form the 3rd Officer General Markov Regiment.

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<sup>4</sup> The corps’ chief of staff. I do not know what the beef was, but it may have been concerns about information security.

<sup>5</sup> At 51.00°N, 37.26° and 51.01°N, 37.11°E respectively.

<sup>6</sup> A *komand* was a unit between platoon and company in size. Sometimes translated as “team” or “detachment”, but since neither of those give an indication of size I have stayed with the transliterated Russian.



The next day, when the entire division went on the offensive, the 1st Regiment was tasked with supporting the offensive from the east, where the Red front line was at Novyy Oskol. The task seemed modest, but important.

### Attack on the “Red Fortress” at Kursk

The first stage was to throw the enemy from its advanced positions to a fortified zone located 12-15 km in front of Kursk; the second stage was to take that zone, and the third was to cross the Rat' (Shchigor) and Seym Rivers, which flow from east to west with swampy beds and elevated northern banks.

The Reds put up serious resistance right from the first stage and it took four days, even with the help of tanks, to throw them back to the fortified zone.

The *Markovtsy* batteries, attached to the *Kornilovtsy*, acted excellently, and not only with their fire. The commander of the 1st Battery, Staff-Captain Sperling, while following the battalion with his battery, saw a Red battery of four guns firing, which he attacked in the flank with his mounted scouts, capturing it. He then immediately opened fire with the captured guns and machine guns on some Reds who were retreating towards their battery. That evening, when it was already dark, the same staff captain encountered a group of cavalymen, instantly attacked them and captured a machine gun and its commanders. Two days later, he and his men joined some Kornilov scouts in another attack, but this time on an infantry column, taking 400 prisoners and two machine guns.

In the 2nd Kornilov Regiment's sector, the mounted scouts of the Reserve Markov Battery captured a gun, complete with limber and horses, which immediately became part of the battery, taking it to three guns.

The Reds' resistance did not weaken and required the introduction of reserves. There was only a battalion of the 2nd Markov Regiment left in reserve. The other battalions were completing their formation in Kharkov.

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On 4 (17) September the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment took Oboyan' Station.<sup>7</sup> The next day, operating under the commander of the 2nd Kornilov Regiment, it took Nikol'skoe and the Selikhova hamlet<sup>8</sup> under heavy fire, capturing two six-inch guns, but losing up to a hundred men out of six hundred.

On 6 (19) September there was an attack on the fortified positions. Scissors were issued for cutting wire. Under heavy fire, the battalion approached and lay down, with the wire still a few hundred paces away. Then the batteries opened a rapid fire on the Red trenches for five or ten minutes, maybe more. The Reds scattered. The battalion's attack was met with weak fire and it lost three killed and several wounded.

The Red artillery continued to fire as the battalion moved rapidly forward, chasing the disorderly fleeing enemy crowds, who left their dead and wounded behind. The battalion commander, Captain Perebeynos, and the head of the machine-gun *komand*, Lieutenant Statsenko, galloped with the horsemen to catch up with the enemy.

Approaching the Voronezh to Kiev rail line, the battalion encountered the Red armoured train *Black Sea* and its auxiliary train. The Markov Reserve Battery knocked out the auxiliary, which was taken, along with its eight machine guns.

Moving further north up to the Seym River, the battalion took the villages of Verkhneye and Nizhneye Gutorovo<sup>9</sup> and three heavy guns in position there. Among the prisoners were the battery commander and his assistant, who managed to conceal their rank at first, before being betrayed by a peasant. They had to confess that they were not only former officers but also Communists.

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<sup>7</sup> 51.20°N, 36.28°E.

<sup>8</sup> From context Selikhova might well be the village now called Selikhovy Dvory, at 51.58°N, 36.08°E, which is on the main road and is the right distance from Kursk. I can't locate Nilol'skoe, but it may have changed name. The later movement north along the Seym to the Gutorovos makes no sense at all though.

<sup>9</sup> 51.60°N, 36.56°E.



Here is a description of the fortifications of the “Red fortress of Kursk” given by Lieutenant Statsenko:

The trenches were full profile along the front – with wire barriers in three staked lines, with communication routes, artillery slits and telephone lines hidden underground – in depth with dugouts and shelters. Almost every rifleman in the trenches had a steel shield. An incredible number of grenades lay all around.

We were stunned when we took such trenches. It was so hard to believe that with our forces, and almost without loss, we had taken such a well-equipped position. If we had been placed in such trenches, we would have had to have been smoked out, and even then it would scarcely have been possible.

The position of a two-gun “Canet” battery<sup>10</sup> is described as follows:

Everything was equipped in for positional warfare: good dugouts, shelters, stores full of shells, shelters, parapets. Comfort in every respect! According to the documents found there, we established that it was a Latvian battery.

On the division’s right flank, General Tret’yakov’s detachment was advancing: the Alekseev Regiment (four battalions) and the Black Sea Horse. The detachment was delayed forcing the swampy upper reaches of the Seym. It was aided by the *Kornilovtsy* from Solntsevo Station. Ahead was a fortified position, and the 3rd battalion of the 1st Markov Regiment was sent to help. On the night of 7 (20) September the detachment attacked and took the position.

On 7 (20) September there was an attack on Kursk, with a crossing of the Rat’ and Seym Rivers. A decisive role was played by the armoured train *Officer* (Colonel Lebedev and his assistant, Lieutenant Zalevskiy), followed by *United Russia*. At night, having repaired the railway track, they stormed Kursk station, firing their guns and machine guns. Such a panic arose among the Reds that the crew of the armoured train *Kronstadt* abandoned it. Without taking losses, the “raiders” retired with their valuable trophy. The Reds began to leave the city. Their retreat was accelerated by the approach from the east of a *division* of the Black Sea Horse Regiment.

General Tret’yakov’s detachment, having taken the fortified position during the night, quickly advanced in three columns: one to Shchigry; one crossing the Rat’ River near Troitsa,<sup>11</sup> then to Okhochevka Station;<sup>12</sup> and one crossing at Grachevka to Otreshkovo Station<sup>13</sup> and then Kursk. All met weak resistance.

By evening *Kornilovtsy* units had advanced ten kilometres north of Kursk, where the Reds were pursued by the *Officer*, an auxiliary and a Black Sea Horse *division*. The trains that returned to Kursk were packed with prisoners.

During the day the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment arrived in Kursk.

It is difficult to convey in words what the highway was like on that day. It was completely crammed all the way to Kursk with Red Army soldiers heading towards us. It was a whole army of healthy men, natives of the south of Russia, returning “to their homes” with undisguised joy. They went to our rear, unaccompanied. There was an army of them, a handful of us ...

After lunch, we went to Kursk. Literally all the streets which we marched were crowded with people, noisily and joyfully greeting us. Every now and then there were exclamations: “Christ is Risen!”, and to this the crowd answered. “Truly He is Risen!”. The majority, both the residents and us, had tears in their eyes – them from joy and the consciousness of their salvation – and us from knowing we were carrying out a holy mission – the liberation of the Motherland and its people

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<sup>10</sup> Canet made field guns, but not in Russia. These are likely the 120mm Model 1892 naval guns heavily used by the Russian navy before the Civil War, although there were also 152-mm and 203-mm models.

<sup>11</sup> 51.75°N, 36.57°E.

<sup>12</sup> In Novaya Slobodka, 51.89°N, 36.73°E, which is quite some distance from Okhochevka village.

<sup>13</sup> 51.79°N, 36.50°E.



On 8 (21) September there was a parade in Kursk, hosted by General Kutepov. A battalion of *Kornilovtsy* and two Markov batteries participated, receiving special thanks from the corps commander.

This is from Colonel Bitenbinder's notes:

General Kutepov arrived and reprimanded Timanovskiy for his disobedience. This had nothing to do with the rear being unprepared but was simply explained by Kutepov being a man of iron will. He was personally brave, alert, energetic and decisive, but he had a domineering nature and could not tolerate independence or being contradicted in any way. Timanovskiy experienced this personally. But since the generals were friends, the misunderstanding was quickly settled.

After a while, General Timanovskiy was promoted to lieutenant general.

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It took the 1st Division nine days to take the "Red Fortress" of Kursk. The honour of victory belonged to the *Kornilovtsy*, the *Alekseevtsy*, the *Kabardintsy*,<sup>14</sup> the *Chernomortsy*,<sup>15</sup> the armoured trains, the tanks and, to some extent, the *Markovtsy* – their batteries, two battalions and engineer company covering the left flank of the division. The *Markovtsy* share of the victory can be determined by the trophies they captured:

1st Battalion, 2nd Regiment – 6 guns, machine guns;

1st Battery – 4 guns, machine guns;

2nd Reserve Battery – 1 gun and an auxiliary train;

3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment – machine guns;

and all of them many hundreds of prisoners.

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On 8 (21) September General Tret'yakov's detachment continued its offensive, with increasing resistance from the Reds. One column went north; the other, a battalion of *Alekseevtsy* and a battalion of *Markovtsy* from the 1st Regiment moved along the rail line to Shchigry, which was also attacked from the south by a Black Sea Horse *divizion*. The Alekseev battalion went around to north of the town while the Markov battalion headed along the main road. Between them was a platoon of 19 bayonets and a Lewis machine gun. General Tret'yakov gave a platoon commander, Lieutenant Chebotkevich, the task of fixing the enemy's attention and drawing the largest possible forces to him with an energetic attack. The task was not difficult, but with so few bayonets ...?

The platoon advanced without visual contact with the battalions. When, 2 or 3 km from the town, he met the Reds, he led an "energetic" offensive, and 77 men surrendered to him, along with a company commander, a former ensign. As soon as the prisoners moved to the rear, the Reds went on the offensive with overwhelming forces, and heavy shells began to explode around the platoon. They could not be held back. There were four wounded in the platoon, one seriously, and the platoon commander was also wounded. The Reds were 200 paces away when, suddenly, they turned and ran.

The *Alekseevtsy*, who were encircling the town to the north, had arrived in the Reds' rear and captured two heavy and three light guns. The Markov artillery platoon with them smashed the fleeing men, and its six mounted scouts moved forward and attacked the transports, capturing some and several machine guns. Lieutenant Chebotkevich's platoon had fulfilled its task brilliantly.

The 3rd Markov Battalion attacked the city from the west and the Black Sea Horse *divizion* from the south-east. Among the prisoners were 40 former officers who had been in the Reds' reserve artillery units.

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<sup>14</sup> The Kabardin Horse Regiment, made up of Caucasian mountaineers. They didn't actually enter the city, but were sent to another sector of the front.

<sup>15</sup> The Black Sea (*Chërnoe more*) Horse Regiment, of Kuban Cossacks.





## The 1st Regiment's Attack

On 1 (14) September, while the division went on the offensive towards Kursk, the 1st Regiment and four guns also moved northwards. At Istobnoe<sup>16</sup> it repulsed a Red advance from the right into its rear and, in pursuit, pushed them out of Melavoe. For the next two days it again had to fight off the Reds from the east and pursued them to Verkhny Olyianets. Then the regiment was quiet for two days in Yushkovo, where the 3rd Battalion left it. Then it moved to Gushchino,<sup>17</sup> where units of the Black Sea Regiment had already passed through.

7 (20) September saw it in Kus'kino. News of the capture of Kursk was received. The *Markovtsy* were happy and frustrated.

On 8 (21) September the regiment arrived in Tim,<sup>18</sup> which had also been visited by the Black Sea Horse and even the *Kornilovtsy*. Their annoyance grew. "We're ready! We have been driven into the steppe, and now sit 60 km from Kursk". While there they also learned that Shchigry, 25 km to the north, had been taken.

On 9 (22) September the regiment set out to the north-east, having sent a reserve battalion to Kursk. It stopped in Kshen', with protection to the north, east and south.

On 10 (23) September the regiment led an attack on Marmyzhi Station,<sup>19</sup> occupied by a considerable Red force with two batteries and an armoured train. Not risking a frontal attack, the regiment began to outflank it. The threat of crossing the rail line to the north forced the Red armoured train to leave the station. Surprisingly, rather than continue to support its own unit, it escaped at full speed. The station was taken by assault; around 700 men were captured, with a four-gun battery in harness and 14 machine guns.

The withdrawal of the Red armoured train from the battle was soon explained: to the north, near Dolgaya Station,<sup>20</sup> the regiment's 3rd Battalion – with two guns, two squadrons of the Black Sea Regiment and the regimental *sotnia* – was approaching the rail line. Mounted engineers managed to blow up the track and the armoured train, already hit by artillery fire, went off the rails and was captured. It was called *IIIrd International* and was armed with three guns and several machine guns. Advancing Red infantry were repulsed by the battalion.

On 11 and 12 (24-25) September heavy fighting took place in front of Marmyzhi Station with the advancing enemy. A surprise night raid by one of the battalions broke into Dolgaya Station, capturing the commander and staff of one of the regiments of the 42nd Rifle Division, but was then forced to abandon it.

Despite the difficult situation at Marmyzhi the regiment, which had by now had also occupied Kshen' Station, was ordered to conduct an attack on Kastornoe Station.<sup>21</sup> It was assisted by the Officer Company of the 2nd Regiment with 200 bayonets and the armoured train *Glory to the Officer*.

Leaving the Officer Company at Kshen' Station, the 1st Battalion took Lachinovo Station.<sup>22</sup> It was in the Reds' rear, only 10 km from Kastornoe. But our forces were too weak to attack that town, especially as our armoured train could not move there because of the unreliability of a railway bridge (it had been undermined by the *Mamantovtsy* and badly repaired by the Reds). Two companies – 100 bayonets – were sent to raid the station. They reached Kastornaya-Staraya Station,<sup>23</sup> and saw movement at the Kastornaya-Novaya Station. The temptation to attack was great, but an enemy train came up behind the companies: "Back immediately!"

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<sup>16</sup> 51.11°N, 37.33°E

<sup>17</sup> 51.34°N, 37.20°E

<sup>18</sup> 51.62°N, 37.12°E

<sup>19</sup> 51.87°N, 37.55°E, now called Im. Lenina.

<sup>20</sup> 52.06°N, 37.54°E

<sup>21</sup> 51.83°N, 38.12°E

<sup>22</sup> 51.80°N, 37.92°E

<sup>23</sup> Now Kastornaya-Vostochnaya, it appears.



When they returned to Lachinovo Station, they found that a battle was already taking place with Reds advancing from the south: the two companies, two guns and an armoured train could barely hold them off. However, the now reassembled battalion drove them back. The armoured train was called to Marmyzhi, but it had to delay almost the whole night, as the Reds had blown up the railway track.

On 13 (26) September the Reds attacked Marmyzhi, broke into the station twice and were eventually driven back. Their attacks were also unsuccessful at Kshen' and Lachinovo Stations.

At night they abandoned Kastornoe, which was occupied by the Composite Rifle Regiment.

The 1st Markov Regiment had fulfilled a big task in a fortnight and became the leading unit of the division, lengthening its front to the east. The four days of fighting around Marmyzhi Station had cost it over 400 casualties, made up for immediately by absorbing prisoners.

These battles took place in a dramatically changed environment. It was now autumn with fogs, rains and low temperatures. Secondly, the nature of the terrain had changed. The steppe was left behind and the terrain became more rugged and undulating; wide gullies were replaced by ravines; the black earth ended and was replaced by loam; villages and hamlets became more frequent, but much less populated; the nature of the population also changed.

The history of the Markov Artillery Brigade describes the village of Stepanovka near Kshen' Station, which was in Orël province, as follows:

The first truly Great Russian<sup>24</sup> village looked bleak: instead of tidy Little Russian "mazankas"<sup>25</sup> or neat "pereverts" huts of prosperous Kursk area, one saw chaotically disordered, unplastered, red-brick, smoky huts with shapeless grey tile roofs. The peasants huddled together with their cattle and poultry in these utterly filthy places.

It was with great difficulty that the platoon managed to find a place for the gun park, as the usual manner of placement on a wide street was not applicable here, due to the lack of straight and spacious roads. A lot of misunderstandings were caused by the arrival of the common people's transport: most of the wagons were pulled by single, incredibly exhausted nags, while the paired carts caused complete despair, as most of them were pulled by cows.

But there was something else that distinguished the settlements here from the population of the districts we had passed. It was a kindness, responsiveness, and openness to the White soldiers ... and open hatred for Red power. Subsequent combat operations and the attitude of the population showed this very clearly, and the first indicator of that was voluntary enrolment by peasants into the Markov ranks.

### **The Attack on Livny**

There was only one day of relative rest for the regiment, 14 (27) September. The Reds did not advance, and the regiment regrouped: the 1st Battalion, with about 450 bayonets and two guns, was concentrated at Lachinovo Station; the 2nd Battalion, with about 450 bayonets and two guns, was at Kshen' Station, and the 3rd Battalion with the scout *komand*, up to 550 bayonets in all, and two guns was at Marmyzhi Station. The reserve was the Commander's Company and the armoured train *Glory to the Officer*. The horse *sotnia* and the regimental machine-gun *komand* were spread equally around the battalions and reserve.

The regiment was placed in General Tret'yakov's detachment, together with *Alekseevtsy*. That detachment was ordered to go onto the offensive the next day: the *Markovtsy* were to take Livny and head to the line of the Chernavka River, and the *Alekseevtsy* were to advance on their left to cross the Elet's – Orël rail line at Verkhov'e Station.<sup>26</sup> To Livny was about 60 km.

The regiment was to advance in three columns: the 1st Battalion along the main road to Livny, but since it was on the open right flank, until the arrival of the 2nd Markov Regiment, it had to keep an echelon behind; the 2nd Battalion was to move along the Kshen' River, which inevitably obliged it to act on both banks; the

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<sup>24</sup> That is, as opposed to "Little Russia" which was what most of the Whites called Ukraine.

<sup>25</sup> The traditional white plastered Ukrainian cottages, made of clay not logs and usually thatched.

<sup>26</sup> 52.81°N, 37.24°E





3rd Battalion was to move along the rail line, and its offensive zone included the space to the left up to the Tim River, which was the boundary line with the *Alekseevtsy*.

So on 15 (28) September the regiment moved to attack on a frontage of around 30 km. The second and third columns immediately met stubborn resistance, and it was only the next day, 16 (29) September, that they reached up to the line of Dolgaya Station.

Some issues were discovered. There were large enemy forces in front of the regiment, forming a solid front but with a strong strike force concentrated between the rail line and the Tim River. General Tret'yakov had to send the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment with two guns to the left flank of the 1st Regiment as a fourth advancing column.

This two-day battle used up a large number of shells. The 2nd Battalion had a transport convoy guarded by 22 mounted scouts from the 1st Battery and two battalion machine guns. While crossing the Kshen' River at night the transport ran into a Red outpost, but the battery men crushed it and took 15 prisoners from under the Reds' noses, despite being not far from their battalion. The convoy then had to return by a roundabout route with 250 shells and 20,000 rounds of ammunition.

Mounted reconnaissance was carried out all night. The 2nd Battalion did not have enough mounted men, especially because the right column was already in a somewhat precarious position. Staff-captain Sperling volunteered to do the reconnaissance with the mounted men of his unit. He never limited himself to merely doing his artillery duties as a battery commander but also took on the wider tasks of the unit to which his battery was attached. A reconnaissance to the east was required, and he set out at night. After ten kilometres he had met nobody. It was getting light. He was due to return when a cart came galloping towards him. A peasant was on his way to inform the Whites that a Red cavalry regiment, four squadrons with five machine-guns, was heading for Volovo.<sup>27</sup> Staff-captain Sperling caught up with the battalion which was already attacking. The commander, Captain Marchenko, unfolded his map: the flank of his battalion was under attack, but the 1st Battalion was to arrive during the day. Nothing especially to worry about.

In the morning of 17 (30) September all four columns went onto the offensive. The entire second column had to cross the Kshen' River more than once to fight on both banks.

A platoon of the 1st Battery was unexpectedly attacked by a Red squadron and nearly wiped out. "Machine guns to the front!" shouted Sperling. A moment and the machine-guns started firing, then the next moment cannister was fired. When the company ran forward, the battery caught all the saddled horses, took off the saddles of the dead ones and captured the flag of the 1st Squadron of the Akhtyrskiy Regiment.

The third and fourth columns pressed the enemy, supported by two or three batteries, each four guns, and an armoured train.

But the situation of the first column was extremely difficult. The battalion arrived at Volovo just as the Red cavalry regiment approached it. The Reds did not attack but surrounded the village. Then a peasant reported that a large force of Red infantry was coming from Verkhnee Bol'shoe,<sup>28</sup> where the battalion had spent the night. With a threat to his rear, Colonel Slonovsky, the battalion commander, led his men back – all the time under the threat of a mounted attack. But the village was already occupied by the enemy. The battalion attacked and took it. The Reds withdrew not far away. Night fell. The whole battalion was in positions around the village. There was shooting. An enemy attack was imminent and even if it was repulsed, what then? The solution was to withdraw the battalion and retreat behind the Kshen' River, to Urusovo.

The enemy followed the battalion as it approached the Kshen' River. They were now 15 km from Marmyzh Station, 10 km from the rail line to Livny and 10 km to the rear of the 2nd Battalion. The commander's company was brought up from the regiment's reserve. But the enemy could still not only disrupt the attack on Livny, but also threaten the 2nd Regiment, deploying to the right of Kastornoe Station. General Tret'yakov demanded the immediate repulse of the enemy cavalry units. He was promised a Muslim

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<sup>27</sup> 52.03°N, 37.88°E

<sup>28</sup> Vyshnee Bol'shoe.



(Mountain) cavalry regiment,<sup>29</sup> a *divizion* from the Black Sea Horse Regiment and then a cavalry *sotnia* from corps HQ.

On 18 September (1 October), the 1st Battalion (the first column) was placed under the direct control of the commander of the 2nd Regiment, Colonel Morozov. The remaining three columns continued their offensive.

The 2nd Battalion, which now had enemy on three sides, was given two platoons of foot scouts from the 3rd Battalion and a platoon from the horse *sotnia*. Its attack went well. Two stations were taken, Prudki and Redkovskaya. There was a desperate fight with the left column – a battalion of the 2nd Regiment. The Reds not only fought back, but also counter-attacked, in some places successfully. Their breakthroughs reached three kilometres in depth. But the companies and platoons of the battalion manoeuvred to hit their flanks. The headquarters of the 21st Rifle Regiment was captured. The 3rd Battalion, whose enemy had already surrendered, sent a company to support. The Reds could not withstand the blow and retreated, losing a mass of prisoners. The prisoners belonged to the 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, 60th and 2nd Simbirsk Rifle Regiments of the 3rd Rifle Division.

By 19 September (2 October) they were 15 km from Livny. Strong resistance was expected on the Sosna River, which flowed in front of the town, as the other back was elevated. But Red resistance was weakening. Korotysh Station<sup>30</sup> was taken. The outlines of the town could already be seen ahead in light fog. The *Markovtsy* moved forward.

There was quite a fierce fight for the right flank battalion then, suddenly at dusk, the Reds quickly withdrew. Surprisingly they did not even offer resistance on the Sosna River near Luchi. The battalion marched towards the town. The centre battalion was at the river and ready to cross at a ford, when the Reds artillery fire suddenly stopped.

Meeting no resistance the left-flank battalion approached Krutoe village. There they found a battalion of *Alekseevtsy*, and they took the crossing of the Sosna. The battalion outflanked the town to the north-west, capturing Monogorovo, taking two Red battalions prisoner, and approached the rail line, along which a Red armoured train and an auxiliary were racing northwards at full speed. To the north at Russkiy Brod Station,<sup>31</sup> to which another battalion of *Alekseevtsy* had already approached, the armoured train was hit by a shell from a Markov battery, and the *Stenka Razin* and the one gun auxiliary were captured.

The out-flanking move forced the Reds to leave Livny in haste. Towards evening there was a small collision with a cavalry regiment, the 9th Soviet, during which several Red horsemen surrendered very readily. Among them was the regiment's commander, a former captain who turned out to be the son of General Brusilov, a general famous in all Russia.

The 3rd Battalion, having passed the town, halted at its northern edge. From the east came the 2nd Battalion. The 2nd Regiment's battalion remained in Monogorovo.<sup>32</sup>

During the five day attack on Livny, the *Markovtsy* marched about 60 km, and 150 km when taken from the beginning of the offensive at Korocha. Those three weeks were a new, second "leap to the north". However, the leap was much smaller than the one from Donbass to Korocha, and also had involved great effort. But the mood was excellent even with the great fatigue, even with the heavy losses: the 1st Regiment had lost around 800 men and the battalion from the 2nd Regiment had lost over 200 men. There was hope that they would be replenished in a town full of officers; from volunteer peasants, who were obviously well-disposed to the army; and then with selected prisoners from the 3,000 taken.

### Battles of the 2nd Regiment

After the capture of Kursk, the whole 2nd Regiment moved there at once from Kharkov, immediately receiving large reinforcements of both officers and soldiers. The regiment's companies rose to up to 250 bayonets; the General Markov Company and Independent Officer Company had 200 officers each. The

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<sup>29</sup> Presumably Caucasians – Circassians, Chechens, Dagestanis etc.

<sup>30</sup> 52.34°N, 37.52°E.

<sup>31</sup> 52.60°N, 37.36°E.

<sup>32</sup> 52.46°N, 37.52°E.



regiment was now huge, some 3,500 bayonets with 40 machine guns. But there were significant issues – the lack of not only a horse *sotnia* but also a mounted scout *komand*. The forty horsemen at the regimental HQ and battalions was barely enough to maintain communication.

On 11 (24) September the Officer Company was suddenly moved to the front. On 14 (27) September all the regiment's units began to load up, and by the next day they were already unloading at Kshen' Station, to join the Officer Company. The regiment was given the task of replacing the Composite Rifle Regiment at Kastornoe Station, which was being withdrawn to the internal front against Makhno, and to cover the right flank of the 1st Regiment, advancing on Livny. The regiment was to be on the flank of the division, having on to its right, 35 km away in the town of Zemlyansk, a detachment of 400 mounted, 400 foot and a battery, which were to watch the sixty kilometre gap between Kastornoe and Voronezh, held by General Shkuro's corps.

On 16 (29) September one battalion was taken from the regiment to go to the left flank of the advancing 1st Regiment. Only one battalion and the Officer Company were left in Kastornoe, the other battalion and scout *komand* were at Lachinovo.

On 17 (30) September the Reds suddenly launched an offensive north of Kastornoe towards Marmyzi and along the west bank of the Olym River to Kastornoe and came within 15-20 km of both places. The intended replacement of the Composite Rifle Regiment was cancelled and the 2nd Regiment, to which a battalion of the 1st Regiment was added, was ordered to repulse the Reds.

On 18 September (1 October) all the regiment's units met the enemy but, having no guns, were unable to dislodge it, as it had several batteries. Only one battalion of the 1st Regiment, which had marched about 30 km during the previous day and had only had four hours rest, was able to push back the enemy's advanced units on the Kshen' River and take Verkhnee Bol'shoe by storm, repulsing several counter-attacks.

On 19 September (2 October) it drove the Reds out of Volovo and held it. They again occupied Verkhnee Bol'shoe and, south of it, Ekaterinovka.<sup>33</sup> The 2nd Regiment battalion and two guns came up and dislodged the Reds from Sergievka<sup>34</sup> and during the day repulsed their attacks. The remaining six companies barely held back the onslaught at Kastornoe.

The situation was difficult: the enemy had overwhelming forces and its artillery fire was crushing. We had gaps of up to 10 km between the battalions. There was no reserve. There was no cavalry to patrol the gaps between the battalions. Above all, there was no unit to cover the 40 km gap between Volovo and Livny, which we occupied during that day.

General Tret'yakov (whose detachment included the 2nd Regiment) ordered the 1st Regiment to immediately send the largest possible force to the place of the Reds' breakthrough. One battalion (from the regiments' three) was assigned, along with a foot scouts *komand*, a half-*sotnia* and a platoon of guns. All units were given to the battalion commander, Captain Marchenko. Having rested only about five hours, the detachment moved from Livny southwards along the main road.

On 20 September (3 October) the Reds attacked the 2nd Regiment, but it held out. The battalion in Sergievka headed west and occupied Ekaterinovka after fierce fighting. The 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment was forced to leave Volovo.

Captain Marchenko's detachment set out at night and marched in the opposite direction to the previous day's attack on the town. After crossing the Sosna River it entered an area that was completely unscouted. On the way they took peasant carts and put the infantrymen on them. At the front of the detachment rode the half-*sotnia* and twenty battery guards, 75 sabres in total, with Staff-Captain Shperling at the head. This glorious artilleryman was now the commander of the mounted group. At Yurskie hamlet<sup>35</sup> a Red outpost was spotted. It was ambushed, and the battery took killed three men and took eight prisoner. Soon a group

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<sup>33</sup> About 5 km directly south of Verkhnee Bol'shoe, on the road. The hamlet no longer exists.

<sup>34</sup> Presumably the one at 51.90°N, 37.99°, which also no longer exists.

<sup>35</sup> Yurskie Dvory (52.19°N, 37.85°E) based on it being on the road, but possibly Yurskoe village.

of 50 horsemen appeared, which turned out to be a *sotnia* of the mountain regiment. From them they received information about the situation to the south.

At nightfall the whole detachment, having marched 35 km, concentrated in Tsurikovo.<sup>36</sup> Here it received information about the enemy's occupation of Gatishche. The detachment was cut off from Livny. The situation worsened, and General Tret'yakov was forced to take another battalion from Livny, leaving only one battalion in the town. The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 1st Regiment, which linked up during the night, were formed into a detachment under Colonel Dokukin, assistant to the regimental commander.

During the night of 21 September (4 October) an order came to attack the enemy. The 2nd Regiment was to move from the south with six companies (two guns) and four companies (1st Battalion) from the south-west. Colonel Dokukin, with two battalions, was to come from the north-west and north, while covering himself themselves against the Gatishche area. The advance from the south was immediately halted by artillery fire and dense enemy chains. During the day neither side was able to move. The 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment began to advance from Ekaterinovka and, forced to deploy all its four companies, it finally dislodged the Reds and began to pursue them, putting the Officer Company into reserve. They took the villages of Verkhnee and Nizhnee Bol'shoe.

The terrain was rugged so there was no observation of the flanks due to the lack of mounted men. The battalion got carried away, and soon an enemy chain appeared only some 600-700 paces to the right of the reserve company on a fold in the ground. The company went on the attack from the spot. The blow was swift, and the officers instantly crushed the Reds and pursued them to the next ridge. In the meantime the Reds had flanked the chains of the lead companies, which began to change direction under fire from both sides. One after another the machine-guns on their *dvukolki*<sup>37</sup> stopped, the horses dead. The companies fought back, supported by the artillery platoon. Then suddenly, when the Officer Company, which had so successfully repulsed the Reds' flank attack on the right, reached the second ridge, Red cavalry swooped down on it from the right. The company got ready to take the attack "at the bayonet", but where? From the right flank to the left, platoon after platoon lay down under the blows of the sabres and the bayonets of the advancing enemy.

The battalion began to withdraw. The last thirty machine-gun belts had already been transferred to its thin chains. The guns were running out of shells too, but were standing at their positions "for the sake of appearances". The enemy, having occupied Nizhnee Bol'shoe, halted and the battalion also stopped. It had only 250 men left of the 800 who had begun the fight, with three machine-guns. The Officer Company had only 21 men. At night another 20-30 men arrived from the enemy zone, both wounded and healthy. They reported that the Reds had hastily withdrawn. The battalion could rest more or less calm, especially because it had been contacted by the Black Sea Horse *divizion*, which had just arrived in the area. It had arrived late, but not entirely too late. At dusk one of its squadrons came upon a small farm, dispersed the enemy infantry in it and saved 16 officers, already stripped, from being shot. The unexpected retreat by the Reds was due to a successful advance by Colonel Dokukin's detachment and especially Captain Marchenko's battalion.

Colonel Slonovskiy's battalion took the village of Volovo after a long and stubborn battle and there received instructions to "wait for further orders". It carried out this order even when an officer from the 2nd Regiment battalion, which was in a difficult situation, came from Nizhnee Bol'shoe asking for support. (The distance between the battalions was less than 5 km).

Captain Marchenko's battalion, which was advancing southwards, despite the danger to the left, took Bogdanovka<sup>38</sup> and then Lipovchik.<sup>39</sup> But did not stay there and, despite it being night, continued to advance,

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<sup>36</sup> Now Bol'shaya Vershina, 52.14°N, 37.91°E.

<sup>37</sup> A *dvukolka* in this context is a two-wheeled military cart, with varieties used as ambulances, ammunition carts (caissons) etc. The Russians had carried their – very heavy – Maxim MGs on them since before 1914, and they were what the *tachanka* developed from, since the MGs were sometimes fired from them (especially if attacked by cavalry). While sturdier than *tachankas* the *dvukolki* were not sprung, and so not as effective away from the roads.

<sup>38</sup> Bogdanova, 52.06°N, 37.94°E.

<sup>39</sup> Lipovets, 52.01°N, 37.98°E.



until it received an order to “stay in the village of Lipovchik and wait for orders.” At the same time, it was told that the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment had failed. This instruction to “wait for orders” saved the Reds – they were allowed to withdraw.

At night there were new orders: in the morning the 2nd Regiment and Colonel Dokukin’s detachment were to go on the offensive and push back the Reds behind the Olym River. They were also told that a battalion of the 2nd Regiment, called from Livny, would lead an attack on Gatishche. But then another order came: the 1st Battalion and scout *komand* of the 1st Regiment were to be immediately sent as quickly as possible to Livny, where the enemy had launched an attack.

On 2 (15) September the 2nd Regiment and Captain Marchenko’s battalion moved forward. Again the 2nd Regiment could not shoot away the enemy on the reduced front, now no more than 10 km, as the Reds had twelve guns firing against four.

But Captain Marchenko’s battalion took Kirillovskoe.<sup>40</sup> It heard the fighting in front and to the right, and headed towards the sounds, paying no attention to the threats to its flanks and even to the rear. Staff-Captain Sperling and his mounted men reconnoitred. Two platoons on carts with a platoon of guns were Captain Marchenko’s mobile reserve who moved from flank to flank. Captain Sperling spotted a column of cavalry in low ground, and the mobile reserve dispersed it. The battalion neared the area of fighting ahead and to the right. The mobile reserve moved in that direction.

A little further on, at Yazykovo,<sup>41</sup> the Reds’ positions on the north-western edge were visible. The battalion was almost on their flank. The artillery platoon opened fire, the Reds could not take it and begin to withdraw. At dusk the weak battalion of the 2nd Regiment, which had also suffered the day before, entered Yazykovo from the north, and from the west. To the south the enemy was still holding out, but the battalion, and especially the artillery horses, were extremely fatigued by the day’s manoeuvre battle and could not move on.

The battalion was given a rest until morning, and then it went on the offensive again, but did not meet any firm resistance. Captain Marchenko’s battalion was the first to cross the Olym River and halted at Naberezhnoe Station.<sup>42</sup> The pursuit was led by the 2nd Regiment. Captain Marchenko’s battalion, after two hours rest, was already travelling by cart to Livny on an urgent mission. It spent the night in Gatishche, which had been taken by the 2nd Regiment’s battalion.

The 2nd Regiment received the sector of the front from Kastornoe, inclusive, to the north along the Olym River, which then bent toward Livny to the Sosna River, beyond which began the 1st Regiment’s sector.

The sector was 50 km long, stretching 30 km in a straight line from south to north, on which the 2nd Regiment was to cover not only the flank, but also the rear of the 1st Division and the whole corps. At its disposal were attached a Black Sea Horse *divizion*, a *sotnia* from the corps HQ, and a weak mountain horse regiment. As soon as the enemy had been driven back, the regiment positioned two battalions at Kastornoe Station, replacing the Caucasian Rifle Regiment, and one battalion at three points near Gatishche (at the crossings) and a company at the Naberezhnoe Station crossing. In between were the mounted units. But the sector was too large for its strength.

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The 2nd Regiment’s losses for the five days of combat were huge – up to 1,250 men. If we include the losses of the battalion which moved with the 1st Regiment to Livny, it goes up to 1,500 men. So out of the original 3,500 bayonets there only remained around 2,000. The reinforcements from prisoners increased its strength by only 200 men. The 1st Company, with only 35-40 men, was sent to Novodevitsk<sup>43</sup> to be replenished with officers. Before leaving it participated in the funerals of its slain officers. Some 50 coffins of officers alone were at the Kastornoe village church.

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<sup>40</sup> Kirillovskaya was about modern Novopavlovka, 52.01°N, 37.99°E.

<sup>41</sup> It no longer exists. It was on the stream at about 51.96°N, 38.05°E.

<sup>42</sup> 51.98°N, 38.12°E.

<sup>43</sup> I can find no town of that name, perhaps it is Nizhnedevitsk, which is in about the right place.



The regiment experienced a blow to its morale – it had taken huge losses for essentially no success. The 500 men taken prisoner were little consolation – the enemy had withdrawn without being defeated. The next day, 24 September (7 October), it was already back attacking two Markov companies near Kozinka,<sup>44</sup> occupying the village before being driven back. The prisoners reported an impending Red offensive with at least two brigades of infantry and two cavalry regiments. And peasants also reported that fresh Communist regiments of workers from Elets and Petrograd and the 13th Army RMS<sup>45</sup> had arrived. At this time the Reds were also conducting an offensive against the 1st Regiment.

On 25 September (8 October) the Reds launched a second counter-offensive from Chernava,<sup>46</sup> from the east towards Gatishche and to the south, along the western bank of the Olym River.

The battalion holding the Gatishche area immediately found itself separated by Red cavalry. Two companies withdrew to Gatishche and were surrounded there by the Reds. They made their way out of the village thanks to a total sacrifice of the machine gunners, losing one gun. They withdrew behind the River Kshen', even losing contact with the Corps HQ *Sotnia* and the mountain regiment. From the nearby Studenniy Station<sup>47</sup> its situation was reported to the 1st Regiment and detachment HQs. But a reserve was on standby: the Rifle Regiment was already loaded into trains, and two of its two battalions immediately set off through Marmyzi to Studenniy Station.

On 26 September (9 October) they and the 2nd Regiment battalion, assembled overnight in full strength, concentrated on the Kshen' River under the overall command of the Rifle Regiment's commander, Colonel Gravitskiy.

That day the 2nd Regiment went on the offensive from Kastornoe Station on both sides of the Olym River. Its units advanced 20 km northwards on the eastern bank, but on the western it met severe resistance and had to withdraw. It took another three days for the regiment, plus the riflemen's 3rd Battalion and Colonel Gravitskiy's detachment to break the stubborn resistance and force the Reds into a hasty retreat.

On 30 September (13 October) the riflemen occupied Chernava, while the 2nd Regiment was on the offensive on both sides of the railway towards Elets. At Bol'shie Ploty the Reds tried to put up serious resistance, but were defeated, losing a four-gun battery, in full harness with caissons. The battery was attacked by mounted scouts of the artillery platoon and the orderlies of the battalion, who had been surrounded in Gatishche but had broken through with the loss of one gun.

On 1 (14) October the regiment halted on the line of Dolgorukovo station.<sup>48</sup> The cavalry units attached to it were withdrawn. Our breakthrough of the Reds ended in a complete, though mainly psychological defeat.

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During this time in Livny.

On 19 September (2 October) the 1st Regiment took the town. The enemy's total disorder allowed us to continue the offensive, but the situation in the rear required the immediate dispatch of a third of our forces, and a day later a second third. Only one battalion and the commander's company, with two guns, remained in Livny.

On 22 September (5 October) the Reds, reinforced by fresh units, went on the offensive and by the next day the fighting had reached the outskirts of the city. It was only the approach from the south of the 1st Battalion and scout *komand* that allowed it to be held. On 24 September (7 October) the 2nd Battalion arrived from the south at a critical moment.

On 25 September (8 October) the Reds made their strongest attack, but it was repulsed, after which they were pushed back somewhat to the north. This day was the 1st Regiment's feast day. The regiment spent it

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<sup>44</sup> Presumably the Kazinka at 52.08°N, 38.40°E.

<sup>45</sup> Revolutionary Military Soviet, so the Army command basically.

<sup>46</sup> 52.49°N, 38.04°E.

<sup>47</sup> Studyonyi, 52.18°N, 37.57°E.

<sup>48</sup> 52.32°N, 38.36°E





in battle. Only the gathered ranks of the regimental staff, headed by the regimental commander, Colonel Bleysch, and a few representatives from the battalions celebrated it in the city.

On 26 September (9 October) the regiment moved to an active defence. Danger was looming from the south. The 1st Battalion moved to the southern bank of the Sosna River and attacked eastwards, keeping contact to the right with Colonel Gravitskiy's detachment.

On 30 September (13 October), before reaching the Chernava River, it again crossed to the northern bank, bypassing Chernava to the west and occupying Troitskoe, five kilometres away. The scout *komand* of 60 men, under Captain Dubinin, captured two guns. The Reds, under the threat of being outflanked, left Chernava, which the Rifle Regiment occupied. Now the battalion found itself in the rear of the enemy in Livny. One Red regiment, hurrying north to cross the Chernava River while pursued by the 2nd Battalion, came across two companies already at the river crossing. The Red regiment was shot at from two sides while seeking salvation at the ford – that on the opposite bank being from its own side.

On 1 (14) October the 1st Regiment reached the line of the [Bol'shaya] Chernava, a tributary of the Sosna, occupying a front 25 km from Troitskoe to Medvezh'e,<sup>49</sup> 20 km north of Livny. Losses were up to 300 men. The success was evident (about 1,500 prisoners were taken), thanks to the mobility of all the units and the initiative of their commanders. The local peasants were of great help, giving information about the enemy forces and movements during the battles.

The physical fatigue was overcome by the great morale. Only the horses did not feel it. They had to work very hard indeed, pulling machine guns and cannons over roads and fields soaked by rain. They were completely worn out. The commanders of the artillery platoons asked for a rest and received the answer: "The fighting ability of an artillery unit depends on the serviceability of the weapons, and as long as the guns are intact and can be fired, there can be no question of giving the batteries a rest."

The 1st Regiment rapidly filled up its losses. About 100 officers from Livny joined its ranks, as well as many volunteers from the peasants. A party of 300 men recruited in the deep rear arrived and many prisoners were added. The regiment grew again to a great force: 700 bayonets in the battalions, each with 5-6 machine-gun platoons. The commander's company and scout *komand* were 200 bayonets each. Even the regiment's horse *sotnia* doubled in size.

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The situation was different in the 2nd Regiment. The elimination of the second breakthrough cost it hugely – up to 1,000 men. Was it covering a huge area? Did it meet units from two Communist brigades and two cavalry regiments? Yes, of course. But was it only that? We began to consider mistakes made, and not only by our junior and middle commanders, but also at the level of the regiment commander, Colonel Morozov. In particular the issue of mutual support was raised. Colonel Morozov had to deal with the failure of the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment to support the battalion of the 2nd Regiment during the battle of 21 September (4 October), while it was in a difficult situation. He and Captain Obrastsov were constantly in close contact with the units of the regiment, strengthening their morale.

In addition, despite the situation in which the regiment found itself, there were orders issued regarding all aspects of combat service: noting mistakes, omissions and displays of valour by officers and soldiers. The names of some machine gunners – Junior officer Papkov, Corporal Rogov, Corporal Pletnev – were mentioned. Through common effort the regiment raised its spirits, improved leadership and developed its tactics in battle.

It was replenished with prisoners, especially from the rear. Its companies increased to 120-150 bayonets each. There were enough machine guns, but there was still a lack of mounted scouts in the regiment, which had played such a fatal role previously.

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<sup>49</sup> 52.66°N, 37.63°E



The mood in both regiments was greatly aided by the news that Orël had been taken on 1 (14) October. The *Markovtsy* shouted an “ura!” to the *Kornilovtsy*. Hopes for a speedy victory were growing stronger. They calculated how many days’ marches were left to Moscow.

But those who returned to the regiments said the newspapers wrote and everyone said: “The *Kornilovtsy* took Kursk. The *Kornilovtsy* have taken Orel.” General May-Maevskiy said, “Orël went to the eagles<sup>50</sup>” but not a word about the *Markovtsy*. As if they didn’t exist. The hurt *Markovtsy* searched the newspapers in vain for anything about their regiments. However, they found a passage: “Captain Kolomatskiy’s detachment took the town of Livny.” They guessed that it was a reference to them, the *Markovtsy*, but only in the name of Captain Kolomatskiy, and also because they knew about how their units had moved from Korocha to Tim, then Shchigry and Marmyzi.... But who else would get the reference? It was annoying. They were in the front line, but if you mentioned those places they would have been unknown to the majority – not even marked on all maps. So their role felt insignificant.

On 1 (14) October, both Markov regiments reached the line Dolgorukovo Station – Chernava and then further north along the Chernava River. Their total frontage was up to 60 km. The Rifle Regiment left to be dispatched to the internal front. It was replaced by a battalion of *Alekseevtsy*, subordinated to the commander of the 1st Regiment. The front of the regiments was almost a straight line. But on the flanks?

The right flank of the 2nd Regiment “dangled in the wind”. True, 25 km to the east the Don flowed from north to south. But was that enough? True, the cavalry units of the Zemlyansk detachment were keeping watch along the Don, but the centre of that detachment was Zemlyansk, now 45 km to the south. Could the Markov Engineer Company, which was based in Kastornoe, 50 km to the south, serve to cover its flank? Could the rail line on which the regiment was positioned be any guarantee – with armoured trains and reserves able to come up? No. All the bridges on it had been thoroughly blown up by the *Mamantovtsy* as they had passed through the area. So the flank continued to “dangle in the wind”.

The left flank of the 1st Regiment was also a problem. There was a gap of 20 km between them and the *Alekseev* Regiment, which was either side of the Elety – Orël rail line, at Verkhove Station, already into Tula province.

The flanks of both regiments were exposed to the enemy’s attack. They faced two rifle divisions, the Simbirsk brigade, a cavalry brigade, and other units. Elety, 25-30 km away, was a Red stronghold, and two rail lines approached it from the north, on which reserves could be quickly brought up.

Could it be said that General Tret'yakov’s detachment was positioned firmly – with three regiments stretching across 100 km, having on its left flank the *Alekseevtsy* then a gap of more than 30 km to the *Kornilovtsy*, observed only by the Black Sea Horse Regiment? But the *Markovtsy* did not think about that. Their aim was the capture of Elety, a large city marked on all the maps. If only the little brother – the 3rd Regiment – would come up!

### **Third Officer General Markov Regiment**

Back in Kupyansk, in early June, it was announced that not only a 2nd but also a 3rd Regiment would be formed, with the main cadre for the 3rd coming from the 9th Officer Company. But that formation did not happen. The 9th Company continued to participate in the fighting, suffering casualties. It was only on 1 (14) September, the first day of the offensive on Kursk, that the cadre, replenished by the ranks of other companies – 60-70 officers and soldiers – left for Kharkov.

Colonel Naumov was appointed regimental commander and his assistant was company commander Captain Urfalov. Dress uniform was the normal Markov one of the 2nd Regiment with the addition of white piping to the upper tunic cuffs. The regimental flag was the white St Andrew’s cross on a black background, as in the 1st Regiment, but with white trim around the edge.

The 3rd Regiment began its formation, in the fullest sense, from the ground up. It was not given a single ready-made unit – not a company nor even a machine-gun platoon – unlike the 2nd Regiment. The first quota of 400 men consisted entirely of prisoners, who were all assigned to the 1st Battalion. On 12 (25)

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<sup>50</sup> Orël translates as eagle.



September, when the formation was transferred to Kursk, the regiment received a large replenishment of conscripted and captured officers and soldiers, which made it possible to begin the formation of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions and staff.

Supplying the regiment with necessary equipment, transport and horses was even more difficult. While in Kharkov Colonel Naumov tried in vain to get something from Army headquarters: everything was available, but it was sent to other units in the process of forming. It was only with the move to Kursk that the regiment began to receive the necessary material. But there was still a shortage of horses, *dvukolki* and wagons.

The companies were brought to 120-130 bayonets. One company in each battalion was an officer company. The regiment's officer cadre was continuously replenished by *Markovtsy* returning after their recovery from wounds or disease.

But forming a regiment requires more than just placing men in a given structure, supplying it with the necessary equipment and even preparing its units for battle. It requires psychological formation too: creating a sense of unity, agreeing on combat doctrine, working towards complete mutual understanding and mutual trust. The regiment was poor in this respect. The battalions were effectively independent, as there was no overall cohesive leadership. Everything, and even that only to some extent, was solved by personal communication between the middle and junior command staff. The regimental HQ remained a unit that had little to do with the regiment. It had its own life, distant from the regiment preparing for battle. One HQ official – a lieutenant, semi-invalid, a volunteer from the 2nd Kuban Campaign – was shot by order of General Kutepov for committing a crime.

The life and training of the battalions, led by their commanders, went on independently. The training was conducted at their discretion, in good faith, with the expectation of completing it as soon as possible. Serious attention was paid to the key ingredient – morale. Conversations were held, especially among the officers, almost all of whom had been mobilised from the Kursk area. In one of the battalions the commander at the first training session pointed out, more or less, the following:

Gentlemen officers! We are fighting the Bolsheviks, and it is not for me to explain why and why not. You know better than I do what Bolshevism, Communism, Workers' and Peasants' Power, "all power to the Soviets" and so on are. You have experienced them! I can say one thing about the struggle – it must be carried through to complete victory.

We, as an army, should be primarily interested in how to conduct this struggle, how to achieve victory. You know that it has been going on since the end of 1917. You read about the deaths of Kornilov, Markov, Drozdovskiy and Alekseev; you also read about the victories of the Red Armies and so on. But nevertheless, we are here, here in Kursk.

The reality is that, as our leader General Markov, said: "You can do great things even with small forces," and the Volunteer Army has done them.

Then the battalion commander gave examples from the history of the *Markovtsy*, talking of the sacrifices made and the duty that they, as officers, were now called upon and obliged to fulfil.

Then it was time to ask questions. From those questions one could see how much these "new" officers failed to understand the high morale of the old volunteers. It seemed to them that a numerical force must be counter-acted by an equal or only slightly inferior numerical force in order to achieve victory.

The commander ended the conversation like this:

Gentlemen! We must decisively overcome all hesitation and fear. Demand this from the officers – with no leniency!

At the end of September, General Kutepov reviewed the regiment. Their appearance was brilliant, but beauty is not enough for battle. They needed their machine guns on *tachankas*, not military-issue *dvukolki*. There wasn't even a small scout *komand*.



## The Regiment's First Battles

The offensive was going well at the front, and the cadre of the young regiment was already thinking of taking part in it: the battles would quickly provide training, and the introduction of the proper spirit. It could also supply all the material still required.

The front was already approaching Orël, and Elets on the right flank of the division. They wanted to hurry there, to their big brothers – the 1st and 2nd Regiments! Then suddenly – and urgently – the 2nd Battalion was loaded and sent to the *Kornilovtsy's* sector, unloading at the division headquarters in Stanovoy Kolodez' Station, 20 km short of Orël. The next day it set out to the west. On 5 (18) October the 3rd Battalion arrived.

What happened? Why was the regiment sent to the front by battalions and not to join its own regiments?

The Volunteer Corps' offensive was not equally successful in every place. At the time when the right flank of the 1st and 2nd Markov Regiments was reaching Elets, the *Alekseevtsy* on the left had crossed the Elets – Orël rail line, and further to the left the *Kornilovtsy* were at Orël, but on the left flank the 3rd Division was far behind. Between the *Kornilovtsy* and the 3rd Division a 20 km gap had formed.

The Army HQ was aware that to the west of Orël, 60 km away near Karachev, a strike force consisting of the Latvian Division and cavalry units had concentrated. But it did not restrain the *Kornilovtsy* advance, encouraging them to take Orël as soon as possible. The *Kornilovtsy*, already under pressure from the left, continued their offensive and on 1 (14) October took Orël. They immediately found themselves under attack, not only from the left, but also a potential turning of their flank. The Latvians raced to get into their rear. The battalions of the 3rd Markov Regiment were sent from Kursk to meet them.

On 2 (15) October the 2nd Battalion faced the Latvians, who had already crossed to the eastern bank of the Oka south of Orël. In the ensuing encounter battle it could not hold and withdrew, having lost a quarter of its personnel, about 125 men. The next day, having repulsed the Latvians, it went on the offensive – but only reached previous day's battle site, where it picked up its numerous dead. The battalion was subordinated to the commander of the 2nd Kornilov Regiment. The Latvians pressed on. The situation was becoming difficult. On 5 (18) October Orël was abandoned.

The entire 3rd Markov Regiment was called to the front.

On 7 (20) October two battalions moved to Dyach'e.<sup>51</sup> The regiment (two battalions) was given a sector from the Oka River on the right flank of the 3rd Division. On 9 (22) October, less one gun, they were ordered to attack towards Kromy, into the flank of the enemy outflanking the *Kornilovtsy*.

It was a frosty day. The column marched in exemplary order, sending pickets forward. They all marched in complete silence. What were the officers and soldiers thinking about, going into their first battle with the Reds? "Old" *Markovtsy* watched the "young" inquisitively, not worrying about themselves, but for those that they did not know properly yet. They were accustomed to the way the old Markov ranks marched, with songs, jokes, confidently, bravely. Exemplary order was not an indicator of reliability. One could see how a kilometre ahead the patrols were somehow not doing it the "Markov way".

The shooting began. The battalions, under artillery fire, deployed into combat order. One attacked Spasskoe,<sup>52</sup> the other Dobryn'.<sup>53</sup>

The attack was swift, and the Latvian Regiment of their 1st Brigade began to withdraw. The machine gunners were exhausted, dragging their machine guns with straps, and were too late to open fire. The battalions lost 128 men. The 3rd Company was advanced strongly, ending at bayonet point, led by the senior NCO after the loss of the officers.

The mood rose in the companies. Continuing the pursuit, the regiment stopped two kilometres in front of Kromy, as its left flank was under attack.

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<sup>51</sup> Modern D'yach'e at 52.52°N, 35.89°E is the village in question. The text has "Dyach'e Station" but the rail lines run 15 km east of it and 30 km to the west and so I suspect that is an error.

<sup>52</sup> About 52.58°N, 35.86°E.

<sup>53</sup> 52.58°N, 35.79°E.



On 10 (23) October the battalions went on the offensive against the hamlets located on both banks of the Kromy River – one east of the town, the other west. The distance between them was more than three kilometres. Some of the villages on the south bank of the river were easily taken, but only the left battalion was able to cross the river. Again further advance was halted. Kromy remained unoccupied.

At night the Latvians attacked the left battalion and forced it to withdraw to the southern bank. Here the Officer Company showed its weakness but paid for it only for the loss of a cart with belongings. “Don’t be bothered! You can fight without things,” the veteran *Markovtsy* said in consolation.

On 11 (24) October orders came to take the town. The Horse Regiment would be on the left to cover the flank.

The crossings and the town were taken easily, almost without loss, but it was impossible to hold them along a front around five kilometres wide. Both battalion commanders came to that conclusion, and reported it to regimental headquarters, which remained three kilometres to the south. No amount of persuasion, evidence, and requests to “come and see for yourself” worked. “Hold the town!” A telephone link was established between the HQ and the battalions.

The battalion commanders decided between themselves not to hold the town, but to hold the crossings, with only two companies covering in front of the town. There was a fine cold rain. Observation became worse. The ground softened. There were alarming reports from the companies as night approached. A peasant reported the Latvians would launch a night attack. An order came from regiment HQ: strengthen the guards, send out reconnaissance, maintain full vigilance and readiness.

“All that has already been done,” was the reply.

Night fell. Two machine gunners and a machine gun were captured in the 3rd Battalion’s sector. The prisoners reported that units of the 3rd Latvian Brigade were advancing, and that they had been ordered to move their machine guns as far forward as possible. The Latvian attack was reported to HQ, whose response was, “send the prisoners immediately”.

A report came from the commander of the 11th Company, Lieutenant Semenyushkin: “The Latvians are advancing. 30 prisoners have been taken. The companies are retreating to the crossing.”

Suddenly the telephone connection with the 1st Battalion was interrupted. There was deafening gunfire and the whole area was lit with glowing rockets, dimly visible through the veil of rain. Suddenly machine-gun *dvukolki*, with men of the 1st Battalion piled on, galloped up to the 3rd Battalion’s crossing. They reported that the Reds had attacked their crossing and taken it. They did not know where their battalion had headed to.

Finally the Latvians approached and machine guns opened fire. The battalion retired behind the crossing. Latvians scattered on the bridge were mowed down by the fire of the Officer Company.

The battalion commander decided not to linger at the hamlet near the crossing, but to withdraw the battalion two kilometres back to Zakromskiy.<sup>54</sup> The Officer Company brought up the rear. Everyone was nervous. Then suddenly, after the Latvians had occupied the hamlet and illuminated it with rockets, the companies saw men running at them from the left ... They fled from the road in panic. The first to be brought back to order was the Officer Company, and that by drastic measures. The running men turned out to not be Latvians, but the ranks of the 1st Battalion, who had crossed the shallow and not very wide river at some point and then ran “as far as the eye could see”. The Latvians did not pursue. The thirty captured Latvians escaped during this, of course.

On 12 (25) October during the night and morning the 1st Battalion reassembled. It appeared to have lost no more than 50 men, while the 3rd had only had three wounded. The losses were negligible in the situation the battalions had faced. But the blow to morale that they suffered was enormous.

A phone line was established from regimental HQ to the 3rd Battalion. The regiment commander called the battalion commander on it.

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<sup>54</sup> Zakromskiy Khutor, 52.64°N, 35.74°E. (My guess is that the bridge was at 52.67°N, 35.74°E.)

“What is the mood in the battalion?”

“Everyone is in a bad mood, from me down,” was the answer.

“A battery is coming to you: a four-gun, reserve battery of the 3rd Division. Its commander, Colonel Dumbadze, went to reconnoitre the area himself.”

In the afternoon the Latvians attacked on the right, at the positions of the 1st Battalion. Colonel Dumbadze saw this and had already set up his battery in position.

“Nonsense, not an offensive,” he said.

But an order came from the regimental HQ to withdraw. Colonel Dumbadze telephoned the HQ: why was he even here? And the order was cancelled. The 1st Battalion halted the Latvians, and the Black Sea Horse squadron attacked and took ten men prisoner, without the battery firing even one shot. In the evening the battery was recalled back to the regiment.

The night of 13 (26) October passed quietly, and there was only a small skirmish during the day. In the evening, in view of the general situation, the battalions were withdrawn to Dyach'e, leaving six companies in front of Zinov'eva.<sup>55</sup> The 2nd Battalion, which had arrived by this time, having been with the *Kornilovtsy*, halted in Karas'kovo.<sup>56</sup> Both points on the north side of a small tributary of the Oka.

The day of 14 (27) October was cold. Snow had fallen. A Kornilov regiment arrived at Dyach'e, forming a detachment with the 3rd Markov under the command of Colonel Peshnya, deputy commander of the Kornilov Division. The detachment was given the sector from the Oka along its tributary to the main road from Fatezh to Orël, inclusive.

In the morning of 15 (28) October the Latvians attacked Zinov'eva and Karas'kovo and occupied them. The battle lasted all day at Zinov'eva.

The *Markovtsy* had to retreat across a river 70 centimetres deep and over two metres wide, as the bridge was under fire. The men were tired, hungry and soaked. The battalion commander ordered that a platoon from each company be sent to the nearest houses. It was already night.

“Your presence is required by the regiment commander,” reported an orderly to the battalion commander. The orderly brought Captain Pavlov to a group of men.

“Report to the detachment commander, Colonel Peshnya,” said Colonel Naumov and pointed to another group standing to the side.

A small man of small stature ... and that was all that could be seen in the darkness.

“Report on the battle!” The voice sounded weak, but dry. The report was short and then a calm, firm tone followed:

“Take the village back. Your four companies are enough. I give you two hours to prepare. Report on the performance.” Then he added, “In the village the battalion can be dry, rested and fed. Go on.”

Approaching Colonel Naumov, Captain Pavlov did not have time to say a word before he heard:

“I do not believe this attack will be successful!”

Turning round abruptly, he went back to the battalion. This was the only meeting during these battles between the battalion and regiment commanders.

The preparation for the attack took over three hours. It was carried out with a desperate frontal attack and an out-flanking move and was met by short bursts of two or three machine guns and a dozen or two rifle shots. The village was taken. An hour later several more shots were heard on the outskirts of the village. Two former officers were brought in – the commander of a Red battery and his assistant, but not the battery itself, because on hearing the shots it had galloped away. The battalion had to limit itself to a few

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<sup>55</sup> Now Mokhovoe, 52.54°N, 35.85°E.

<sup>56</sup> The modern Koros'kovo is somewhat south and east of the village of this time, which was 52.56°N, 35.94°E.





weak trophies: three machine guns, a few wagons and a dozen prisoners. But there were some others: dozens of pairs of shoes, some equipment and in every house a dinner ready to eat. All night long, lone men ran out through the village and hid in the darkness. The prisoners said that a battalion of Latvians and a training company, up to 700 men in all, had attacked the village. The battalion's losses in the defence had been about 30 men, but only two in the attack, one of whom was wounded with a bayonet in a skirmish outside by his own side.

From 16 (29) to 21 October (3 November) there was continuous fighting along on the whole front of the detachment. The Latvians tried to advance and the detachment tried to advance. The *Markovtsy* held, and it seemed that the Latvians were exhausted. But what surprised the *Markovtsy* was that their battalions operated in bits and pieces and were subordinate to Kornilov commanders, not to their own regimental commander.

Why? What had happened?

We did not find out at once. It turned out that the regiment's commander had been dismissed from his post by the detachment commander, and a *Kornilovtsy*, Lieutenant Levitov, had been appointed in his place. Moreover, the Kornilov and Markov battalions had been mixed up, ostensibly in view of the inefficiency of the 3rd Regiment. There were even two combined battalions, consisting of two companies of *Markovtsy* and two of *Kornilovtsy*.

Reacting to that combination Captain Pavlov replied: "I cannot have any trust with a battalion composed like that!" And he turned out to be right: while carrying out a task one night, two Kornilov companies deserted the battalion.

On 22 October (4 November) the 3rd General Markov Regiment was withdrawn to the reserve in Kursk. There was much to rejoice about.

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The regiment had many different impressions after the three-week initial trial. Rain, damp, mud, and then snow and frost ... battles both night and day, many sleepless anxious nights, some moments of extreme panic and some joy of success ... against a brave and daring enemy – the Latvians. But there was also a certain sense of their own strength. However, how do we know what the green *Markovtsy* thought about and experienced all this, and especially the withdrawal and abandonment of Orël?

The veterans treated everything in war as inevitable. The abandonment of Orël? A local tactical failure that could be corrected, and they thought would be corrected. But they were concerned about something else: the omissions, shortcomings, and major deficiencies in their regiment's leadership during the actions, which needed to be noted and eliminated immediately.

In the first days this task was put off while counting the losses suffered and receiving reinforcements. The losses were enormous – up to 500 men – a third of the regiment. Two machine guns had been lost, but more had been taken. They received a replenishment of 400 men, which allowed the companies to increase to 80 bayonets. Training began, but again without any participation from the regimental headquarters. If its participation is not important in training the companies, it was essential for the preparation of the leadership in battle. The gross shortcomings in the past battles were quite obvious, and yet they were not explained nor any attempt taken to eliminate them. Questions were raised, but the HQ avoided them. Their past experience was deliberately not taken into account. As a result, there was no mutual understanding nor trust between HQ and battalion commanders. There was only formal communication, no proper linking. The leaders who bore the responsibility, felt anxious about the future.

### **The General Markov Division**

After the capture of Kursk the regiments making up the Volunteer Corps' 1st Division were the three Kornilov, two Markov, one Alekseev and the Black Sea Horse. The 3rd Markov and 2nd Alekseev Regiments were being formed at that time. It was operating in two separate areas: around Orël and then around Eletsk. It was time to divide it, as had been decided earlier, into two divisions – the Kornilov and Markov Divisions. That split was carried out after the capture of Orël.



General Timanovskiy was offered the Kornilov division, as the stronger (three regiments of four battalions and larger numbers). He refused, as he did not want to leave the *Markovtsy*. But he did not have to accept the Markov Division either: there were two regiments near Elets and the 3rd in the Orël area. He was temporarily appointed commander of the defence of Kursk and received at his disposal the 3rd Markov Regiment, which had been withdrawn to the reserve.

However, the situation over the following days not only prevented the 3rd Regiment from joining the 1st and 2nd Regiments but also required it to be sent to the front separately from them. The division could not unite, and General Timanovskiy found himself without his units and without a job. His wish to take command of the 1st, 2nd and Alekseev Regiments was not possible: they formed a detachment which had been successfully commanded by General Tret'yakov since the middle of September.

General Timanovskiy loaded the wounded and sick *Markovtsy* in Kursk into his train, travelled to Belgorod, and waited there.

The division was not able to assemble, even though all its component parts were ready: three regiments, an engineer company, an artillery brigade, and there was even a hospital train named for General Markov. It could have been a powerful force, but for a number of reasons beyond its control it could not assemble to become one. Nor could it add one of its batteries, which was assigned to the *Kornilovtsy*.

That unit deserves special mention. During the attack on Kursk, it was assigned to the *Kornilovtsy* as a two-gun battery. Its scouts captured one gun and put it into service. It received a fourth gun in Kursk. During the Orël offensive its scouts captured two more guns and they were also put into service, so becoming a six gun unit. During the subsequent offensive, alongside the Kornilov units, it scattered the Reds with its fire. As a result of that battle, the HQ of the 55th Rifle Division was captured, headed by former General Stankevich, brother of General Stankevich who had commanded the 1st Division in the Donbas before he died of typhus. It knocked out a Red armoured train. Then, on the initiative of the battery commander, Colonel Izenbek, the battery's scouts and some *Kornilovtsy* carried out a raid in which they captured a four gun battery, not only with a full horse teams but also with a full complement of officers. So it became a ten gun battery. However a few days later two of the guns were transferred to the Kornilov Artillery Brigade.

The battery's success was due to both the Kornilov units and its own ranks. The battery was called "the kindergarten" among the *Markovtsy* because it consisted exclusively of young men, partly cadets who had joined the Volunteer Army in Novocherkassk at the end of 1917 and were then promoted to officers. The young men were in that reserve battery to improve and expand their knowledge and acquire artillery skills. It is not known to what extent they mastered the knowledge necessary for an artillery officer, such as fan formation, but "the kindergarten" proved to be excellent in battle.

### Battles for Elets

The *Markovtsy* had no information about the situation on the other fronts or even in some sectors of their own division. They were unaware that Orël had been abandoned and that General Shkuro's corps had left Voronezh. They only knew that the Red Army had been reinforced at Elets and thought that if an offensive was inevitable, it would be better to pre-empt it with a counter-offensive. Besides, the city was not far away, and it was drawing them in.

And indeed, after four days of calm, on 5 (18) October, the 2nd Regiment went on the offensive. After a heavy battle on 8 (21) October, including facing a detachment of 600 sailors, they pushed the Reds back to the northern bank of the Sosna River, taking Talitsa-Eleetskaya Station<sup>57</sup> on the Gryazi – Elets line with their right flank. The regiment stretched along the river, with weak cavalry units of the Zemlyansk detachment to its right and rear along the Don River, and to its left, a 10-km gap to Chernava, which was unoccupied.

Meanwhile with the 1st Regiment, on 5 (18) October General Tret'yakov gathered his senior commanders and announced an offensive aimed at defeating the Reds concentrated in front of the regiment. Then it was

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<sup>57</sup> Modern Talitsa-Eleetskaya Station is in Talitsa, at 52.71°N, 38.72°E. However, that station is not on the Gryazi line, although it is on the Sosna River, and is very far north of Elets. I wonder if the writer has somehow confused stations and it refers to somewhere like modern Izvaly Station, 52.61°N, 38.70°E, which is at least on the Gryazi line and in line with the other unit positions mentioned in the text.



to work with the 2nd Regiment to take Elets. He explained the plan of operation and set its start for the next day. But before the meeting was over, a message arrived the Reds had taken Chernava. The offensive was postponed for a day so that the Alekseev battalion, supported by the 1st Markov Battalion, could restore the situation.

Chernava was captured on 6 (19) October and at nightfall the 1st Regiment took up its starting positions for the offensive, in the pouring rain. The 1st Battalion and the Alekseev battalion concentrated near Chernava, while the 2nd Battalion marched 12 km from Preobrazhen'e to Rakhmanino<sup>58</sup> to join the 3rd Battalion. The units were issued provisions for the whole day. The transports with ammunition stretched out from Livny and several carts got hopelessly stuck. The rain ruined the roads, although it had got much lighter as time went on.

The plan was that two battalions, with two guns each, were to set off from Chernava, defeat the enemy and occupy Afanas'evka<sup>59</sup> and Khmel'noe;<sup>60</sup> the other two battalions, with six guns, were to advance north from Rakhmanino towards the rail line, then turn east and reach Afanas'evka, which by that time should have been taken by the Alekseev battalion. These battalions were to raid the Red positions at least 35 km away. The foot scouts *komand* moved to Chernava as a reserve, while the commander's company and a horse *sotnia* were to secure the 30 km front, which had previously been occupied by three battalions.

On 7 (20) October, they began their mission. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions, under the command of Colonel Bleysh, scattered the enemy's guards and wedged themselves into their positions. Three kilometres to the left, in Leski,<sup>61</sup> a battalion of 300 bayonets was captured in its entirety. The reports from the scouts were concerning: the village of Troitskoe<sup>62</sup> ahead was occupied by large forces; two empty trains had passed from Rassoshnoe Station<sup>63</sup> to Elets, and two columns had left from there for villages on the other side of the railway. According to a peasant, the Reds had unloaded from two trains at Shatilovo Station<sup>64</sup> and left in the direction of Chernava.

In order not to get involved in a serious battle near Troitskoe, the battalions turned east. They advanced behind enemy lines, encountering weak resistance. But they had to take Chernik<sup>65</sup> by force. Hundreds were taken prisoner and sent south with a horse *sotnia* that had arrived from the Chernava River line.

They did not stop in the village, but after marching three or four kilometres, the battalions suddenly halted, and two companies turned back. It turned out that the Reds had surrounded the straggling ammunition wagons and the unit guarding it. The Reds were surprised by the return of the companies and another 300 prisoners were taken, along with six machine guns, twenty carts and three field kitchens with meals ready to go. The carts were released. The companies permitted themselves a short rest. Later, they were asked why they had gone back. They replied, "To have lunch."

The battalions, not expecting the companies to return, moved on and encountered strong resistance near Baranovo, but here too the Reds were defeated. Most of the enemy began to retreat south, but a smaller number went north-east towards Afanas'evka, only 10 km away. Night was falling. Our forces were exhausted.

We wanted to hurry to the objective, but artillery fire could be heard from the direction where most of the Reds had retreated. We needed to move towards the shooting.

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<sup>58</sup> Rakhmanovo, 52.64°N, 37.71°E

<sup>59</sup> The north-eastern end of what is now Afanas'evka, 52.58°N, 38.21°E.

<sup>60</sup> Khmelevoe

<sup>61</sup> Lesnoy?

<sup>62</sup> There are Troitskoe's at 52.49°N, 38.00°E and 52.50°N, 38.33°E and also Ivanitskoe-Troitskoe at 52.60°N, 38.26°E, but none of these appear to fit. I think it is Trostnoe, 52.705°N, 38.37°E.

<sup>63</sup> 52.78°N, 37.68°E

<sup>64</sup> 52.77°N, 37.80°E

<sup>65</sup> 52.58°N, 37.98°E



The battalions headed out on the main Chernava – Elets road. It was night and totally quiet. Contact was made with the *Alekseevtsy*, south of them, and also with General Tret'yakov. They were ordered to take Afanas'evka. No enemy was met along the way, but shortly after they arrived there a column of Reds entered the village. Without losing momentum, the *Markovtsy* crushed that column in the darkness, taking around 300 prisoners and several machine guns. Only now did they get a chance to rest, after seventeen hours of marching and fighting.

The regiment had accomplished its mission, although not entirely according to plan. The Alekseev battalion, which had occupied Afanas'evka during the day, was attacked by infantry and cavalry and was forced to retreat to Chernava under very difficult conditions, almost losing two guns. The artillery commander, Lieutenant Plotnikov, was killed while trying to rescue them.

The *Markovtsy* suffered minor losses, around 150 men, but the losses in the *Alekseevtsy* were serious. The artillerymen also suffered heavy losses: Captain Knyazev, Lieutenant Grachev and several soldiers were following their battery when they were caught by Red cavalry and hacked to death, except for one man who managed to jump over a fence. During the night the dead were brought to Chernava by the surviving soldier.

It appeared that the Reds had suffered a serious defeat: they had lost over 1,000 men taken prisoner from the 3rd and 42nd Rifle Divisions, as well as many machine guns. It seemed that Elets would be occupied soon. The 1st Regiment was ordered to attack the city, while the 2nd Regiment would advance on it from the east. The battalion of *Alekseevtsy*, having occupied Chernik, would support the attack from the left. Two platoons of scouts would secure the rear of the battalions around Afanas'evka.

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When the men rose before dawn on 8 (21) October they found fog had descended. The 1st Battalion advanced from Khmel'noe. On their way was the deep valley of the Vorgol River, which the Reds were positioned behind. The ravine is crossed with great difficulty. The Reds attacked from a forest on the right, but were repelled and the forest was occupied. Heavy fighting could be heard to the east, perhaps five kilometres away, where the 2nd Regiment was advancing. The battalion approached the city itself, only two or three kilometres away. Heavy and light batteries were firing at it. A strong counter-attack was repelled. The battalion reached the outskirts, but the Reds threatened on the right and there was no communication with the 3rd Battalion on the left. Time moved on.

The 3rd Battalion had advanced from Afanas'evka along the road south of the railway, driving the Reds from their positions along the Vorgol River. The city was close, but reports came in that the Reds were in their rear. The battalion turned back and encountered extremely stubborn resistance to its counter-attacks. Some 500-600 sailors from the Baltic Fleet were taken prisoner. It was impossible to break through, especially since the Reds were on the flank and bullets were flying into the rear from the direction of Elets. Night fell. In the situation there was only one option – to retreat in the only free direction, to the south. The 1st Battalion, near the city, also began to retreat at nightfall without waiting for the 3rd Battalion.

The 2nd Battalion had been given the task of out-flanking the city to the north-west along the main Chernava – Elets road, to assist the 1st and 3rd Battalions in capturing the city. It was a risky task: it was to penetrate deep into enemy territory and, when attacking the city, would have enemy to its rear. The battalion was assigned the four-gun 1st Battery.

The battalion knocked out the enemy's outpost from the railway crossing near Kazaki Station in the fog, then moved on. The fog dissipated quickly, and a clear panorama opened up lit by the rays of the rising sun: there was a hamlet in the undulating terrain, with Elets visible to the right, and enemy chains everywhere, pouring out of the farms and rushing to gather by the road. But the battalion's rapid movement prevented them from doing so. The Reds put up their first resistance near Kazaki village, were defeated and retreated to the north. The road turned sharply to the east, then to the south-east, towards the city. Leaving a company in Kazaki village, the battalion moved on.

In the bright autumn sunshine, the battalion saw a pretty picture: Elets and its railway station, with steam locomotives rushing around with an anxious hum, trains leaving for the north, and carts galloping across the fields. The battery's fire halted the trains. The target was close. The way was open for the battalion. But a



messenger arrived with a report that the Reds were advancing on Kazaki with large forces. The battery rushed back but were unable to stop the Reds. They took the village and the battalion was cut off from the road that it was taking.

Should they continue the advance on Elets with enemy in their rear? What might they encounter in the city? There is no communication with the other battalions. The battalion decided to retreat, seeking to reach the main road. It advanced, holding back the Reds to its right, with its supply train and batteries moving along tracks in the fields and even across the fields themselves. It crossed the valley of the Vorgol. Would the bridge hold the heavy guns? The Reds were pressing forward. Casualties were mounting, so that all the wagons and even the machine-gun *tachankas* were filled with wounded. The battalion fought its way out and reached the main road. It had been covered eight kilometres after it seemed that it was “curtains” for it.

On the right was a column of Red cavalry, but what lay ahead? Railway tracks were visible, with a chain on it. Whose side? Scouts galloped forward and were met with fire. But perhaps it was a case of “friends not recognising friends”? The enemy chain rose and moved towards the battalion, huge and dense. The two leading companies of the battalion scattered into chains, the others into the rearguard, followed by the enemy. The battery took up a position and opened fire with high explosive.<sup>66</sup> Four guns with 12 shells per gun gave 48 shells in under two minutes. The companies moved forward. On the track was another enemy chain, and again the battery fired at a narrow section of their line to create a breach. The Reds scattered. The companies on the railway line turned their front – one facing one direction, the other in the other, so that they covered the road along which the wagons and battery were galloping, under fire from both sides. There were many killed and wounded: the battery alone lost six horses, two men killed and four wounded. After crossing the line, the battery opened fire again. The battle ended at night, when all the companies had withdrawn.

It was 3-4 km to Afanas'evka. But who would they find there? Horsemen sent out reported that a column was approaching from the west. The battalion went round the village to the east. A battle began behind them; presumably the Reds were fighting themselves. At midnight the battalion stopped in Korotkoe,<sup>67</sup> finally establishing contact with the rest of the regiment.

What had happened the previous day became clear. At the same time as the regiment had attacked the city in the morning, Red Army reserves stationed to the west had also attacked. They had pushed back the Alekseev battalion near Chernik and attacked the two platoons of scouts near Afanas'evka, forcing them to retreat south with a loss of 60 men out of 100. Leaving some of their forces near that village, the Red sailor detachment then encountered the retreating 2nd Battalion and then followed the 3rd Battalion, striking at its rear. Two days of fighting and 60 kilometres of marching had exhausted the Markov Regiment. It had lost 400 men.

On 9 (22) October the Reds tried to build on their success. The sailors advanced towards Khmel'noe, but failed to take it and so headed for Elets. By the end of the day all the regiment's battalions had retreated almost to the very outskirts of Chernava.

The next day the Reds advanced again. They were thrown back several kilometres by counter-attacks.

During those days the nights saw thick fog, which lasted for many hours. Partly as a result of this, enemy movements remained unobserved, but it mainly because the regiment was missing its horse *sotnia*, which had been left observing a 30-km section to the west. This explained the total failure of the attack on Elets.

But the 2nd Regiment was also advancing on Elets. It was 20 km east of the 1st Regiment and had to keep two companies to secure its right flank at Talitsa Station and two companies to secure its left flank. It could only advance with nine companies, which was a weak force.

On 8 (21) October, while the 1st Regiment was advancing on the city, the 2nd Regiment repelled an attack by the Reds from the southern bank of the Sosna River and reached 4-5 km from the city.

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<sup>66</sup> The Russian has “Byzantine” shells, whatever they are.

<sup>67</sup> The south-western end of what is now Afanas'evka, 52.57°N, 38.18°E.



The next day, when the 1st Regiment was fighting off the Reds, having already retreated from the city, the 2nd Regiment fought its way across the Sosna River. Its left flank, south of the city, met stubborn resistance from the sailors; the centre approached the city but, coming under attack from the left, halted; the right flank did not encounter serious resistance. It was foggy and the regiment was spread out in a wide fan shape, making communication difficult.

Ensign Serbinov's machine-gun platoon, tasked with securing the right flank, approached a group of houses.

A Red Army soldier came out of the house and asked, "Which regiment are you?"

They replied, "The Second."

"I don't get it! Everyone is running away. They say the Whites have broken through to the rear," he said

Then he went into the house, followed by Serbinov and two of his men. There were several people there. The man who had come out before picked up the telephone, reported the situation to someone, and then, after listening for a while turned around:

"We have orders to hold back the Whites! The 61st Division is coming to help."

Only then did the machine gunners reveal who they were and, taking the telephone and prisoners, they returned to their unit.

The fog cleared and as visibility increased, machine gun, rifle and artillery fire intensified. The threat to the regiment's left flank from the sailors became increasingly plain. There was no possibility of regrouping the companies. The orders were to hold out until evening and then retreat across the river, holding the crossings.

On 10 (23) October, having reinforced its left flank, the regiment returned to the offensive. The sailors on the left flank began to retreat after a bayonet attack, stopping at a position prepared and occupied by their reserves. (Its detachment which had been fighting against the 1st Regiment had returned to them). The regiment's centre again neared the city, which was defended by two or three Communist regiments. They took the freight station, but then encountered barricades. On the right flank, which had been decreased in strength, the regiment's chains suddenly encountered an advancing mass of a brigade from the 42nd Rifle Division, which moved forward with a shout of "ura!" but lay down under fire.

The fog was clearing. The Reds' heavy and light batteries rumbled. The *Markovtsy* awaited the enemy's attack. In a rare move, they took the machine guns from the *tachankas* and placed them on the ground.

The sailors attacked, now with almost 1,000 bayonets. They advanced systematically, running in short bursts, encircling the left flank. The *Markovtsy* began to retreat. A *tachanka* that had raced in to provide support fell silent: two machine gunners had been killed, and the horses shot.

The order was given to retreat across the river. The sailors followed directly behind. The two companies in Talitsa Station were withdrawn to provide extra support.

From 11 to 13 (24 to 26) October it was foggy and the first snow fell. The Reds tried to build on their success. Heavy fighting took place near the villages of Kazinka, Pushkari<sup>68</sup> and Golubevka. The *Markovtsy* fought desperately, launching counter-attacks. Initially they could not withstand the sailors, whose formidable chains advanced with wild yelling, but they quickly regrouped, counter-attacked, and the sailors broke, fleeing across the river in search of salvation. The regiment took heavy losses. Its commander, Colonel Morozov, and Colonel Kudrevich were wounded. Captain Obratzov took command of the regiment.

At this time, the newly formed 1st Officer Company, with 150 officers, arrived at the regiment.

The situation for the regiment was becoming threatening: the Reds were already in the rear, on their way to Kastornoe. During the night the regiment withdrew by battalions to Chernava, not to the south, but to the west.

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<sup>68</sup> Now Arkhangel'sk 52.56°N, 38.61°E.



There were continuous skirmishes in Chernava fought by the 1st Regiment's three battalions and the Alekseev battalion: the Reds would advance each morning in the fog, but were always repelled by the end of the day. The 1st Battalion was tasked with conducting a raid on the nearby enemy rear, but failed to carry out the order due to thick fog. Captain Popov received a repeat order. The next morning his battalion and two guns moved up hidden by the fog, scattered the enemy's guards and the units in the hamlets. In Baranovo it scattered the enemy before its units could form up, capturing prisoners, some of the baggage train, an entire military band, and a cavalry brigade's standard. The battalion was given a short rest. The captured band played for them.

Two hours later the battalion moved on, sending its trophies and prisoners to Chernava. It turned right and headed for Afanas'evka. There were some minor skirmishes and then more serious ones with cavalry. It was the afternoon before the fog dissipated somewhat. The Reds fled from Afanas'evka. The battalion was now behind the Reds, almost 10 km from the front line.

Night fell, and the fog returned. The battalion packed in tightly: guarding itself on all four sides. All night long, it was attacked by groups of Red cavalry. Those captured were locked in barns: there were hundreds of them. They said that their units were scattering. In the morning fog the battalion set off back along roughly the same road. This time it had to face deployed infantry in battle. It had left the prisoners in the barns. The battalion safely rejoined the regiment.

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A captured commissar gave interesting testimony about the morale of the Soviet 42nd Rifle Division.

The division had been at full strength and preparing to go on the offensive near Elets. Commissars and political officers had daily conversations with the Red Army soldiers, convincing them of the imminent and inevitable victory over the Whites and that the war would soon be over. One of the arguments was that the Whites lacked numbers and were suffering heavy losses, which they could not make up, since no-one wanted to serve in the White Army, whereas the Red Army's forces were constantly growing. The mood in the Reds seemed to be becoming more cheerful. But as soon as the "black-shoulderboards" began their offensive, the cheerfulness instantly disappeared and panic set in. The Whites seemed to be everywhere. Companies and battalions quickly dispersed or surrendered. Reinforcements arrived continuously, but they too were infected with fear. The command was forced to take harsh measures and include fresh battalions from the rear into the regiments, to replace those that had scattered.

Even if the command managed to force its units to fight, those units always suffered huge losses. For a Red Army soldier, being wounded was a welcome escape from a war that was meaningless to him. The captured soldiers admitted that they fought against their will and felt helpless, as the daring actions of the "black-shoulderboards" froze their thinking and willpower.

As for the *Markovtsy*, they held out despite a week of desperate fighting, despite their significantly reduced numbers, and despite the reduction in hours when they could rest. The warm and dry weather had passed, during which it had been possible to lie down on the ground during battles and guard duty. Now it was wet and cold, and impossible to lie down. The food supplies were also poor – the units were always on the move. For days on end the kitchens did not reach them with bread, and when they did, the soldiers had to be happy with both the mash from the kitchen and stale, soggy bread. No matter how well disposed the peasants were towards the Whites, what could they give them?

Morale was no longer what it used to be. No one talked or thought about a drive on Moscow. But the mood was firmly at the level required to hold back the enemy, regardless of the difference in size between the forces.

### **Defending Livny Again**

The fighting continued without interruption.

On 12 (25) October, the Reds launched an attack on Livny, on the left flank of the 1st Regiment, where only the 250 bayonets of the commander's company and some of the horse *sotnia* were stationed. The attack was carried out with large forces, but sluggishly: it was held back by fog and, it would seem, the threat of a flank attack by the *Alekseevtsy*.



On 13 (26) October, a scout *komand* rushed to the aid of the commander's company, and Colonel Bleysh arrived. He said, "Not another step!" and took command of the battle himself.

All the battalions were fighting at Chernava that day, and only at night was the 2nd Battalion withdrawn to urgently move along the Chernava River to strike the left flank and rear of the enemy advancing on Livny. Before dawn on 14 (27) October the battalion passed through the villages of Prechisteno and Gnilovody and encountered a column of Reds near the village of Preobrazhenka, pushing it north across the river, but was immediately forced to engage in battle with another column that had occupied Gnilovody.

The situation on the regiment's front was now dire. Having repelled the Red Army's attack at dawn near Chernava, the 1st Battalion rushed to fulfil the 2nd Battalion's mission. But it encountered a third enemy column near Prechisteno and had to take that village by combat.

At dawn of 15 (28) October, when the Reds attacked, it advanced under artillery fire to carry out its task without entering combat and, under fire, reached to near Gnilovody, where the 2nd Battalion was fighting. By the afternoon it had made it to Prilepy. It could hear fighting from the direction of Livny, but the situation there was completely unknown to it. However, the Reds advancing on that town were now aware of the threat to their rear and began to retreat, then lost order and started to flee. They were pursued by the commander's company, scout *komand*, horse *sotnia*, and part of the 1st Battalion, which had only just begun to get its bearings. Up to 600 men from a brigade of the 3rd Rifle Division were taken prisoner.

During three days of fighting the commander's company, under the command of Captain Shevchenko and the leadership of Colonel Bleysh, had retreated 12-15 kilometres, putting up stubborn resistance. It lost 117 of its 250 bayonets,.

The 2nd Battalion, left by themselves at Gnilovody, fought back in difficult circumstances, surrounded by cavalry. It was rescued by the 3rd Battalion, which arrived from Chernava. But both were forced to retreat under pressure from three enemy columns: the 2nd Battalion to Kozmodemyanskoe,<sup>69</sup> the 3rd to Khmelevaya. The 3rd Battalion was pursued relentlessly by infantry and cavalry, and at night it was surrounded and attacked in the village. It was rescued by the 2nd Battalion, but barely 100 of its bayonets made it to Kozmodemyanskoe.

The *Markovtsy* front was broken.

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The battalions of the 1st Regiment were leaving Chernava when the 2nd Regiment arrived there.

The lead battalion arrived in the village on 14 (27) October and immediately took up position on the northern outskirts. The Alekseev battalion immediately moved south to secure the rear: the Reds were now advancing south along the eastern bank of the Olym River.<sup>70</sup>

At that point General Tret'yakov's front line stretched from Kastornoe Station, where the Markov Engineer Company was stationed with two guns, north along the Olym River to Chernava, from where it turned west to the intersection of the Livny to Verkhov'e rail line – a distance of around 100 km.

The village of Chernava is divided into two parts by the Sosna River – eastern and western; the western part is then divided by the Sosna's tributary, the Chernava, into northern and southern parts. The position of the regiment's 2nd Battalion was cut by the Chernava.

On 15 (28) October the Reds moved out of a nearby forest and attacked the right flank of the battalion. The enemy suffered heavy losses crossing the flat, open field and retreated. After intensifying their artillery fire, they attacked again. The infantry lay down, but then a cavalry *lava* came out of the forest, which reached the outskirts of the village, followed by the infantry. The officer company on the right flank, found itself cut off from the bridge. Some of them broke through, some managed to cross the swampy river, but 50 officers were either killed or missing.

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<sup>69</sup> Koz'minka, 52.45°N, 37.78°E

<sup>70</sup> Directly to the south of Chernava.



The situation was restored by a counter-attack carried out by wading across the river, but the battalion lost around 125 men.

Another attack on the battalion was expected for the next day, to surround the left flank, but it did not happen: the Reds would have had to walk over the bodies of their wounded and dead, which were still lying in the fields.

Instead they advanced from the east towards two battalions that had retreated to Sloboda<sup>71</sup> after a series of clashes with the enemy, trying to block their retreat. The Reds broke into the eastern part of the village, but they managed to capture only some of it and push several companies southward 5-6 km to the crossing near Butyrki, which the companies held.

On 17 (30) October, contrary to expectations, the enemy remained passive. It was the “calm before the storm,” and the expected onslaught weighed heavily on everyone’s minds. Everyone zealously cleaned their rifles, machine guns, and artillery and shod the horses.

The peasants said that the Reds were bypassing the settlement to the west. The conclusion reached was that the 1st Regiment had retreated. That was very alarming. But only in the evening did an order come: at nightfall the regiment was to leave the settlement and move to Kastornoe Station in two days. That was 60 kms!

The order shocked everyone. What was this? A retreat? They refused to believe it.

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<sup>71</sup> Sloboda-Zarech'e, 52.52°N, 37.97°E.



## Withdrawal

The Volunteer Corps' situation was critical. The Red command had set the task of crushing it – pincering between a strike force from the west and Budënný's cavalry corps from the east. The latter's offensive had been very successful. General Shkuro had retreated before the overwhelming forces of Red cavalry. The Terek Division was taken from him and sent to suppress Makhno's growing uprising in the rear. Budënný was nearing Kastornoe, located more than 50 km south of the *Markovtsy's* right flank. This threat forced General Tret'yakov to quickly withdraw the 2nd Regiment there.

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During the night of 18 (31) October the 2nd Regiment, which had lost about 500 men in the battles at Elets and Chernava, marched in two columns: the battalions moved along the Olym River; and the artillery with the supply train a little further west. The Reds were on the eastern bank of the river. The Alekseev battalion, which was securing the rear, marched to join its regiment.

The bad weather, difficult roads and numerous ravines slowed down the march. Men had to harness themselves to the guns and wagons. It wasn't until the end of the third day that one battalion arrived at the station, and it was the fourth day before the entire regiment made it. The engineer company and its guns were already firing at enemy cavalry units approaching from the north.

The Reds were active across the detachment's entire front. Orders were given. The 2nd Regiment was to hold the Kastornoe Station area at all costs. The 1st Regiment was to hold back the enemy on a line from Veselaya<sup>72</sup> on the Olym River to Koz'modem'yanskoe,<sup>73</sup> sending one battalion to Nikol'skoe<sup>74</sup> on the Olym River, 20 km north of Kastornoe. The Alekseev Regiment was to hold the Livny area. The retreat routes were: 1st Regiment, between the Olym and the Kshen' Rivers; the Alekseev Regiment, between the Kshen'<sup>75</sup> and Tim Rivers, on both sides of the Marmyzi – Livny rail line.

On 17 (30) October the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment, after a major success north of Livny, was surprised by an unexpected order to march to Nikol'skoe, where it arrived on the fourth day, the 2nd Regiment having just been there. The 2nd Battalion moved to the right to occupy from Veselaya to the Sosna River. The 3rd Battalion and its teams remained in Koz'modem'yanskoe.

The 2nd Battalion, having set out, soon encountered a column of Red infantry marching south. It scattered it and immediately learned that another column had already passed by. The battalion followed and scattered it near Lipovchik.<sup>76</sup> After spending the night there, it moved on to Veselaya, which had already been occupied by the enemy. Two companies led the attack and soon pushed the Reds back beyond the Olym. But then another column of Red infantry arrived from the north and started deploying behind the battalion. The fighting became so intense that it was necessary to call in reinforcements from Veselaya, first one company, then the other, to assist the two companies engaged in combat. The Reds who had retreated across the river reoccupied the village.

Only thanks to the exceptional support of the glorious 1st Battery were the Reds pushed back, and the battalion was able to advance to Lipovchik. But the Reds were already there. Not risking an attack with the enemy close behind, the battalion turned south to Krugloe,<sup>77</sup> where it arrived during the night. But after a thirty kilometre march it could not even rest there: the Reds had crossed the Olym south of Veselaya and were nearby. Seeing that the battalion's mission was unachievable its commander, Captain Marchenko, led it west to Parnyy Kolodez'. There it was closer to the 3rd Battalion, with which, like the regiment HQ, it had long since lost contact.

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<sup>72</sup> 52.35°N, 38.0°E.

<sup>73</sup> Koz'ma-Dem'yanovskoe, 52.02°N, 37.63°E.

<sup>74</sup> 51.94°N, 38.17°E (not the one at 52.30°N, 37.67°E)

<sup>75</sup> More or less directly south of Livny.

<sup>76</sup> Just south of modern Okunev Gory at about 52.36°N, 37.96°E.

<sup>77</sup> The one at 52.33°N, 37.98°E.



19 October (1 November) passed quietly, and the battalion rested a little.

On 20 October (2 November), the Reds took Livny. The *Alekseevtsy* and the 3rd Battalion withdrew to the south. The detachment's line was now significantly levelled out and shortened. The 2nd Battalion was ordered to take Krugloe, where it had been the day before yesterday.

There were no Reds in the village, but before it had time to set up guards, new orders came to drive the enemy out of Parnyy Kolodez', which it had just left. No sooner had the battalion gathered to advance than the enemy launched an energetic attack. We repelled it for many hours and had to start conserving ammunition. Nevertheless, the Reds were unable to take the village. Night fell and the battalion pondered what to do? Carry out the orders several hours late? There was no communication with regiment HQ. The enemy was approaching from three sides. Captain Marchenko decided to withdraw the battalion south to Trubitsyno.<sup>78</sup>

There seemed to be no-one there. The battery, the wagon train and the wounded approached the village. Suddenly, a *lava* rushed out. The battery's machine guns opened fire and a company rushed forward. The Reds disappeared into the darkness, but not before killing three men. The village was in ruins, it was impossible to stay there. And just then an order arrived for the battalion to move to Navesnoe, where transport with ammunition was waiting for it. Upon arriving there the battalion felt very uneasy.

Night fell and guards were posted on three sides. It was past midnight when suddenly the Reds attacked. There was almost no resistance. In complete disorder the *Markovtsy* were scattered and mixed up, rushing out of the village. The battery raced out through the courtyards then, after crossing the ravine, it fired several shots, and became the centre around which everyone began to gather. The battalion retreated three kilometres to the west. The 5th Company was missing. It was cut off and needed to be rescued, so Captain Alabovskiy took temporary command of the battalion and led it back to Navesnoe. The Reds were in turn taken by surprise. Around hundred men were taken prisoner, two machine guns were captured, the carts with ammunition were recaptured, and the 5th Company was found. There was general excitement and joy. Only 25 men from the battalion were missing.

From the morning of 21 October (3 November), the battalion repelled the Reds from two sides throughout the day.

On 22 October (4 November) there wasn't even an hour's sleep before it received orders to retreat south to Gatishche, where new orders awaited it to move on to Yurskoe. The rest of the day passed quietly.

That night was not quite normal, as gunfire could be heard to the north. "Were our side behind the Reds?" But a communications officer who arrived from the regiment HQ reported that it was peasants who did not want to remain with the Reds and were fighting their way to the Volunteer Army. The orders from HQ were to keep that in mind and not to fire on them. It was also reported that over the past few days, the 3rd Battalion, with the commander's company and scout *komand*, had been holding back the Reds in heavy fighting. In one of these battles they had inflicted heavy losses on the Reds, but had also suffered considerable losses themselves. They had had to provide assistance to the *Alekseevtsy*.

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The peasants made their way south individually and in groups, some in hundreds. How many were there? Well, the 3rd Battalion replenished its losses with them. Over three days about 400 men arrived at the 1st Battalion, which was stationed by the Olym River. They were not just leaving, but came to fight their enemy. They asked to be enlisted and given weapons. But they were only accepted based on the number of rifles available. It was very sad to refuse them. "Why wasn't mobilisation carried out in a timely manner?" said the *Markovtsy*. "The Reds carried it out in the frontline zone. And how we needed reinforcements, especially such loyal ones!"

All night long on 23 October (5 November) peasants made their way to the 2nd Battalion's position. It spent the whole night in a state of tension, cold and hungry. And in the morning, the Reds advanced.

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<sup>78</sup> About 52.30°N, 37.90°E.



A cavalry regiment began the attack, followed by infantry attacks from the north and east. By evening, the cavalry was hanging around in the south. Once more there was no communication with the regiment HQ. Night fell. Everyone's nerves were stretched to the limit – they had to remain on full alert. It was cold. The battalion was not able to sustain a night attack and it was withdrawn to the west, to the Kshen' River, to Ol'shanka,<sup>79</sup> to the rear of the 3rd battalion.

The 2nd Battalion had covered a total of 10 kilometres, but the horses could barely pull the carts and guns. When they arrived in the village, everyone fell asleep as if dead.

A report on the battalion's retreat was sent to the regiment headquarters via an artillery officer, who returned with orders for the battalion to take Yurskoe.

For the first time, HQ's orders were subjected to merciless criticism [among the officers]. The actions of the regiment HQ seemed incomprehensible from any point of view. Even disregarding the extreme exhaustion of the men, who were lacked proper clothes, without shoes, and had not received hot food for three days, the offensive was completely senseless due to the lack of shells and ammunition, and with no sensible plan. Having received the combat orders, an officer asked the adjutant to explain the main objective of the attack and, in general, what goals the battalion was supposed to achieve. The response was: "There is only one goal: to fight!"

When the officer conveyed the orders and the ensuing conversation to the battalion commander, the latter immediately went to HQ himself and returned with a supply of shells and ammunition, part of the foot scout *komand* – and the same orders. The battalion was put on alert.

Over 400 peasants who had passed through the Red Army's positions watched a battalion of 350 bayonets being formed. The *Markovtsy* also watched them. "This is a whole battalion of ready fighters!"

On 24 October (6 November) the battalion moved, deployed slowly and attacked the enemy sluggishly at the crossing, reaching Yurskoe by noon. The Reds abandoned it and headed south.

The night of 25 October (7 November) was extremely restless: the Reds were expected from all sides. But they only began to advance at noon and by evening had not been able to take the village. Night came again. The situation was dire. An orderly rode up on a foaming horse, having narrowly escaped capture by the Red cavalry, with orders to retreat to Zamaraika, 15 km to the south.

Arriving there on 26 October (8 November), that village turned out to be occupied by the Reds. At dawn, the battalion attacked it, but it was not a real attack, but rather a slow "creep" of people exhausted by fatigue and sleeplessness. The battle was fierce and difficult. The village was taken, but there was no time to rest: the battalion was ordered to march east to Bogdanovka,<sup>80</sup> 10 km away. It was difficult to wake up the sleeping men.

Halfway there, a new order came: to go to Golitsyno,<sup>81</sup> which meant returning almost from where they had been. More than 10 km had been travelled in vain. By evening, they reached the village, but two hours later they were already marching another 6-7 km west across the Kshen' River to Urusovo.<sup>82</sup> Everyone fell into a deep sleep without even touching their bread. This time, the battalion was lucky: they had six hours sleep before the next morning, 27 October (9 November), marching east again, crossing the river, and driving the enemy out of a number of hamlets, before returning. Then an hour later they were ordered to drive the enemy out of the hamlets again, engaging in serious combat near Novye Vyselki,<sup>83</sup> which they took. They stopped for the night in Platavets. But in what condition?

By evening the battery's horses were so exhausted that some of them lay down on the ground in protest, and there was no strength left to lift the poor animals and force them to pull the

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<sup>79</sup> Vyshnee and Nizhnee Ol'shanoe, 52.14°N, 37.69°E.

<sup>80</sup> Bogdanova, 52.06°N, 37.94°E.

<sup>81</sup> About modern Kshen' village, 52.05°N, 37.77°E.

<sup>82</sup> Modern Znamenskoe, 52.02°N, 37.69°E

<sup>83</sup> Presumably Mikhayloanneskie Vyselki, 51.98°N, 37.75°E.



heavy guns through the icy mud. A frost came that night. With it came new challenges for the battery: the horses slipped, often falling on the descents and ascents. Some of them bruised their knees so badly that they had to be unhitched and replaced with riding horses.

If the enemy had attacked that night, they could have easily captured the entire battalion. A report was sent to headquarters, stating decisively and firmly that the battalion was unable to move.

On that day the 3rd Battalion repelled an attack on Kobyl'e,<sup>84</sup> pursuing the enemy for 10 km. It was then attacked on its right by some cavalry, which almost captured the battery, but it repelled the attack and returned to its original positions.

28 October (10 November) was an exceptionally quiet day. The enemy did not bother either the 2nd or 3rd Battalions. Only the 1st Battalion, which had been standing quietly for nine days at the crossing over the Olym, was approached closely by the enemy.

On 29 October (1 November), the 1st Battalion moved to Verkhnee Bol'shoe.<sup>85</sup> The 2nd Battalion repelled the Reds. It was a difficult day for the 3rd Battalion and the commander's company. It was ordered to leave Kobyl'e and retreat south. But the Reds were already advancing in large numbers. The battalion retreated while fighting, delaying and launching counter-attacks. Suddenly, there was some disorderly movement in the commander's company's sector when the Reds were about 600 paces away – some of the company began to retreat, some remained in place, and some ran with their hands up towards the Reds. The Reds rushed forward. What had happened?

The company had been lying down in a chain and firing at the advancing enemy, when suddenly a platoon commander, Lieutenant Kritsman, ran in front of the platoon with a revolver in his hand shouting: "Drop your rifles! We surrender." The platoon's shooting began to die down. "Chain fall back!" commanded another platoon officer. Lieutenant Kritsman ran up and shot him at point-blank range. "We surrender!" he shouted. The Reds were 100-200 paces away. The company lost about 100 men and two officers were missing. It had about 80 bayonets left.

On 30 October (12 November) the enemy's attacks were repelled by all three battalions, but the infiltration between them forced them to retreat south.

On 31 October (13 November) the enemy continued its offensive. The 3rd Battalion found itself in a difficult position, attacked simultaneously by infantry and cavalry, but repelled the attacks. By the evening the regiment had withdrawn to the Kastornoe – Marmyzy – Kursk rail line: the 1st Battalion at Lachinovo Station,<sup>86</sup> the 2nd at Kshen' Station,<sup>87</sup> and the 3rd at Marmyzy Station.<sup>88</sup>

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In the period from 7 to 31 October the regiment was engaged in continuous combat: the attack on Elets became an active defence, and then from 13 October, it turned into a retreat of 17 days, the front line moving back 20 km, and then 25 km. Due to the difficult situation the *Alekseevtsy* faced, the Regiment was constantly moving to the left.

There were no more than 1,200 bayonets left in its ranks: there would not have been even 900 if it had not been for the replenishment by volunteer peasants. The regiment lost two-thirds of its strength from 7 to 31 October, some 2,000 men.

The losses, the harsh weather, the physical exhaustion, the low morale, the growing strength of the enemy, and the retreat led to some falling apart mentally. But who?

Lieutenant Kritsman had joined the regiment in Livny and was appointed a platoon commander in the commander's company. He was a Latvian, full of energy and will-power, an excellent officer. He commanded

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<sup>84</sup> Now Kalinovka, 52.04°N, 37.59°E.

<sup>85</sup> Modern Vyshnee Bol'shoe, 51.97°N, 37.86°E

<sup>86</sup> 51.80°N, 37.92°E

<sup>87</sup> In Kshenskiy, 51.85°N, 37.72°E.

<sup>88</sup> In Lenina, 51.87°N, 37.55°E.



his platoon excellently in the battles for Livny. And then a few days later he changed, killing an officer and perhaps two others, and persuaded his subordinates to surrender. Only now did people start talking about him, saying that he seemed to be a “dark personality.” But how can one determine a truly “dark personality” in a timely manner? Perhaps there were others like him in the regiment?

There was another case. A young man, also a recent recruit, serving in one of the companies. He was lively, intelligent, and had a secondary school education. He was assigned to the company commander’s communications unit. Then, having been sent to an outpost, he disappeared. Since the timing of each order in combat situations is strictly monitored, that was quickly noticed. Find him! Catch him! And he was located in front of the security line, almost under the Reds’ noses. The captured man justified himself by saying that he had lost his way. They searched him and found a notebook containing the names of his superiors, their characteristics, the names of townspeople in Livny, peasants who had spoken out in favour of the Volunteer Army, and so on. He confessed that he had served with the Reds and that he was supposed to leave his notes for the Reds.

When asked, “Why didn’t you carry out your orders exactly, but decide to finish your work and return to the Reds?” he replied that during his time in the Markov Regiment he had become so tired that he no longer had the strength to continue. That was absolutely true.

And again, as in the Kritsman case, people began to talk about that young man belatedly: how he did not inspire confidence, kept aloof, and even showed signs of a certain nervousness.

The conclusion was to increase vigilance. But how difficult that was in the circumstances of that time.

#### **On the Kastornoe – Kursk Rail Line**

Even before the 1st Regiment withdrew to the rail line, the Reds cut it off to the west near Shchigry. Thus General Tret'yakov's detachment found itself cut off from Kursk, deprived of direct communication with the Corps HQ to which it was directly subordinate. It seemed that communication would be restored, as the 3rd Regiment marched from Kursk to Shchigry, together with the Black Sea Horse, to form a detachment under Colonel Naumov, which also reported directly to General Kutepov. Thus all of the Markov regiments were stationed on this railway line together with the Alekseev and Black Sea Horse Regiments. Their front line was 100 km long. The *Markovtsy* believed that they had to hold that line at all costs and that the rail connection with Kursk would be restored.

The composition of General Tret'yakov's detachment was:

1st Markov Regiment — around 1,200 bayonets;

2nd Markov Regiment — around 1,400 bayonets;

Alekseev (reduced to two battalions) — around 800 bayonets;

Horse *sotnia* of the 1st Regiment — 150 sabres.

And that was all his forces. The engineer company was replaced in Kastornoe by the 2nd Regiment and left for Kursk on 2 (15) October.

The detachment faced the Soviets' 3rd and 42nd Rifle Divisions, an independent rifle brigade and a cavalry brigade, not counting the reserves – a sailor detachment and some other units.

#### **The Second Regiment**

On 22 October (4 November), the 2nd and 3rd Battalions took up positions on the northern and north-eastern outskirts of Kastornoe.

The next day small enemy cavalry units approached the village. It was clear that combat reconnaissance was being conducted. The sound of approaching artillery fire could be heard to the east. Captain Obratsov, the temporary regimental commander, rode around the battalions, saying:

Budënniy's cavalry corps, with up to 10,000 sabres and bayonets, is approaching Kastornoe. The regiment's task is to hold the station and village as a stronghold for Shkuro's corps. The fate of the White struggle is being decided here!



This was a significant statement, putting at stake not only the outcome of the local battles, but the entire White cause.

The *Markovtsy* took their commander's words totally to heart. They forgot their disappointment at the retreat and considered their new position a tactical manoeuvre dictated by the situation, which required them to help the *Shkurintsy*. This alone caused a surge of enthusiasm, as they remembered the days at Korocha when the *Shkurintsy* had helped the *Markovtsy*.

The Second Regiment got ready. They were super confident. The mood was more than good. Day and night, not caring about the bad weather, the activities went smoothly. All the commanders were in full contact with their subordinates.

On 24 October (6 November) the Reds were three or four km to the north-east and north of Uspenskoe<sup>89</sup> and Arkhangelskoe.<sup>90</sup> In the morning their infantry, supported by cavalry, launched an attack on the 2nd and 3rd Battalions which was repulsed. Even a surprise cavalry attack on Lieutenant Deludenko's company, stationed at the railway bridge two kilometres from the village, failed completely, although from the village, it seemed that the company was finished.

On the same day the first units of General Shkuro's corps approached Kastornoe. The companies of the 1st Battalion, stationed in reserve, watched them. A group of about a hundred horsemen with the emblem of a wolf's head rode by – it was General Shkuro with his staff and escort. Then several hundred more. All were wrapped in *bashlyks*,<sup>91</sup> scarves, and Kuban hats pulled down over their heads; in *burkas* that concealed their figures. Their only visible weapons were rifles. All were on thin, tired horses. There were only 30-40 horsemen in each *sotnia*. The Kuban Cossacks no longer had their former warlike appearance. Upon closer acquaintance, it turned out that their spirits were also greatly undermined. All this caused a feeling of anxiety among the *Markovtsy*, but there was confidence that the Cossacks would perk up when they felt their support.

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The 2nd Regiment was placed at the General Shkuro's disposal and joined General Postovskiy's infantry group, consisting of the Caucasian Rifle Regiment (400 bayonets), the 25th Smolensk Regiment (400 bayonets, formed in Voronezh from volunteers, mainly workers), and the Wolf Battalion (150 bayonets). The Zemlyansk detachment also joined the group (150 bayonets and 400 sabres). In total, the infantry group had around 2,750 bayonets and 400 sabres.

The group surrounded Kastornoe and the settlements adjacent to it to the east. The cavalry corps was positioned south of the village. General Shkuro also had four tanks and three armoured trains at his disposal. To the right was General Mamantov's cavalry corps.

The ratio of forces between the opposing sides for the decisive battle was of little interest to the *Markovtsy*: whatever it might be, a battle was still inevitable. For them the figure Captain Obratsov gave was just a number that could not change the situation.

But still, what were the forces on both sides?

Soviet sources give Budënniy's corps 7,500 sabres, about 200 machine guns and 26 guns. One source estimates the strength of the infantry assigned to Budënniy at around 5,000 bayonets. Among other things it mentions the continuous replenishment of the cavalry units. Soviet sources consider the strength of the White cavalry to have exceeded that of the Red. Meanwhile, White sources give 3,000 sabres in each corps for General Shkuro and General Mamantov, for a total of 6,000 sabres. According to one *Markovtsy* soldier who spoke with the *Kubantsy* about the strength of their corps-division (Budënniy talks of six regiments), he received the answer: "There aren't even 2,000 sabres."

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<sup>89</sup> Uspenka, 51.82°N, 38.23°E.

<sup>90</sup> Now Andreevka, 51.86°N, 38.17°E.

<sup>91</sup> See <https://pygmywars.com/rcw/barendspages/mountainhosts/mountaindress/mountaindress.html> for details on the terms used here.



25 October (7 November) was the anniversary of the October Revolution. The Red command wanted to mark the day by taking Kastornoe.

Dense infantry chains came out of Uspenskoe and Arkhangelskoe and advanced towards the 2nd and 3rd *Markovtsy* battalions. They were allowed to advance to 1,000 paces and then were forced to lie down by fire. The support of their two batteries was in vain. Standing up, the Red chains were able to run only 200-300 paces before lying down again. Our battalions could not take a passive stance: they charged the Reds. On the heels of the running enemy infantry, they broke into both villages and, reaching the opposite edges, encountered columns of Red cavalry, which attacked, but were scattered by fire. A second attempted attack also ended in failure. The Red infantry and cavalry retreated, covering the field and presenting excellent targets for the artillery. But the two artillery platoons had remained in their positions in Kastornoe: they had not expected a counter-attack. At night, both battalions were withdrawn to their original positions. Their losses were tiny.

On the same day the Red Army's offensive to the east was repelled with the help of the 1st Markov Battalion, which had arrived from the reserve. Here they met the 25th Smolensk Infantry Regiment. The *Smolentsy* complained about the Cossacks who, according to them, did not want to fight and retreated even in the face of weaker enemy. The Smolensk Regiment had been transferred from sector to sector to save the situation; they had had no rest and were exhausted to the limit. They were very happy to have the *Markovtsy* in reserve. In the evening, the battalion went back into the reserve.

The next day the Reds repeated their attack from the north, encircling the village from the west, but again without success. Once again the reserve battalion came to the aid of the *Smolentsy* and together they scattered and repelled the cavalry. The *Markovtsy* were delighted with the *Smolentsy*, who were few in number but strong in spirit. The *Smolentsy* and their artillery platoon reciprocated with the same praise. However a retreat by General Shkuro's cavalry units forced General Postovskiy to withdraw his units stationed east of Kastornoe back to the village and the settlements south of it.

The *Markovtsy* battalion went back into the reserve but less than an hour later it was hastily called to the station, along with an artillery platoon. Tired, cold, and wet, they loaded themselves into the carriages and, of course, immediately lit fires as the temperature was falling rapidly. The train set off towards Marmyshi without delay. Clearly, they had to "plug the hole" somewhere.

So General Postovskiy's group was reduced by 350 bayonets and two guns at this critical moment near Kastornoe. It had lost its reserve, and the 3rd Markov Battalion had to be withdrawn from its sector to the reserve, and its sector had to be taken over by the 2nd Battalion and the *Smolentsy*, thus lengthening their front.

From 27 to 29 October (9-11 November) the group's sector was quiet, but over those three days the rumble of battle could be heard to the south, where the Red cavalry was pressing the *Shkurintsy* and approaching Sukovkino Station.<sup>92</sup> General Postovskiy's infantry units held their positions, with the support of the Markov reserve battalion.

On 30-31 October (12-13 November), it was relatively quiet everywhere due to the extremely bad weather, but the reserve battalion and the weak cavalry brigade from General Postovskiy's group carried out a successful raid on Naberezhnaya Station.<sup>93</sup>

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The easing of combat operations in those days was caused not only by the terrible weather, but also because the Red command did not expect to capture Kastornoe using Budenny's corps alone and was waiting for the arrival from the north of the 42nd Rifle Division, which had been delayed by the actions of the 1st Regiment and the breakthrough by the peasants. The plan was to encircle the Kastornoe group.

However the situation of the Whites on the Kastornoe – Kursk front was tragic enough: it had already been broken through at Shchigry. General Tret'yakov's forces: the 1st Markov and Alekseev Regiments were too

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<sup>92</sup> The village is 51.67°N, 38.13°E, but the station may have been north of that.

<sup>93</sup> Naberezhnoe, 51.97°N, 38.12°E.



weak for the 30-km front they held. Even the arrival of the 2nd Regiment's battalion from Kastornoe did not ease the situation. A decision was made to send the Kastornoe group's last reserve to the combat zone – the 2nd regiment battalion and foot scouts *komand* – to occupy the area near Lachinovo Station, and to move the 1st Regiment battalion stationed there closer to Marmyshi.

On 1 (14) November the 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Regiment took up positions at Lachinovo and in nearby Uspenskoe.<sup>94</sup> So General Postovskiy's group had extended its front westwards by 10 km and lost its last reserves. Hopes were pinned on the support of the armoured trains.

The day passed quietly. Gunfire could be heard to the south. Snow fell. Night fell. Gunshots rang out from time to time in the distance. The *Markovtsy* were on edge: their nerves, spirit and willpower stretched to the limit. A fateful battle was inevitable.

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In the morning of 2 (15) November the ground was covered with falling snow. It was freezing cold and there was a light fog.

Those *Markovtsy* who were not on duty lay in a heap in their quarters. They were both asleep and awake at the same time. Someone quickly got up, shook himself, and looked out the window. It was dawn. "Get ready," he quietly said, either to himself or to everyone else. Everyone heard him, as no one was asleep. They began to get up. They talked about anything but what they were all expecting. It was quiet outside the house. For now, it was time to boil some tea and at least eat a piece of bread. The platoon leader entered. He saw that the men were already up and said "Be ready," before he left. They drank the tea and chatted, but each man went to his rifle, checked it and the cartridge belt hanging from it. The machine gunners bustled about the horses, which seemingly sensed that they would have to work and so hurried to eat.

It was getting light. Someone entered the room and said, "Shooting at the guard posts." Everyone waited for the order to leave.

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The battle flared up. Guns thundered. The Reds advanced in dense chains in two or three lines towards Uspenskoe and Lachinovo. All was quiet on the 2nd Battalion's sector.

The Reds advanced methodically, in order. The battalion's two guns could not fire on all the attackers across the frontage of many kilometres. When the machine guns began firing the Reds began to advance in short runs. The companies open fire when they were 1,000 paces away. The Reds scattered and lay down. Their commanders' efforts to raise them were in vain. The fire from their two batteries was also in vain. On the right the Reds broke through between the battalions, but the guns hit them in the flanks and they halted. On the left, they had already crossed the rail line, but they were being fired upon from behind by guns from Kshen' Station. When the *Markovtsy* launched a counter-attack, the entire Red Army hastened back. The battle lasted only three hours, and then silence fell.

But the thunder of battle grew louder and louder from the south.

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It was around 14:00 when the Reds launched another attack, this time on Kastornoe. Again they were unsuccessful. The *Smolentsy* repelled the attack, but fighting soon resumed in their sector.

At 16:00 an officer rode up to Captain Obratzov with a request to assist the Smolensk Regiment, as it was barely holding back the Red infantry's advance. Captain Obratzov sent his last reserve there, the Officer Company. Twenty minutes later another orderly reported that the *Smolentsy*'s front had been broken and was under attack by cavalry.

Captain Obratzov rode to that sector. On the streets he encounters *Smolentsy* soldiers running away. He stopped them and, with the help of the glorious officers of that regiment, organised a defence. Then he himself rode on, awaiting the arrival of the Officer Company. On one of the streets he came under fire from

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<sup>94</sup> Uspeno-Raevka, 51.83°N, 37.91°E



the Reds. His horse was killed just as some cavalymen attacked. Captain Obratzsov fired his revolver and fell to a sabre blow. His orderly managed to ride away.

The Officer Company found itself surrounded by the Reds in the centre of the village and, having no idea of the overall situation, began to retreat to the western outskirts. The commander of the 2nd Battalion, learning that the enemy was already in the village, began to withdraw his battalion along the western outskirts. He was followed by Red infantry and cavalry. The battalion fought back but would have been surrounded if the Officer Company had not left the village at that moment. The battalion and company began to retreat to the Old Kastornoe Station. The Reds were stopped by the fire of an armoured train supporting the retreating *Markovtsy*, *Smolentsy* and *Kavkaztsy*.<sup>95</sup> The village was taken by the enemy. Night fell.

After regrouping, General Postovskiy's infantry units took up positions covering the railway. The 2nd Battalion and the Officer Company were withdrawn to the reserve in Ozerki.<sup>96</sup> That battalion now had about 250 bayonets remaining. The total losses of the two battalions and two companies amounted to 300 men out of a total of 900.

The Reds had not achieved the slightest success on the left flank. They occupied the village in the centre. But they had considerable success on the right flank against General Shkuro's cavalry units: they pushed them westward, taking Sukovkino Station. By cutting the rail line they had cut off the retreat route to the south for the three armoured trains, but they had still not surrounded the infantry group.

### **The Final Battle at Kastornoe**

Captain Obratzsov's death and the heavy losses weighed heavily on the *Markovtsy*, but did not break their spirit. They were very concerned about the situation in the *Shkurintsys'* sector. However hope was not yet lost.

The night passed quietly, but no one could sleep. At dawn of 3 (16) November artillery started firing. The armoured trains fired rapidly. The Reds advanced from the direction of the village towards the 3rd Battalion and foot scouts *komand*, but were repulsed everywhere.

To the south, there was a battle of masses of cavalry. The day was clear and they could see manoeuvring *lavas*. The cavalry battle was still going on in the same place until after noon, but suddenly there was a fateful cry: "Our men are retreating!"

General Shkuro's units were falling back. However it did not appear that the enemy had won a clear victory: the guns of the three armoured trains were still firing; the attacks from Kastornoe village had not dislodged the infantry units; the 3rd Battalion was holding its ground; and the reserve – the 2nd Battalion and Officer Company – had not yet been moved.

In the second half of the day there were reports from the observation posts that "the *Shkurintsy* are retreating!" There were muffled explosions. The armoured trains were no longer moving or firing – they had been blown up by their crews. Some sparse chains began to leave the station with the tanks.

It was evening. The sky was covered with clouds and snow had begun to fall. The wind was picking up. Nothing could be seen anymore.

Messengers arrived at the Markov battalions with orders that the 3rd Battalion was to leave Lachinovo and move south to Soldatskoe,<sup>97</sup> while the 2nd Battalion was to move west to the Tim<sup>98</sup> area and report to General Tret'yakov.

The battalions' paths crossed, but they did not meet. The 2nd Regiment was scattered into its battalion.

### **General Tret'yakov's Detachment**

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<sup>95</sup> The Caucasian Rifle Regiment, the Russian for the Caucasus being *Kavkaz*.

<sup>96</sup> 51.77°N, 38.05°E.

<sup>97</sup> The one at 51.48°N, 37.89°E, a distance of about 35 km.

<sup>98</sup> 51.63°N, 37.12°E, 70 km WSW.





As the detachment withdrew from Livny its left flank had been under constant pressure from the Reds, who were pressing the Black Sea Regiment, which occupied the 30-km interval between the detachment and the Kornilovtsy. The detachment was still 30 km north of Marmyzhi when, on 26 October (8 November), the Reds occupied Shchigry, driving out the newly formed 2nd Alekseev Regiment and cutting off communication with Kursk. General Tret'yakov's detachment was supposed to restore communication and hold the front on the Kastornoe – Kursk line to the east, while Colonel Naumov's detachment was supposed to do so on the Kursk side.

General Tret'yakov had two regiments at that time: the 1st Markov and Alekseev, a total of five battalions on the front line stretching 30 km. These were insignificant forces, and on the night of the 27 October (9 November) a battalion of the 2nd Markov Regiment and two guns were sent to the detachment from General Postovskiy's group near Kastornoe. That same night the battalion arrived at Marmyzhi. General Tret'yakov gave it the task of driving the enemy out of Shchigry. The armoured train *General Kornilov* was sent to assist. "Extinguish the fires, as enemy attacks can be expected at every turn!" he added.

Shchigry was about 30 km away. The trains moved slowly, feeling their way. It was freezing and so fires still burnt in the carriages. The town appeared in the morning and greeted the trains with artillery fire. The companies immediately disembarked, launched an offensive and within an hour drove the Reds out, then repelled their counter-attack, taking up to a hundred prisoners and a machine gun.

Two trains with refugees from Voronezh were at the station. Never before had the *Markovtsy* experienced such a bad feeling, never before had their hearts ached so much as at the sight of these refugees, who had survived a day in Bolshevik captivity, robbed, insulted, raped, left in the cold and hungry. The trains carrying them were immediately sent to Kursk.

As soon as Shchigry was taken the armoured train was recalled to Marmyzhi. But less than an hour later a message arrived: it had crashed five kilometres from the city. The rails had been loosened and two observation carriages and one armoured carriage had derailed. The battalion commander, Staff Captain Perebeynos, immediately sent a company and prisoners there to lift the carriages. When the company reached the armoured train, it was already firing all its guns and machine guns at advancing Reds. The company repelled them, but not enough to prevent them from interfering with the work. There were casualties among the armoured train crew and prisoners. It was only with the arrival of the entire battalion, replaced by the 3rd Regiment battalion that had arrived from Kursk, that the Reds were repelled.

Efforts to put the armoured carriage back on the rails were in vain. It had to be pushed off the tracks, along with the two others, and only in the early morning did the shortened *General Kornilov* move on.

The battalion was ordered to return to Marmyzhi and, in order to prevent the Reds from reaching the rail line, the battalion began to load its train right there in the field, in a strong, cold wind. The delay was not caused by the loading of the *tachankas* and wagons, which were lifted onto the carriages by hand, but by the horses. Three sleepers and long ropes were used to load them. The horses had sacks thrown over their heads, were pushed over and dragged on the sleepers into the carriages. The men worked so hard that steam rose from them all. Fortunately, the battalion had handed over its two guns to the battalion of the 3rd Regiment. The Reds unsuccessfully tried to interfere with the loading. The train cautiously went to Marmyzhi with the hungry and frozen *Markovtsy*, from where it was sent to Dolgaya Station and unloaded. But the *Alekseevtsy* no longer needed help, and, having reloaded, it returned to Marmyzhi and then once again headed in the direction of Shchigry. However it unloaded after travelling only 10 km.

For five days it remained first near the rail line, then 12 km south-west of Marmyzhi in Mazhurovo, tasked with securing the detachment's left flank. It was assigned to the commander of the Alekseev Regiment and given a platoon of guns. The situation was tense: Red patrols roamed everywhere.

### The 1st Regiment

By the evening of 31 October (13 November), the 1st Regiment had retreated to the rail line, occupying Lachinovo, Kshen' and Marmyzhi stations. To its left was the Alekseev Regiment. The front line, stretching for 20 km, was too much for the Regiment to hold, and so it was reduced: Lachinovo was transferred to General Postovskiy's group, and the 1st Battalion moved from there to Kshen'. While making the transition it made a successful raid on the Red Army units concentrating to the north. The regiment's front was



reduced by 8 km. But that night, without pressure from the enemy, the regiment left Marmyzhi and concentrated even more: the 1st Battalion at Kshen' Station, and the rest in Berezovchik and Lipovchik,<sup>99</sup> slightly south of the rail line between Kshen' and Marmyzhi.

The *Markovtsy* did not know what was happening with General Tret'yakov's detachment, and in particular with the 1st Regiment, but they sensed that it was dangerous. They did not dare to ask, but there were serious indications: the supply convoy stayed with to its units, sensing danger in the rear; the supply officers said that part of the train that supplied food and bread had gone somewhere else, which is why everything was brought in from the nearest villages, resulting in liquid food and small portions of bread. Then, what was particularly telling was that the regiment was more closely bound than ever before, with the regiment HQ right there with it. There were more frequent meetings with superiors than before, and the tone of orders – even from platoon commanders – had completely changed, becoming strictly by the book, and moreover saturated with the smallest details. There were probing questions and scrutinising glances by the superiors towards their subordinates. The regiment commander, Colonel Bleysh, gave the order: “Keep a close eye on morale!”

The fact that the regiment was bound tight was reassuring, but the fact that it was in a dangerous position and outnumbered was worrying. There was a strong desire to increase the size of the companies, especially since there were people to increase them with – peasants fleeing from the Bolsheviks. But this desire was rejected by experience of the situation: small companies were more mobile, and their strike power was greater in manoeuvre warfare. So when Colonel Bleysh was told about the possibility of adding a dozen or so bayonets to the companies, he firmly stated: “Now is not the time.” The company commanders nevertheless accepted a few men.

The regiment's units tightened up, becoming attentive to every word and gesture of their superiors. It was as if the feeling of fear had been lost and weaknesses had vanished. Nerves were on edge, but everyone kept themselves under control. Discipline, compliance with orders and orderliness reached their highest level.

Early in the morning on 2 (15) November, when almost no one was still sleeping, the command was given: “Fall in!” Everyone was in formation instantly. The companies dispersed, deployed and moved forward calmly, making no fuss and ignoring the shells tearing through the air and the dense chains advancing towards them. The guns roared, the machine guns rattled. The Reds scattered to the sides and began to lie down. The *Markovtsy* rushed forward. They ran after the enemy for two or three kilometres, and would have gone further if it had not been for an order to retire to the rail line.

There was a sort of internal “collapse” in the soldiers. Even fear began to rise. The thunder of artillery from Kastornoe awakened that feeling, and it took an effort on everyone's part to control themselves. It also took the commanding officer's “Calm down!”

The Reds attacked again in the afternoon. They advanced confidently on the left flank. An intense and heavy battle ended in complete failure for them. There seemed to be many more of them left lying on the field than ever before. Everyone became calmer after that battle.

At night, Colonel Bleysh told his commanders that General Shkuro would attack on the next day and that the regiment must be ready for a decisive counter-attack.

The regiment was roused before dawn on 3 (16) November and deployed to their positions. Dawn was breaking. The morning was clear and visibility was excellent. The Reds showed no signs of preparing for an attack. Guns were already firing at Kastornoe. Binoculars were pointed in that direction from elevated positions. The distance was 20 km, but visibility was quite good. There seems to be no change there until noon and no change here where they were either.

Finally, around 14:00 the long-awaited cavalry units began to appear, accompanied by three light tanks. Armoured trains were smoking at Kastornoe Station. No one had any doubts about the outcome of the battle. The battalion commanders gave the order to prepare to move forward.

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<sup>99</sup> 51.82°N, 37.65°E and 51.84°N, 37.68°E.



Suddenly, exclamations rang out from the crowd of Volunteer observers: “The *Shkurinty* are retreating!” Everyone poured out onto the railway embankment, binoculars were snatched from hands and an unimaginable noise arose. To stop it, the command “To arms!” was given, and talking among themselves was forbidden.

The mounted *Shkurinty* retreated in disorder at a trot. The tanks and scattered chains of riflemen which remained on the field also began a rapid retreat.

After a while a dispatch rider, who had been sent to Kastornoe Station in the morning to establish communication, arrived and reported: “The *Kubantsy* do not want to fight.”

The wind had already picked up, the sky was covered with clouds, and thick snow began to fall. The temperature was dropping.

After remaining where they were for a while longer, the regiment’s units began to form column and headed for Bereзовchik and Lipovchik, but they did not linger there and continued on. The wind was getting stronger. A blizzard was beginning. Night fell. Nature, which had illuminated the last battle at Kastornoe with bright daylight, unleashed a terrible blizzard.

### The 3rd Regiment

This regiment had left the Kromy area and arrived as the corps reserve in Kursk on 21 October (3 November). By 26 October (8 November) it was already loading up to head east: the Reds were advancing in a 30-km gap between General Tret'yakov's detachment and the *Kornilovtsy*. Each battalion was loaded onto a separate train and the regiment headquarters and its teams, and medical, supply and combat trains were loaded separately. This was so the battalions could enter the battle directly from the carriages at different places.

On 27 October (9 November), the battalions were stationed in their carriages at Melekhino Station.<sup>100</sup> It was forbidden to light fires or stray from the trains, as they might move off at any moment. That evening the battalions were moved to Okhochevka Station. The regiment HQ, *komands* and supply trains remained in Melekhino.

Night fell. Guards were posted to the east, north and west of the station. But the battalions were in the carriages, and once more were forbidden to light fires to warm themselves, even to make hot tea. It had been more than a day since hot food had been issued, and the dry rations were coming to an end.

The regiment’s assistant commander, Captain Urfalov, who commanded three battalions, said that Shchigry was occupied by the enemy and they were approaching Okhochevka – Melekhino. He also said that two reserve battalions, Markov and Alekseev, were being unloaded at Melekhino, and that Colonel Naumov had been appointed commander of the detachment – which, in addition to the regiment and reserve battalions, included the Black Sea Horse Regiment, which was in contact with the enemy, and the corps HQ escort unit.

On 28 October (10 November), the lead battalion left for Shchigry with the armoured train *To Moscow*, which had just been taken by the 2nd Regiment from Marmyzhi, and replaced it there. There was a brief first meeting between the “younger brother” – the 3rd Regiment – and the “middle brother” – the 2nd Regiment.

The enemy was near Shchigry, near Okhochevka, and was approaching Melekhino. Two battalions remained at Okhochevka.

On 29 October (11 November) the Reds advanced on Shchigry and flanked them to the east. The 1st Battalion repelled the attacks, in some places even in the streets of the city. The company of Ensign Kavunovskiy put up a desperate resistance, losing half of its personnel – around 30 men, including its commander, among the dead.

The remaining battalions were sent out to defend the town. The train with the regimental HQ remained in Okhochevka.

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<sup>100</sup> 51.86°N, 36.61°E.



No sooner had the last battalion arrived in the city than the Reds launched an attack to flank the city from the Kursk side. The train *To Moscow* managed to slip back in front of the Red chains, which were already crossing the railway tracks. The battalion quickly climbed the hills surrounding the city to the west, which the Reds were already climbing, and put them to flight with a counter-attack. Their machine guns shot up those who had gathered in the hollow. Only the onset of night and cavalry on the flank stopped the pursuit. The Reds' losses were heavy. Among other things, three badges were taken from the dead – two silver and one gold with red stars, issued to commissars and commanders who were party members. The battalions lost a total of 82 men during the day.

That day the Reds occupied Okhochevka, and the regimental HQ, with the teams and supply trains, left for Melekhino. The regiment's three battalions found themselves cut off from the detachment. They were without field kitchens and food supplies, but that was not so important. They could not count on the help of the regimental machine-gun *komand*, which was also not so important. But what was a problem was that they could not count on being replenished with ammunition, and the two guns left there by the 2nd Regiment were out of shells. Captain Urfalov also had only ten orderlies at his disposal, but he needed to maintain contact with the battalions scattered across the outskirts of the city, to contact the detachment HQ, and to conduct reconnaissance. Two orderlies sent by a roundabout route to the detachment HQ nearly fell into Red hands and returned on foaming horses.

At night a transport with the wounded and two orderlies were sent from Shchigry along the southern bank of the Rat River to liaise with the detachment HQ.

On 30 October (12 November) the battalion stationed on the eastern outskirts of the city conducted a reconnaissance on carts and found out that the Reds had crossed the railway in large numbers, heading south. A patrol of three horses was sent south along the road to Tim. The battalions then just conducted surveillance and rested in the warm houses, satisfying their hunger with modest gifts from the residents.

During the day the detachment commander sent the two reserve battalions with an armoured train and two guns to occupy Okhochevka and establish communication with Shchigry. The battalions took the station after a battle. The armoured train headed off to Shchigry, but the track had been broken and there were Red Army nearby. The Alekseev battalion and the armoured train returned to Melekhino.

Meanwhile the enemy remained passive at Shchigry. But the battalion commanders stationed on the northern and western outskirts, unaware of the results of the reconnaissance to the east, were concerned. They planned to leave Shchigry and break through to join the detachment.

Finally, in an urgent meeting with the battalion commanders, Captain Urfalov briefly outlined the situation: there was no communication with the detachment and the enemy was advancing on Shchigry from the south, as reported by the reconnaissance unit. Without asking the battalion commanders their opinions, he ordered the regiment to assemble on the south-western outskirts at night, from where it would proceed along the southern bank of the River Rat', the route south-west being seemingly unobstructed. The proposal to break through along the rail line was rejected briefly and firmly: "Proceed with the orders."

It was quiet and snow was falling. The battalions gathered and set off. The Reds noticed them, and several shells exploded before reaching the column. A battery fired from the southern side of the city. A gun slid off the road into a ditch. It took almost an hour to pull it out. The regiment marched 10 km and stopped.<sup>101</sup>

Early on 31 October (13 November), with snow falling, patrols set off on sleds from the regiment in various directions. Shots were heard to the north and east. The Reds advanced from the direction of Shchigry. A battalion repelled them and took around 60 men prisoner. What next? We eagerly awaited the restoration of communication with detachment HQ. By night there was still no news.

The regiment did not know or hear that in the morning, just 5-6 km to the north, a battle was taking place near Okhochevka. The patrols sent there on sleds had returned, having encountered Red cavalry.

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<sup>101</sup> Presumably in Krutoe.



The *Markovtsy* reserve battalion and two guns was almost surrounded at Okhochevka. Its commander, Captain Kosmachevskiy, telephoned about the situation and expressed uncertainty about his men. He was ordered to hold the station and promised help from an armoured train.

It was dawn and it was snowing. The Reds advanced hesitantly and lay down under fire from an artillery platoon and machine guns. But there was unrest in two of the companies – they were ready to surrender. Captain Kosmachevskiy brought up reserves – the training *komand*. The Reds rose and advanced. The companies threw down their rifles, but the Reds were met by the training *komand* and rapid fire from the artillery platoon and the armoured train that had arrived: they ran.

Captain Kosmachevskiy gathered up the unreliable companies and took them to the station. An order came from HQ that the armoured train was to return to Melekhino. Loading those companies onto it, and the artillery platoon, the remaining units of the battalion – 200 bayonets and two machine guns – were to stay and hold Okhochevka. “Report immediately on everything that is happening.”

The situation was clearly hopeless. Communication with HQ was breaking down. Captain Kosmachevskiy left the station and led his battalion to join the detachment on the southern road through Troitskoe,<sup>102</sup> where he stopped for the night. But as soon as the companies settled down to rest, a patrol rode through the streets from the rear and threw a hand grenade into a house, killing one and wounding several. The battalion was placed in such a position that Captain Kosmachevskiy decided not to lead the battalion to the detachment, but head south. A day later the battalion arrived at Solntsevo Station. After contacting Corps HQ and explaining what had happened, the battalion received orders to go to Belgorod.

Colonel Naumov’s detachment thus lost contact with another of its battalions and so was left with some of the Alekseev Reserve Battalion, the Black Sea Regiment, the 3rd Regiment’s reconnaissance and machine-gun *komands*, eight guns, an armoured train and all the regimental supply trains.

By 1 (14) November the regiment – the three battalions that had withdrawn from Shchigry – were in a desperate situation. That was clear to everyone, absolutely everyone. Soldiers had already begun to desert. Patrols sent out on sleds reported a deep encirclement to the south. A battalion was sent to repel the enemy. The regiment’s front line was 8 km long.

The surviving calendar of the regiment’s combat operations records the marches and battles day by day, but without details. It does not even mention that there has been no communication with the detachment HQ for five days. For 2 (15) November it only says: “The regiment retreated with fighting to Luzkovo.<sup>103</sup> Storozhevka. Guard post. The 8th Company lost all its soldiers.”

What really happened?

The battle had ended relatively peacefully, and the regiment withdrew to Luzkovo. Four orderlies approached the commander of the 3rd Battalion, Captain Pavlov, and reported: “We are at your disposal,” and handed him a note from the regiment commander, Captain Urfalov: in view of his departure, Pavlov was to take command of the regiment. The captain was completely unprepared for this – he was not a deputy, he had not met with the regiment commander for two days and he was completely unaware not only of the regiment’s tasks, but also of what was happening in his sector. He did not have a map, and the only one in the regiment was not given to him. The officer who served as adjutant was not placed at his disposal either – he left with Captain Urfalov.

That was how the transfer of the regiment was carried out.

The battalions withdrew to Luzkovo, and one was immediately sent to the northern, elevated bank of the River Rat', to Troitskoe, with the task of establishing contact with the detachment HQ, which was believed to be located at Melekhino Station. The other battalions set up guards to the east and south.

The battalion and the artillery platoon commanders gathered to discuss the situation. They were totally in the dark as to the general situation. The regiment’s mission was also unknown. The regiment’s mood was anxious and uncertain. The men had not received hot food or bread for a week. Cartridges and shells were

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<sup>102</sup> Troitsa.

<sup>103</sup> Berezki / Bereznik, 51.79°N, 36.65°E.



running out. There were only four orderlies in the regiment, and they were totally exhausted. It was decided to immediately send an orderly to the detachment HQ with a detailed report and a request for clarification of the situation and orders for the regiment. It was assumed that the orderly would return by morning.

The report was written and the messenger was ordered to take a roundabout route to Otrreshkovo Station,<sup>104</sup> where he would find out the location of the headquarters.

3 (16) November dawned brightly. There were no reports of the enemy, but its patrols were visible near Troitskoe. It was calm but the regiment was restless: the commanders kept checking whether communication with the rest of the detachment had been established.

"If there is no communication by 12:00 we will march straight to Kursk!" said Captain Pavlov. This reassured everyone somewhat.

Suddenly an officer ran in with a joyful cry: "A messenger from headquarters!"

Captain Pavlov grabbed the thin envelope as if it were a life-line. The time and place of departure were "20:00 hours. 2 November. Melekhino junction." So headquarters was only 10 km away. But what next? The letter was short and personal, from Colonel Naumov to Captain Pavlov. It began, "Take care of the regiment!" and went on to say that orders, a briefing on the situation and a transport of shells and ammunition had already been sent with an orderly. The time of their dispatch was not specified, but it was clear that they had been sent before 20:00.

"Where is the courier and the transport?" asked Captain Pavlov.

"I don't know," replied the courier.

More than twelve hours had passed since they were sent. There was no doubt: they had taken the shortest route and fallen into Red hands.

"How did you get here?"

"I took the same road back as I did to get there, the road you showed me."

The regiment remained in its previous position – completely cut off.

The guards reported that there was fighting to the south. Captain Pavlov sat on a peasant sled, rode a kilometre, and observed through his binoculars a large chain advancing from the east, eight kilometres away, and in front of it a sparse line of people sitting on sleds and carts.

"Where is the battle taking place?" Captain Pavlov asked a peasant.

"On the main road from Tim to Kursk."

From the answers it became clear that the distance from the battle site to the crossing over the Rat' near Grachevka<sup>105</sup> was 10 km, the same distance as from the regiment's camp. The conclusion was that the regiment must immediately march to the crossing.

It arrived in Grachevka at dusk. One battalion remained there while two battalions and the battery climbed the high opposite bank and took up positions in two neighbouring villages. For the first time in many days the regiment was able to set itself a clear task that seemed applicable to the situation: to defend the approaches to Kursk from the south-east, assuming that Colonel Naumov's detachment was stationed further north on the railway.

Heavy snow began to fall.

But the mood in the regiment was poor. Three hours earlier, when the regiment had been leaving Luzkovo and Troitskoe, about 50 soldiers declared, "We are staying." They had learned from the residents that some cavalry units had passed through those villages on their way to Kursk, that soldiers had passed by on carts from the Tim area, and that gunfire could be heard not far to the northeast.

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<sup>104</sup> 51.79°N, 36.50°E, about 10 km west of Bereznik.

<sup>105</sup> More or less modern Krasnikovo-2, 51.73°N, 36.47°E. The crossing appears to be in largely the same spot today.





“Did they really leave without warning? Immediately deploy strong guards to the north! Be on full alert!”

Less than an hour later, the commander of the artillery platoon arrived and reported:

“There is shooting on the northern outskirts of the village. Bullets are landing in the battery’s position.”

A messenger ran from the guards and reported: “The Reds are advancing! It’s pointless to engage them in battle.”

“Take your platoon to Kursk while you still can,” Captain Pavlov ordered the artillery commander.

With one battalion acting as cover, another one marched to Kursk. The third, left behind the river, was ordered to go along its southern bank. The regiment got out safely.

Snow fell and the wind picked up.

After marching several kilometres the column approached a village, but only entered it after conducting reconnaissance. It was Dolgaya Klyukva, made of eight adjacent villages separated by ravines and forests.<sup>106</sup> Leaving one battalion in the first village, Captain Pavlov crossed the forest-covered ravine with the other and arrived at the next village. Unhitched carts stood in the street and *Chernomortsy*<sup>107</sup> were resting in the houses. After sending the battalion to search for vacant houses, he went personally to the commander of the Black Sea Regiment, excited by the joy of reuniting, but at the same time deeply concerned.

Captain Pavlov entered a lit room where several officers were seated at a table drinking tea.

“I am the temporary commander of the 3rd Officer General Markov Regiment!” he introduced himself to a colonel who had stood up.

“Commander of the Black Sea Regiment!” Colonel Glavche introduced himself.

Among those present was Colonel Levikov, chief of artillery in Colonel Naumov’s detachment. Everyone looked at the newcomer with interest.

“My regiment has moved to this village!” Captain Pavlov reported briefly and saw how this immediately caused great excitement.

“What? The regiment is here already?” Colonel Glavche asked. “We assumed that it was at least ten kilometres from here.”

Colonel Glavche unfolded a ten-verst map<sup>108</sup> and leaned over it.

“Yes, indeed, at noon today the regiment was not 10 kilometres away, but 20 kilometres away. Now it is here,” Captain Pavlov replied briefly.

Silence fell. Everyone looked at the map, then at the officer who had delivered the unexpected bad news.

“How could the regiment get here so quickly?” came the question, but instead of answering, Captain Pavlov asked his own:

“Do you have contact with Colonel Naumov? Where is Colonel Naumov?”

“At Otreshkovo Station,” Colonel Glavche said coldly.

“What is our regiment’s mission?” was asked firmly.

Colonel Glavche did not answer immediately. He apparently did not like the officer’s excited insistence and replied casually, “At the moment, as you can see, we are resting, and we are waiting for orders in the morning.”

The answer and his tone infuriated Captain Pavlov.

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<sup>106</sup> Now Dolgoe and Klyuka, 51.71°, 36.36°E, with Durnevo, Marshala Zhukova, Zvyaginstevo and Yakunino.

<sup>107</sup> Soldiers from the Black Sea Horse Regiment.

<sup>108</sup> Assuming this is 10 versts to the inch, about 1:400,000 scale.



“Colonel! Two hours ago, the regiment left Grachevka and Krasnenkoe after combat. The enemy was advancing from the north...”

Colonel Glavche interrupted him, “My squadrons passed through those villages, and neither you nor the enemy were there.”

Captain Pavlov sensed a reproach for something.

“Ah! So those were your squadrons? How excellent our communication is. My regiment, therefore arrived in Grachevka after your squadron. Now it is here, and the Reds are in Grachevka. They advanced from the direction of the rail line. Do you have any guarantee that they will not attack Klyukva from the north tonight? You say that Colonel Naumov is at Ostreshkovo Station? I fully admit that the Reds may attack from the north. I left one battalion on the eastern side of the village. I know neither the situation nor the terrain. I think we must post guards and send out reconnaissance to the north,” Captain Pavlov concluded emphatically.

His words aroused everyone. Questions poured in: “Do you think so?”, “Do you believe so?” Eyes were fixed on the map, and fingers traced not only the front lines where the enemy might appear, but also the retreat routes from the village.

“Colonel!” Captain Pavlov addressed Colonel Glavche.

“I suggest you take command of the detachment gathered here.”

There was no response. Everyone remained silent and looked at Colonel Glavche. He thought for a while and then turned to one of the officers, ordering him:

“Tell the squadrons to saddle their horses and be ready.”

At that moment Lieutenant Yureninskiy entered the room.

To understand the tense meeting described and the subsequent events, it is necessary to mention what had been happening at the detachment HQ since 1 (14) November. It had been located at Melekhino junction, 25 km from Kursk. Colonel Naumov had at his disposal only the Black Sea Cavalry Regiment, a foot scouts *komand* and a commander’s *komand* – a total of 319 men with 100 bayonets, a machine-gun *komand*, nine guns and the armoured train *To Moscow*, plus the dwindling Alekseev reserve battalion. The detachment had been ordered to hold back the enemy until the *Kornilovtsy* retreating to Kursk halted, with their right flank at the junction between Otreshkovo and Kursk Stations. It was assumed that this would be on 3 (16) November.

The enemy was in close proximity to the detachment. Its scouts were bold and daring: they captured some *Alekseevtsy* and removed the scout *komand*’s guards. At nightfall on 3 (16) November, the *Chernomortsy* captured some Red Estonian scouts, who reported that their regiment had been ordered to attack the railway junction and capture the detachment HQ that night. Colonel Naumov gave orders that the Black Sea Regiment and the batteries were to retreat to Dolgaya Klyukva, and the other units to Otreshkovo Station.

The Black Sea soldiers made a 25-km march, clashing with the enemy along the way. They were totally exhausted: they had been holding back the enemy as best they could since mid-October, retreating from the Elets – Orël rail line, and needed rest, which they had hoped to get in Dolgaya Klyukva.

3 (16) November began calmly at Otreshkovo Station. News that the *Kornilovtsy* had retreated to the junction near Kursk convinced the detachment’s HQ that its mission had been successfully completed. What happened next is described in an excerpt from Lieutenant Yureninskiy’s notes.

At about 10:00–11:00 on (3 (16) November) Colonel Naumov gave me an order to lead the *komands*, the combat transport (20 carts with ammunition) and the rest of the train to Dolgaya Klyukva, while soon afterwards he went with the regimental machine-gun *komand* and orderlies to Otreshkovo Station and then moved to the nearest junction to Kursk. He promised to arrive in Dolgaya Klyukva shortly after that. At the same time Colonel Naumov reported that no immediate danger was foreseen in that village.



We moved along a country road. Machine gun fire could be heard to the east and south-east. We arrived in the village at about 16:00 and settled in its central part. Conversations with the peasants made it clear that something was wrong. There was great danger. I set up outposts and sent out patrols.

Having received no orders from Colonel Naumov by 21:00, I was very concerned. But at then I learned from the peasants that some of our troops and cavalry had stopped in Marvino, so I went there. Passing through the western village, someone called: "Who goes there?" It turned out that our batteries were standing there in harnesses, with sentries. A north wind was blowing, with occasional snow. Finally, I reached an illuminated house – the HQ.

Lieutenant Yureninsky introduced himself as the commander of the 3rd Regiment, stationed in the village. Everyone was surprised. None of them knew that a group of 100 bayonets was stationed there, and Lieutenant Yureninskiy did not know that the Black Sea Regiment had arrived in the village until the peasants told him.

"Were you not warned that the Black Sea Regiment would be staying in the village?"

"No."

"Where did you come from?"

"Otreshkovo station."

"And where is Colonel Naumov?"

"The detachment was supposed to leave Otreshkovo Station around noon, and Colonel Naumov was supposed to move on to the half-station so that he could arrive in this village without delay," said Lieutenant Yureninskiy.

Everyone's faces fell.

"Colonel!" Lieutenant Yureninskiy addressed Colonel Glavche, "What is our regiment's task, and what information do you have about the enemy?"

"So far, I only know one thing: the detachment has been given a new mission – to cover the rail line from Kursk south along the Seym River. We will probably set off for there tomorrow. The *Kornilovtsy* will defend the city."

"And you, Captain, what do you have?" Lieutenant Yureninskiy asked Captain Pavlov.

"No tasks, no communication!"

Lieutenant Yureninskiy shared his information about the Reds and the possibility of them attacking the village. This finally convinced Colonel Glavche and the others of the reality of Captain Pavlov's fears. Colonel Levikov left. Colonel Glavche began to issue orders.

"Well, then? If anything happens, we'll retreat behind the Seym," Captain Pavlov said to Lieutenant Yureninskiy. "For now, let's go to our men. We'll keep in touch."

At that moment, a rider rushed into the room and reported:

"There's shooting in the streets!"

Captain Pavlov went out onto the porch. A strong, cold wind was blowing, carrying thick streams of snow in all directions. Through the howling wind, sporadic gunfire could be heard coming from the direction of Kursk. Horsemen and carts rushed through the streets, and people were running about. So, Captain Pavlov's warning of a possible attack by the Reds from the north was somewhat mistaken – the Reds attacked from the west!

"Orderlies!" Captain Pavlov shouted.

"Here, Captain."



“One of you go to the 2nd Battalion. It is to retreat to the southern outskirts of the village and, without delay, cross the Seym River. Another is to find the 1st Battalion and follow it across the Seym. The third is to come with me to the 3rd Battalion.”

Captain Pavlov walked alongside the orderly through the deep snow among the fleeing people and carts, holding on to his stirrup. The battalion was already formed up. “Follow me!” In the intensifying blizzard, two columns merged: the battalion and eleven guns.

### **In a Snowstorm at Night...**

The blizzard turned into a snowstorm.

Eventually the guides refused to show the way. The detachment turned into a helpless crowd of blinded travellers. The head of the column stopped. It was impossible to go any further: nothing could be seen except a solid veil before their eyes. Using a compass was suggested. The battalion adjutant took one out, but nothing could be seen – it was too dark. Matches were blown out. Someone suggested lighting a pinch of gunpowder. After a series of failures – the wind instantly blew away and mixed the gunpowder taken from rifle cartridges with snow – the artillerymen sacrificed a shell. They formed a makeshift shelter out of several *burkas* near one of the guns. The tape flared up, burning the eyelashes, eyebrows, and *papakhas* of the people bent over the map. The direction required was straight south. But the luminous compass was broken. They resorted to simple ones. But it was the same thing: the needles were motionless and pressed against the dial. Finally, the artillery compasses appeared, with the same disappointment as before.

After a series of experiments and assumptions, which vainly attempted to justify or explain the general issue with the compasses, suggesting the influence of gun and rifle barrels on the magnetic needle, everyone came to the conclusion that a magnetic storm was occurring. It did not occur to anyone that the detachment was witnessing the so-called “Tim-Shchigry magnetic anomaly”.<sup>109</sup>

After standing for more than an hour in the snowy chaos, increasingly approaching despair, it was decided to move on so as not to freeze, and to rely on the horses’ instincts to choose the direction. Two horses were unhitched from civilian carts and sent to the head of the column. The poor animals took a few steps, stopped in confusion, and returned to the people.

Finally, it was suggested to organise groups to scatter in different directions in search of the village. It was 04:00 when a saving volley rang out. After a quarter of an hour of rapid movement, they approached a huge burning haystack. After eleven hours of wandering, the detachment had returned to where it had started.

The battalion was a large column, including the artillery with 11 guns. It was led by a peasant who, only after insistent requests, agreed to be a guide in the desperate night blizzard, even though the planned destination was only eight kilometres away. A snowy stream stretched out before their eyes. The backs of those walking ahead were invisible, and no sounds could be heard over the howling of the wind and the sharp, glassy sound of snowflakes, even though there were heavy guns rattling over the frozen ground. It was impossible to open one’s eyes properly because the frozen snowflakes cut them so painfully.

After walking a kilometre, the guide began to express obvious concern with his movements: he bent down to the ground, feeling it, looking around. “There is no road!” he said. Despite that, he continued to walk on, stopping more and more often. The column contracted and expanded.

But then those around him began to fall over: they had landed in some kind of ditch covered with snow. But the column did not immediately stop until the lead gun got stuck in the ditch. “These are the Reds’ trenches. They defended Kursk here this summer,” said the guide.

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<sup>109</sup> Now more often called the Kursk anomaly, the largest such on earth, caused by the very large rich iron deposits in the area.



A search began, if not for the road, then at least for a place where they could cross the trenches. Meanwhile, the artillerymen and everyone else nearby pulled the stuck gun out of the trench. Finally, a crossing was found, the column turned towards it and passed the unexpected obstacle.

Suddenly, several carts raced towards the front of the column. Who was it? It turned out to be the tail of the column, which had broken away and was catching up with it. It was led by a peasant cart driver, taken from the village where the column had started, to the village where the column was heading. Two diametrically opposite directions to the same village. The guides began to discuss the situation. It turned out that the rear of the column had just passed a small forest; it was two or three hundred paces away but not visible. For them there was no doubt that that forest was located on the road leading to the desired village. Now they needed to take the right direction. Still not on a road, they moved on.

Suddenly, cries rang out: "Lights! Lights!" Through the snowfall, flashes of light appeared from time to time on the right behind them. "That's Kursk!" said the guide joyfully. "Now we need to turn left." The lights of Kursk needed to be behind the column. But after travelling some distance, they came to a ravine and stopped. "The village must be close now," said the guide.

While horsemen rode off in different directions to look for the road, the column stood at the edge of the ravine in the cold wind and snow. People began to freeze. The only salvation was to keep moving. But where to? Several men slid down into the ravine and shouted from there: "Come down! There's no wind here." Many descended. And indeed, although they were waist-deep in snow and snow was falling heavily on their heads, it was much warmer there.

Half an hour had passed when the guide returned, having found the road, and the horsemen arrived, having found a village a kilometre and a half away. Soon the column entered the village, and people filled all its houses. The batteries, for lack of space, had to go to a neighbouring village.

It had taken about six hours to cover eight kilometres.



## Retreat

The decisive turning point in the Volunteer Corps' fortunes was brought about not so much by local setbacks as by the appearance of Budënný on its right flank. Even the Red Army's breakthrough at Tim did not play a decisive role. And this turning point was marked by a blizzard of tremendous force. But it did something else as well — it stopped the flow of people fleeing Soviet power: many hundreds of peasants who had reached the *Markovtsy* front lines stopped moving. And beyond that began a strip of country that was indifferent to both the Whites and the Reds.

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The Markov regiments, two battalions of *Alekseevtsy* and the Black Sea Horse, positioned along a 100 km front that had been breached in the centre and was under threat from the right, had a difficult task. The overall situation led to the *Markovtsy* retreating in a scattered manner: the 2nd Regiment moved in three columns, the 3rd Regiment in four, and only the 1st Regiment moved with the *Alekseevtsy*. Meanwhile the Black Sea Horse and the artillery column attached to the 3rd Regiment retreated independently.

### Movement Of Colonel Naumov's Detachment

While at Bol'shaya Klyukva,<sup>110</sup> which had been taken by the Reds, the units of the 3rd Regiment were told: "To the Seym." Nothing more specific could be said. The battalions and Lieutenant Yureninskiy's group withdrew independently. Two battalions crossed the Seym at different times via the crossing west of the railway near the village of Lebyazh'e; one battalion and Lieutenant Yureninskiy's group crossed the ice at different points. Only two field kitchens and an ammunition cart fell through the ice.

One battalion, the Black Sea Regiment and the battery column converged at the crossing over the Seym. Colonel Glavche, Colonel Levikov and Captain Pavlov discussed the situation and sought an answer to the only question — what next?

Captain Pavlov asked Colonel Glavche: "Do you know of any orders for your regiment, or perhaps for the entire detachment? Shouldn't we think about the future?"

Colonel Glavche replied immediately and firmly: "Given the current situation, they are no longer relevant. We need to contact corps HQ as soon as possible and receive instructions from them."

But where was the corps HQ? In Solntsevo, Rzhava, Prokhorovka<sup>111</sup>? Should they head there along the railway?

All three came to the same conclusion: since it was quite obvious that the Reds, having long since taken Tim, had headed for Solntsevo, and might already have occupied it, and since the mental and physical condition of the men was desperate, they should take a detour through Oboyan', then head to the rail line. A report was written to the corps headquarters and sent with two Black Sea soldiers to the nearest station for transmission.

"I am heading off with my regiment separately," said Colonel Glavche. "I must use the high speed of the cavalry to be at the disposal of headquarters as soon as possible." And, wishing them a safe journey, he left.

The battalion and artillery moved together, but after the first march, Colonel Levikov said that due to the bad roads, he was going to have to move along the main road from Kursk to Oboyan'. The battalion and batteries parted ways.

At Kankrinovka station, the Black Sea horsemen reported to Lieutenant Yureninskiy. That was then forwarded to the corps HQ and the Kornilov Division HQ in Kursk. From corps HQ came an order: all units were to proceed to Solntsevo.

Lieutenant Yureninsky set about searching for the units, but could not find any of them: Captain Davydov's battalion, which had crossed the ice, had marched without delay to Solntsevo, taking into account the danger there. The other two, without communication between them, had marched straight to Oboyan'. It

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<sup>110</sup> Or Kliukva.

<sup>111</sup> 51.42°N, 36.75°E, 51.23°N, 36.70°E (in Pristen'), and 51.03°N, 36.73°E. All stations on the rail line.





was only in the afternoon when General Naumov's group joined Lieutenant Yureninskiy's group – a machine-gun *komand* and twelve orderlies. Colonel Naumov led the assembled detachment not to Solntsevo, but to Staroye Cheremoshnoe, 15 km northwest of the station, from where he took measures to search for all the units.

The previous day, Colonel Naumov had gone to the siding at Otrishkino Station<sup>112</sup> where the *Kornilovtsy* had stopped, telling Lieutenant Yureninskiy that he would not linger there and would head to Bol'shaya Klyukva. But he was delayed by a snowstorm, and the next morning, when the storm had subsided significantly, he set off for the village. He ran into the Reds there. Then, having lost three men, he crossed the Seym and met up with Lieutenant Yureninskiy again.

On 5 (18) November the Reds crossed the Seym near Solntsevo and occupied the station, forcing the battalion of the 3rd Regiment there to retreat. In several places to the north, they blew up the railway track. The rumble of explosions was heard by Colonel Naumov's detachment, but the scouts sent there did not return.

On 6 (19) November the detachment remained in the village, searching in vain for the other units. The officers insisted on retreating, but it was only on 7 (20) November, when the Reds launched an attack on the village, that Colonel Naumov led his men towards Oboyan', narrowly escaping capture by Red infantry and cavalry on the way.

The other two battalions of the 3rd Regiment and the artillery column, having made contact with the corps HQ in Oboyan', received orders to proceed to Prokhorovka Station, where they arrived on 7 (20) November. Colonel Naumov, who the others had no information about, joined them only on 9 (22) November and took command of the regiment.

That day was memorable for the starving *Markovtsy* not only because everyone had at last gathered together, but also because, for the first time since leaving Kursk on 26 October (8 November), they finally received hot food and bread.

The line between Rzhava and Oboyan' was occupied by the Black Sea Horse and the *Kornilovtsy*, who had left Kursk on 6 (19) November.

In the previous days a terrible tragedy unfolded at Solntsevo Station: four armoured trains and two auxiliary trains leaving Kursk encountered Red Army infantry and a destroyed section of track. There was no way to repair it under fire. They headed to L'gov, but a viaduct had been blown up there, but this time by their own side. The trains were lost.

### **Retreat of General Tret'yakov's Detachment**

During the night of 4 (17) November, amid a fierce blizzard, on the much calmer day and the following night, the units of this detachment retreated, losing their way and crossing each other's paths. The battalion of the 2nd Regiment, which was securing the left flank, was almost left behind. It had no communication with the *Alekseevtsy*: messengers did not arrive from them and their own messengers did not return. Finally, the battalion commander decided to make one more attempt to establish contact and sent the last mounted men who volunteered: machine gunners 2nd-Lieutenant Gerasimov and Private Belyaev, a former Red Army *kursant*. It was agreed that if they did not return by midnight, the battalion would march south.

Gerasimov and Belyaev removed their shoulder-boards and all insignia and disappeared into the blizzard. They did not return by the deadline, but two orderlies from the Alekseev Regiment had already arrived at the battalion more than an hour earlier, with orders to immediately retreat south. The battalion loaded onto sleds, left at midnight, and contacted the Alekseev HQ during the day. They were told that four pairs of couriers had been sent, but one pair had disappeared, and three, having encountered Reds, had returned. 2nd-Lieutenant Gerasimov and Private Belyaev had not arrived at the HQ.

The enemy followed the detachment. There had already been clashes on the 4th; on the 5th the enemy was repulsed.

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<sup>112</sup> I think this is Otreshkovo, 51.79°N, 36.50°E



During that day the detachment concentrated in the area of Verkhnyaya OPOCHKA<sup>113</sup> and Rogoztsy,<sup>114</sup> 25 km south of Marmyshi. It was joined by the Battalion of the 2nd Regiment, which had arrived from Kastornoe.<sup>115</sup> It had roundabout communication with the corps HQ via Korocha and Belgorod, although it had already been cut off several times by Red Army patrols. It was given an order to strike into the rear of the Reds advancing from Tim towards Solntsevo Station: to send some of its forces there, while the rest were to head to the southern bank of the upper Seym and take up positions there. And then an additional order came to send one Alekseev battalion to Korocha.

At that time the detachment was surrounded by the enemy on three sides, with patrols on the fourth. Solntsevo was 40 km away in a straight line. Enemy units were already at the upper reaches of the Seym, i.e. 20 km south of their position. Their strength was unknown.

To begin the operation, General Tret'yakov decided to occupy Pogozh'e<sup>116</sup> and Kuz'kino.<sup>117</sup>

On 6 (19) November they woke at 01:00 and set off. The 1st Regiment marched to the right towards Pogozh'e; the two battalions of the 2nd Regiment and Alekseev battalion marched towards Kuz'kino. There was a gap of some 8 km between them, but they had to march with all the battalions in the front line and in such a way that there was fire support between them. Each battalion had a company in reserve. In the morning skirmishes began with Red cavalry across the entire frontage of the detachment. An attack on one battalion was repelled. At another hamlet, the *divizion* forming behind it was scattered by the battery. At a third the Reds attacked from the rear, nearly capturing the battery, but were repelled by machine-gun fire and the reserve company. At a fourth the Reds left and withdrew to the side, but when the battalion passed the hamlet, they retook it, so the reserve company turned back and drove them out. In the evening, the detachment, having advanced 25 km, and occupied Pogozh'e and Kuz'kino and captured the train of the 1st Brigade of the Reds' 2nd Cavalry Division.

In Kuz'kino the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 2nd Regiment met, having been separated for a while, and it was only here that the 1st Battalion learned about the battles at Kastornoe and the death of Captain Obratsov. Neither knew anything about the whereabouts of the 3rd Battalion and the Officer Company.

There was a blizzard during the night. The detachment was behind Red lines so had sentries on all four sides. It was very cold, so there were shifts every three hours. Those resting were ordered to sleep. More definite information had come about the enemy: to the south along the Seym River was an infantry brigade; a cavalry brigade and infantry had left for Solntsevo; 6 km to the north in Tim were one or two regiments; a cavalry brigade, scattered during the offensive, remained to the east. In the situation, a decision was required on how to accomplish the orders.

The decision was made to divide the detachment. The 1st Regiment would head to Tim, i.e. turning to the right of the direct route, with the aim of defeating the Reds there, as they might otherwise follow the detachment and threaten it from the rear. The rest of the troops, with General Tret'yakov, would continue to advance west, taking Verkhosel'e,<sup>118</sup> from where they would turn south and reach the crossings over the Seym.

General Tret'yakov's group had 900 bayonets (600 *Markovtsy* and 300 *Alekseevtsy*), 50 mounted and 8 guns. The 1st Regiment had around 1,000 bayonets, 100 mounted and 10 guns.

### **Raid by General Tret'yakov's Group**

At dawn on 7 (20) November the group left Kuz'kino, accompanied by Red cavalry to the flanks and rear. There were no Red combat units in Verkhosel'e.

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<sup>113</sup> Verkhnie Apochki, 51.58°N, 37.61°E

<sup>114</sup> 51.59°N, 37.49°E

<sup>115</sup> 51.84°N, 38.14°E

<sup>116</sup> 51.61°N, 37.26°E

<sup>117</sup> 51.53°N, 37.24°E

<sup>118</sup> Verkhoseym'e?



On 8 (21) November it moved south to Svinets,<sup>119</sup> which was occupied by infantry. The Reds did not offer serious resistance, and the cavalry following the group was halted by fire.

On 9 (22) November, the advance south continued. Suvolochnoe,<sup>120</sup> with its crossing over the Seym, was taken with a decisive attack, and the cavalry that attacked during this time was severely repulsed. Leaving a battalion of *Alekseevty* there, the Markov battalions pursued the Reds along the northern bank of the Seym and crushed the resistance at another crossing, near Orlyanka, located 10 km from the crossing over which the 1st Regiment was to pass.

The group had completed its mission and took up positions along the southern bank of the Seym. Losses were insignificant.

### **Raid by the 1st Regiment**

Well before dawn on 7 (20) November, Colonel Bleysh gathered his senior commanders and announced the mission: the difficult situation at the front required them to go to Solntsevo Station. They were to sweep away the Reds in their path. Having confirmed all the orders given earlier, he emphasized that precise, quick and decisive execution of all orders was required. He said: "There are difficult marches ahead, day and night, with only a few hours of rest. Everyone will have to overcome fatigue!"

It was not yet 09:00 and visibility was poor when the regiment approached the town of Tim, pushed out the guards and entered it. The Reds fled their quarters and ran through the streets. Units of the regiment passed through a small part of the city and gathered on the north-western outskirts. The cavalry completed the task: they disarmed and drove hundreds of Reds into the courtyards. There was a regiment and some other units there.

Colonel Bleysh, learning that a Red regiment had stopped north of Stanovoy Kolodez',<sup>121</sup> led his regiment there after a four-hour rest. The village was 8 km away. The Reds prepared themselves, but it was taken with a swift attack. And again the horse *sotnia* finished the job.

Despite the onset of evening, Colonel Bleysh led the regiment further on, but taking an almost southerly direction, only to soon turn north-west again. This was intended to mislead the enemy about the regiment's intentions. At 22:00 the regiment arrived at Gniloe Kolodez', where there was no enemy. He gave his men a night's rest. But the rest was short-lived: soon shots rang out on the outskirts. The regiment instantly fell into formation. Two cavalymen were brought to Colonel Bleysh. Their group of five horsemen had been travelling from Rozhdestvenska,<sup>122</sup> from the commander of the rifle brigade to the commander of the cavalry brigade, which was heading to Rozhdestvenska from the area north of Tim. Considering that the three horsemen who had escaped had ridden north and would not be able to report what had happened in Rozhdestvenska anytime soon, Colonel Bleysh immediately led his regiment to that village, located 10 km away and directly in the direction of Solntsevo.

At about 05:00 on 8 (21) November the two battalions began to surround the village in the darkness. At that moment, a report came in that a large enemy column was approaching the village from the east. "The reserve battalion is to let them close and then shoot them!" Colonel Bleysh ordered. The column was swept away by the fire of that battalion, leaving only 150 survivors gathered among the wounded and killed lying on the field. A regiment of 600 bayonets had been defeated. At exactly the same time the other two battalions broke into the village, capturing almost the entire regiment of 600 men who had been there, along with a four-gun battery in full harness with its full complement of officers, plenty of machine guns and carts. Sadly the brigade HQ managed to escape.

Having ascertained the situation, Colonel Bleysh orders: "Two hours' rest! When required the *Markovtsy* know no fatigue. When the regiment moves out, leave half of the prisoners behind." The captured battery was handed over to the artillerymen – a new combat unit. The convoy of wounded, sick, shells and

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<sup>119</sup> 51.45°N, 37.03°E

<sup>120</sup> 51.37°N, 37.02°E

<sup>121</sup> This is Stanovoe at 51.64°N, 37.04°E (not the station Stanovoy Kolodez' near Orël)

<sup>122</sup> 51.62°N, 36.90°E



ammunition doubled in size, around 50 carts. The regiment's column grew and involuntarily became more of a burden.

The regiment arrived at Leshchinskaya Plota<sup>123</sup> after noon. There were no Reds. A rest was given for the night.

The regiment was roused and marched out during the night of 9 (22) November. It was known that there was Reds in Subbotino, 12 km away. Battle was inevitable, and against a prepared enemy at that. "Exert all your strength!" said Colonel Bleysh.

Two battalions were at the head of the column, and the third was to the rear. Another group of prisoners was released. Seeing the approaching columns, the Reds opened artillery fire. The regiment turned around on the move. The scout *komand* and commander's company were sent to flank it to the west at the intersection of the road to Solntsevo. There was heavy machine gun and rifle fire. The regiment's chains were forced to move in short bursts. It took four hours to break the enemy and another two hours to drive them completely out of the village. It was a heavy battle, which put more than 100 men out of action. Once again a Red Army regiment, with some auxiliary units from the brigade, was defeated. Two hundred men were taken prisoner. Only at the end of the battle did Red Army cavalry appear.

Solntsevo was now 8 km away. It could be reached in two hours, before dark, but a battle at the crossing over the River Seym was inevitable, which could drag on until nightfall. Colonel Bleysh decided to remain in the village. The regiment had to rest, ready for a possible night attack.

But Colonel Bleysh and his closest aides had no rest. They needed to find out, by questioning prisoners and villagers, what enemy forces might be on the other side of the river near Solntsevo and also to find out details about the crossing itself. It was established that a cavalry brigade and one or two infantry brigades had used the crossing. Some of these forces had gone on to Oboyan', some were in Solntsevo, some in Zuevka, immediately behind the crossing, and some were south of the station. The crossing itself consisted of a dyke about two kilometres long, then a bridge and a steep, wooded ascent, with the road climbing at an angle. The river itself was not wide, but it had a marshy eastern bank with low shrubs. The main danger was that the marsh did not always freeze – there might be holes that were covered with snow. The conclusion was that an attack with chains was possible, but dangerous, and would be slow.

During the night of 10 (23) November Bleysh gave the order for the attack and added that the upcoming battle would be the last: the regiment, having completed its task of capturing Solntsevo Station, would break out of the encirclement with the support of the *Kornilovtsy* and armoured trains. Of course, he said this to encourage his men, as he himself knew nothing of what was happening around him – he had had no communication, even with General Tret'yakov, for three days.

Two hours before dawn, the regiment moved out, leaving the horse *sotnia* and *komands* behind as cover. Two battalions marched in chains on both sides of the dyke, concentrating their forces on the outer flanks. There was cautious movement through the deep snow. Dawn broke, but there was a light fog. The Reds noticed them and shooting began. The companies moving onto the ice of the river lay down under heavy fire at the crossing, but those on the flanks climbed the banks. The Reds were surrounded and retreated. The reserve battalion quickly moved in column along the dyke and bridge, reached the crest, turned and attacked Zuevka. The Reds abandoned it. The regiment took Solntsevo with the support of the batteries. Until then the batteries had been silent, unable to see their targets because of the fog.

The battalions were followed by the batteries, the transport convoy, a column of 400-500 prisoners and then the covering units, already under fire from the Red cavalry surrounding the village.

Telephone communication from Solntsevo to the south was interrupted, and peasants were sent to establish contact, passing through the positions of the Red Army's advanced units. Communication was quickly established, as the Reds hastily withdrew to the west.

In the evening an armoured train arrived at Solntsevo, onto which the wounded, sick and prisoners were loaded (300 of the prisoners had been released, these were those that did not wish to stay behind). The

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<sup>123</sup> Somewhere north of modern Staryy Leshchin, 51.48°N, 36.91°E, presumably on the road.

regiment spent the night at the station and in Zuevka. The next morning, it marched east to take up its combat positions.

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The 1st and 2nd Regiments not only got out of a tough spot, but also did hard and dangerous tasks. The 1st Regiment, in particular, pulled off an amazing operation. They had started retreating on the night of 4 (17) November and finished on 10 (23) November. For seven days and nights it was engaged in marches and battles in terrible weather. It covered up to 100 km. At least six infantry regiments were defeated and scattered. The enemy suffered enormous losses. Around 400 prisoners were taken, with over 500 being released, not counting the hundreds who were locked in barns. Four guns plus many machine guns and ammunition cart were captured. The regiment lost just over 200 men.

Everyone knew that Colonel Bleysh was undoubtedly the driving force for all this. As well as his bold manoeuvring and skilful leadership, everyone clearly felt the influence of his spirit and will. At Marmyzhi and now, in this raid, he had been with the regiment, and that had a beneficial effect.

But Colonel Bleysh had a bad cold, which worried everyone.

### **Results of the First Stage of the Retreat**

One way or another the Markov regiments safely withdrew from the 100 kilometre front between Kastornoe and Kursk and took up positions along the Kursk–Belgorod rail line. For the first time, all three regiments were in close contact with each other and were finally able to form the Officer General Markov Division as a single unit. Only then could General Timanovskiy accept command of it. General Tret'yakov was assigned to the Alekseev Division. The 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Regiment, which had been detached with the Officer Company, had retreated south from Kastornoe and joined its regiment. Gradually, the regiments' supply trains arrived. The mere fact that the division had assembled lifted morale. The *Markovtsy* began to say that the offensive on Moscow was being postponed "until spring." They didn't know about the situation on the rest of the front and could not imagine that the *Kubantsy* did not want to fight. The *Kubantsy* had suffered a setback, but so had the *Markovtsy*.

An example of the soldiers' steadfast spirit was provided by Second-Lieutenant Gerasimov and Private Belyaev, who had been sent on 3 (16) November to liaise with the Alekseev Regiment HQ and returned eight days later. Their epic story is as follows.

In the first village they ran into Reds, fortunately simple-minded ones. They talked with them and found out the number of the Red Army regiments in the area. Taking a more southerly direction, they ran into serious Red Army soldiers, who took them to their superiors. However they were not recognised as Whites during the questioning but were thought to be officers from the unit they had named. They were released with directions to the unit's location. They had to travel back north in order to turn south at the right moment. The Reds were everywhere. They sat in hiding during the days and moved way south during the nights. Finally they arrived. Their horses were exhausted, and they themselves could barely stand on their feet from fatigue, hunger, and lack of sleep.

The mood in the 3rd Regiment was completely different. It was in reserve and was still reeling from recent hardships. It had suffered heavy losses – almost half of its personnel, around 500 men. But only 100 had been killed or wounded and 50 fallen ill, so over 300 were "missing in action." They had not surrendered in battle, but had openly fallen behind ("We are staying here").

The regiment's officer cadre – the middle and junior commanders – found an explanation for such a massive loss, having themselves experienced great mental anguish over the shortcomings they saw during the formation of the regiment and its leadership in action. They recognised that even ordinary soldiers felt the complexity of the situation and the danger in which their unit found itself.

The regiment was extremely depressed by the judgements, even accusations, they heard directed at the *Markovtsy*: "They allowed a hole in the front"; "Four armoured trains were lost because of them"; "They almost led to the destruction of the *Kornilovtsy*, allowing the Reds to get behind them."



The investigation into the collapse of Colonel Naumov's detachment, which began immediately, calmed things down somewhat.

But everything remained the same in the 3rd Regiment. Four hundred new recruits arrived, and they were taken care of – as before – by the battalion commanders, company commanders, and junior commanders. As before, there were no meetings with the regiment's commander and no discussions about the extremely serious issues they had witnessed. But two weeks later there would be a change at the top of the regiment.

### **The Retreat Continues**

The Red command had forced the Volunteer Corps to abandon the Kastornoe – Kursk – L'gov line, but had failed to fully defeat the corps or completely destroy Shkuro's and Mamantov's units. It decided to immediately continue the offensive with all forces. A long-range task was set: using the strength of its cavalry and the weakness of the White forces, to advance south and separate the Volunteer and Don Armies. The target was the Sea of Azov.

The Reds' task was made easier by the fact that the Volunteer Corps had been forced to move to the left, thus increasing the gap between the White armies. Budënniy's corps<sup>124</sup> and their 13th Army moved into that gap.

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On 10 (23) November, the Volunteer Corps took up positions on the Rzhava – Oboyan' line and further west. The *Markovtsy* remained to the right and slightly north of the railway line on the southern bank of the River Seym.

On 11 (24) November, the 1st Regiment left Solntsevo and moved eastwards across the Seymitsa River<sup>125</sup> to the 2nd Regiment. The Alekseev Battalion went into the reserve. During the day the Reds began an offensive, encircling the right flank of the regiments.

On 12, 13 and 14 (25-27) November, the regiments slowly retreated, fighting back with counter-attacks.

Colonel Bleysh fell ill with typhus and was replaced by Colonel Dokukin; Captain Perebeynos, who was temporarily in command of the 2nd Regiment, also fell ill and was replaced by Captain Kryzhanovskiy.

On 15 (28) November, the Reds made a deep flank move to the right, transporting their units on sleds. The regiments withdrew to the south and moved to the left. The 1st Regiment was already occupying the rail line at Prokhorovka Station.

The 3rd Regiment, in reserve, left in a sombre mood after hopes had been raised that the tide of battle might turn in their favour. A fresh infantry brigade had arrived at the front, 1,500 bayonets from a three-regiment composite division being formed in Kharkov, commanded by General Volkhovskiy. One of the regiments went to the internal front, and two took up positions in the Kornilov's sector, to the left of the *Markovtsy*. The regiments were well equipped, armed, and supplied, with strong morale, reliable in combat, and had a significant officer corps – according to an officer from the brigade's HQ who visited the 3rd Regiment. Of course, the *Markovtsy* were happy to hear this, but they thought the officer's statements were overly confident: they themselves would not have said such things about their own units. But still? And then suddenly there was another retreat.

Two days later, they learned the reason. The brigade had been completely defeated in two days, and most of its members had surrendered. An Kornilov officer told them about it. He had been sent to liaise with the brigade, but at its position he found field guards, rear outposts, etc., exactly as required by the regulations. When he reached the regiment headquarters, he found complete calm there. He could not resist expressing his bewilderment. In response, he was met with surprise and complete incomprehension. He knew such a deployment would ensure its defeat, and so it happened. It entered battle not understanding the spirit, character, and tactics of the civil war, blindly following regulations, disregarding the experience not only of the current war but even of the world war, firmly rejecting "partisan" methods.

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<sup>124</sup> It was not yet the 1st Horse Army.

<sup>125</sup> Or Donetskaya Seymitsa





16 (29) November was a difficult day. The 1st Regiment repelled strong frontal attacks, then sent one of its battalions to help the *Kornilovtsy* drive out Reds who had broken through the front at Bogoroditskoe.<sup>126</sup> The 2nd Regiment repelled the Reds advancing frontally and also encircling them on the right, near Redkovka.<sup>127</sup> In the heat of battle, it received a message that its battalion, sent 10 km south to Sagaydachnoe during the night, was engaged in combat. The regiment began to retreat, pursued by the enemy. When it reached Sagaydachnoe its battalion there was almost surrounded. The battalion was saved, but large enemy forces forced the regiment to retreat slightly to the west. Units of the Reds' Estonian Division were advancing there.

The situation on the right flank of the division was becoming threatening. The Reds had occupied Korocha and their units had advanced on Belgorod. Only a battalion of *Alekseevtsy* with two guns stood in their way. The *Markovtsy* lines were twenty kilometres to the south.

On 17 (30) November the 2nd Regiment rushed to the village of Kazach'e,<sup>128</sup> with Red cavalry on its flank. The march was 25 km. The 1st Regiment moved to the west, keeping its left flank on the rail line. To the east was a battalion of the 3rd Regiment. The division's frontage was 20 km.

From 18 to 21 November (1-4 December) there was heavy fighting across the entire front. The Reds drove a battalion of the 3rd Regiment out of Kryukovo-Barskoe<sup>129</sup> with a night attack but the situation was restored with a counter-attack. The Reds then broke through the front between the 1st and 2nd Regiments. A scout *komand* from the 2nd Regiment, led by Captain Andreevskiy, took Kurakovka<sup>130</sup> with a second night attack, but was outflanked and had to abandon it in the morning. Two battalions of the 3rd Regiment and two guns were sent forward. They fell under heavy fire and the battery, showered with shells, fell silent. Six horses were killed while attempting to remove the guns from their position. On the left the 1st Regiment battalion, having repelled the Red attack, sent its four-gun battery to the aid of the 3rd Regiment. After an hour of rapid fire (300-400 shells) the enemy was disordered and began to retreat.

The 2nd Regiment held its ground in Kazach'e, but the Reds pressed the *Alekseevtsy* battalion and bypassed the village to the south. The regiment sent two battalions, which were also pushed back. The battalion remaining in Kazach'e was attacked by cavalry, which it repelled, but was then ordered to leave the village anyway. The road along which the two battalions had been travelling, passing through a ravine, was cut off by the Reds. There was another road two kilometres north of a hamlet, which was occupied by the enemy. Captain Empakher, temporarily in command of the battalion, decided to withdraw the battalion along the northern road. With a swift attack, the Estonians were forced out of the hamlet and, under the cover of twelve heavy and six light machine guns, the battalion crossed the ravine. The Red cavalry was too late: being held back by 2nd-Lieutenant Ruzsky's machine gun platoon, and across the ravine the Reds' attack from the opposite side was held back by the scout *komand*.

The Reds attacked across the entire front of the division, again threatening to encircle the right flank. The *Alekseev* battalion moved to Sheyno,<sup>131</sup> followed by the 2nd Regiment. Two battalions of the 1st Regiment moved to Shlyakhovo. The 3rd Regiment occupied the area either side of the rail line. In the centre were the battalion of the 1st regiment and the *komands* of the 1st and 2nd Regiments. The division's frontage was 25 kilometres.

The troops were exhausted by the marches, battles and extreme vigilance. Fog, snow, and cold weather took a particularly heavy toll on the horses, only a small portion of which had been shod with spikes, so they slipped and fell. To pull the guns up-hill required an extra pair of horses being harnessed: with the howitzers it might require a double team. Once a battery took 10 hours to cover a distance of 7 kilometres.

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<sup>126</sup> 51.16°N, 37.35°E

<sup>127</sup> Rad'kovka 51.10°N, 36.97°E

<sup>128</sup> 50.82°N, 36.88°E.

<sup>129</sup> 50.81°N, 36.64°E?

<sup>130</sup> 50.84°N, 36.85°E.

<sup>131</sup> Sheino 50.68°N, 36.87°E.



The machine gunners found a solution: they sent their *dvukolki* and *tachankas* to the supply train and put their machine guns on civilian sleds. Most of the peasants willingly agreed to be carters with their horses.

To make matters worse, there was a change of commanders: Colonel Slonovskiy took command of the 1st Regiment, replacing Colonel Dokukin, who had been called to Army HQ; the 2nd Regiment was taken over by the little-known Colonel Danilov, who had briefly commanded a detachment during the elimination of the Kupyansk breakthrough in August, replacing Captain Lutskalov, who had fallen ill after just replacing Captain Kryzhanovskiy, who had also fallen ill (so four commanders in 11 days); finally, Captain Savel'ev, a veteran who had previously commanded a special company at headquarters, took command of the 3rd Regiment from Colonel Naumov.

On 22 November (5 December) the Reds continued to pound the *Markovtsy's* front. They launched a strong and persistent attack on Sheyno, where the Alekseev battalion was stationed and where the 2nd Regiment arrived during the night. The attack was carried out by fresh troops in an exemplary manner. Two attacks were repelled, but with the third they broke into the village before being driven out. Up to 250 men were lost from the regiment alone.

The Alekseev battalion was urgently called to Belgorod. During the day the 1st Regiment repelled attacks on Shlyakhovo, but immediately afterwards one battalion went to support the battalion that was near the Donets River<sup>132</sup> which had fallen into a difficult situation. The 3rd Regiment successfully held back the enemy.

Night fell. The Reds attacked the centre of the division.

An order was received to retreat to Belgorod.

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During this day the Reds made a new breakthrough at Kupyansk, this time with all their cavalry and infantry, which Generals Shkuro and Mamantov's cavalry could not hold back. The Red infantry had already bypassed Belgorod and occupied Volchansk.

During the night of 23 November (6 December) the 3rd Regiment passed through Belgorod and arrived at Razumnoe Station,<sup>133</sup> which was already being approached by Red patrols. During the day all the division's convoys left Belgorod in a single column, guarded by a battalion, and headed south along the western bank of the Donets River. At nightfall, the rest of the units followed the same road along with the division HQ, which was on horseback, having abandoned its train.

The division was on the flank of the corps, marching along country roads to the large Murom and Chuguev forests, where Green detachments were hiding, made up of deserters and escaped prisoners, organised by men the Communists had sent there.

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The *Markovtsy* left Belgorod with a dull ache, as it had become as dear to them as Novochoerkassk and Ekaterinodar had been before.

Five months earlier Belgorod had been a stop-over on their way to Moscow. There they rested and gathered strength. They prayed for help from the Almighty at the city's holy sites and received blessings to continue their military exploits at a convent in the village of Borisovka, along with blessings and rosary beads.<sup>134</sup>

They had then moved forward. Their fingers mentally counted the beads of the rosary: Korocha, Tim, Shchigry, Livny, and paused at the next one – Elets. Then they counted back until the first one – Belgorod – also fell away. Next was the knot of the rosary with its cross.

May God's will be done!

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<sup>132</sup> The Siverskiy Donets'.

<sup>133</sup> 50.52°N, 36.68°E

<sup>134</sup> The gift of the wooden rosary beads by the abbess of the convent to the officers of the 1st Battalion, in thanks for capturing the convent without loss to buildings or occupants, became part of the mythos of the Markov Regiment.



The *Markovtsy* retreated in good order.

### In the Forests

A group of 20-30 *Markovtsy* gathered in Kharkov, returning from leave, business trips and hospitals. Their conversations were about the situation at the front and in the rear. There was concern for the front, for their units, and also concern about the growing Green movement in the rear.

"They detained me and appointed me commander of a detachment, but I was drawn back to the regiment," said one.

"No one will tell us where our division is. They say it's moving to Kupyansk and advise us to go there."

So they went. On the train, the commander handed out rifles: "There are Greens in the Chuguev forests." The *Markovtsy* were not surprised. Where weren't they? The train moved slowly, with long stops between stations. But it got through safely.

In Kupyansk, they met two of their own. "What are you doing here?"

"We're recruiting volunteers, but without success. We need to get out of here."

There was astonishment. Where were the front lines? In the city garden the *Markovtsy* saw two small tanks, freely and easily breaking trees. This was the first time they had seen them. They were not at the front, so things must not be so bad there.

The next day, when they asked where the division was, the train commander replied: "It seems to be retreating to Chuguev,<sup>135</sup> but we have to wait before going there, as there is no communication with Chuguev."

Well, well! No-one could say for sure where the division was. But that was their fate – to wander around in the rear. And in the evening, they got solid advice – go to the Donbas and start looking from there.

At Nyrkove Station<sup>136</sup> the commandant interrogated them sternly: "Who are you? Why are you here and not with your units?" and ordered them to go to Slavyansk.<sup>137</sup>

Some 40 *Markovtsy* had already gathered in Slavyansk. A senior officer went to their commander:

"Documents!"

"They're expired."

"Arrest them!"

The whole group came to the rescue. They were given rifles and did patrol duty, saying that when the division's location was known, they would report to it.

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From Belgorod the division marched to Murom<sup>138</sup> (while the *Kornilovtsy* went along the highway to Kharkov). The 1st Regiment was the head of the column and also the rearguard; the 2nd covered to the east; the 3rd covered the west. The march was easy, but cold. A solid wall of forest stretched along the Severskiy Donets River to the east.

On the second day of the march a 2nd Regiment battalion was in Arkhangel'skoe.<sup>139</sup> The scout *komand* was ahead, past the forest by the river, about two kilometres away. It was foggy and the *komand* did not notice that Red infantry had slipped by them. The Reds suddenly descended on the resting battalion. Men rushed out of their houses in whatever they were wearing; there was no question of resistance. Only one company and a machine-gun *komand*, quartered at the far end, came out in relative order. All the fleeing men

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<sup>135</sup> Now Chuhuiv.

<sup>136</sup> 48.74°N, 38.31°E

<sup>137</sup> Slov'yansk.

<sup>138</sup> 50.31°N, 36.71°E

<sup>139</sup> 50.35°N, 36.79°E



stopped upon reaching their line. As soon as the Reds appeared from the village, the battalion went on the attack. An hour later, the village was taken and the Reds were driven back across the river. The battalion's losses were only a few wounded.

Later, a battalion arrived at a village of a dozen houses, surrounded by forest. There was not a single man over the age of 15 in the village and the soldiers began to ask where they were. The women cried and the old men remained silent, but the children were more candid: "They all went into the forest."

"No wonder! They might lead the Reds here along paths unknown to us? We could end up in our graves here!"

The battalion stayed there in a state of extreme tension and anxiety. At dusk, alert and ready for anything, they left the forest.

The division was now on its third day of marching. It went through Murom and entered Ternova. The road was difficult, crossed by frequent ravines. Red patrols were already closing in from behind, so close that artillery fire had even been opened up on them. The 3rd Regiment engaged in a firefight with the Greens.

On the fourth day the temperature began to rise and it rained all night. The snow melted, and the roads thawed. It became difficult to move, only getting worse in the afternoon. The head of the column was still manageable, but the middle and tail had to walk through thick slush of snow and black earth. Leaving the wide well-travelled road leading to Kharkov, the division turned left onto a country road and entered a forest defile. The column began to stretch out and widen at the same time, but it was still possible to travel on the sleds over the unmelted snow. The horses were exhausted. They began to lag behind. Carts had to be abandoned, regardless of their load. One or two more horses were harnessed to the carts carrying the wounded and sick. The artillerymen harnessed all their riding horses to the guns and ammunition boxes, and the machine gunners loaded the machine guns onto horses. The sick were restless and the wounded were anxious, but there were nurses with them, guardian angels and comforters, who helped as best they could.

One of the participants wrote:

Abandoned property lay scattered along the road for many kilometres. Boxes of shells and cartridges. Guns and machine guns with exhausted horses. Fallen horses were everywhere. It was the first time any of us had seen such a scene in all our time as Volunteers. And most importantly, we had to do abandon it ourselves. It was a road of death.

Meanwhile the Greens grew bolder and there was shooting all around. One of their mounted squads appeared, but was dispersed by fire. Some artillery foragers who had moving out on a flank disappeared. A horse *sotnia* and two guns were sent that way. In a village they found Lieutenant Khrenov brutally murdered and two wounded soldiers. The perpetrators, who had been handed over by the population, were shot, and the village was burned down.

The column was told that in another ten kilometres they would be out of the woods, which was encouraging. By evening, the head of the column had reached the town of Rogan', on the main road from Kharkov to Chuguev, but the rear was delayed for the night, 10 kilometres behind.

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Units from the Kornilov Division were already in Rogan'. The *Markovtsy* had gone in a straight line from Belgorod, while *Kornilovtsy* took a circular path. They travelled up to 70 kilometres and had arrived more than a day later. The seven-day retreat cost them dearly. They fell asleep, hungry, wherever they could settle down.

The morning of 30 November (13 December) the division was to go to Chuguev, 20 km away. The first sensation was of cold – overnight the temperature had dropped, and a cold northerly wind was blowing, which seemed to drive the dampness of the clothes into the body. Salvation was in keeping moving.



The division moved in two columns: one went on the main road, the other to the north through Kamennaya Yaruha.<sup>140</sup> Both roads passed through forests and the Greens did not leave the division in peace there. They shot at it and in one place, having leapt on a wagon, killed Lieutenant Evlampiev and several soldiers. But the road was comparatively easy and by evening the columns had reached the town of Chuguev. The rearguard battalion did not arrive until midnight.

The town was dead but the warm houses were of some comfort and revived the *Markovtsy*. They had something to eat. There were urgent matters to deal with – there was a change of guard almost every hour, whereas others had to take care of the horses or sort out the technical material, putting everything into proper order.

Exactly at 24:00 the command duty officer reported to me that the machine guns had been brought back to full readiness and put on *dvukolki*. I went out personally to check and it was encouraging to see that the *komand's* morale had not yet faded. The men were still the same despite the setbacks that had befallen them. A count showed that one soldier had lagged behind and three boxes of ammunition had been lost.

It was worse in the companies – their ranks had thinned again. In the 1st Regiment they had 50-100 bayonets, and in the 2nd and 3rd only 30-50. There were a lot of sick – the regiment had at least 100 of them. But where could they be sent?

Deep in the night, when most of the men were sleeping soundly, having eaten what small amount they could get, the battalions heard shouting:

“Come out for dinner!” With a hubbub of awakened vigour, rattling pots and bowls, the field kitchens arrived.

“Ah! Here they are!”, “Where have you been for ten days?” and “Why did you starve us?” they jokingly asked the cooks and hands.

“You should thank us for not abandoning the kitchens, for bringing you bread and for not being lost,” they objected.

The cooks were generous and poured out a thick meat soup, filling the dishes to the brim, and the hands also handed out loaves of stale, soggy bread without counting them.

“Eat what they give you and keep what is left. They fed the horses with bread on the way.”

“How kind you have become,” they said to the cooks. “I wish every day was like this.”

“Take it and don’t think about it!” The dinner seemed to be a feast, and they ate it in a civilised manner, from plates sitting at tables, free of the equipment – belts and boots – that squeezed the body. A calm light from kerosene lamps and candles created a cosy atmosphere.

At dinner they talked about what was happening and the situation calmly, as if not realising what had happened and what was still happening.

“Have we left Kharkov behind? In war everything is possible.”

A hearty and plentiful meal put them to sleep. There was silence, interrupted only by the voice and shaking of the duty officer: “You are on guard!” The division still had the enemy on four sides.

Early in the foggy morning of 1 (14) December shots rang out on at 2nd Regiment’s positions. As the companies ran out of the houses the bullets were already coming into the streets. Clearly the guard had missed the enemy, who had reached the very outskirts. Without any orders the *Markovtsy* fired back. Machine guns appeared. The enemy fled after a short skirmish.

There was a quiet meal and then an order came: a battalion of the 2nd Regiment was to dislodge the enemy from Kochetok, four kilometres north of the town, and destroy the bridge over the Donets there.

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<sup>140</sup> Kam’yana Yaruha.



Four horsemen rode ahead and, not meeting anyone, entered the village. Suddenly four men came out of a house, one of them was wearing a Hungarian coat trimmed with fur.

“Who are you?” our horsemen asked them.

“We are your side, comrades, we are your side” they answered in broken Russian.

At that moment armed Reds ran out of the houses. Having killed the four men, the horsemen galloped back.

The battalion was approaching the village. One of the companies headed to the bridge. But the battalion found itself engulfed on its left and began to withdraw. Pressed against the river the company began to rush to the other bank. Private Selivanov held back the enemy with his Lewis gun, but while crossing the river he and five others fell through the ice and drowned.

When the battalion retreated to the initial positions in Chuguev it found a battle already underway along the entire western outskirts of the city. The Reds were advancing in large numbers against the 1st and 2nd Regiments, but were brutally repulsed. It was units of the Red 14th Army's 46th Rifle Division. The next day they repeated the attack, again unsuccessfully, and then left the town undisturbed until the evening. At 20:00 the *Markovtsy* left Chuguev and concentrated in Malinovka.<sup>141</sup>

On December 3 (16) the division took the main road to Kupyansk. The Reds and Greens were squeezing in a ring around it. The 3rd Regiment pushed them out of Korobochka.<sup>142</sup> The rearguard held back the enemy. A strong detachment from the division, covering it to the south-west, was attacked and lost several men. A detachment sent there burned the village.

At nightfall the division gathered in Grakovo.<sup>143</sup> With it was a large wagon with the wounded and sick. It had been thought that it would go to Kupyansk to join General Shkuro. But it turned out that Kupyansk had already been surrendered, and the Reds were advancing from there in the direction of Izyum, in the rear of the Volunteer Corps. The Markov Division was ordered to cover that road, while the 2nd and 3rd Regiments were to go to Shablievka Station<sup>144</sup> for loading, in order to be transferred urgently to Izyum. The 1st Regiment, as the strongest, would go there on foot, taking a direct path. It will have to march over 50 km through woods occupied by the Greens.

In view of the fact that the regiments were given a limited number of wagons for loading, all the heavy machine guns, regimental and battery wagons were sent in a special column to Izyum through Balakliya Station.<sup>145</sup> A *komand* of 50 bayonets was assigned to protect it.

On December 4 (17) the division dispersed. The 2nd and 3rd Regiments, their batteries and the wounded reached Shablievka Station safely. They immediately loaded 50 or more men and 12 horses into a wagon.

But the transport convoy, stretching over a kilometre, was attacked by the Greens. The head of it, under cover of the commander's *komand* slipped through, the tail – the machine-gun teams – had time to turn aside and make their own way separately to the railroad; the middle part, mainly the wagons, was captured by the Greens.

The 1st Regiment, having marched 12 km, learned that Volkhov Yar,<sup>146</sup> through which it was to march, was occupied by the enemy. It also learned that a village three kilometres to the left was also occupied. The regiment halted and sent a battalion to the left to dislodge the enemy from that village, who might otherwise strike the regiment in the rear when it advanced on Volkhov Yar. The battalion's fight with the Estonians in front of it ended in failure, the Estonians withdrawing a short distance in order. The whole regiment had to be pulled back together. During the night it became known that they had moved to Volkhov Yar.

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<sup>141</sup> Malynivka.

<sup>142</sup> Korobchine 49.78°N, 36.82°E

<sup>143</sup> Hrakove/Grakove 49.72°N, 36.82°E

<sup>144</sup> Shebelynka? 49.54°N, 36.64°E

<sup>145</sup> 49.44°N, 36.93°E

<sup>146</sup> Volokhiv Yar, 49.60°N, 36.98°E





In the morning the regiment led an attack on the village. The Reds had artillery and put up stubborn resistance, but fled when out-flanked, suffering heavy losses. Several machine guns were taken and among the prisoners was the Estonian brigade's chief of staff, a former officer of the General Staff.

The regiment was given a two-hour rest and lunch. But it was not possible to eat it quietly, as the Estonians suddenly attacked. Again they were severely repaid, losing up to 300 prisoners during the day, which the regiment did not want to take with them as it moved on. By evening it came to Brigadirovka,<sup>147</sup> met only by some light shooting.

On the third day the regiment arrived at Kun'e,<sup>148</sup> after a skirmish at Kryuchki, where it took one machine gun. It was ordered to remain there until further orders were received.

It was 15 km to Izyum. The 2nd and 3rd Regiments were already positioned 10 km to the west of the town.

From 6 to 8 (19 to 21) December the regiments held back the Estonian Division's advance on Izyum. Then, when the *Kornilovtsy* withdrew to the city, they moved southward by passages, halting in front of Slavyansk.

On 9 (22) December the encirclement of the corps' right flank continued, but now by the Red 3rd Rifle Division, which had crossed the Seversky Donets River was 25 km from Slavyansk, while the *Kornilovtsy* were still 40 km north of it. Four Markov battalions held back the Reds in front of the town. Three more battalions were a little to the north. Two battalions were in the rear, securing it from the "Makhnovists," as the Greens were already called here. There was forest all around.

While the previous Greens they had run into were small groups or detachments of deserters and Bolsheviks in hiding, the Makhnovists were much larger, being almost the entire peasant and working population of the district.

One of the machine-gun *komands*, which moved away from the Greens and avoided the woods, marched somewhat to the west. In one village a delegation from the "Union of Defence" came to its commander and politely suggested that he surrender his weapons. Behind this politeness lay a serious threat. The officer politely stated that not even one cartridge would be given out. The delegation insisted. The *komand* got ready to fight. Avoiding long negotiations, the *komand* leader said that if even one shot was fired then, the village would be left as ashes. Having rested, the unit quietly left the village.

On 10 and 11 (23-24) December there was some serious fighting east of Slavyansk against a persistently advancing enemy. The *Markovtsy* were forced to retreat. At dusk on the 11th (24th) they repulsed attacks five or six kilometres from the town to which the *Kornilovtsy* were retreating.

At night the division received orders to march to Bakhmut.

It was withdrawn to the reserve. Its place on the right flank of the corps was taken by the fresh 2nd Infantry Division, transferred from the Georgian Front. It occupied the area along the southern bank of the Severskiy Donets River, where it started to head east. Now the enemy could not so freely outflank the Volunteer Corps to the right.

The Markov Division had fulfilled its heavy mission, being on the flank of the corps since they had left Elets, in extremely difficult conditions. It had melted away without receiving replenishment. In Slavyansk it was finally met by around 150 *Markovtsy*, infantrymen and artillerymen, who had been searching in vain for it since the abandonment of Belgorod.

The division's hospital train had remained in Slavyansk because of the blocked tracks. Some of the wounded and sick in it were killed by the Reds, and the others perished after a number of days from cold, hunger and lack of assistance. The pleas of the doctors and nurses were in vain.

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Back in Izyum it became known that General Wrangel had been appointed commander of the Volunteer Army on 27 November (10 December), replacing General May-Mayevskiy. There was general joy and cheer

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<sup>147</sup> Bryhadyrivka

<sup>148</sup> 49.38°N, 37.26°E



about this, as people believe in General Wrangel. Although the appointment was made late, he would not allow the army to collapse and be defeated. In an order, General Wrangel wrote:

I demand the fulfilment of everyone's duty to the Motherland. In the face of the formidable reality facing us, personal life must give way to the good of the Motherland.

He who is Russian at heart is with us, and victory will be with us.

A month later the *Markovtsy* were to finally heard the voice of their army commander in person.

### Back in the Donbas

Travelling through the night and part of the day of 12 (25) December, covering 40 km, the division's main units gathered in Bakhmut. However the division was not fully complete. The engineer company had separated in Belgorod, moved to Kupyansk, and then to build a fortified line in front of Rostov. Three of the batteries were assigned to the army reserve, and one was attached to the *Kornilovtsy*. Nor had all the machine gun *komands* and supply trains arrived yet.

The combat strength of the division was approximately: 800 bayonets in the 1st Regiment; 550 bayonets each in the 2nd and 3rd Regiments. Each regiments had about 20 heavy machine guns. The horse *sotnias* were 60-100 sabres each. There were 14 guns. A horse *divizion* of 200 men was being formed, to which General Timanovskiy ordered almost all the horses be transferred, but that *divizion* was lacked some saddles and, of course, was untrained, so suitable only for reconnaissance.

In Bakhmut, the 2nd and 3rd Regiments were reinforced with around 200 officers from the disbanded guards<sup>149</sup> and 15 young volunteers. The division was a formidable force in terms of numbers, but its morale was in dispute...

An excellent soldier, who was completely trusted, went to his commander. "Captain! You have known me for many years and know me well. I have come to tell you honestly that I am going home. My village is near Kupyansk. I don't know what has happened to my wife and child. I am not a Communist, I have not served them, and they will not force me to serve them."

The captain ordered him to hand over his horse and weapons, except for his revolver, and to leave without anyone knowing. They hugged each other goodbye.

There were eleven Makhnovists in the mounted scout *komand* of one battalion. They had been recruited by one of them, a senior NCO, while the regiment was still marching north. They were excellent soldiers. When they were retreating through the forests the same NCO said to his commander:

"The army is retreating, and we have decided to go home."

"Well, if that's the case, goodbye!" was all the commander could say; he did not try to hold them back or dissuade them.

Captain Orlov, a recipient of the Order of St. George, who had been conscripted, once remarked to the officers who were with him: "I don't believe in victory any longer." No one objected. A little later he said again: "It's pointless to keep fighting." They vehemently objected, reminding him of honour and duty. Apparently after a painful struggle with himself, he quietly said, "I'm done fighting." One night he disappeared.

There was a great blow to morale when news of the Cossacks' disintegration reached Bakhmut. Would General Wrangel be able to cope with their collapse?

Despite everything, the *Markovtsy* nevertheless made a decision, first silently and then openly expressed: "We will continue to fight!" How could they not come to such a decision when women, children, and old people, albeit few in number, said to them:

"Are you really going to leave us? If you go, at least come back quickly. Come back by Christmas!"

There were also conversations among the soldiers on military topics.

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<sup>149</sup> I presume, from the use of the word *стражи*, that this was a city guard.

“Well, what now? Let’s start again with the defence of Donbas.”

“We’ll probably have to cancel this whole year, go to the Cossack regions and start a new campaign from there.”

“What if the Reds stop us?”

“Stop us? We’ll push through by force.”

The *Markovtsy* had only one plan: if they were to retreat, it would only be to the Don – even though they knew that they could retreat to Crimea with much less effort. The Don, the Kuban, and the entire north Caucasus were Cossack Host bases, places where the population was most hostile to the Bolsheviks. It was only from there could they gather their forces and launch a new offensive. Almost all of their wounded and sick were there, ready to be reinforcements. Even if the *Markovtsy* had known what was happening in the Kuban at that time; even if they had known that there were different opinions in the high command – whether to go to the Don or to the Crimea – their judgment would still have leaned toward the Don. The fact that they and the entire corps would have to fight their way to the Don, dealing with Budënný’s cavalry, did not bother them.

Shooting started somewhere during the night, but the duty unit quickly dispersed the emboldened miners. In the morning an order came that the division would march to the Debal'tsevo area, spending the night in Luganskoe.<sup>150</sup> They would march in two columns: the left, northern column with the regiments and batteries; the southern column with the supply trains and some covering forces. A encounter with Budyëny’s cavalry was possible.

They left at 05:00 on 13 (26) December. It was still dark. Groups of miners were visible in the side streets. There was something sinister about their appearance. As the last battalion was leaving the city centre, behind it there is a rumbling, a noise.

“The crowd is looting shops!” they reported to the battalion commander.

“Battalion, halt!”

The platoon returned to the square and fired several volleys at the crowd, which scattered. A house was already on fire. The atmosphere was heavy and tense.

We spend the night in Lugansk on full alert. It started to rain.

On 15 (28) December we marched through rain and wet snow. We received reports of desertion from among the Bakhmut guards we had received as reinforcements. “To hell with them!”

The units were deployed: the 1st Regiment in Chernukhino,<sup>151</sup> the 2nd Regiment with two battalions at Baronskaya Station<sup>152</sup> and in the nearest village, and the 3rd Regiment at Debal'tsevo Station and village. A battalion of the 2nd Regiment, a scout *komand* and the division HQ were held in reserve at Chernukhino Station.

The division occupied the central section of the Donbas, tasked with protecting the rail line to Rostov and allowing the corps to pass through the Donbas (the rest of the army was retreating to Crimea). The division’s sector was well known from the battles there in March and April of that year. Then it was a regiment of 150 bayonets and four guns, whereas now it was a division of 2,000 bayonets with 14 guns and a significantly larger number of machine guns. The only thing missing was the armoured trains. The Don train *Cossack*, assisted by the Markov Railway Company, was stationed at Chernukhino Station, but its task was to patrol along the line to Likhaya Station.<sup>153</sup>

The division prepared for defence.

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<sup>150</sup> Luhans'ke, 48.45°N, 38.24°E.

<sup>151</sup> Chornukhyne. The station is at 48.33°N, 38.49°E.

<sup>152</sup> Barons'ka Station, 48.38°N, 38.55°E.

<sup>153</sup> By Likhovskoy, 48.16°N, 40.19°E.



We were given rifle oil and ordered to clean and lubricate our rifles and replenish our ammunition supplies. ... The mood was high, and we eagerly awaited our meeting with Budënný. I didn't know, and I don't think anyone in our *komand* of 120 bayonets knew about the situation at the front. Our *komand*<sup>154</sup> was good. Captain Shevchenko was brave and loved by the soldiers.

In division's other units the mood was more subdued, but the officers did not waste any time trying to lift it. The 3rd Regiment found itself in a difficult situation, stationed in Debal'tsevo, as the local workers were hostile. It depressed the weak and embittered the strong, but everyone was cheered up by the weather – it was starting to freeze, snow was falling, and the mud was coming to an end.

The night passed quietly.

In the morning of 16 (29) December the division was on the front line. The *Kubantsy* passing to the right of it moved eastwards; on the left the 2nd Division withdrew to the Debal'tsevo – Nikitovka line. Enemy patrols appeared in front, gradually encircling it from the flanks.

Then at midday there was a surprise: a patrol sent to liaise with the 2nd Division raced back after almost being captured. What had happened to the 2nd Division was unknown. Anything was possible, and so the commander of the 3rd Regiment sent the supply train south along the only road crossing the ravines through the villages of Debal'tsevo and Ol'khovotka. Three hours later there was another surprise: the convoy had been attacked by enemy cavalry. The Red Cavalry had made it around the flank of the division. HQ issued an order: the regiment was to cover itself from the south. Red cavalry occupied the station and village of Fashchevka, 10 km south of the division's right flank. However, it was reported that the Kornilov Division was unloading at Beshchinskaya Station,<sup>155</sup> 50 km to the south.

The commander of the 3rd Regiment, Captain Savel'ev, listened to the information from the battalion commanders about the terrain and possible difficulties for the regiment if it had to retreat. He had not been with the regiment when it was fighting in that area at the beginning of the year. They talked about the ravine behind the division, impassable to artillery, supply trains and even *tachankas*. They told him that Colonel Bulatkin had died in that ravine. They said that it could only be detoured to the east, and if the regiment had to move around the ravine, it would first have to march 15 km along the front lines to the Chernukhino. There were two roads there: one along the railway line, somewhat circular, approaching towards the enemy; the other went through a deep ravine. The first might be crossed by the enemy, the second would be a difficult obstacle.

Everyone was worried, but they all agreed on one thing: they would fight. Captain Savel'ev was silent, listening distractedly, and finally said, "General Timanovskiy is very ill, but don't tell anyone that."

Chief of Staff Colonel Bitenbinder wrote in his notes:

I was most concerned about the condition of the division's commander. In recent days, he had become emaciated, hunched over, and lost interest in his surroundings. He was silent, thought endlessly and, to make matters worse, began to drink pure alcohol. Our failures had devastated him; something was wrong in his head. Was it a premonition of imminent death? Suddenly, he developed a high fever.

During the day the division's left flank was completely exposed. The 2nd Infantry Division retreated under pressure from enemy cavalry. At the time the reserve battalion of the 1st Regiment, a machine-gun *komand* and a supply train were stationed in Enakievo,<sup>156</sup> unaware of the enemy's proximity and preparing to march the next morning. By chance several officers encountered a retreating Kuban unit of 50-60 sabres, whose commander informed them of the Reds' approach.

The news was stunningly unexpected. The answers to the *Markovtsy's* questions surprised them even more. It turned out that the Kuban unit they had run into was not a *sotnia*, but a regiment, and the officer they

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<sup>154</sup> The scouts of the 1st Regiment.

<sup>155</sup> Bezchyn's'ka, 48.05°N, 38.92°E.

<sup>156</sup> Yenakieve, 48.24°N, 38.20°E.



were talking to was the regimental commander. He said that the *Kubantsy* no longer wanted to fight and had gone back to Kuban, and that this was all that remained of the regiment. The situation was the same in other Kuban regiments.

The *Markovtsy* were so shocked that they did not ask any more questions. The commander of the Kuban regiment waved his hand hopelessly and fell silent. "Leave!" was all he could say.

An artillery officer who served in General Shkuro's corps<sup>157</sup> described the collapse of the *Kubantsy* as follows:

The commander of one regiment assembled his troops and gave a speech, calling on the Cossacks to fulfil their duty. At the end of his speech, he announced that the regiment would march past him, and those Cossacks who remained loyal to their duty should line up behind him, while those who decided to go home should go straight ahead. It was a sad and tragic scene. From each sotnia, 5 to 15 horsemen turned back, while the rest rode straight ahead, singing their Kuban songs. Those who remained looked sadly at those who were leaving. Many had tears in their eyes. They considered themselves doomed, but their sense of duty proved stronger. There were no officers or NCOs among the departing Cossacks.

The news was shocking. They knew that the Cossacks did not want to fight, and would not face the Reds' attacks, their *sotnias* retreating before small detachments, but only now did they learn that they were going home.

The officers hurried to the battalion commander, Colonel Brzezicki, but he did not believe the report. He wanted to stay until the morning, and only gave the order otherwise under their firm pressure.

Colonel Brzezicki had recently taken command of the reserve battalion. His first impression was excellent: he was slender, interesting, cheerful, and sociable. In his first few days, he established close communication with the officers in a simple and relaxed manner and even talked about himself: as a career lieutenant, in 1905 he was stripped of his rank and exiled to Siberia for his revolutionary activities; in 1917 he was released and given the rank of colonel to level him with his peers. He spoke of this with no small amount of pride. How he ended up in the Volunteer Army remained unknown, but it was clear to everyone that he harboured no intense hatred for the Bolsheviks. The officers began to watch him closely. He showed no interest in the regiment for which the reinforcements were being prepared, treated his duties formally, gave orders without much care, and was completely unconcerned about events at the front. As a result people started to mistrust him.

The day of 15 (28) December had a severe frost caused icy conditions, slightly covered by falling snow. The machine gunners and artillerymen were concerned. When dawn broke the picture became clear: there were long lines of infantry advancing across the entire front of the division. Suddenly an order for the division to retreat came through, as Red cavalry was already in Grabovo 20 km to the south;<sup>158</sup> while to the right it was bypassing the ravine. The division faced a march of 15-20 km. The *Kornilovtsy* were located 15 km south of Grabovo.

Given the division's position, all its units had to retreat via Chernukhino Station, and this required a careful sequence of actions: the 3rd Regiment could only begin to retreat when the two battalions of the 2nd Regiment had left Baronskaya Station; the 1st Regiment could only start to retreat when the 2nd and 3rd Regiments had passed. The reserve had to ensure that the ravine was covered. The division was to retreat along the railway line, just 10 km from the enemy.

At 09:00 the battalions of the 2nd Regiment began to retreat from Baronskaya under fire. When the flanking battalion reached the road to Chernukhino, the Reds were already there, having pushed back the right flank of the 3rd Regiment. The attacking units were from the Red 9th Rifle Division. The *Markovtsy* battalion, together with the 3rd Regiment, repelled the Reds and moved towards Chernukhino. It was time for the 3rd Regiment to retreat. But it was in fierce combat repelling the enemy's attack, which caused a delay.

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<sup>157</sup> Captain Shklyar, who later transferred to the Markov Artillery Brigade.

<sup>158</sup> Hrabove, 48.15°N, 38.65°E.



Its units gradually left the station and village of Debal'tsevo, but again there was a delay: there were workers firing at the platoons covering the retreat. *Markovtsy* raced into the houses and streets from where the shots were heard. There was no mercy. While we were waiting for everyone to leave the village, the Reds again pushed back the right flank and crossed the Chernukhino road, while other Red units also were approaching from the Baronskaya area. The 3rd Regiment was left with either clearing a path along the main road, with the enemy on three sides, or heading straight along the road through the ravine. The decision made was to take the shortest route. A battalion and horse *sotnia* retreated slowly, delaying and repelling the Reds. Finally they received an order to stop and hold their positions.

Time went by and evening approached, but the battalion was still stationary. Why the delay? Captain Savel'ev rode up to the battalion commander.

"Move to the vanguard. You will proceed to Chernukhino station, taking all precautions. Find out who is at the station. The 1st Regiment should be there. Take a battery with you," he said with undisguised agitation.

The battalion approached from the ravine, deploying on the move.

"What has happened?"

"You'll see!"

When the battalion reached the ravine, the reason for the delay became clear: the descent into the ravine was quite steep and icy. An ammunition wagon was descending the narrow road, with all its brakes engaged and ropes as well, as artillerymen and infantrymen trying to prevent it from sliding down by clinging to bushes. The horses were led down separately. All the separate units were together at the bottom of the ravine, in a narrow space. The battalion descended without delay. The ascent was gentler, and the artillery platoon made it easily.

It was already dark. Sporadic shots could be heard somewhere. Ahead, presumably at the station, there was the glow of a fire. Two horsemen were sent out and returned with the message that the Reds were at the station. A report was sent to the regiment commander.

The situation was clear: the regiment would have to attack the station, about two kilometres away, in order to reach the road to the south. A company sent to the left approached the railway and captured some guards in a booth, without firing a shot. The prisoners reported that the 105th and 108th Regiments of the 12th Rifle Division were stationed at the station, while its other units were in Chernukhino. This was all the information needed for a successful surprise attack. A second report was sent.

Time passed, but the regiment still didn't arrive. The messengers didn't return either, and there were no orders. The battalion, lying in wait, was freezing. It became clear that it had been left to its fate with only two guns. The battalion commander decided to take a chance and head south of the station to reach the railway line running south. The frozen ground made it easy for the battery to move across the fields, and the layer of snow softened the noise. Not a single shot was fired. The railway line was reached. The battalion arrived at Nikishine at midnight. No one was there. "Your people left long ago," the residents informed them. But they had no strength left to continue, so a rest until morning was ordered. Two hours later the rest of the regiment arrived at the hamlet. It had not followed the battalion sent as the vanguard, but had moved southward along the ravine. A guide led them from ravine to ravine. It took eight hours to cover ten kilometres. Everyone arrived at the hamlet exhausted and nervous. A few hours later the regiment re-established contact with the division HQ, which had been out of touch since noon the previous day.

While this was happening, during the day the 1st Regiment held back the advance of the Red 12th Rifle Division at the village of Chernukhino. Surrounded on the right, it withdrew to the station, continuing to fight. The battalions of the 2nd Regiment passed through, but the 3rd Regiment had not yet arrived. It was getting dark. The regiment was surrounded at the station. All deadlines had passed, and so it left the station. It was ordered to detach a unit for a night raid on the village of Fashevka.<sup>159</sup> Approaching the village,

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<sup>159</sup> Fashchivka.



the detachment saw Red cavalry leaving it, but the raid failed. The detachment went to join the regiment, which had stopped at the hamlet of Strukov,<sup>160</sup> south of Nikishine.

The 2nd Regiment marched quickly south. It was tasked with occupying Rassypnoe<sup>161</sup> and Grabovo, while assigning one battalion to the division's reserve at Rassypnoe Station.<sup>162</sup> But on the way, due to the loss of communication with the 3rd Regiment, which was supposed to be at N. Orlovka, the battalion assigned to the reserve went to that village to cover the division from the west. There were no Reds in Rassypnoe, but the attack on Grabovo was a complete success: the enemy was not expecting it and left the village in disorder, leaving behind saddled horses and several prisoners from Budënniy's 6th Cavalry Division.

There was extreme concern at the division HQ: the division was in a difficult situation and the 3rd Regiment was missing. The sick General Timanovskiy was beside himself. The chief of staff, Colonel Bitenbinder, went in search of them. It was night when several horsemen ambushed him – they were his own men. They had been looking for the regiment on the southern edge of the ravine, but it had gone ahead of the 1st Regiment to the eastern edge. With contact finally established, the 3rd Regiment was ordered to go to N. Orlovka.

Thus, by dawn of 17 (30) December the division had safely retreated to new positions 12-15 km to the south. The previous day had been very trying, but the new day was also to bring neither peace nor rest. Its front line formed an arc about 15 km long, with enemy cavalry on its flanks. It was occupied by scattered battalions, which was completely inappropriate for the situation. Every hour there were new complications and the situation worsened. A strong detachment sent to liaise with the *Kornilovtsy*, who were presumed to be in the Beshchinskaya Station area, rode back, narrowly escaping capture by the Reds. A convoy sent to Alekseevo-Leonovo<sup>163</sup> in the rear, with a guard of 30 men, was captured by the enemy.

The following orders were issued: the division was to concentrate at Rassypnoe Station and the scout *komand* of the 1st Regiment was to proceed immediately to Chistyakovo Station.<sup>164</sup> Upon arrival there it repelled a Red Army *divizion* that had come from Alekseevo-Leonovo. While the division was concentrating, Red forces were already advancing from the north and east and looming to the west. The 2nd Regiment battalion in Rassypnoe, in order to allow the 1st Regiment to retreat, held back and repelled an attack. Forces now also appeared from the south. An attack on the station was repelled.

Taking advantage of some delay on the part of the enemy, the division began to retreat in three columns: the right column was the 2nd Regiment along the western side of the rail line; the middle column was the 1st Regiment; and the left column was the 3rd Regiment. The enemy forces pressed forward again. The division retreated slowly, in bounds, fighting back with fire. Halfway there it was threatened with an attack from the right and from the rear, but the advance of the Red Cavalry regiment from Alekseevo-Leonovo was delayed by the scout *komand*.

The division's resilience stopped the enemy's advance, and by evening the 1st and 2nd Regiments had retreated to Chistyakovo Station, and the 3rd to the Olkhovchik hamlet, six kilometres to the west. The frost was at least 10 degrees. All the houses were filled with *Markovtsy*. The tired horses, which had pulled machine guns and artillery across the fields, were covered with whatever could be found but stood in harness in the streets. They were hungry, and so were the men.

The wounded and sick were loaded onto a train at the station, among them the seriously ill General Timanovskiy. There was communication with the Ilovaysk junction station, but were told that the trip was not completely safe. A while later it was reported that the train had arrived safely. Few knew about General Timanovskiy's illness and evacuation.

Corps HQ was naturally trying to figure out the enemy's intentions. There were two assumptions: either it would seek to cut off the Volunteer Corps' retreat route to Rostov, i.e. advance to the south or, according to

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<sup>160</sup> Stryukove, 48.18°N, 38.59°E.

<sup>161</sup> Rozsipne, 48.15°N, 38.57°E.

<sup>162</sup> 48.13°N, 38.56°E.

<sup>163</sup> Now called Torez, Chystiakove or Chistyakove, 48.02°N, 38.65°E

<sup>164</sup> 48.04°N, 38.58°E.



a number of reports, it was preparing to strike directly at Rostov in order to capture it, not only cutting off the route but also surrounding the corps.

With events unfolding rapidly, the corps HQ had no time for intelligence gathering, nor was there time for combat reconnaissance, but questioning captured *Budenovtsy* could yield some information. The questioning was conducted by Lieutenant Kritskiy. He compiled a report and, as was normal, gave his conclusion: "The Markov Division is under attack."

Chief of Staff General Dostovalov read the report, then asked the lieutenant: "How did you conclude that the Markov Division is under attack?"

"That is my opinion based on the interrogation," he replied.

"Wrong! The Cavalry Army is heading straight for Rostov," Dostoevsky said firmly. "Its main forces are aimed at Rostov. They are attacking the *Kornilovtsy*."

"Your Excellency. In addition to my conclusion, allow me to say this. Budënniy cannot head towards Rostov with three of our divisions in his rear."

Dostovalov, by now agitated and irritated, objected: "Reports and messages from Army HQ say that the Horse Army has turned towards Rostov. Repeat your questioning immediately!"

"Maybe towards Rostov! We don't know," replied the prisoners.

At 23:00 all senior unit commanders had been summoned to division HQ. Only the commander of the 3rd Regiment, Captain Savel'ev, had not arrived: the orderly sent to fetch him had been unable to find the village where the regiment was stationed for the night.

Opening the meeting, the chief of staff said first: "The division's commander, General Timanovskiy, has been evacuated in a serious condition, and based on the relevant field regulations, I have taken command of the division."

He then outlined the situation. The Kornilov, Markov and 2nd Divisions were covering the main evacuation route, the rail line to Rostov; the Drozdovskiy and cavalry units were retreating along it. At that time the 2nd Division was 10 km to the west; the Kornilov Division was about 15 km to the east. Their exact location was unknown. The enemy's 6th Cavalry Division had wedged itself between the Kornilov and Markov Divisions; the 12th Rifle Division was facing the division; the 9th Rifle Division and units of the 4th Cavalry Division were threatening from the west.

According to the orders received, the division was to move eastwards and join forces with the *Kornilovtsy*. It would begin that mission that night. Its march would take it through Alekseevo-Leonovo, Orekhov hamlet and Stepanovka.<sup>165</sup> Where the 2nd Division would go and when was unknown, due to a lack of communication. The division would set out at 05:00. The 1st Regiment was first to take Alekseevo-Leonovo and advance to the hills on the left. Under its cover, the other regiments would advance. The plan was to move quickly.

Then Colonel Bitenbinder asked for comments. All the officers saw the extreme complexity and difficulty of moving along the indicated route. Concerns were also expressed that the division would have to cross two ravines; between them it would have a deep ravine on the third side and only one road to the south; on the fourth side, there was a ridge that would have to be occupied by units from the division. This task could only be accomplished with speed, good judgement and pressure. However, would crossing the ravines on just one road cause delays? There was a proposal to take a more southerly route, on the other side of the ravine, rather than the indicated road. But Colonel Bitenbinder believed that the division's march through Alekseevo-Leonovo "corresponded to the situation and its position."

The commanders left the meeting with feelings of unease: had everything been weighed up and taken into account? What was the condition of the bridges across the ravines? What were the slopes of the ravines like? But it was too late by then. They needed to think about each regiment fulfilling its own tasks.

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<sup>165</sup> 47.93°N, 38.80°E.



The 1st Regiment began the fighting, followed by the 2nd, with the 3rd in the rear.

### 18 December

The 3rd Regiment was in a small village in a hollow. Visibility across the snow-covered ground was up to 1,000 paces. The *Markovtsy* were doing their usual guard duty and sleeping. They slept like the dead. No wonder! They had spent the previous night in the hollow in heavy traffic. But those in charge had no time for sleep.

"Why are you awake?" asked the officer entering the house of his comrade-in-arms, who was writing something in his diary by the dim light of a lamp. "You can write it down later!"

"When later? You know, this is a good opportunity. And there are events to record!" replied the other.

"Yeah," said the one who had entered, and then continued, "I came to see you because I remembered March and April of this year. Do you remember? It was hard: forward, backward, and no progress overall. What did we sing it then, as a joke? The Reds will press, and we'll scatter and run to Rassypnoe.

But from Rassypnoe there was nothing else for it, so we fled to Chistyakovo. Then from Chistyakovo it was full steam ahead, forward to Nikishine. ... Well, now it's no laughing matter ... so, I'll be off!"

Finally an orderly arrived from division HQ, and at 04:00 the regiment set out for Chistyakovo. The preparations were brief, and the regiment stretched out along the road like a long, thin snake. The column marched calmly, without noise, without a single word. Only the snow crunched underfoot. The dark starry sky merged with the snow-covered ground no more than 1,000 paces away, beyond which lay the unknown.

At about 05:00, when the regiment arrived at the station, units from the division were lined up there, and the 1st Regiment had already left.

"Commander of the 3rd Battalion to the regiment commander!" was relayed along the column.

"Your battalion will remain at the station in the rear of the division," Captain Savel'ev said hurriedly and curtly. "Immediately replace the 2nd Regiment's guards on the northern and north-western outskirts. Your task is to remain there until the regiment enters Alekseevo-Leonovo. The entire division is passing through this village. Then catch up with the regiment."

The 1st Regiment was supposed to start the attack on that village while it was still dark, but it was delayed and so assaulted at dawn. The village was taken with the loss of 15 men. The left flank of the regiment was covered by a scout *komand*.

We quickly took up positions near the mill as soon as dawn broke. Our artillery fired heavily at the start, and we saw Budënný's cavalry being driven out of the village, and our division with its long supply train moving into it.

Alekseevo-Leonovo was a large village stretching from north to south on both sides of a ravine. The western side, which was under attack, was low-lying, while the eastern side is elevated. The sides were connected by a single bridge in the southern part of the village.

It was 10 o'clock. The enemy began shelling our *komand* with artillery fire, and at about the same time the last units of the 3rd Regiment entered the village. We were in high spirits, and everyone thought that everything was going well, since the division had taken the village.

Indeed, the leading battalion of the 1st Regiment occupied the elevated part of the village and reached its northern outskirts. The other battalions of the Regiment crossed the bridge and were to follow the leading battalion, with one reaching the north-eastern outskirts of the village. There was a delay on the ascent: the icy road was impassable for the machine gun *dvukolki*; the horses slipped and fell, and the passing companies began to help them.

"Don't delay! Move forward!"

The lead battalion on the northern outskirts was waiting for reinforcements and its machine guns. It could not advance until its right flank was secured (the left flank was blocked by a ravine, behind which was a scout *komand*). There were some buildings ahead, and Red machine guns were firing from them. An



advance by one of the companies cost 20 men out of 60. Finally the machine guns arrived, but they still had to warm up the water in their casings.

The regiment commander, Colonel Slonovskiy, raced up to the battalion commander, Captain Papkov.

“Attack immediately! Take the mine buildings! Forward!” he shouted. Captain Papkov – who was always cool-headed and calm, assessing each situation, but acting boldly and decisively – objected.

“Attack!” Colonel Slonovskiy shouted, beside himself.

“Battalion... Forward!” Captain Papkov commanded.

Meanwhile, where street ascended, there was a heavy, anxious traffic jam, with machine gun *dvukolki*, ammunition wagons, and a battery assigned to the 1st Regiment. It took a long time to pull up just one gun, then another, then the ammunition wagons. There was a lot of shouting and noise.

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The 1st Battalion advanced rapidly under machine gun fire. Another battalion deployed behind it. The third deployed on the north-eastern outskirts, against which cavalry charges were already underway.

The attacking battalion was 300-400 paces away and was about to launch its attack. But suddenly dense waves of cavalry rushed out from behind the mines. In an instant the battalion's chains were broken. The cavalry did not stop, but raced towards the village and crushed another battalion. The first battalion was finished off by subsequent waves of cavalry. The Reds launched an attack with their entire front, surrounding the village from the east.

This scene was witnessed by the scout *komand* on the other side of the ravine.

Clouds of cavalry appeared on the left. I saw how the first battalion was cut down – the tall figure of Captain Papkov in a white “Manchurian” *papakha*, being struck down by sabres, will remain in my memory until I die. We wanted to rush to their aid, but there was a menacing cry: “Stop! Back!”

The same thing happened to Captain Tsvetkov's resisting men on the right.

The Reds' leading *lava*, having rushed up to the village, dismounted and led an attack on it, where the carts were galloping about in panic. The *lavas* surrounding the village were thrown back, but their flank flowed deeper around the village, along the entire eastern edge. The first two guns to climb the hill rushed to the outskirts but managed to fire only two shots. The division HQ *sotnias* and the 1st Regiment ran out of the village to attack. The Reds retreated before them, but attacked them in the flank. The *sotnias* ran to the south and finally withdrew from the battle.

Back in the village the 1st Regiment was in complete disorder. The battalion on the eastern outskirts was still holding out, but behind it the Reds were in the village.

The 2nd Regiment was still in the village, along the street across the bridge. It was demoralised by everything that was happening on the heights. There was no leadership.

The 3rd Regiment, on the western outskirts, repelled a cavalry attack, but the infantry was still advancing. There was a traffic jam on the street and in the square: batteries, machine guns, wagons. The battery commander, seeing the Reds advancing, positioned one gun and fired a shot. The incredible happened: the horses all bolted in different directions, everything was chaos.

Lieutenant Maiboroda wrote:

The *komand* commander walked quickly towards us; as soon as he arrived, he ordered us to immediately form up and follow him. Going down into the village, we saw a company of the 3rd Regiment repelling a cavalry attack with volleys from the knee. Passing the wagons and reaching the western edge of the village, we saw cavalry charging at us from both sides. The commander ordered us to stop, and we repelled the attack with volleys from behind some fences at a distance of a hundred paces and moved towards the stream.

Lieutenant Neznamov wrote:



The supply wagons, which the cavalry had crashed into, raced forward. One gun slipped over the bridge breaking it; the second got stuck on it. The supply wagons were piled up ... When the cavalry charged us, we repelled them at point-blank range, killing many.

Captain Shevchenko saw clearly that it was impossible to resist any longer and began to withdraw his *komand*.

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But what of the rearguard battalion? It was still at the station. Dawn broke. A column of cavalry appeared, riding along both sides of the track. Under machine-gun fire, it quickly descended into a hollow and disappeared. It could then have appeared 600-800 paces in front of the battalion. That was not scary, but then an armoured train appeared. It entered the dip. Red infantry chains also appeared. The battalion now felt completely powerless: it did not have a single gun. The armoured train was approaching the station.

A *lava* emerged from the ravine on the left flank of the battalion, but disappeared back under fire. The armoured train opened fire, aiming at the machine guns. It was hopeless for the battalion to remain there, although the tail of the division's column was still visible. The battalion began to retreat. As soon as it left the village, the cavalry attacked it, unsuccessfully. Retreating a little further, it came under fire from the armoured train on the right. The battalion veered slightly to the left. Not only was it unable to defend itself but more importantly, it could not secure the division's rear. There was only one way out: to cross a small ravine and take up a position on its opposite high ridge. There it saw the 3rd Regiment on the western outskirts, less than half a kilometre from its left flank. The position was excellent, flanking the approaches to the village.

Suddenly, a cavalry *divizion* attacked it from the left, but was repelled. However, the battalion could remain in that position no longer and had to retreat behind another small ravine. During the retreat it was attacked again, repelling that attack at the cost of sixteen men.

Behind the next dip, the battalion was merely a spectator to the agony of the division in Alekseevo-Leonovo. It set itself the task of preventing the enemy from bypassing the second ravine and cutting off the retreat route of those leaving the village along the large ravine that led from it.

### The Agony

The Red Cavalry surrounded the village from the south, completing its encirclement. Red *tachankas* fired at anyone who tried to leave. But then one of the machine gun teams from the 2nd Regiment, fought its way through the courtyards and reached the outskirts, opening fire. The ring on the southern side broke, and the *komand*, moving in bounds, reached the ravine, along with dozens of infantrymen and two guns. There was a steep descent into it and then a steep riverbed. One gun made it out, but the other got stuck and was abandoned. After a while, two more guns followed, but they were overtaken by the Reds.

The Reds entered the village's main street from the east with impunity. They raced among the wagons. Captain Bukin was with his company on the north-eastern outskirts (8th Company, 1st Regiment) and saw the complete collapse of resistance, so took his company to the southern outskirts and came out onto the main street. The Reds had cleared that area of the village. When Captain Bukin saw the Reds south of the village, his company opened fire, and the way south to the large ravine was cleared. The company, returning fire, reached the safety of the ravine, covering the retreat of dozens of others and several carts with the wounded. The latter were taken out by the company's nurse, Olga Eliseeva. She not only bandaged and placed the wounded on the carts, but with a revolver in her hand, she stopped those who were running away and ordered them back. Thanks to her, up to thirty wounded were evacuated.

Lieutenant Betkovskiy's 5th Company moved to the southern outskirts behind the 8th, holding back the Reds. On the main street it had to once more drive out the advancing Reds. Like the 8th Company, it had to fight its way south. At that moment a scout *komand* from the 1st Regiment came out of the village.

Lieutenant Maiboroda wrote:

Before we had gone a hundred paces from the village, we saw a cloud of horsemen heading towards us from the south. Everyone knew that it was a matter of life and death. The



commander ordered the *komand* to stop and line up in two rows. The order was not to shoot until commanded.

The cavalry rushed towards us in dense, large columns, with red banners flying. Now 600, 400, and finally 200 paces away. The commander, who was standing on the right flank with a Browning, gave the order: "Fire!" The first volley was just like in training. Again the command: "Fire!" A second volley, then third, fourth ...

With the first volley, confusion broke out among the cavalry, but the attack continued as planned. After the second, a mass of horses raced in all directions without riders. After the third, almost all the cavalry turned back, but some riders carried forward for 50 more paces. After the fifth volley, the rifle magazines were empty, but the cavalry was already 500-600 paces away and retreating in all directions.

The picture was indescribable: there were horses and people running across the field, dead and wounded everywhere. I remember still how relieved I felt, as if my life had re-awakened.

Then a Red *sotnia* leapt out from behind our left flank and launched an attack, which was easily repulsed. We descended to a stream in a gully, which concealed us from the enemy's sight and fire. They were shelling our mounted units scattered on the field two kilometres away from us. From the ravine we began to ascend the ridge. We were bombarded with frequent and accurate fire from the guns. But the enemy did not pursue us.

Lieutenant Neznamov finished his recollections of the *komand*'s combat this way:

Thanks to Captain Shevchenko, the *komand* held on, fighting back with rifle fire. We covered the withdrawal of others and allowing many of them to join us, flee and bring out their wounded. I vividly remember the scene: Lieutenant Kovalevskiy gave a rifle to Colonel Bitenbinder, division commander, who was marching by himself. I remember the figure of the commander of the 5th Company, Lieutenant Vakh Betekovskiy, who was almost killed when we mistook him for a *Budenovtsy*. He led his company to join us.

The scout *komand*, the 5th Company and the 8th Company were the last units to leave the village. There, in a field south of it, the last shots rang out. One from Colonel Bitenbinder saved Lieutenant Lebedev: he killed a Red who was about to bring a sabre down on his head.

But the Red horsemen had not yet made their way to the place where the division's tragedy actually began, the village square, the bridge and the ascent.

The tail of the 2nd Regiment was still at the church. It was Lieutenant Deludenko's company. It resisted the Red infantry that had entered the village. When Deludenko was killed the company's resistance ceased.

The wagons, batteries made frantic efforts on the rise at the bridge:

The 6th Battery was somewhat delayed. With great difficulty it managed to cross the bridge over the river (the bridge collapsed with the weight of one gun), but on the ascent the battery stopped: the horses could not pull the guns up the hill. With the help the men they had somehow dragged three guns up and the fourth one was still being wrestled with when the cavalry arrived at the battery. The guns were captured by the Reds. Very few officers from the battery were saved. Five officers, a cadet and, several soldiers were killed.

Sporadic shooting came from the village: small groups, unwilling to surrender, fought back. Single muffled shots were also heard: it was the unreconciled killing themselves.

The division was in a dip, surrounded by the enemy. It turned out that the only way out, a gully with a stream at the bottom, was clogged with wagons. It took self-control not to stop at the obstacle, but to wade through it. But even this last escape route did not give a full guarantee of safety: there were Reds on both sides of it.

"Surrender, black shoulder-boards!" shouted the Red horsemen who were riding nearby. We fired at them. They retired back, and then their machine guns started to fire.





A sparse chain of the *Markovtsy* exited via the stream, shooting left and right. The commander of the 3rd Regiment, Captain Savel'ev, was making his way through it on horseback with his orderly.

"Captain, Sir! I'll tear off the flag," said the man carrying the regimental banner, and then fell down, hit by a machine-gun burst. The *Markovtsy*, who had some Lewis machine guns, shot back. The Reds finally managed to close the last escape route from the village.

So the remnants moved on faced with two-sided danger for a kilometre and more, until they reached a large gully, where danger threatened only from one side. Their hopes of escaping increased, and they began to fight back more confidently and calmly.

Some managed to leave, others stayed. The wounded and killed covered the ravine and the village with their bodies. The exodus from the village gradually stopped.

### **Retreat of the Remnants of the Division**

It was about 13:00-14:00. The Reds did not pursue. Their squadrons formed columns near the village, and others stayed in *lava* on the edge of the ravine, occasionally firing rifles and machine-guns.

Those who were the last to leave the village, having gathered in groups, continued to march along the ravine, ready to resist, in conditions that had become more favourable: the Reds would have to descend the steep edge of the ravine and cross the steep riverbed.

Was it that or something else that kept the Reds from completing the rout? Maybe they didn't dare because they would have also had to attack the retreating chains of the scout *komand*, the 5th and 8th Companies and the chain of the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Regiment, which was a kilometre away? Could it be that they were held back by a column of infantry two kilometres south of the gully, which they could not think of attacking with their now badly battered forces? It was the 2nd Infantry Division that was passing through.

Lieutenant Neznamov recorded:

The division marched along the dirt road with only a few wagons, some machine-guns on the same type of wagon, the infantry in ordered ranks. Our superiors raced off to ask for help. In spite of deathly fatigue we were prepared to charge the *Budenovtsy*, to retrieve the wagons, artillery, and wounded. But the commander of the regiment marching nearby said that a huge column of Reds was following him and all he could do was to give us some ammunition and take us in. It was very hard on the soul. Everything was gone – weapons, the wounded, the sisters...

A group was standing to the side of the passing 2nd Division – apparently the staff. The commander of the rearguard battalion hurried to it.

"Your Excellency! The Markov Division is dying. Please help them!"

"The Markov Division has fulfilled its mission!" was the reply.

The battalion attached itself to the rear of the 2nd Division, followed by a *division* of the Black Sea Horse Regiment.

The road led towards a large ravine that separated the opponents. Further on it crossed that ravine. A clash seemed inevitable. But it didn't happen: the Reds limited themselves to heavy machine-gun fire, which halted the 2nd Division. The *Markovtsy* battalion did not stop, continuing along the road, crossing the ravine. It had gone eight kilometres when it saw a group of horsemen. They turned out to be the headquarters of the Kornilov Division. The battalion was sent to Stepanovka to make contact with Kornilov units there. At night it was ordered to Rostov.

The main body of *Markovtsy* who had escaped from the battle, gathered about thirty kilometres to the south, in Uspenska.<sup>166</sup> There were about 300 infantrymen with 20 heavy and light machine guns, artillerymen with horses and one gun, and dozens of carts. Colonel Bitenbinder's first measure was to gather all the *Markovtsy* scattered around the area and tell them to move to Rostov. His second was to

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<sup>166</sup> 47.73°N, 38.71°E



remove Colonel Slonovskiy from command of the 1st Regiment. The *Markovtsy* reacted to this with sarcasm: his mistakes were only a small part of the main, fundamental mistake. But they had other things to worry about at that time.

On 19 December (1 January 1920) the *Markovtsy* headed for Rostov by various routes. The reserve battalion, supply trains, teams, and batteries that had been in reserve had long since lost contact with the division and were also heading there. The carts were loaded with the most essential items taken from the trains, as the line was completely congested. The rear guard battalion, which had suffered little damage, travelled on carts. A high ridge was sighted ahead - an excellent position for defence. Was this the "line of honour" that had been talked about in Bakhmut? Indeed, piles of stakes and coils of wire lay on the ridge. The officers of the Markov Engineer Company were at work.

"Hurry up!" they were told.

They spent the night in Sultan-Saly. During the next day's march they encountered a column of infantry – a Terek *plastun* battalion. The *plastuns*, almost all of them young men, walked with gloomy faces and heavy steps, bent under the weight of the loads they were carrying. They passed in silence, and the *Markovtsy* were silent too. Behind the *plastuns* were two guns, which turned out to be the Markov reserve battery. The *Markovtsy* greeted their fellow *Markovtsy*, but there was anxiety on both sides mixed with the joy of meeting. The division's defeat left the artillerymen shaken. There were hopes for General Toporkov's Terek Cossack Division, which was advancing to the front. With good wishes for each other, the comrades parted ways – some to battle, others to heal their wounds. A few days later, that artillery platoon was completely wiped out.



## In Rostov

From 20 December (2 January) the *Markovtsy* gathered in Rostov. A large column of 400 arrived, followed by another of 160, then several small groups, a column of nearly a hundred horses, dozens of carts, one gun, and *tachankas*. The townspeople stopped and watched the arrivals with eyes full of bewilderment, confusion, and horror. It was indeed the *Markovtsy* who had been somewhere near Orël and were now here. The fate of the city and its inhabitants was sealed: the Bolsheviks were coming. Some people were in tears but most, looking at the weary, dejected new arrivals, turned away and left.

The *Markovtsy* settled in the centre of the city. There were get togethers, embraces. Then the questions and news:

"Is he alive?", "Where is A.?", "What happened to B.?"

"Killed", "Hacked to death", "Wounded", "Left wounded, then shot himself." But most often the answer was: "Unknown. The last time we saw him ..."

"Colonel Naumov shot himself! We were running past him. He was standing with a revolver in his hand. 'Colonel! We're going to break through, come with us.' He didn't move, and as soon as we walked away, we heard a muffled shot." The story of the sad end to that extraordinary and well-known *Markovtsy* left a very heavy impression.

"General Timanovskiy is dead!" That news shocked everyone. The *Markovtsy* had lost not only their valiant and beloved commander, but also the inner strength that held their ranks together and kept their morale high.

"He died on the day of our defeat."

"He did not outlive his division."

A mournful funeral service was held for him; the commander of the 2nd Regiment, Colonel Morozov, who also died of typhus, which we had only just learned about; and for all those others who had perished. There was not a single coffin at the funeral service. All those killed remained "where they were". Timanovskiy's coffin was sent to Ekaterinodar for burial in the crypt of the Host Cathedral next to General Alekseev, Colonel Geydeman, Colonel Mionchinskiy, and Colonel Morozov.

After the questions about comrades there were other questions:

"How is the company? The regiment?", "How many got out?", "How many machine guns and guns got out?", "What about the nurses?" The answers were sad. The conclusion was obvious: the division no longer existed, and there were barely enough men left for one regiment.

When those topics were exhausted, the most painful question arose: "How could this have happened? It's unbelievable that the enemy could crush the division, drive it into a dip and not let it out."

"Our men fought back like heroes, using only guns and machine guns."

"We fought back even when we were stuck in a vice."

"It wasn't our fault. We fought hard to break through."

"You can ask anything of us, but you can't place us in a impossible situation."

"We would have fought to the end, but we didn't even have the opportunity to resist."

"Strictly speaking, there was no real battle. The companies did not have time to deploy, and the machine guns and batteries did not have time to take up their positions."

"Did you know that our artillery, with fourteen guns, fired very effectively at the Reds when they were leaving the village, and fired only three shells when they attacked?"

"The delay occurred on the bridge."

"But I saw that it occurred on the climb."



Among the middle-ranking officers, there was talk of other things. Was the commander of the 1st Regiment, Colonel Slonovskiy, to blame? Why did he send Captain Papkov's battalion into battle without making all the necessary preparations? Was Colonel Danilov, commander of the 2nd Regiment, to blame for doing nothing during the battle, leaving his regiment completely inactive and disappearing without a trace? What about Captain Savel'ev, commander of the 3rd Regiment? He was responsible for the passive task as the division's rearguard. He did not receive any orders during the battle. The had disaster begun in the vanguard, which he could not have done anything about, but he pointed to one of the main, even fundamental reasons:

"I was not at the meeting at the division headquarters when the question of the division's route was decided. I would have objected strongly."

Captain Savel'ev, like the entire 3rd Regiment, remembered the retreat from Debaltsevo, also along an icy road through a ravine. It was a fateful event. But would Captain Savel'ev's objection have been accepted?

Blindly following a flawed plan led to a tragic outcome.

Colonel Bitenbinder explained the failure by the fact that Colonel Slonovskiy began the attack on Alekseevo-Leonovo more than an hour late. That was true. But...

"It looked good on paper."

"But they forgot about the ravines."

"And marching across them..."

The *Markovtsy* were greatly pained by their defeat. They blamed everyone, including themselves: they had lost their bearings, lost control of their units and while recognising what was happening didn't dare to act independently. Only those who dared to act organised themselves.

