

## The Trans-Dnieper Operation

The final stage of the White movement in the south of Russia is associated with the name of General P. N. Wrangel, who on 22 March (4 April), 1920 took command of the Armed Forces of South Russia, which he later renamed the Russian Army. His stay in the Crimea was marked by battles in Northern Taurida in the spring and summer of 1920, the August landing in the Kuban and the Trans-Dnieper Operation.

The Trans-Dnieper Operation, described below, was the last offensive operation of the Russian Army. Carried out in the last days of September 1920, it ended in failure, with a retreat to the left bank of the Dnieper. This was followed by battles in Northern Taurida and a retreat to the Perekop fortifications, soon broken through by the advancing Red Army.

The preparation of the Trans-Dnieper Operation dragged on for almost a month. According to Wrangel, the collection of the necessary pontoon material presented great difficulties. All the preparations for the operation were carried out in secrecy, since its success largely depended on surprise. The main goal of the operation, the leadership of which was entrusted to General D. P. Dratsenko, was to transfer military operations to the right bank of the Dnieper, to eliminate the Kakhovka bridgehead and to try to retain the strategic initiative. In a September directive, Wrangel set the following tasks for the units involved:

General Kutepov ... covering himself from Taganrog, the Coal District, Chaplin and Sinelnikov, is on the night of 24 September (7 October) to cross the Dnieper in the Aleksandrovsk area and, having set up a barrier towards Ekaterinoslav and gained a foothold on the right bank of the Dnieper, most of the cavalry is to advance on the Dolgishchevo – Apostolovo front. General Dratsenko, with the 3rd and Horse Corps and the 42nd Don Rifle Regiment, is during the night of 25 September (8 October) to cross the Dnieper in the Nikopol – Sofiivka Nassauskaya sector and, sending cavalry to capture Apostolovo station, is to strike at the rear of the Reds Kakhovka group. General Vitkovskiy is to secure the Salkov and Perekop areas, then on the night of 25 September (8 October) seize the Kakhovka bridgehead, and then cross the Dnieper below Beryslav, assisting General Dratsenko in the defeat of the Kakhovka group.

However, it was not possible to carry out the plan and take the Kakhovka bridgehead. Having encountered superior enemy forces during the operation and suffering significant losses, General Dratsenko gave the order on 30 September (12 October) to retreat back to the left bank of the Dnieper.

Wrangel laid the main blame for the failure of the operation on General Drazenko:

The Trans-Dnieper operation is over. The correctly conceived, carefully prepared and systematically planned operation ended in failure. The reason for this failure – in addition to the accidental, unpredictable, death of General Babiev – was the unsuccessful actions of the 2nd Army commander, General Drazenko. The latter, with exceptional moral courage and captivating honesty, admitted it himself, asking to be relieved of his post as army commander.

A different view of the overall concept of the operation was expressed by the author of the following essay, laying the main blame for its failure on the commander of the 1st Corps, General Pisarev, and the Corps Chief of Staff, General Egorov (the attitude of the corps commander to the head of the Markov Division, General A. N. Tretyakov, who committed suicide shortly after the end of the operation, described by Bitenbinder, is also indicative).

The memoirs of the chief of staff of the Markov Division, A. G. Bitenbinder, are printed from a manuscript kept in the State Archive of the Russian Federation. This essay is a fragment of those memoirs, a more complete version of which was available to V. E. Pavlov. Extracts from those memoirs used by Pavlov in writing his second book of Markov history, as well as other information used by Pavlov, is given in the notes to the essay.



# The Markov Division on the Right Bank of the Dnieper River in the Area West of Aleksandrovsk in the period from 24 September to 1 October 1920

A.G. Bitenbinder

## The Situation at Aleksandrovsk at the Beginning of the Operation

On 8 (21) September 1920 the *Markovtsy*, together with the 1st Kuban Cossack Division, seized the town of Aleksandrovsk with a swift attack, capturing about 1,500 prisoners, 8 trains with valuable property and a convoy of two-horse wagons.<sup>1</sup> The capture of the latter made it possible to create our own troop convoy, releasing us from using peasant carts, which were extremely constraining on the division's manoeuvrability.

After the occupation of Aleksandrovsk, the division was assigned the task of securing the city from the north-west. To do that the units positioned themselves with: the horse *divizion* of the division HQ with two guns in the village of Mikhaylovka, watching the road to Ekaterinoslav; the 1st Regiment in the village of Voskresenskoe, watching the Dnieper River from Mariental village<sup>2</sup> to Aleksandrovsk exclusive; the 2nd and 3rd Regiments were in the city itself. The 1st Army Corps HQ arrived there a few days later. The *Drozdovtsy* moved to Natalievka-Sofievka<sup>3</sup> to cover the Synel'nykove area.

The enemy on the left bank of the Dnieper occupied Mirgorodovka – Ternove (46th RD), and on the right bank from the Kichkas<sup>4</sup> crossing to Aleksandrovsk was occupied by the 3rd Rifle Division (3,000-3,500 bayonets) and Katsyuk's mounted detachment (600-800 sabres). The Kichkas pontoon bridge was drawn over to the enemy's side.

## Khortitsya Island<sup>5</sup>

The island of Khortitsya was occupied by units of the same 3rd Rifle Division. The Reds fired at the town, especially the railway station, with rifles from the island and artillery from the higher western bank of the Dnieper, preventing the restoration of the railway line and disrupting normal life.

The question of occupying Khortitsya arose. To do that it was necessary to force the Dnieper, which at Khortitsya was 225-300 metres wide. There were one or two dozen steamboats at the Aleksandrovsk wharf,

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<sup>1</sup> Pavlov wrote about the occupation of Aleksandrovsk:

As a result of the offensive, the division took up to 2,000 prisoners from the 3rd and 46th Rifle Divisions, an armoured train, a mass of carts with military equipment, field kitchens, searchlights, plus a lot of fodder and food. They even captured a train at the evacuation point with all its medical personnel and a train with the families of the commissars designated to occupy posts in Northern Taurida and the Crimea. The division had 150 casualties.

<sup>2</sup> There were a very large number of Marientals in Russia, but I have been unable to identify this one.

<sup>3</sup> Sofiivka.

<sup>4</sup> Now the Borodyn'skyi suburb of Zaporizhzhia. This is the narrow point and on rock (hence the modern dam there).

<sup>5</sup> Describing the terrain in the upcoming Trans-Dnieper Operation, Pavlov wrote about the island:

Khortitsya is the largest of the islands on the Dnieper, up to 10 km long and 2 km wide. It is at the point on the river where it breaks out of 80 km of narrow channel, with many small rocky islands, and – having passed through the narrow stone gates over which the railway crosses – finally finds a wide calm course. The river divides there into many arms and channels, between which there is the famous Dnieper *plavni*. A stony ridge starting to the south, which is crossed by the Dnieper and the *plavni*, runs along the island, dividing it into two equal halves: the northern side is elevated, and the southern is low-lying. ... The island is flanked by two branches of the river: on the eastern side is the New Dnieper, up to 150 paces wide, deep and with a fast current; on the western side is the Old Dnieper, some 100 paces wide, which has five fords up to the chest and one up to the waist. To hold the island, an army needs to occupy it completely and then have guns on it, as three of the fords cannot be observed from the eastern bank of the Dnieper.

*Plavni* is a term for a growth of largely reeds, but also shrubs, on the sandy islands in a river, submerged for a small time every year when the spring melts cause the river to grow. It can grow quite tall and thick.



but their valves had been taken by the Bolsheviks. We had to be content with fishing boats: 30 or 40 of them were collected, which was enough to allow one battalion to cross.

During the night of 10/11 (23/24) September a battalion of the 1st Regiment left Voskresenskoe for Khortitsya, pushing out the Reds' 19th Regiment. But due to our small numbers, we were only able to firmly occupy a small part of the island, facing the south-western edge of Voskresenskoe. During the day the remaining two battalions of the 1st Regiment were ferried across and we occupied the southern half of the island. During the next two or three nights the Reds attacked the 1st Markov Regiment with two or three regiments, but were repulsed behind the Rechitsa River, and the island was finally taken.<sup>6</sup> Four guns of the 4th Battery were moved across, which gave more stability to the defence of the island and prevented the enemy's artillery from bombarding Aleksandrovsk with impunity.

On 16 (29) September an order was received to more firmly occupy and fortify Khortitsya. To occupy the whole island, it was necessary to transfer a further regiment with a battery, but then the matter of feeding of the men and horses, and the delivery of military supplies became extremely complicated – there was an urgent need for a bridge crossing. At this time the valves for some of the steamships were found in one of the captured trains and the commander of the Markov Engineer Company, with the help of some newly arrived sailors, managed to put five steamships and two motor boats into operation.

The Engineer Company was assigned the task of building a bridge across the left branch of the Dnieper River for the passage of all branches of the army. By 21 September (4 October) the bridge was ready: it was 25 metres long; partly on trestles, partly on barges and pontoons.

Even before the bridge was finished the 2nd Regiment and a battery was transferred to the island and occupied the northern half. All the units on the island were under the commander of the 2nd Regiment, Major-General Gravitskiy, and began work to fortify it. The division's reserve, the 3rd Regiment, moved to Voskresenskoe. The division HQ also moved there, so as to directly supervise the work of building the bridge and fortifying the island. The division's remaining six batteries were located in the Voskresenskoe area, having observation points on Khortitsya connected with the division HQ by telegraph and telephone.

So by 21 September (4 October) we had reliably occupied island, which was connected by a good bridge with the left bank of the Dnieper River.

### **Crossing to the Right Bank of the Dnieper**

On 22 September (5 October) General Kutepov arrived at Aleksandrovsk. We learnt the details of the proposed operation. We already knew it was coming. The ranks grumbled the most. I must say that after closely observing the life of the troops for many years, I have been repeatedly convinced that they have an amazingly developed sense of anticipation for events. And in this case, despite spending several days on Khortitsya among officers and soldiers, who were in an excellent mood, I met no faith in the success of the planned operation.

A Ukrainian battalion was to be formed at our division, which was supposed to be deployed into a division on the right bank of the Dnieper. Some Ukrainians, who did not inspire confidence with their appearance and who spoke in "Move",<sup>7</sup> even came to us. This promised little chance of success.

We were not numerous. We had to succeed with all our attempts. Any major failure could be the beginning of the end. Were the senior commanders confident in the success of the operation? General Kutepov seemed to be only concerned with the difficult task of forcing the right branch of the Dnieper, given that the enemy occupied the dominant heights. General Pisarev, the corps commander, and General Egorov, his chief of staff, took part in the noisy life of Aleksandrovsk, apparently having little interest in the outcome of the operation, leaving complete freedom to the divisions, without taking the measures necessary to prepare and ensure the success of the operation. The head of the Markov Division, General Tretyakov, placed all his

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<sup>6</sup> According to Pavlov, the *Markovtsy* losses from 10 to 12 September were more than 150 men. During its stay at Khortitsya, before the start of the Trans-Dnieper Operation, the 1st Regiment received reinforcements: the companies then had 40-50 bayonets.

<sup>7</sup> The term for the Ukrainian dialect, since the White Russians generally did not regard Ukrainian as a language.



hopes in successful joint action with the 2nd Army. As far as I remember, General Kutepov expressed the same opinion.

The Corps order shattered all our illusions. After crossing to the right bank of the Dnieper River, the *Kornilovtsy* and *Kubantsy* were to move to Tokmakovka to assist the 2nd Army, while the *Markovtsy* were to move northwards, covering the movement of the *Kornilovtsy*. Thus, some were to “assist” and others to “cover”, but the question arose, who was to strike? After crossing the Dnieper River, the units were to fan out in different directions. The *Markovtsy*, left to themselves, could easily have been subjected to a separate defeat, which in reality was avoided only thanks to the valour of the troops.

The *Kornilovtsy* and *Kubantsy* were given an extremely vague task, each division acting independently of the other, neither subordinated to the commander of the 2nd Army. Acting basically towards Tokmakovka, they still had Khortitsya as their base, so exposing their supply to enemy attacks. The most important question for the *Kornilovtsy* and *Kubantsy* was the supply of ammunition. All their units would be moving far away from Khortitsya, and the corps HQ had still not taken care of the direct defence of the crossings at Khortitsya. If the enemy had been more energetic it could easily have occupied the island itself.

It is difficult to imagine a more poorly designed operation. It would seem that everything was done to ensure our failure. It was only thanks to the bravery of the troops and the enemy mistakes that the operation did not end in complete disaster for the units of the 1st Army Corps making the crossing.

### **Preparation for the Operation and Reconnaissance of the Fords**

But the orders had been given, and had to be carried out. The division was given the middle (Burvald<sup>8</sup>) crossing, while the *Kornilovtsy* had the southern (Nizhne-Khortitsya). Despite our best efforts, we could not make a thorough reconnaissance of the fords. The enemy occupied forward trenches placed on the very bank of the Rechitsa River and could fire from a distance of 100-150 paces at the slightest attempt to approach the river bank. As far as possible, we explored the fords, but could not make a proper check. According to the locals the Burvald ford was waist-deep, 200-300 paces long, and 80-100 paces wide.

### **Terrain**

In its middle section the Khortitsya has a number of heights that descend quite steeply to the Rechitsa River (to the Burvald crossing). At the foot of those heights, and along the very bank of the river, were small groves and bushes, which could partly camouflage the position of the units, but in no way hide them from enemy fire. The enemy's bank had a commanding view, with many folds convenient for hiding its units, was overgrown with woods in some places, and in general was very convenient for defence.<sup>9</sup>

### **Crossing Plan**

The conditions of the terrain and the location of the fords did not allow for the preliminary construction of bridges, so the only method of action was an infantry approach at night to the respective fords in order to attack the enemy in the predawn gloom by fording the river. Only the question of any artillery preparation caused major controversy, but the infantry strongly opposed it, pointing out that our artillery fire would cause the enemy to return fire on our infantry's concentration areas. In the absence of shelter, the infantry might suffer heavy losses. It was decided to only fire at the guard units on the night of the attack, as had been done on the preceding nights. The artillery remained partly in their positions, to support the infantry

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<sup>8</sup> The modern village of Baburka was the 1920 Burwald. Like many of the towns in this area, it was a German colony at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Pavlov wrote about the crossing place to the right bank of the Dnieper:

How did the crossing place look? On the edge of the forest there was a wall of sand. Then 30-40 paces on was a sandy bank, then the Dnieper river bed of 100 paces, another sandy bank for 50 paces, a wall of sand, a strip of bushes and trees and the steeply rising dominating edge of the river. The enemy's position was along the wall of sand, with a wire fence set up in front of it. There are also trenches along the high edge of the bank. There were a lot of machine guns in the trenches. A few batteries of them were aimed at the ford itself. The ford was clearly visible, sandy and waist-deep, but only in its shallowest part; to the left it dropped off steeply, and the water was totally dark; to the right the depth increased gradually. The current was swift.



in case of need, and partly concealed as close as possible to the crossing area, so that in case of success they could immediately follow their infantry.

### Forces and Means

The division had three regiments, each of 800-900 bayonets, 150 mounted men and 24 guns. The men were mostly experienced soldiers and could be relied upon. The mood was excellent. The success of the crossing itself was not doubted. The regiments prepared obstacles, so that the advanced units could hold their bridgehead on the other bank before the entire infantry had crossed.

### The Crossing

At 03:00 on 25 September (8 October) the regiments concentrated at the crossing point. No fires were lit and there was no smoking. It was scary: the enemy was only 200-300 paces from us as we lay very close to each other and we could suffer heavy losses. The enemy opened rifle and machine-gun fire at about 03:00, which became more and more intense: we could see from their firing that the Reds' trenches were full of men. The concentration of two divisions on the island could not have escaped the enemy's notice. At about 03:30 the Reds opened up artillery fire on our positions. The ground rumbled with shell bursts in all directions, but while it became heavy we fortunately escaped with few losses.

At this time a hurricane fire began from the Kornilov artillery. The enemy left us alone and transferred its fire to the *Kornilovtsy*. The division commander, General Tretyakov, gave a signal and the companies of the 1st Markov Regiment followed him, running to the shallows of the river. The enemy came to its senses only when the *Markovtsy* were already in the river and an indiscriminate rifle and machine-gun fire began. The ford was deep – up to the chest – but in a minute the *Markovtsy* were in the enemy's trenches. The Reds did not resist. Their 19th and 21st Regiments surrendered almost completely. We lost about 20 men.

The regiments quickly occupied the commanding heights in the neighbourhood of Burvald colony and from there led a vigorous attack on Rosental<sup>10</sup> colony and Kantserovka: by noon the *Markovtsy* had occupied them. The Reds hastily withdrew in the general direction of Lukashevka – Neuendorf.<sup>11</sup> By this time a bridge on trestles had been built across the Burvald ford.

So this highly risky operation ended in complete success and, most importantly, with few losses for us. The whole crossing had gone exactly as planned. Everyone felt satisfied. In the morning General Pisarev came to visit us and in everyone's presence began to berate the commander for the disorder in his division. It turned out that one gun had got stuck in the ford and had not yet been pulled out. This was how the division commander was rewarded for the operation, in the implementation of which he had put his whole soul, risking his life every minute.

### The Division's Actions on the Right Bank of the Dnieper

The first part of the operation was over. We now had to think about the next steps – to cover the operation of the *Kornilovtsy* and *Kubantsy* from Ekaterinoslav. It was necessary to move to an area that would intercept the shortest routes from Ekaterinoslav to Khortitsya and to the right flank of the *Kornilovtsy* in Tokmakovka. Lukashevka was such a point, and the division moved there by the evening of 25 September (8 October). The Reds occupied Vinogradovka<sup>12</sup> – Peters' farm<sup>13</sup> – Grigor'evka.<sup>14 15</sup>

In the morning of 26 September (9 October) the Reds' 3rd Rifle Division and Katsyuk's horse, reinforced by the 85th Rifle Brigade, went on the offensive. One brigade of the 3rd RD headed from Peters Farm to Lukashevka, bypassing the left flank of the *Markovtsy*, while the other brigade headed in the direction of

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<sup>10</sup> Modern Khortitsya town.

<sup>11</sup> Shiroke/Shyroke.

<sup>12</sup> Possibly Ivanhorod.

<sup>13</sup> This would appear to be modern Petropil'.

<sup>14</sup> Hryhorivka in the Ukrainian.

<sup>15</sup> According to Pavlov, the losses of the Markov division on 25 September (8 October) amounted to about 150 men, while up to 500 prisoners were taken prisoner and 12 machine guns were captured at the crossing alone.



Neuenburg colony<sup>16</sup> – Neuendorf. Katsyuk's cavalry and the 85th RB headed through Kronsweide<sup>17</sup> to Kichkas-Khortitsya, bypassing the division's right flank.

Thus the enemy, taking advantage of its superiority in forces and the presence of cavalry, intended to completely encircle the division. The division commander decided to set up a blocking unit (1st Regiment) to the west against the 3rd RD units, while the rest of the forces would attack the 85th RB and Katsyuk in order to defeat them. This would free his right flank from the threat of being cut off from the crossing, and he could then attack the 3rd RD.

About noon the 2nd and 3rd Regiments attacked the 85th Brigade and Katsyuk in the area south-west of Kronsweide, thoroughly destroying the 85th RB, taking prisoners and machine guns. The Reds hastily withdrew to Mariental, covering the withdrawal with cavalry. The division commander intended to pursue in order to finally defeat this Red group, but then received a report from the commander of the 1st Regiment. It said that the regiment was unable to withstand the pressure of the Reds (3rd RD) and that one rifle brigade had moved from Shiroke to Khortitsya colony.<sup>18</sup> The division commander took the 2nd and 3rd Regiments to face the 3rd RD but the latter, seeing our movement, did not accept battle and hastily withdrew to Neuhorst<sup>19</sup> and partly then to Lukashevka.

The evening of 26 September (09 October) found the division in the field on the heights south of Malyshevka. It was clear that the enemy would repeat its same manoeuvre the next day, and the division would have to rush from side to side again. We needed to do something that would give us the initiative of action. The division commander decided on a night action. By pushing the enemy out of their sleeping places and forcing them to wander all night, we could spend the whole of the next day in peace. In spite of their extreme fatigue, that night the *Markovtsy* attacked the Reds quartering in Mariental and Lukashevka. Two guns and several hundred prisoners were taken. The Reds in front of the division started to withdraw to the north.<sup>20</sup>

The day of 27 September (10 October) passed quietly. In the evening a Red attack on Vesele - Kronsweide was discovered. Units of the division again moved to the area south-west of Malyshevka, from where they attacked the enemy at night, knocked the enemy out of the villages of Kronsweide, Lukashevka and Vesele, capturing prisoners and machine guns. The Reds withdrew to the north. The division halted at Malyshevka.<sup>21</sup>

The morning of 28 September (11 October) it was quiet. We learned of a raid by small Red mounted units on Kronstal<sup>22</sup> - Schoeneberg<sup>23</sup> and Burvald. The Reds had nearly captured the Burvald crossing. The Drozdovskiy Reserve Regiment was hastily transferred there and restored the situation. In fact the regiment did not have to do much fighting, but the merrymaking ranks of the corps HQ, sitting in Aleksandrovsk, had finally realised what damage such carelessness threatened. They tried to disguise their mistake by playing on the troops' bravery. So it was announced that the Drozdovskiy Reserve Regiment had performed some supernatural feat, and permission was requested from the Commander-in-Chief to rename it the 4th Drozdovskiy Regiment for its outstanding honours. The troops noted this and evaluated it in their own way, while confidence in the commanders fell.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Malyshevka.

<sup>17</sup> Neu Kronsweide is now northwestern Volodymyrivs'ke and Alt Kronsweide is now southeastern Volodymyrivs'ke.

<sup>18</sup> Verkhnya Khortitsya / Verkhnya Khortitsya.

<sup>19</sup> Zeleniy Gay / Zelenyi Hai.

<sup>20</sup> Pavlov cites the capture of around 400 prisoners by the 3rd Regiment near the village of Vesele.

<sup>21</sup> Pavlov states that the 1st Regiment took around 300 prisoners.

<sup>22</sup> Dolins'ke / Dolyns'ke.

<sup>23</sup> Smolyane.

<sup>24</sup> After repelling the attack on the crossing, the 4th Drozdovskiy Regiment was recalled to Aleksandrovsk. The Markov Engineer Company and the 1st Markov Battery remained in charge of guarding the crossing. In Pavlov's opinion this shifted its defence entirely to the Markov Division, which was an impossible task.



We had intended to spend the morning of 28 September (11 October) in the village of Lukashevka and maybe we would have stayed there forever, but luckily one of our detachments in the area north-west of Vesele captured a member of the communications team for a Red *Kursanty*<sup>25</sup> Brigade. He reported that units of the 3rd RD, the 85th RB, Katsyuk's cavalry and the newly arrived brigade from the 46th RD were to go on the attack that day on the Mariental – Lukashevka line. Meanwhile a *kursanty* brigade, consisting of Petrograd and Moscow cadets for a total of 1,500 bayonets, was to make a deep flanking move around our left and reach Rosental colony, cutting us off from Khortitsya.<sup>26</sup>

And indeed we discovered at that time an attack by dense enemy chains from the Peters' farm area towards Vesele – Lukashevka. Without the information about the *kursanty*, we would probably have engaged in a decisive battle with the enemy advancing on us from the north and would have been surrounded by the cadets and left with no rear, i.e. without combat supply. But now the situation was clear to us. The division quickly concentrated in the area to the south of Malyshevka and, having deployed the 2nd Regiment to block the Reds advancing from the north, the rest of the forces rushed towards the *kursanty* in the general direction of Neuendorf colony.

The 3rd Regiment attacked the *kursanty*, who had just approached that village. That regiment's commander, the valiant Colonel Nikitin, attacked the lead battalion of Moscow cadets with mounted orderlies and the divisional HQ horse *divizion*. The *kursanty* let our cavalry come to within 100 paces, pretending that they wished to surrender, but the *Markovtsy* did not fall for this ruse, attacked the battalion and completely cut it down. Unfortunately, however, the *divizion* lost nearly half its strength, as the cadets defended themselves desperately. At the same time the 1st and 2nd Regiments attacked the enemy in the village itself. The cadets, who were advancing in dense columns, suffered heavy losses from our artillery fire, which greatly contributed to the successful attack by our regiments, which ended with the occupation of Neuendorf. The *kursanty*, apparently discouraged, withdrew to Neugart<sup>27</sup> without even putting all their forces into the battle. However the 2nd Regiment could not hold back the onslaught of significant enemy forces and slowly withdrew to the area of Khortitsya colony – Kantserovka Station. By the evening the whole division was concentrated there.<sup>28</sup>

There was no point in thinking about any offensive manoeuvre. After the incessant fighting of those days the men were exhausted to the extreme and were falling down feet from fatigue. There were no more than 600-700 bayonets left in the division, and with such numbers it was difficult to remain active.

It was decided that the heights south of Rosental would be defended, putting the division's right flank on the Dnieper River, which covered that flank and made it possible to allocate a reserve for an active defence of our left flank.

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<sup>25</sup> *Kursanty* were men doing commander training courses (*kurs*). At crucial times they were formed into units and sent to the most critical fronts, as they were the elite of the Red Army.

<sup>26</sup> Pavlov, who used the more extensive notes of Colonel Bitenbinder, quotes a passage from them concerning 28 September (11 October):

... But sleep escaped me. Instinct told me that the division was in danger. I began to rack my brains – what could we do in order to pin the Reds to the front, to divert their attention from our open left flank and rear with the crossing at Khortitsya? At that time the door opened and an officer appeared on the threshold, followed by the slender figure of a dapperly dressed Soviet officer in a *Budenovka* hat, who stood to attention and clearly reported: "Head of the communications service of the Moscow School of Red Cadets". Goosebumps ran down my spine: this was too much!

<sup>27</sup> If this is Neu Rosengart, then it is Zoryane / Zoriane.

<sup>28</sup> Pavlov quotes these lines from Bitenbinder's notes on the outcome of the manoeuvre undertaken by the Reds to encircle the division:

The Reds made a mistake. Instead of a long-range flanking of the division, they made a short-range flank move. Their plan – to take the *Markovtsy* in a vice between the Dnieper and units of the 3rd and 46th Rifle Divisions on one hand and the *kursanty* brigade on the other – corresponded well to the situation and the balance of forces. But the plan failed.



There was fighting all of 29 September (12 October) but all the enemy attacks coming from Kichkas – Malyshevka – Shiroke and Schoenhorst<sup>29</sup> were repulsed.<sup>30</sup> The division spent the night with the 3rd Regiment in Kronstal Colony and the 1st and 2nd Regiments with the division HQ in Burvald. In the evening we learnt that the *Kornilovtsy* had arrived at Schoenberg colony. This astonished us, for we had thought that the *Kornilovtsy* and their HQ were somewhere on the right flank of the 2nd Army, but, on the other hand, we were also pleased, because the enemy was so numerically superior to us that we could not be sure that we could hold our positions, given that our whole rear (on the south side) was completely open to the enemy's attacks.

Indeed, that evening the Reds attacked the 3rd Regiment from the south and south-eastern side of Kronstal. We did not expect the Reds to be in our rear and we at first thought them to be one of our units, and thanks to that they managed to break into the village. Having realised what was going on, the 3rd Regiment pushed the enemy out. Undoubtedly, this incident could only take place because the 3rd Regiment had no close protection in its rear.<sup>31</sup>

On 30 September (13 October) the *Markovtsy* and *Kornilovtsy* were ordered to attack the Reds on the line of Khortitsya – Mikhaylovka colonies. The main Red forces were concentrated against our left flank (against the *Kornilovtsy*), so the head of the division decided to leave the 1st Regiment to defend the heights south of Khortitsya, and go with two regiments on the offensive towards Kantserovka Station, acting together with the *Kornilovtsy*, depending on the situation. But in the morning, before they marched out, a report was received from the commander of the 1st Regiment of the advance of large Red forces from Khortitsya Colony to the Burvald crossing, and the 1st Regiment began to fall back to the rear. This movement by the Reds threatened our entire group with being cut off from the crossing. In view of the seriousness of the situation, the division commander held the 2nd and 3rd Regiments until the 1st Regiment had regained its original positions. As consequence of this the 2nd and 3rd Markov Regiments approached the *Kornilovtsy* only at 15:00, when further advance was no longer of any use. At about 18:00 an order was received to withdraw to the left bank of the Dnieper, which the *Kornilovtsy* did on the night of 1 (14) October.

### **Return Crossing to Khortitsya**

The *Markovtsy* were given the difficult task of covering the *Kornilovtsy's* withdrawal and destroying both bridge crossings. The 3rd Regiment was ordered to withdraw to the Nizhne-Khortitsya crossing, and the 1st and 2nd Regiments to Burvald. The enemy, from the morning of 01 (14) October led a vigorous attack on Kronstal – Burvald. The units withdrew slowly, delaying every step, gaining time.

The heights east of Burvald was the last position. From there, at about 13:00 our batteries, having fired their last shells, raced to the crossings.

The infantry had to delay for another 60-90 minutes to enable the artillery to cross to Khortitsya. The Reds, having deployed 7-10 rows of chains one after another, and noticing the absence of our artillery, rushed to the heights. The moment was critical. The division chief ordered the 1st and 2nd Regiments to meet the enemy's attack with a counter-attack. The thin *Markovtsy* chains of 200-300 bayonets greeted the enemy. The Reds' front chains paused, but were pushed forward by the ones behind. The *Markovtsy* attacked with bayonets. The Reds did not accept the blow and fell back a little.

Some time had been won. The *Markovtsy* immediately began to withdraw. Then the Reds quickly rushed forward and in some places mixed with our units. Everyone raced to the Burvald bridge crossing. There was no possibility of crossing the bridge. The head of the division ordered the Rechitsa River be forded to the farm, and he and his staff galloped to the bridge. However, it was so firmly made that in spite of all the sappers' efforts they could not destroy it. Meanwhile, the Reds were 400-500 paces away. Working together everyone was able to break the join to the bank, after which they all rushed into the water and headed for

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<sup>29</sup> Ruchaivka.

<sup>30</sup> During the fighting of 29 September (12 October) the 2nd Regiment captured about 400 prisoners and lost about 20 killed and about 100 wounded

<sup>31</sup> After this incident General Tretyakov, dismissed the commander of the 1st Markov Regiment, Colonel Marchenko, who was responsible for security, from the command of the regiment.



Khortitsya. And it was just in time, for at the same moment the Red chains reached where the bridge had been.

Now there was the difficult task of destroying the bridge completely, while under rifle fire from the Reds. Our artillery opened fire from Khortitsya on the Red chains lying on the river bank on both sides of the bridge. The Reds could not withstand the fire and fled back, hiding in the coastal bushes.

We took advantage of the moment to destroy the bridge. The commander of the 1st Engineer Company, Colonel Ivanov, personally worked chest-deep in water together with his sappers to pull the whole bridge to the Khortitsya bank. The Nizhne Khortitsya bridge was burned by the Markov Engineer Company.

So our combat tasks had been fulfilled – the division was concentrated on Khortitsya and the bridge crossings had been destroyed. The *Markovtsy* could consider themselves victors, having brilliantly performed an extremely difficult operation. But everyone knew that our success was partial and that, sadly, we had been defeated. This was evidenced by the victorious shouts from the Reds on the right bank of the Dnieper, which rang in our ears like death knells.

How much labour had been put into the execution of this whole operation? How many sacrifices and deprivations had been made? How much valour had been shown, and for what purpose? No-one could answer those questions. But everyone felt it – that this was our first major failure and that it marked our eventual doom. In order not to repeat myself, I will not draw conclusions that are already available in the text itself, but as a participant in this unprecedented operation – in terms of the amount of effort put into it – and as a General Staff officer, I can testify that I had never before had to take part in such a senseless operation, devoid of any guiding idea.

In practice, the units of the 1st Army Corps crossed to the right bank of the Dnieper River only to race from side to side, exposing themselves piecemeal to the enemy's blows, without having any influence on the 2nd Army's actions and without co-ordination between the two.

Again, as usual, numerous honours poured in, intended to raise morale in the units. But we were not amused. Everyone knew perfectly well that we were not strong enough to allow ourselves the luxury of suffering defeat. And the defeat was a major one – we had lost faith in our leaders, and consequently in the success of the cause they led. We had lost spirit, and “to lose spirit is to lose everything.”

Our commanders, apparently, did not have the courage to report frankly to the Commander-in-Chief about the extent of the defeat suffered, for if he had been informed properly of the mood in the units, he would certainly not have agreed to the risky manoeuvres which were subsequently undertaken by the mentally “beaten” units. And those manoeuvres led to an unheard-of defeat for the Russian Army, which amazed the whole world with its unexpectedness. But for the soldiers that defeat was not a surprise: it was a logical consequence of the unsuccessful operation on the right bank.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pavlov, summarising the battles of the Markov Division on the right bank of the Dnieper, wrote:

We talked about the battles just behind us. There was a peculiarity to them: a feeling of loneliness, the consciousness that we had left the Dnieper behind us and the feeling of the enemy's immediate strength, the attachment to a location without success. To be stalked. Still, we had fought well. Eight days almost without rest and sleep; three days without food – we had eaten the meat of cows we killed, and a few potatoes, but no salt or bread. The supply crews told how they had rushed back and forth to the crossing. The division lost about 500 men, almost a quarter of its strength. It had taken around 1500 prisoners, a gun and many machine guns. We saw clearly that great losses had been inflicted on the Reds and their *kursanty*. The conversation naturally moved on to the bigger picture. The division had fulfilled a certain task in a large scale operation, the purpose of which was to eliminate the Reds' Kakhovka bridgehead. The *Kornilovtsy* said that they had not reached it, and they did not know how the operation had ended. Then reports came through that the 2nd Army had also returned to its original positions behind the Dnieper.

