

The Kolesnikov uprising

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Ivan Sergeevich Kolesnikov was born in 1894 in the settlement of Stara Kalitva in Ostrogozh county of Voronezh province in a large but prosperous farming family of four sons and four daughters. He is described as having blond hair, and as being of medium height with a stocky build. During the First World War he went from private to junior non-commissioned officer and platoon commander, fighting in the Caucasus on the Turkish front. From May 1919 he served in the 107th Red Army cavalry reconnaissance detachment and from August 1919 in the 357th Infantry Regiment, 40th Infantry Division. At the end of May 1919 he was appointed platoon commander and then commandant of the regiment headquarters and in early January 1920 temporarily filled the post of commander of the 3rd Battalion, 357th Infantry Regiment. His career in the Red Army was characterised by an exemplary combat record. In the second half of 1919 he received gunshot wounds in combat at least twice. Apparently after being wounded once more he was made regimental treasurer on June 18, 1920. While in this position he was involved in a great waste of money (embezzlement?) and then deserted and returned to Stara Kalitva.

In early November 1920 a mass uprising against Bolshevik grain requisition broke out in Ostrogozh county. A famine and a poor harvest in the summer of that year were not taken into account in the autumn grain requisitioning. Many grain stores of local peasants were completely expropriated with the requisition squads acting as a law unto themselves and in a high handed way. As a result, in the southern districts of Voronezh province deserters from the Red Army set up armed detachments. One of these groups was led by a cousin of Ivan, Grigori Kolesnikov, and was raised widely supported by the local peasantry. In the first days of the rebellion the major challenge for the rebels was to organise an effective armed struggle against the Soviet authorities. In this regard, it was necessary that the revolt was headed by a man who had a rich military experience and leadership qualities. Kolesnikov fitted the bill. On November 7th 1920 at a mass meeting in Stara Kalitva he was elected as the military leader of the uprising.

Immediately after taking command of all rebel forces Kolesnikov announced the mobilisation of the male population aged 17 to 50 years. In a short time he managed to equip a detachment of a thousand people. It furnished itself with large number of weapons left behind by the Red and White armies during the Civil War and hidden by the peasantry.

Kolesnikov begins to operate successfully in mid-November, with the broad support of the local population, destroying two large punitive detachments. The head of the Voronezh Cheka with other top-ranking Bolshevik officials and a death squad came to Stara Kalitva to impose

order, believing the uprising was small and marginalised. They took up residence in a house on the outskirts of the settlement. During the night the house was surrounded by insurgents and shooting broke out. By the morning all the Bolsheviks had been shot dead (a monument was later raised in their memory by the Soviet authorities). The first success not only raised the morale of the insurgent peasantry, but also allowed Kolesnikov to broaden the area of the uprising. Insurgency spread to the villages and settlements of Bogucharsky and Pavlovsky counties. Under the motto “against hunger and looting”, the Kolesnikovists wherever they appeared, dispersed the requisition squads and gave the bread back to the peasants. It should be noted that local soviets were not destroyed, but taken over by the insurgents.

In the second half of November an insurgent detachment led by Emelyan Barabbas, hitherto operating in the area to the south, joined the Kolesnikov forces. A cavalry unit formed under the command of Ivan Pozdnyakov. At first it had only 35 horses, but grew from day to day as many peasants flocked to the insurgents with their own horses. There was a special regiment under the leadership of Alexander Konoptsev, a former Chekist who had sided with the insurgents. He directed their counter-intelligence unit, which reported on the movements of the Soviet authorities and Red Army, with great effectiveness. A headquarters was set up at Stara Kalitva with several observation posts to protect it.

By the end of November 1920 the Kolesnikov forces had already covered a large part of Voronezh province in the south. There were up to 10 thousand armed insurgents, according to Bolshevik military intelligence. By 25th November, the apex of the movement, the Kolesnikov detachments had become a full division with 5,500 infantry and 1,250 cavalry, with 6 artillery pieces and 7 machine guns.

The rapid spread of the insurrection compelled the local authorities to seek help from the centre. Large red army forces soon began arriving in the Voronezh area. In early December 1920 in Bogucharsky county Red cavalry utterly defeated the combined forces of Kolesnikov. However the following day Kolesnikov’s forces together with a detachment led by Kamenev (Kamenyuk) an anarchist-Makhnovist flying a black banner captured Starobelsk in Kharkov province in the neighbouring Ukraine. Kolesnikov wintered in this area alongside the detachments of Kameniuk and Marusia (not the redoubtable anarchist Marusia Nikiforova but another female Makhnovist commander).

This caused great concern to the Bolshevik commander in the Ukraine and Crimea, Mikhail Frunze. Repeated attempts to smash the Kolesnikov unit failed as it avoided direct confrontation moving over the border into the neighbouring Don region when necessary.

On January 29th 1921, the Kolesnikov detachment appeared in Bogucharsky county. At this time the military leadership of the province were concentrating all their efforts to fight the Antonov uprising in the northern counties and units led by Makhno which had suddenly appeared in the south-western counties. Consequently the forces of the Reds in the southern district were small and scattered. Also worthy of special attention is the fact that the local population there were still very dissatisfied with Bolshevik food policies. As a result the slogans of the Kolesnikov forces of “Against Hunger, Against Robbery” had a great resonance among it.

Returning to his native land Kolesnikov consolidated himself again, operating with three other insurgent units, those of Demian Strezhnev, Emelyan Varavva, and the anarchist-Makhnovist Parkhomenko. The rebels were well armed with artillery pieces, although suffering from lack of large supplies of ammunition. From 29th January to 3rd February the Kolesnikov forces easily took control of the entire southern Bogucharsky county. The ranks of the rebel units were rapidly

reinforced by former combatants and Red Army deserters. On February 4th after an unsuccessful attack on Boguchar, the insurgent detachments started moving to Stara Kalitva.

Encountering no resistance, as a result of a mass evacuation by the Bolsheviks, the insurgents reached the area of Novy Kalitva and Stara Kalitva on the following day. Here they were reinforced by many volunteers; in Stara Kalitva alone two hundred local peasants joined them. The Kolesnikovists now had 500 cavalry and 700 infantry. Divided into several units, the Kolesnikovists occupied all the surrounding villages and settlements during the day. There they seized government warehouses and granaries and a large part of their contents were immediately distributed under the direction of Kolesnikov to the local peasantry.

On 6th February, Kolesnikov led a 500 strong detachment to the village of Evstratovka, located a few miles from the station of the same name. It was obvious that the Soviet authorities would not give up such an important railway junction without a fight. To support the garrison at the railway junction an infantry battalion was dispatched from Pavlovsk, and two armoured trains from the stations of Millerovo and Mitrofanovka. Despite the fact that the Reds did not arrive to the 8th Kolesnikov made no attempt to take the station. The purpose of a strange manoeuvre can be understood if we take into account the fact that just a week before him near the same station Makhno turned up with his forces. The Reds foiled his breakthrough to Voronezh province. Borisov advances the hypothesis that it is likely that Kolesnikov intended to meet the advance Makhnovist detachments not suspecting that they were already defeated and pushed back into central Ukraine. He assumes that this was part of an overall plan of the two insurgent commanders to unite their forces, hatched during Kolesnikov's stay in the Kharkov region. If this is true it means that the Makhnovists intended to break out of the Ukraine into the Central Chernozem region.

With the failure of the link-up with Makhno, Kolesnikov turned to the mass insurrection in the Tambov region and the northern counties of Voronezh region led by Antonov. He rapidly advanced to the north east of Voronezh province, with Red Army squadrons in hot pursuit. BY now the Kolesnikovists had run out of ammunition and often had to engage in costly hand-to-hand fighting. They invaded the town of Novohopersk to get supplies. This resulted in fierce resistance from the Bolshevik garrison. Kolesnikov, realizing that his cavalry was not able to fight in the narrow streets of Novohopersk, gave his men the order to dismount. But two commanders refused to obey orders of their leader. Infuriated by this, Kolesnikov personally shot them down. After sustaining heavy losses, the insurgents left the town.

Eventually after much harassment from their pursuers there there was a meeting of the Kolesnikovists with an Antonovist regiment. As a result of this Kolesnikov was elected leader of the 1st Antonov Army, which now escalated its actions. It defeated the 14th Red Cavalry Brigade Reds, followed shortly after by the capture of 2 Red units, followed by another major defeat of Red Cavalry units. As a result of this the insurgents were able to replenish their arms supplies. But as it turned out, it was the last success of Kolesnikov. On March 22nd Milonov's red Cavalry inflicted a serious defeat on the 1st Antonov Army, with about three hundred men killed and wounded. A twenty year old Chekist called Katarina Verenikina had infiltrated the Kolesnikov headquarters and was able to pass information back to the Soviet authorities. Among those killed was Grigori Kolesnikov, the cousin of Ivan and a regimental commander.

At the end of March the insurgents heard of the decision by the Bolshevik Plenipotentiary Commission of Tambov region, headed up by Antonov-Ovseenko, to end food requisitioning in the region. Antonovists began to desert so Kolesnikov decided to leave the area. On April

6th in Voronezh province a spontaneous meeting of the insurgents was held, where there was a split between the majority of the Antonovists and the Kolesnikovists. Most Antonovists (1400 insurgents) decided to return to Tambov.

Kolesnikov with about 500 insurgents moved on to Stara Kalitva by mid-April. The appearance of Kolesnikov in his native place once again stepped up the insurgency in the south of Voronezh province. On April 21st the insurgents were attacked by a Red cavalry division. The insurgents gathered all their forces in one detachment and the Red Cavalry were driven back. On April 24th insurgents completely destroyed a Bolshevik special unit. But the days of Kolesnikov were numbered. According to one account on the of evening April 28th at the end of a fierce five-hour battle with the Reds he was shot in the back by one of his own men. According to another version Kolesnikov died two weeks later on May 12, 1921, when his group fought a battle against Red mobile groups which vastly outnumbered them.

No one with the military skills of Kolesnikov could be found to replace him. As a result, by May 1921 the scattered Kolesnikov detachments moved from an open confrontation of Soviet power to local guerrilla struggle. After the death of Kolesnikov the Soviet government declared an amnesty and thousands of insurgents surrendered, although many fought on with up to 2,000 insurgents dispersed in Ostrogozhsk and Bogucharsky counties in small mobile detachments. Many of the insurgents linked up with the forces of Makhno or Antonov. In June the Cheka reported a Kolesnikov band with 1000 cavalry and 13 machine guns, which operated in the Lugansk region. Perhaps the commander of this detachment was our old friend Kamenyuk. In July, the remnants of a Kolesnikov unit under Luhachev returned from Ukraine to Voronezh province, where fighting continued until October 1921, until they disappear from records.

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Sources: <http://bereg.sia.vrn.ru/article554.html> In the interests of the oppressed peasantry by Denis Borisov (In Russian) Photo of Kolesnikov from same source.

Newspaper article in Volga Commune, No.130 old.samara.ru/paper/41/6771/119544/ (in Russian)

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