



*The Red Army Crossing the Syvash (1935), painting by Nikolay Samokish (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)*

# Battle of Perekop

Glenn Corn

**A**s Ukrainian forces fight their way south toward the liberation of their country, they will approach probably their most important and challenging objective in their war of liberation—Crimea. Ukrainian military planners are most certainly considering options to enter the peninsula, including via the Isthmus of Perekop, a narrow land mass connecting Crimea to Ukraine proper. Given its strategic significance, Perekop is often referred to as the “Gateway to Crimea,” and it has been the center of battles between warring armies vying for control of the peninsula for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## The Battle

In November 1920, 103 years ago, Perekop was the center of an incredibly important battle between the “White Russian” forces of Gen. Pyotr Wrangel and the “Red Army” of Soviet Russia. Multiple factors undermined the ability of the White Movement to defeat Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik party and stop the

Soviets from seizing Crimea. However, as a result of Wrangel’s loss, hundreds of thousands of Russians and other citizens of the former Russian Empire were forced to flee their countries and live in exile; others remained in Soviet Russia under the rule of a brutal autocratic system that denied its people basic civil liberties and rights and slaughtered millions of its citizens in purges, forced starvation campaigns, and blood political repressions. Understanding some of the mistakes made by the White Movement between 1918 and 1920 might provide some insights into the current war between Ukraine and Russia.

By the time Soviet forces, led by Red Army commander Gen. Mikhail Frunze, started their approach to Perekop, Wrangel was leading the last real remnants of organized resistance to Soviet rule in the south of Russia. From 1918 to 1920, the forces now under his command were known as the “Volunteer Army.” It had been led first by legendary Russian Gen. Lavr Kornilov, then by Russian Gen. Anton Denikin following

Kornilov's death in 1918. In 1920, Denikin, who most likely missed his best opportunity to defeat the Bolsheviks and seize Moscow in 1919 and was now retreating from the Bolsheviks on all fronts, handed over command of the seriously weakened Volunteer Army to Wrangel. As we will see below, one of Denikin's greatest mistakes was failing to agree to join forces with Ukrainian Nationalist forces against the Bolsheviks because of Denikin's "Great Russian chauvinism" and refusal to accept that there was any group of people known as Ukrainians.<sup>2</sup> Like Vladimir Putin a century later, Denikin insisted that the Ukrainians were nothing more than "little Russians" and refused to agree to any alliance with the Ukrainian anti-Bolshevik forces unless those forces recognized future Russian control over Ukraine after defeating the Reds.<sup>3</sup>

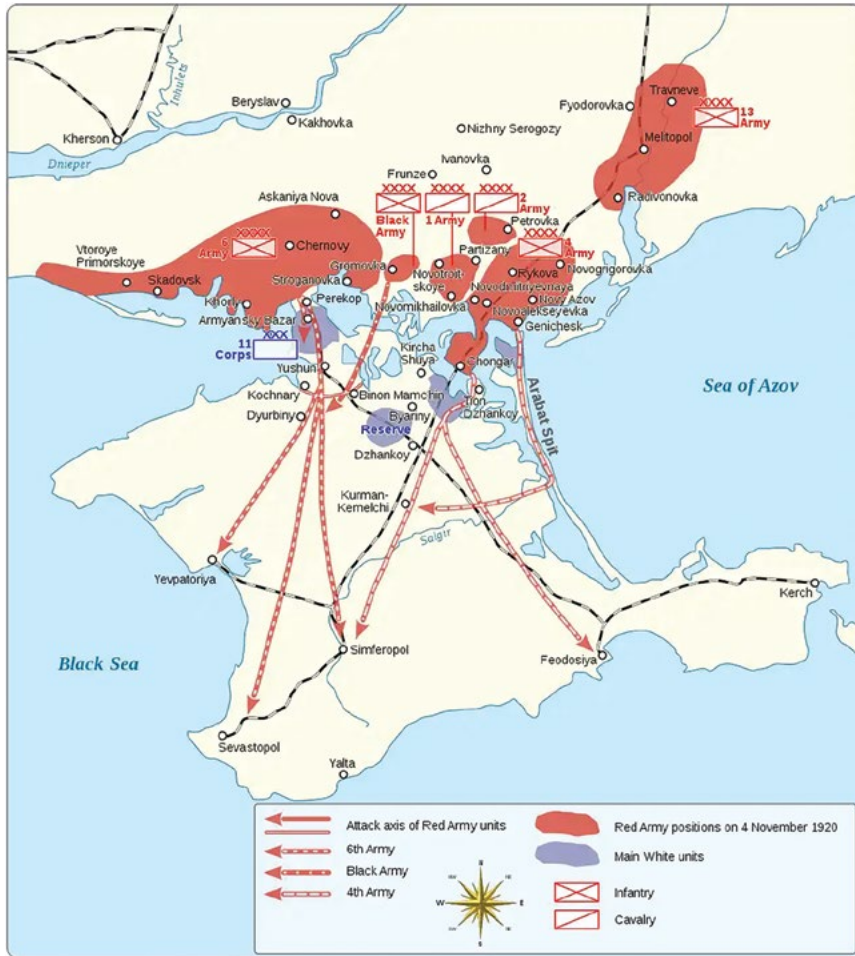
Upon assuming command of the army, Wrangel, who almost certainly knew that he had little chance of withstanding a massive Red Army offensive without the direct intervention of Russia's First World War allies, France or the United Kingdom, took the symbolic act of renaming his forces "The Russian Army." Wrangel appears to have planned to hold onto Crimea either long enough to allow the British to land military forces on the peninsula to help him defeat the Reds and retake all of Russia, or at least long enough to provide for the orderly retreat and evacuation of all those members of the White Movement who did not want to remain in any country controlled by the Bolsheviks. For his part, Red commander Frunze was under intense pressure from Lenin to ensure that Wrangel and his forces were not allowed to hold onto Crimea and give London time to decide to send British forces to save the Whites, which was a threat the maniacally paranoid Lenin greatly feared. As history shows, the British never had any serious plans to land an invasion force in Crimea to assist Wrangel and, in late November 1920, the Whites organized a mass maritime evacuation of their remaining military units and civilians across the Black Sea to what is today Türkiye but was then still considered the last remains of the Ottoman Empire.

The siege of Perekop, also known as the Perekop-Chongar operation, was fought from 7 to 17 November 1920 and pitted five Red armies and the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine led by Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno against Wrangel's forces. White troop strength totaled approximately 41,000 infantry and

cavalry soldiers (though due to a lack of horses, the White cavalry was forced to fight on foot) supported by 213 pieces of artillery, compared to almost 200,000 opposing forces, including 40,000 cavalry troops, 17 armored trains, and 985 artillery pieces.<sup>4</sup>

After Red forces crossed the Syvash (an area of marshy inlets and coves on the western edge of the Sea of Azov), they began a siege of the White positions behind the "Turkish Embankment," a set of natural and man-made fortifications that had been used by many armies in the past to defend the peninsula from invaders. Initial attempts by Frunze forces to capture this embankment resulted in a large number of casualties among his troops and a belief among many Red Army soldiers that it would be impossible to overcome White forces holding the embankment. But while Soviet historians would later claim that Frunze and his forces conducted a heroic and effective assault on the embankment and successfully defeated the White forces, as with many things found in Soviet history, the reality was much different. The White forces faced not only overwhelming odds but also the reality that Paris and London had given up on the Whites; they had no stomach for a larger conflict with Soviet Russia. They saw Frunze's forces break through the White defensive lines on the Kuban Peninsula and threaten to cut off

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The Red Army plan for the 1920 Prekop-Chongar Operation on the Isthmus of Perekop and the Syvash in Crimea. (Map courtesy of Goran tek-en via Wikimedia Commons)

Wrangel's forces at Perekop. On orders from their commander, on 9 November, the Kornilov Shock Division tasked with defending the Turkish Embankment was ordered to retreat under the cover of darkness in the early morning hours to avoid encirclement by Frunze's forces.<sup>5</sup> By 11 November, the Red forces captured Yushun, while the Whites fell back to the ports of Yevpatoriya, Sevastopol, Yalta, and Feodosiya, where they started the large-scale maritime evacuation of approximately 150,000 people using Russian naval and merchant vessels and private boats and yachts.<sup>6</sup>

Within two years of this armada's arrival in Istanbul and off the shores of Gallipoli, the bulk of the White Russian exiles would leave Türkiye and move to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Latin America, and the United States. Many would become valuable and loyal citizens to

their new adopted homelands, but almost all would eventually pass away in exile, harboring a great nostalgia for the country they were raised in, bitter at the way power in their country had been usurped by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and frustrated by the mistakes their leaders had made that led to the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty, the provisional government, and the White Movement.

### Parallels to the Current War

Military historians who study the history of the Russian Civil War might find some interesting parallels to today's war between Russia and Ukraine. Examining the lessons of the civil war may also provide important insights into why Russia's invasion of Ukraine is failing and why the Whites ultimately failed to save their country from Bolshevik rule.

**Foreign intervention.** Soviet and today's Russian historians often speak about the allied intervention in the Russian Civil War, citing

the deployment of U.S., British, French, and Japanese troops to parts of the collapsing Russian Empire as an example of the West's efforts to overthrow the Soviet regime by force. These claims, which are highly exaggerated and based, in part, in the deep level of paranoia found among the leaders of the Bolshevik party, often fail to discuss the real scope of Allied intervention and the reasons behind the intervention. While it is true that the allies did deploy troops to parts of the former Russian Empire during the war, the main task of these troops was not to destroy the Soviet regime but to secure military supplies provided to the tsar's army as part of the overall allied effort to defeat the Axis powers. When Lenin returned to Petrograd from his exile on Switzerland, with the help of the German government and German funding to support his plans to seize power in Russia, one of his main policy objectives

was to sign a separate peace with Germany and withdraw Russia from the war. Thus, allied leaders had legitimate reasons to fear that Lenin would turn over weapons and supplies intended for the fight against the Axis powers to the Axis powers themselves. Further, the allies were also well aware that Lenin was anxious for Bolshevik control over Russia to spark revolutions in Europe. Thus, his party and its ideology and stated goal of upending the order in Europe and funding and supporting communist revolutions around the world created a threat to the allies that they could not ignore.

the populations of France, the United Kingdom, and other European countries were exhausted and had little interest in fighting in a new war. This is a reality that U.S. leaders must face today, with many Americans tired of “forever wars” after the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course, the U.S. population has seen nothing similar to the carnage and casualties suffered by the Europeans during the First World War, and Americans should study the history of the Russian Civil War and understand the heavy price the world paid when it failed to stop Lenin from seizing control over all of the former

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Finally, Soviet and today’s pro-Putin historians also fail to mention that those allied forces that landed in Russia were often invited to enter the country in areas controlled by Lenin’s enemies, that is by White Russian forces. Lenin was not seen as the legitimate leader of Russia; his party had seized power in October 1917 by means of a coup vice democratic election, and a large part of the Russian population was opposed to the rule of the Bolsheviks. Today, much of the same paranoia and false interpretation of history that was used by the Bolsheviks, then by Soviet historians and commentators in the past vis-à-vis the threat of foreign intervention, can be seen in claims by Putin and his allies that their war in Ukraine is justified because of the threat of NATO expansion and Western—read the United States—plans to invade Russia.<sup>7</sup>

**War fatigue and its impact on support for anti-Bolshevik forces.** While the Allies deployed a limited number of military forces to Russia during the Russian Civil War, they were never willing to send large enough numbers to effectively fight the Bolsheviks and tilt the scales in favor of Denikin and other White leaders. While some in Europe, including Winston Churchill, recognized the long-term threat posed by Lenin and his cabal to Europe, they had to accept that even after the defeat of the Axis powers in the First World War,

Russian Empire and the threats he and his communist successors presented to the United States and its allies. As many experts have argued, a failure to stop Putin in Ukraine today will have dire consequences for the United States in the long run and, while there is a sense of fatigue among Americans after twenty-plus years of wars in the Middle East and South Asia, Americans need to find the will to continue support for the Ukrainians and stop Putin well away from the borders of any NATO country.

**Corruption.** After twenty-plus years of running the Russian Federation and claiming to turn the Russian armed forces into one of the world’s most formidable military machines, events of 2022 demonstrated the reality of the poor state of those armed forces. From the start of the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russians have suffered repeatedly for poor logistics, poor-quality equipment, and low levels of supplies on the battlefield. Russians who ask where billions of dollars of oil and gas revenues earned by Russia from 2000 to 2022 have gone know that the money was not invested in expensive defense programs and, instead, was siphoned off by corrupt Russian officials. The high level of corruption in Russia is nothing new for the country and, during the Civil War, corruption was a major problem for the White Movement. For

example, Allied liaison officers assigned to work with Denikin and his forces in southern Russia regularly reported back to their chains of command that money and equipment sent to the Volunteer Army to help in their fight against the Red Army was often stolen, misappropriated, and misused. This high level of corruption was a significant factor in the Allies losing faith in the White Movement, and likely led to decisions in

defeat of the Reds, Russia would assume control over their country. Instead, the Bolsheviks then benefited from fighting between the Whites and Petliura's forces. For example, in the autumn of 1919, when Denikin was conducting critically important operations against the Reds in Ukraine, he was forced to dedicate eight thousand to ten thousand of his troops to fight Petliura.<sup>8</sup> Like Putin today, Denikin's refusal to

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London and Paris not to continue or increase support for Denikin and his allies. Of course, concerns about corruption in Ukraine are also very real factors that Kyiv's current allies have had to consider when delegating much-needed military and financial assistance to the Ukrainians. But in the case of the Ukrainians, they appear much more willing to fight corruption than their Russian opponents and recognize that the failure to tackle this problem risks their ability to continue to attract assistance.

**Great Russian chauvinism.** As discussed above, one of Denikin's greatest mistakes as the leader of the Volunteer Army was his inability to accept that Ukraine had a right to exist, and that Ukrainians were not “little Russians.” This “Great Russian chauvinism” crippled his ability to form an alliance with Ukrainian nationalists when, together, they could have defeated the Bolsheviks in Ukraine and opened the door for Denikin to seize Moscow and defeat Lenin.

When Denikin's forces entered Ukraine from the east in the summer of 1919, the allies encouraged him to set aside his differences with the leader of the Ukrainian nationalists, Symon Petliura, who was fighting the Bolsheviks in the east and recommended that he join forces with the Ukrainians to defeat the Reds. Petliura indicated his willingness to enter an alliance with the Volunteer Army and even accept Denikin's command over the joint forces until the Reds were pushed out of Ukraine. Denikin, however, refused to take advantage of the opportunity because the Ukrainians were not willing to agree that after the

understand that the Ukrainians are not simply “little Russians” and accept Ukrainian sovereignty ultimately resulted in a great tragedy for Russia and the Russian people. Denikin himself died in exile in 1947 in the United States, having been forced to flee Soviet power and never return to the country he failed to free from the Bolsheviks. And, in 2005 during a reburial ceremony of Denikin's remains at the Donskoye Cemetery in Moscow, Putin himself told journalists, “You certainly should read Anton Denikin's diary; specifically, the part about ‘Great and little Russia, Ukraine. He says nobody should be allowed to interfere between us. This is only Russia.’”<sup>9</sup>

**Brain drain.** One of the most tragic aspects of the Russian Civil War and the Bolsheviks' eventual victory was the negative impact it had on the population of Russia and destruction or displacement of many the country's most educated and capable citizens. The death toll on both sides of the conflict is staggering, and the number of Russians who fled their country for exile resembles those Russians today who have fled Putin's Russia and are living in exile all over the world. It is estimated that the territories that were part of the Russian Empire prior to February 1917 suffered as many as ten million casualties from the Civil War and associated consequences of the disruption caused by the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Further, it is estimated that between 1.3 and 2 million citizens of the former empire, the majority Russians, fled the country, with the first Russians leaving in March 1917 after the February revolution, and numbers surging following Lenin's seizure of power

and the collapse of anti-Soviet resistance between 1920 and 1922. (Note: The last elements of this resistance were located in the Russian far east, which was eventually captured by the Soviets in 1922, leading to the exodus of a large number of Russians opposed to Soviet rule to China, and many eventually to the United States.)<sup>11</sup> Today's exodus of Russians from their country comes on the tail end of years of the demographic decline of the Russian population, which will undoubtedly play a factor in stunting economic and social growth in Russia for years after the war in Ukraine comes to an end. Sadly, six million Ukrainians have also been forced to flee their country under the threat of Russian aggression, and Ukraine is already suffering from the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While it was Putin who claimed in 2019 that

the thought of depopulation in Russia "haunted him," his foolish war against Ukraine seems to ensure that his nightmare will become a reality.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to Frunze's assault on Perekop 103 years ago, many believed that it would be impossible for the Red Army to overcome White defenses designed to protect the peninsula from any invasion. Wrangel appears to have been wise enough to understand that, in fact, Crimea could be taken by a determined military force, and he wisely prepared to evacuate the last vestiges of the White Movement. It remains to be seen if Russian commanders in occupied Crimea today remember Wrangel's example and will be wise enough to prepare for their forces evacuation before the Ukrainians launch their offensive to retake their territory in the future. ■

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## Notes

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