

FORTIFIED ODESSA – MARCH 1919

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By March 1919, the French military wanted to abandon Odessa. The food supply was insufficient to feed the city of a million people and the political situation was unfavourable. Despite some assertions to the contrary, often fed by Soviet propaganda, the French had not landed in the Ukraine with the intention of fighting the new Bolshevik state – their aim had been to support local government against the Soviets. French foreign policy, although contradictory and muddled, was aimed at providing a *cordon sanitaire* between the communists and the West, and an independent Ukraine could have been part of that cordon, along with Rumania, Poland and the Baltic states.

Part of the generals' concern was that the numerous "workers" of Odessa were both "red" and armed. The French and Greeks had seen the workers rise up to fight them in Nikolaiev and rightly feared the same if Odessa came under direct attack. Tens of thousands of men, women and children shooting from windows and basements into the rear of the defenders could have overwhelmed the small Allied contingent. The defensive plans therefore had far more troops occupying the town itself than external military conditions would seem to require.

On 23 March, General Anselme, commanding the 1st Divisional Group, received from General Franchet d'Esperey, Commander of the Allied Armies in the Orient, new directives for the occupation, defence and security of Odessa. A revised defensive plan was drawn up based on this. The new defensive plan was made with the Russian, Polish and Greek troops in the front line, with the French in support or reserve.

The Russians were not very effective, but it was seen that the intervention had been to assist them to "save" their country and they should at least pull their weight. The Poles were more committed as fighters, though badly organised, and they were tasked mainly with protecting the town's water supply and some exterior patrolling. The Greeks formed the bulk of the front line because they formed the bulk of the troops available.

The French units were largely in reserve because they were much easier to command in an emergency, trained in French doctrine and with no language problems. The poor morale of the French troops at this time has been grossly over-stated, mostly for political reasons. The troops were tired and units were at skeleton strengths and this bred poor spirit, but all the "intervention" troops in the Russian Civil War suffered from similar poor morale.

The plan of defence was an advanced line, a principal defensive line and a redoubt close to the port. Forces were not spread out and care was taken that detachments were not smaller than a company, this having shown itself in the past to be dangerous. An intermediate line, with troops in support of the advanced line, was also given.

The redoubt, from which all civilian population had been evacuated, grouped the French reserve troops, all the services and the officers' quarters. Access to it was permanently defended and liaison for naval fire support worked out.

The Eastern sector was to come under sustained attack soon after this plan was put into operation. The collapse of the initial lines over the next weeks was sufficient to persuade the French that the entire area should be evacuated, which they did soon after.

Despite exaggerated reports of the Reds' drive on Odessa, the city was in no real danger of falling to external attack – the support of the navy's guns would ensure any Red troops would not approach too aggressively. The only real danger to the French was that the local population, which they could not feed, would start an internal rising. In any event, the reasons for the intervention in the Ukraine had either been met or were patently impossible, so the retention of Odessa served no purpose.

The following is a translation from *Les Armées alliées en Orient après l'armistice de 1918*, Vol 2 *L'Armée du Danube, L'Armée française d'Orient, 8 October 1918 - 25 January 1920* prepared under the direction of General J Bernachot. I have retained the place names as they appear in the original, inconsistent though they are, but translated the often somewhat obscure unit abbreviations into English.

The fortified camp was divided into two sectors, separated by the Gadjibiesky Liman.

A. Eastern Sector

Command:

- General Nérel, commander of the [French] 30th ID;
- HQ at Odessa;
- Command post at Gevanova.

Troops:

- Infantry
 - [French] 40th IR;
 - two regiments of the Greek 13th ID;
 - one regiment of the Greek 2nd ID;
 - detachment of Russian Volunteer Army in cover.
- Artillery:
 - one group from the divisional artillery of the [French] 30th ID;
 - artillery of the Greek 13th ID;
 - field and heavy artillery of the Russian Volunteer Army
- Cavalry
 - two squadrons of the 4th Chasseurs d'Afrique and one battalion of MGs
 - one squadron of Russian Volunteer Army

I. The advanced line ran along the Cerbka river, the bridge at Popovca on the Tilgulski [Liman] and the defile of Koblievo-Troïtkoïe. Covered to the east by a detachment of the Russian Volunteer Army operating between the Berezanski Liman and the Tilgulski Liman (1 battalion, 2 squadrons and 2 guns), it was divided into three parts:

a. Under the orders of Lieutenant-Colonel de Clavières:

- advanced post of Cerbka
- advanced post of Pocrovscoe;
- bridge of Popovca.
- *advanced post of Cerbka* under the orders of Colonel Manetas and consisting of:
 - one Greek IR;
 - one Greek artillery group;
 - two [French?] 75mm batteries;
 - one Greek engineer company;
 - one squadron of the 4th Chasseurs d'Afrique;
 - one Greek infantry battalion at Bol Buyalic in support, limited to the east by the Tchernogorka to Krasnogorka (included) road and to the west by the Gradenfeld to Andriewka road, and liaising to the east with the Russian Volunteer Army detachment and to the west with the Polish cavalry at Liebenthal.
- *advanced post of Pocrovscoe* under the orders of the commander of the Russian Volunteer Army detachment and disposing of:
 - four infantry companies;
 - 36 machine-guns;
 - two squadrons on foot;
 - 10 guns,
 - limited to the west by the Tchernogorka to Krasnogorka road and the east by the village of Kapri. Liaising to the west with the advanced post of Cerbka on the river of the same name and to the east to the village of Kapri with the advanced post of Popovka.
- *advanced post of Popovka* held by two companies and 16 MGs of the Russian Volunteer Army in liaison to the west with the company of the Russian Volunteer Army in Kapri and to the east with the garrison of Koblievo at Savnia.

b. Fortified line of Koblievo-Troitkoie, under the orders of the commander of the Greek battalion occupying the line and possessing a Greek battalion and 4 guns of the Russian Volunteer Army, limited to the west by Tiligulski Liman and to the east by the sea. Liaison to the west to the village of Savnia with the Russian Volunteer Army detachment at Popovka.

c. Cover to the east, under the direct orders of the general commanding the 1st Divisional Group comprising a squadron of the Russian Volunteer Army (bulk at Krasnaia) patrolling in the direction of Lubianka and Cozlo with a line of retirement on Koblievo-Troitkoie. The Russian Volunteer Army occupied, as well, Otchakov, Fort National and Fort Kimburn.

The admiral to give all necessary orders to support, with the fleet, the occupation of Fort National and, eventually, the evacuation of Otchakov.

II. An intermediate line, passing through Bol Buyalik and Kremidovska, to be held by:

- one Greek battalion;
 - one half-company of Greek engineers;
 - one French cavalry squadron;
 - one platoon of French MGs;
 - one French 75mm battery,
- and placed in reserve at the disposition of the colonel commanding the 4th Chasseurs d’Afrique.

III. The principal line, under the orders of the colonel commanding the 30th ID, consisting of:

- two Greek battalions (of which one detached to the Troitkoie line);
 - one French regiment;
 - one Greek 65mm battery,
- was divided into two sub-sectors each occupied by a Greek battalion and organised defensively:
- one sub-sector from the sea to Kouialnitchki Liman;
 - one sub-sector from Kouialnitchki Liman to Gadgibiesky Liman.

In reserve, a French regiment at Marewska at the disposition of the general commanding the eastern sector.

B. Western Sector

Placed under the orders of General Borius, commander of the [French] 156th ID, limited between Gadgibiesky Liman [exclusive] and the Dniestr (exclusive) and consisting of:

- a sub-sector of defence, properly speaking;
- Odessa itself;
- a detachment in cover at the water plant under the direct orders of the general commanding the 1st Divisional Group.

A. *Sub-sector of defence*, under the orders of General Borius, limited to the east by Gadgibiesky Liman and the Dniestr to the west, in liaison to the east around Andriewka with the Polish Cavalry and to the west, on the Dniestr, with the Romanian units occupying Tiraspol and consisting of:

- Infantry:
 - one regiment of the [French] 30th ID;
 - one regiment of the [French] 156th ID;
 - one regiment of the Greek 2nd ID;
 - one Romanian infantry regiment, under certain conditions.
- Cavalry:
 - one regiment of Polish cavalry.
- Artillery:
 - one group from the divisional artillery of the [French] 30th ID;
 - one group from the Greek 13th ID;
 - one Romanian group.

B. *Advanced line*: Under the orders of the lieutenant-colonel commanding the [French] 58th IR, running along the railway to Razdelnaia and consisting of:

- the advanced post of Razdelnaia-Tiraspol;
- Tiraspol;
- the detachment at Bielajewska.

a. The advanced post of Razdelnaia-Tiraspol, under the orders of the commander of the 1st battalion of the 58th IR and comprising:

- one Romanian battalion;
- one battalion of the 58th IR (less one section);
- one Romanian battery,

in liaison to the east with the Polish cavalry around Poniatowka and to the west with the garrison of Tiraspol around Strasburg.

b. Tiraspol, under the orders of the lieutenant-colonel commanding the Romanian regiment and consisting of:

- two Romanian battalions;
- one Romanian battery;
- one section of the [French] 58th IR,

in liaison to the east with the garrison of Razdelnaia around Strasburg, to the west with the Romanian troops of Bessarabia at the Bender bridge. The liaison with the advanced post of Cerbka (eastern sector) and with Razdelnaia (western sector) was confided to the Polish cavalry of which the bulk was at Chimiotowka, under the direct orders of the lieutenant-colonel commanding the 58th IR.

c. Detachment at Bielajewska [the water plants] under the direct orders of the general commanding the 1st Divisional Group and consisting of:

- three infantry companies;
- one squadron;
- one battery.

of the Polish 4th ID.

C. The intermediate line, under the orders of the lieutenant-colonel commanding the [French] 58th IR, holding Novodlagodatnaya with the staff of the regiment and one battalion of the 58th IR.

D. The principal line, established at 6 to 8 kilometres from Odessa, running via Ustowa, Dalnik and Tatarka, under the orders of Colonel Gargalidis, commander of the Greek 2nd ID and held by one infantry regiment of that division.

Finally, the town of Odessa. This was placed under the orders of General Borius, the governor, charged with the interior defence of the town. The defence was to be based on the organisation of a principal line established around the rail line and a redoubt in support of the port.

The support of the fleet was to be realised by agreement between the governor and the admiral commanding the naval forces in Odessa.

General Borius had for the defence of the town:

- the [French] 156th ID (less a regiment);
- one company of the legion;
- one regiment of tirailleurs algériens;
- the 4th regiment of Chasseurs d’Afrique, less two squadrons;
- the remainder of the Polish 4th ID;
- the remainder of the Russian Volunteer Army;
- the Russian police;
- the disembarked companies [naval landing parties]
- the staging battalions (Indo-Chinese for the port guard and Algerian for the redoubt).

A general reserve, at the disposition of the general commanding the 1st Divisional Group, consisted of:

- one infantry regiment of the Greek 2nd ID and the advised reinforcements;
- tanks of the AS/303 (one section at Peressip, one at the station, one in the proximity of the HQ)
- the aviation.