

Aral Sea : the forgotten battle of Aralsk (september 1919)

By rené Létolle

The well known Kazakh writer A. Nurpeysov (Nourpeissov, in french) wrote a literary story¹ of the dramatic events which occurred in Central Asia during the war between the “ Reds” –communists- and the ”Whites” – remnants of the tsarists supporters and democrat republicans. During several years, from 1917 to 1920, there was a complicated situation, well described by Buttino (2003)². As well in the Transcaspian oblast (today Turkmenistan), as in the Syr Darya oblast (today Uzbekistan and part of Kazakhstan) power was disputed , especially in Tashkent, then the capital city of russian Central Asia. A communist power was established in Tashkent, and could maintain itself only through links with the Central power of Russia in Moscow: telegraph, and the recently laid railway between Orenburg and Tashkent. Very often these two links were cut by kazakh horsemen commandos, allied to the white armies of Siberia.

Nurpeysov describes in the “Cendres de l’été” (Summer ashes) the adventures and sensations of a young Kazakh who participated to the campaigns in north-western Kazakhstan. Here is not the place to summarize his story, but the background of the story involves the Aral Sea, whence this small research of an intriguing episode of the war, which apparently nobody working on the Aral Sea problems recalled... and really occurred.

The Aralsk battle of september 1919 seems to have been ignored by most people. People in Aralsk did not know anything about that, or just had a hazy recollection of something...To my knowledge, historical texts I could examine³ did not tell about an event which had important consequences on the unfolding of the military situation which followed, except a short allusion in Lafleur⁴.

In spring 1919⁵, with Admiral Kolchak new chief of the Whites in Siberia, the Whites reoccupied South Urals and the Ural basin. The idea was to march towards the Caspian Sea and eventually join with General Denekine, chief of Whites in South Russia and Caucasus. But Trotsky , Minister of armies of the Soviet Central government, took the necessary steps to reconquer the lost territories, and the Whites, under General Tchernov, had to retreat, far away from their rear positions in South Siberia (presently north Kazakhstan).

The only possibility for white troops, under General Belov, to break free was to retreat to the South, in a country almost devoid of resources. The background of Nurpeysov’s story describes their slow march from Aktiubinsk to the Aral Sea, in harsh conditions, especially due to the lack of water (which had to be carried by rail from the north), and , in spite of the protection of Cossacks of ataman Dutov, to the unceasing attacks of kazakh horsemen under Khan Daurov, and sabotages on the railway line by workers.

¹ Nourpeissov A., « Les cendres de l’été », Gallimard, Paris, 1975.

² Buttino M. La rivoluzione capovolta, publ. By L’ancora del mediterraneo, Napoli,2003, 492 p. The author just gives on p.345, a short allusion to the reconquest of Orenburg by the Reds and the reconecion of Tashkent with Russia.

³ M.Grey, J. Bourdier, Les armées blanches, Stock ed.. Paris, 286 p.,1968. ; Venner D., Les blancs et les rouges, Pygmalion.,Paris, 400 p., 1997.

⁴ Lafleur T.M.,” Michael Frunze, and the unified military doctrine”. Thesis for M.A. of the military faculty US, 2004, p. 30-41(internet site) ; Lafleur uses essentially the memoirs and reports of Frunze to Moscow;

⁵ Orenburg, internet site of the town: “From July till the 27th of September of 1918, the defence of the town against the White Cossacks with Dutov at the head lasted. In 1919 the power changed in Orsk two times. The fiercest fights were at Kumack heights, where the monument to defenders of the town was placed in 1967. On the 29th of August in 1919 the Soviet power was again proclaimed in Orsk”

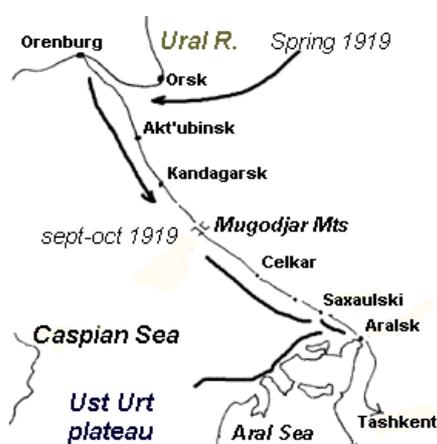
Nurpeysov apparently knew very well the area and the events he describes shortly: the Whites suffered heavy losses under Kandagatch (Oktobriask ??) and at the crossing of river Emba. He describes the crossing of Ulukumpass (Magodzarskaia ??), through the Mugodjar hills, from where White troops attained Chelkar, the most important station between Aktiubinsk and Aralsk. White troops waited there for three days there that water wagons arrived from the north, as the line was constantly sabotaged. Nurpeysov describes the atmosphere of this small town. Then the Whites arrived at Saxaulski, the last small station about 60 km before Aralsk, where always exists a repair shop for locomotives⁶.

At the same time, Frunze sent hastily fresh supply of troops from the Syr Darya oblast, and, apparently, following Nurpeysov, a gunship, the "Turkestanets" (certainly from Muynak, as there were no gunships on the Syr river). The Whites filled their tank cars at the Shitisou station (unidentified), and concentrated before Sakaulski at the small station "Halt 68", between Saxaulski and the outliers of Aralsk: this station always exists – which proves Nurpeysov does not invent the settings of his story- but is abandoned to-day. He writes that "between halt 68 and the sea there is only a brown ridge"; in fact there are a few miles between this place and the shore, and guns of the gunships were certainly firing at their farthest range (see fi. Below). Red soldiers took their defensive position at the "pass"- in fact, all this area presents very smooth ground with very low altitudes, and the so-called pass is in fact a slight lowering of the ground which the railway line follows. There they dug trenches. Just before the battle, the Whites had the visit of english general Knox, arriving from the "Caspian shore" by plane, and who set back again immediately⁷

The battle last two days, and finally, the White troops, several thousands (20 000 perhaps at that time), surrendered or fled away to the west, from hamlet to hamlet following the Small Aral northern shore, trying to reach the Caspian shore; most will die from thirst.

Frunze now was able to reconquer quickly the railway line, and went yet further to the NW as he conquered Guriev, on the caspian, on Dec.30 1919.

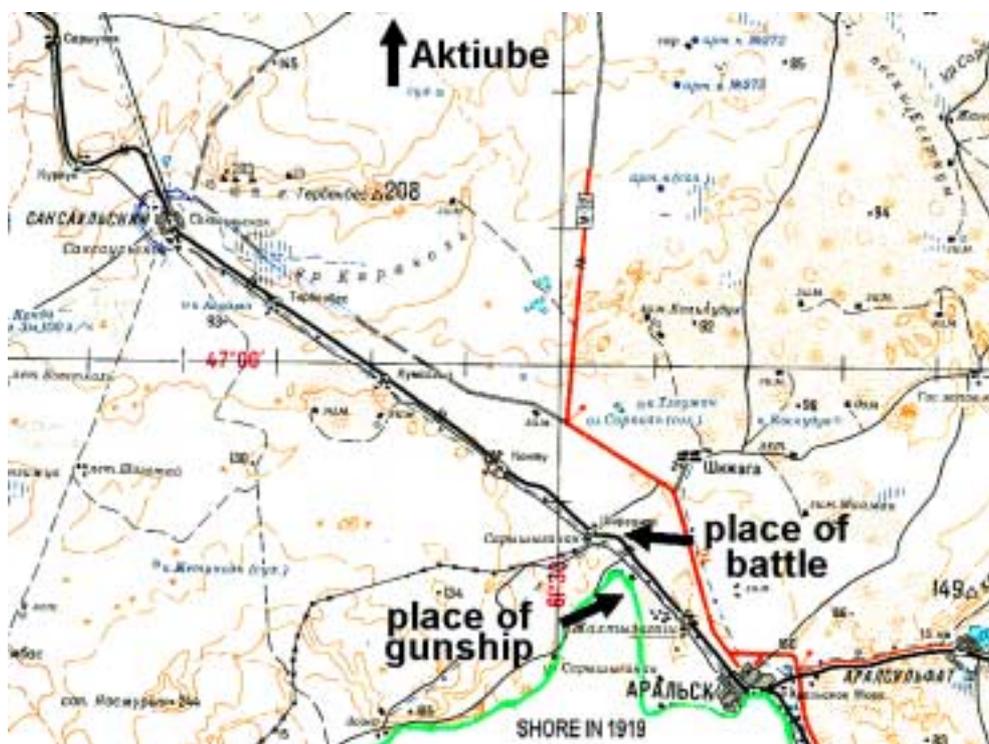
The relation by Nurpeysov of this retreat is so tight to the scarce historical information which may be gathered here and there that it seems to reflect an authentic event, very important for the consolidation of soviet power in Central Asia, at a time when it had to fighting also the beginning Basmachi insurrection. But what Belov hoped to do at "the Aral ports?" (Frunze, quoted by Lafleur)? Where could he go? In any case, there is apparently no trace of this battle in Aralsk – at the difference of the celebrated message of Lenin in 1920, asking the fishers of the Aral sea to send fish to the starving populations of the Volga valley, which they did, and for which a stele was erected in the Aralsk station (see below). It has disappeared since.



⁶ And said by R. Cagnat to be the dirtiest city of Central Asia...

⁷ General Knox came probably from Krasnovosk, which was the last position the english army yet occupied in the Transcaspian province (see elsewhere this story...)

Would anybody discuss this scenario and bring original data?



The hypothetical place of Aralsk battle, from descriptions in Nurpeysov's book. See detailed topography from Google Earth satellite photos. Approximate scale on paper: 1 / 400000.

Following the official uzbek atlas from 1985, a map, p.145, shows the front between Reds and Whites at Aralsk in september 1919, and a battle at Mougodjar the 13 of september 1919, which would give some confirmation to the reality of the Aralsk affair



The Lenin stele of 1920.