



Special artillery in South Russia 1918-1919

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During the spring and summer of 1918, the Renault FT tanks experienced their first victorious engagements. As victory engines and synonymous with modernity, they embodied invulnerability, mobility and strength. The French general staff, noting these successes, decided to use these vehicles outside of France, particularly in the Eastern armies, where the situation had been static since 1915. Vectors of power and "deterrence" before their time, battle tanks became, in the immediate post-war period, instruments of French foreign policy.

The commitment of tanks to the Eastern Army (AO)

The Salonika front, in Macedonia, follows the failure of the Dardanelles and Gallipoli expedition. Despite numerous attempts to break the front, the situation in the summer of 1918 remained unchanged. General Franchet d'Esperey, at the head of the Allied armies in the East (AAO), asked Paris to send battle tanks. He specified that "the appearance of this war machine, unknown until now to the Bulgarians, allies of the Germans, would certainly have a big moral effect and surprise on them, which it seems interesting not to neglect¹". Prepared in absolute secrecy at Recloses near Fontainebleau, the 3rd company of the 1st battalion of the 501st RAS (AS 303) arrived on October 3rd. It was too late because the front had been broken on September 15. The armistices follow one another². Anarchy and disorder, linked to the Russian civil war, to the instability of the borders, to the internal political struggles and to the departure of the Germans, took hold of the whole region, particularly in Ukraine where the situation was very confused. An intervention was launched on November 21, 1918 to support the local governments and evacuate the remaining German forces. In December, the first French elements landed in Odessa and Sevastopol.

Odessa and South Russia

On January 23, 1919, the AS 303 was regrouped in the city of Odessa. It was composed of 6 officers³ 14 non-commissioned officers, 15 brigadiers and 83 gunners, but its situation in terms of manpower became problematic with the demobilization in progress and the recall of classes 19 and 20. Lieutenant Vergne states that "it was a 'phoney war', and the front, some 100 kilometers away, was hardly stable. Constantly fluctuating, it could only be called the "accordion front".⁴ " In February and March, the tanks, with a strong moral effect, exhausted themselves in attempts that were nonetheless fruitful but without any effect on events. Despite the sub-zero temperatures and the difficulties of supply, the tank sections, dispersed, are engaged in Tiraspol, Razdelnaya, Verelinovo ... In the course of March, the pressure of the enemy intensifies. An intervention on Kherson, surrounded, is cancelled ⁵. On March 18, the Bertrand section, deployed in Berezowska (80 km northeast of Odessa), after a fierce resistance is surrounded in the locality. The tanks were disarmed and abandoned. Odessa was then transformed into an entrenched camp and, on the 29th, the decision was made to evacuate it⁶.

On April¹, the relief personnel commanded by Captain Bonnavita arrived and usefully assisted the elders of AS 303. The company embarked its equipment on two barges which were towed to Brigaz on the 8th by the torpedo boats Fauconneau and Spahi. Eight days later, the whole AS 303 was regrouped in Galatz before being transported to Réni on the 18th. The Danube army (General Berthelot and then Graziani) settled on the Dniester.

From the banks of the Dniestr to Constantinople

In parallel to these events, six companies of tanks were requested in Paris on 18 February. Franchet d'Esperey obtained the rest of the 1st battalion of the 501st armored tank regiment (AS 301 and AS 302 as well as the 106th supply and recovery section).⁷ On 2 May, his battalion commander, Major Goubenard, made a bitter assessment: out of 476 troops, only 307 were present and three officers were absent; the deficit in terms of vehicles was 67% (30 vehicles were present, 18 of which were in good condition). As for the instruction given, it is self-explanatory: " only 1/3 of the personnel received and needed know how to drive; 1/3 do not know much and the last third, nothing at all. 8 On May 18, the battalion was ready to be taken away, but the orders to embark did not arrive until June 17. The situation having changed considerably, it was out of the question to join Russia. The tanks of the 1st BCB therefore headed for Hungary. The region was then the scene of numerous battles between Czechs⁹ and Romanians against the Hungarian communists of Béla Kun. Romania, supported by France during the war, became the pivot of this "containment" policy.

Elements of Major Goubenard's battalion began to reach Szeged on 26 June, by which

time the French troops on the Dniestr front were gradually relieved. The tanks were then placed in army reserve and had to participate in a possible counter-attack against the Hungarian forces or fight against communist elements inside the occupied zones. Following numerous changes, the battalion, whose headquarters initially joined Constantinople, saw its forces dispersed between the Turkish capital (one section), Desk (AS 301, Danube army), Giurgiu (AS 302, Romanian army training¹⁰), Neusatz (AS 303). In August, following successive demobilizations and repatriations, two divisions (from Turkey and Bulgaria) were formed within the French Army of the East (AFO). The^{1st} BCL enters in its army elements. Following the transfer of the equipment of the 301st and 302nd companies and the SRD to Romania, the AFO had only one tank company left on 10 September. On 5 December 1919, the AS 303 was stationed at Bankia, near Sofia in Bulgaria. In 1920, the continuation of demobilizations and the situation in the Levant, Greece and Turkey made it necessary to reorganize the AFO. In May, the company joined Constantinople as part of the Eastern March Infantry Division (DIMO). In 1922, it was in the Constantinople occupation corps where it became the^{3rd} company of the 61st BCC. In August 1923, it was transported to Tunisia. At that time, there were no French tanks left in Southern Europe.

The use of tanks in the armies of the East, and in particular in Southern Russia, revealed interesting projection capabilities (sometimes in very short timeframes) and a constantly renewed adaptation of men and equipment to geopolitical and geographical constraints. Characterized by the search for secrecy, strategic surprise and an important tactical morale effect, the action of the AS was nevertheless mitigated by the difficulties experienced by the French army at the time, notably in terms of manpower, morale, sanitary conditions, equipment and political and military indecision. As the first - indeed, the only - victorious army in 1918, the weary and exhausted French Army of the East continued to make numerous and costly efforts during the following years. But the climate of suspicion between the allies, the lack of public support, the defective organization of the command, the slowness of communications lead to the failure of the intervention in Russia. In 1919 and 1920, they participated in the erection of a "barrier against Bolshevism" despite difficult conditions of use (cold, lack of parts, difficult reinforcements). In the years that followed, they constituted an important military asset that reinforced diplomatic and commercial links with the Eastern allies in order to build a continental security system.

1 - Note 4588/3 from General Franchet d'Esperey dated July 25, 1918. Ministry of War, EMA, historical service, Les armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre (AFGG), Tome VIII, 1934, ^{3rd} volume, Annexes, ^{1st} Volume, Annex n° 493, p. 833.

2 - September 29 with Bulgaria, October 31 with Turkey, November 4 with Austria-Hungary.

3 - Captain Gaillet, Second Lieutenant Leblond (1st section), Lieutenant Marchal (^{2nd} section), Lieutenant Bertrand (^{4th} section, replacement tanks), Lieutenant Delaporte, Lieutenant Kullmann (rank). The^{3rd} section was commanded by Warrant Officer Besserat.

4 - Labayle Éric (texts commented by), Histoires vraies, Les trois guerres du général Vergne 1914-1918, 1919-1920, 1939-1945. Anovi, 2002, p. 89. General Vergne, who testified, was a lieutenant at the time. He lost his brother Gabriel on May 5, 1917 and his brother-in-law Jean-Baptiste on August¹, 1918. In November 1918, he was awarded the Legion of Honor and received five commendations on his war cross. In 1919, he was assistant to the battalion commander Goubenard.

5 - On the 9th, the guns of the Algol, the Pluton, the Mameluk and the Aldebarran supported the progression of a Greek battalion in charge of opening a corridor to unblock the besieged garrison. Around 4 a.m. on the 10th, the Franco-Hellenic detachment commanded by Colonel de Clavières (4th Chasseurs) managed to take the sea (74 killed in the process).

6 - The situation turned out to be perilous. In March 1919, Béla Kun proclaimed the Hungarian Republic of Councils. Encouraged by Moscow, it endangered the French elements present east of the Dniester. On April 15 and 16, the Hungarian army attacked Romania. In addition, the French troops themselves began to mutiny: the ships France and Jean-Bart, refusal to go to the front, to embark on the ships, etc.

7 - At that time, the AS provided a substantial effort for overseas and TOE: French Army of the Rhine, test detachments from Algeria, Morocco (on 30/09/1919 a battalion of AS was requested) and Indochina and two battalions for Poland (6 companies of the 14th and 15th BCL). Later, in January 1920, it will be the Levant (a company was requested on 13/10/1919).

8 - Report 3616 relating to the constitution of the 1st BCB, in the armies on May 2, 1919 by the battalion chief Gubernard, 501st RCB, 1st BCB, (SHD 16N2165). Lieutenant-Colonel Velpy adds in the margin of the same document: " that these vehicles are used, nevertheless it seems to me that there may be a little exaggeration [...]".

9 - A certain number of command posts were occupied by officers of General Pellé's French Military Mission.

10 - A tank school was created there (Școala de Care de Asalt). A first battalion was formed in November 1919. It participated in the inter-allied tank competition in 1920 in Belgium.

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