

General Wrangel's Military and Civic Genius

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Transcript

00:01 November 1920. The Black Sea. A late
autumn wind cuts across the Crimean coast.
00:09 A man in a black Cossack coat stands
on the bridge of the cruiser General
00:14 Kornilov. He is forty-two years
old, six-foot-three, lean as a wolf,
00:20 and he has exactly seventy-two hours to save
one hundred and fifty thousand human lives.
00:26 His name is Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel.
The Black Baron. The last commander of
00:32 the last White army of Imperial Russia.
Behind him, in the streets of Sevastopol,
00:38 a hundred thousand soldiers and fifty thousand
civilians are streaming toward the docks. Ahead
00:44 of him, an army of one hundred thousand
Red bayonets under Mikhail Frunze has just
00:49 shattered the fortified line on the Perekop
Isthmus and is closing the door behind them.
00:55 By every law of war ever written, what should
happen next is a massacre. A panic. A trampling.
01:02 Burning ships. Bodies in the surf. Officers
shooting their own families on the piers.
01:08 And it does not happen.
In the next three days,
01:12 one hundred and twenty-six ships will lift
anchor in flawless order, in five separate ports,

01:17 on a precise timetable — carrying not just
refugees but an entire functioning government.
01:23 Its treasury. Its archives. Its cadet schools.
Its priests. Its newspapers. Even its racehorses.
01:31 The Reds will enter Sevastopol three days later
and find an empty city. No bodies. No looting.
01:38 No surrender. The keys to every government
office are stacked neatly on the desks.
01:44 White Crimea does not fall.
White Crimea evaporates.
01:49 Lenin, three thousand kilometers away in the
Kremlin, will read the dispatch and refuse
01:55 to believe it. Trotsky, who personally promised
that not a single White officer would escape the
02:02 peninsula alive, goes silent for two full days.
Because what Wrangel pulled off in those seven
02:09 months on that small Black Sea peninsula was
not a last stand. It was something far more
02:15 dangerous to the Bolsheviks.
It was a working alternative.
02:20 Today we are not telling you the story of how
the Whites lost the Civil War. You already know
02:26 that story. Today we are telling you something
almost no one outside of Russia has ever heard.
02:33 How one bankrupt Baltic baron, with a
typhus-ridden, mutinous army, no money,
02:39 and four months of grain, built a functioning
capitalist republic on a single peninsula. Gave
02:45 land to peasants. Legalized a free press
in wartime. Paid the Tsar's foreign debts
02:51 in wheat. Forced France to recognize him as a
sovereign government. And almost cracked the

02:57 Soviet project before it had even hardened.
Why his reforms terrified Lenin more than
03:04 his cannons. How he out-bargained
Britain, out-maneuvered Trotsky,
03:08 and out-organized his own generals. And why, in
the end, what defeated him was not the Red Army.
03:16 It was the weather.
Sit down. This is the
03:19 autopsy of the most successful crisis-management
operation in the history of modern warfare.
03:27 April 1920. Seven months earlier.
Wrangel steps off a British destroyer
03:34 into Sevastopol harbor and inherits a corpse.
The man he is replacing, General Anton Denikin,
03:41 has just presided over the greatest collapse in
the entire White movement. Ten months earlier,
03:48 Denikin's forces stood three hundred kilometers
from Moscow. By March they have been pushed
03:54 back two thousand kilometers, evacuated through
Novorossiysk in scenes of pure horror. Officers
04:02 shoot their own wives on the docks rather
than leave them to the Bolsheviks. Horses
04:07 are pushed off piers into the freezing sea.
Fifty thousand soldiers are abandoned on the
04:14 quays while their commanders sail away.
What washes up in the Crimea after that
04:19 catastrophe is not an army. It is a
herd of armed, broken, infected men.
04:27 Seventy percent of the soldiers have lice-borne
typhus. The officers — many of them aristocrats
04:33 who lost everything three years ago —
are selling their rifles to buy vodka.

04:38 Two generals are personally running cocaine
through the Sevastopol docks. There is no
04:43 coal. No bread. No flour. No horseshoes. No
boots. The peninsula has four months of grain
04:51 in storage and one and a half million mouths
to feed, half of them refugees from the north.
04:58 Wrangel takes one look at this and does
what no White general before him ever dared.
05:04 He drops the pretense of restoring the empire.
In his first week he issues an order most history
05:10 books skip past, because they do not know what
to do with it. He cancels every Imperial Tsarist
05:17 decoration awarded for fighting in this war.
His reasoning is brutal and clear. Russians
05:24 are killing Russians. The old Saint George
Cross was earned fighting Germans and Turks.
05:30 It cannot be earned fighting your own cousin.
The old symbols are spiritually bankrupt.
05:37 In their place he establishes the Order
of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker — a new
05:42 decoration for what he privately calls the
last Russians. Not subjects of a Tsar. Not
05:48 citizens of a Republic. Something new,
defined only by the refusal to surrender.
05:55 Then he turns on the bandits inside his own ranks.
Officers caught looting are not court-martialed.
06:02 They are hanged in the street, in
uniform, with placards on their chests.
06:06 A general caught running contraband through
the port is publicly cashiered and exiled to a
06:12 prison ship. Two of Denikin's most corrupt staff
officers vanish overnight. Nobody asks where.

06:19 The Sevastopol garrison, which had been a drunken mob for six months, sobers up in two weeks.

06:26 By June the typhus is contained. By July the army is back in uniform. By August the

06:32 salute is being returned in the streets.

This is not romance. This is a hostile

06:38 takeover. Wrangel is not behaving like the last knight of the empire. He is behaving like

06:44 the receiver of a bankrupt corporation. Strip the unprofitable divisions. Fire the C-suite. Restore

06:51 the brand. And then — and this is where it gets interesting — pivot the entire business model.

06:58 Because the army was the easy part.

The real problem was the peasants.

07:02 The Bolsheviks won the Russian Civil War for one reason. One.

07:08 In October 1917, three days after seizing power, Lenin signed a decree giving every landlord estate

07:15 to the peasants who worked it. He did not actually mean it — within three years his commissars would

07:21 be confiscating that same grain at gunpoint — but in the autumn of 1917 the promise was enough.

07:27 The peasants who made up ninety percent of Russia chose the side that handed them the land.

07:33 Every White general — Kolchak, Denikin, Yudenich — campaigned on the implicit promise of giving that

07:40 land back to its original noble owners. Every single one. They marched into village after

07:46 village with the old landlord riding behind the staff, ready to take possession again.

07:51 And the peasants, who would happily shoot a Bolshevik commissar in the morning, hid the

07:56 Red partisans in the hayloft by evening.
Wrangel understands this in a way no
08:01 other White commander ever did. And he
understands he has roughly four months
08:06 to fix it before the world ends.
He calls in a man almost forgotten today.
08:12 Aleksandr Krivoshein. Sixty-three years
old, soft-spoken, son of a minor official,
08:18 and once the right hand of Pyotr Stolypin —
the prime minister who tried to give Russian
08:23 peasants private land before the war and
was assassinated in a Kyiv theatre in 1911
08:28 for his trouble. Krivoshein is the ghost of an
alternative Russia that died nine years earlier.
08:35 Wrangel hands him the entire civil government
and says, finish Stolypin's work in ninety days.
08:41 Krivoshein does it in sixty.
May 25, 1920. The Wrangel Land Law.
08:47 Every peasant currently working a piece of land
— whether it once belonged to him, to a noble,
08:53 to the church, or to the crown — becomes its legal
private owner. He pays for it. But the price is
08:59 symbolic, payable in grain over twenty-five
years, and the contract is registered in a
09:05 brand-new state cadastral system that produces
an actual document. A title deed. With a stamp.
09:11 A red seal. In a country where most of the
peasantry has never owned anything in writing.
09:18 By August, over fifty thousand
peasant farms in the Crimea hold
09:22 title deeds signed by the Wrangel government.
Read that again. The White general — the Black

09:29 Baron, the aristocrat, the Imperial cavalryman
— is the one who finally puts land into
09:35 legal peasant hands. Lenin's decree gave them
seizure. Wrangel's decree gives them ownership.
09:43 The political shockwave is so toxic
that the Kremlin nearly chokes on it.
09:48 A captured Red Army telegram from June 1920
begs Moscow for urgent counter-propaganda,
09:55 because peasant deserters are switching
sides — not to fight for the Tsar,
09:59 but to fight for the title to their twenty acres.
Trotsky, in a furious memo, calls Wrangel the most
10:06 dangerous White general we have ever faced. Not
because of his bayonets. Because of his paperwork.
10:13 Meanwhile, on the peninsula itself,
something stranger is happening.
10:18 Two hundred kilometers north, in Soviet
Russia, War Communism is at full burn.
10:23 Private trade is illegal. Bread is requisitioned
at gunpoint. Currency is collapsing. People in
10:30 Petrograd are eating wallpaper paste.
On the Crimean side of the front,
10:35 in Sevastopol and Yalta, French cafés
are open. Opposition newspapers print
10:41 editorials critical of the government. A
stock exchange reopens. Cinemas show new
10:46 films. The ruble stabilizes — temporarily
— against the franc. A tourist guidebook
10:52 is reissued. Refugees from Moscow weep at the
sight of fresh bread sold openly in a market.
10:60 For seven months in 1920, on a single
peninsula, two completely opposite versions

11:06 of twentieth-century Russia existed at the same time, separated by a single fortified ditch.

11:13 And one of them was winning the argument.

That is the real reason Wrangel

11:18 had to be destroyed.

But ideas do not feed an army.

11:24 By July, the Crimea is starving. Not the cities — those have been stabilized by trade. The army.

11:32 One hundred and twenty thousand soldiers need wheat that the peninsula simply does not grow

11:37 in those quantities. And to buy wheat, you need recognition, credit, and a port that foreign

11:42 captains are willing to enter.

Wrangel turns to London.

11:47 The British have been the principal patrons of the White movement for two years. They

11:52 have supplied tanks, planes, advisors, uniforms. Surely they will help now.

11:58 The answer from Whitehall arrives in a single ice-cold telegram.

12:02 Lord Curzon, the Foreign Secretary of the British Empire, informs Wrangel that His

12:08 Majesty's Government has decided to open trade negotiations with Soviet Russia. Britain considers

12:14 the White cause finished. Britain advises Wrangel to surrender. And Britain offers,

12:20 as a gesture of goodwill, to mediate the terms of his capitulation to Lenin.

12:26 This is the betrayal that almost no English-language history book about Russia will

12:30 tell you about. The very Empire that financed the White armies for two years sells them

12:36 out — for a trade deal that Lenin will sign
eight months later, agreeing to nothing he
12:42 would not have signed anyway.
Wrangel reads the telegram,
12:46 files it, and immediately turns to Paris.
He plays the only card he has left. France
12:53 lost more money in the Bolshevik default than
any country on Earth — billions of gold francs
12:59 lent to the Tsar, owed to ordinary French savers,
vaporized overnight by Lenin's repudiation of all
13:06 Imperial debt. Wrangel walks into the French
embassy in Sevastopol and makes the offer that
13:12 no Russian leader since 1917 has dared to make.
The Crimea will pay back the Imperial debt. In
13:20 grain. Over time. With interest.
In return — recognition.
13:26 It is the longest diplomatic shot in the
history of the Civil War. And Paris takes it.
13:33 On August 10, 1920, France officially
recognizes the Government of South
13:39 Russia as the de facto government of Russia.
For the first time since the abdication of the
13:46 Tsar, a Russian state — one that is not Soviet —
has a flag at a foreign ministry. A precedent is
13:53 created that the Soviets will spend the next
seventy years scrubbing out of the history
13:57 books. The precedent of Two Russias.
But recognition does not fill silos.
14:05 To pay France, to feed the army, to survive the
winter, Wrangel needs the wheat fields of Northern
14:11 Tavria — the steppes immediately above the Crimean
isthmus, the breadbasket of southern Russia,

14:17 currently held by the Reds.

So he attacks.

14:22 Western journalists, then and now, misunderstand this campaign completely. They describe it as a

14:28 march on Moscow. It is nothing of the kind.

Wrangel never had any intention of taking

14:34 Moscow. He had eighty thousand soldiers and a defensive bottleneck behind him.

14:40 The Northern Taurica offensive of the summer of 1920 is a coldly calculated

14:45 logistics raid. Get in. Harvest. Get out.

For three months it works. Convoys of grain

14:52 pour south into Sevastopol. The army is fed. The French are paid. The project survives the summer.

14:59 And then, in October, a man Wrangel has never met, four hundred kilometers to the north,

15:05 makes the decision that will kill him.

The man is Marshal Józef Piłsudski.

15:11 The country is Poland. The decision is to sign an armistice with Lenin.

15:17 For the entire summer of 1920, the Red Army has been fighting on two fronts. In the north,

15:23 against Poland, where Trotsky has thrown the elite — Budyonny's First Cavalry, the best artillery,

15:29 the freshest divisions. In the south, against

Wrangel. As long as both fronts are open, the

15:35 Bolsheviks cannot concentrate force in either one.

On October 12, Poland signs.

15:42 Within seventy-two hours, the Red command begins shifting an entire army group southward. Over

15:48 two hundred thousand fresh troops, including the First Cavalry, plus artillery, armored trains,

15:55 and aircraft, all aimed at one peninsula. Frunze is given command. His orders, signed personally
16:02 by Lenin, are explicit. The Wrangel ulcer must be cauterized completely. Use any means.
16:09 What follows in early November on the Perekop Isthmus is not a battle from
16:14 the imagination of Tolstoy. It is a glimpse of the wars that are coming twenty years later.
16:20 The Perekop is a five-mile-wide strip of land between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. To
16:26 enter the Crimea, the Reds have to cross it. Wrangel has spent his summer turning it into
16:32 a system of trenches, wire, blockhouses, and concrete bunkers — a small-scale Maginot Line,
16:38 built five years before the real one. Behind it, armored trains run on a
16:44 perimeter track. Twelve French Renault tanks, the first tanks ever to fight on Russian soil,
16:50 sit in reserve. Sikorsky biplanes fly observation overhead. Heavy machine guns
16:56 are positioned to interlock their fire. By the standards of 1920, it is the most modern
17:03 defensive position in the world. Frunze hits it with human waves.
17:08 For three days the Red infantry walks straight into the Wrangel wire and dies. Soviet eyewitness
17:16 accounts describe drifts of bodies five and six deep along the entire frontage. One Red
17:24 division loses sixty percent of its strength in a single morning. By the evening of November 8,
17:30 Frunze's frontal assault has stalled. The line is holding. The Black Baron is winning the battle.

17:37 And then the temperature drops.
To the east of the Perekop trench
17:42 line lies the Sivash — a vast, shallow, salty
mud lake fifteen miles wide. Wrangel's engineers
17:50 had calculated it to be impassable. In a normal
year, it is. The water is too deep to wade and
17:57 too shallow to boat. The bottom is sucking mud.
In the night of November 7 to 8, an unseasonable
18:05 freeze arrives. A once-in-a-decade Black Sea
Arctic event, combined with a powerful offshore
18:12 wind that physically pushes the salt water
westward and exposes the lakebed. By dawn,
18:19 a temporary, hardened, walkable bottom
appears across the entire Sivash.
18:24 Frunze, a brilliant tactician, sees it and gambles
his career on a single order. Three Red divisions
18:32 — fifteen thousand men with light artillery —
are sent across the dry lakebed in the dark.
18:39 They emerge in Wrangel's rear.
The most modern defensive line in
18:44 Russia is suddenly being attacked from behind
by an army that should not exist. The Perekop
18:50 position becomes untenable in eighteen hours.
On the morning of November 9, Wrangel's chief
18:57 of staff hands him a single telegram and
says one sentence: We have lost the war.
19:04 Wrangel reads it. Nods. And gives an order
that he has secretly prepared for seven months.
19:10 He activates Plan B.
This is the part the Bolsheviks could never
19:16 explain. Soviet historians spent decades trying.
From the day he took command in April,

19:22 Wrangel had been quietly buying coal.
Not for his railways. Not for his factories.
19:28 Coal for ships. Bunker fuel, in massive
quantities, stockpiled in Constantinople,
19:34 in Varna, in Constanța, scattered through six
neutral Black Sea ports under shell companies
19:40 and friendly merchants. Coal for one hundred and
twenty-six ships. Coal to move an entire state.
19:48 He had prepared the evacuation from
his second week in office. Seven
19:53 months earlier. He simply never told anyone.
Order Number Eighty-Two, issued on November 11,
20:00 1920, contains a sentence that has no equivalent
in any other defeated army in modern history.
20:08 Every officer, soldier, and civilian
is hereby granted the absolute right to
20:13 remain on Russian soil or to embark,
according to his own conscience.
20:18 No coercion shall be applied either way.
Read that one more time. A defeated commander,
20:25 with the enemy hours away, granting his own
troops permission to surrender if they so choose.
20:32 He does it because he knows. He knows that an
evacuation only works without panic when every
20:38 passenger boards by choice. He knows that
one weeping woman screaming I want to stay
20:44 in a crowded gangway will trigger a stampede that
kills hundreds. So he removes the issue by decree.
20:52 In the next seventy-two hours, one hundred and
forty-five thousand six hundred and ninety-three
20:58 people board ships in five Crimean ports in
perfect order. Wrangel inspects each port

21:04 personally. He boards last, from Sevastopol, on the General Kornilov. Not a single ship is lost.

21:12 Not a single port is touched by fire. Not one passenger is shot. The Reds, when they finally

21:19 enter Sevastopol on November 15, find the keys to the city offices stacked neatly on the desks.

21:27 And those who stayed?

They believed the amnesty

21:30 that Béla Kun and Rosalia Zemlyachka, sent personally by Lenin, broadcast over the

21:36 city walls. Surrender your weapons. Register at the commandant's office. Return to your

21:42 normal lives. No harm will come to you.

Between November 1920 and March 1921,

21:49 in the Crimea alone, between fifty thousand and one hundred and twenty thousand people — officers,

21:56 civil servants, doctors, priests, nurses, ordinary refugees who registered as instructed — are shot,

22:04 drowned in the sea with stones tied to their necks, or buried alive.

22:08 It is one of the largest single mass killings of the entire Civil War. And it happens,

22:15 by design, to the people who chose to trust the Bolsheviks instead of the Black Baron.

22:21 Wrangel was right. About the only thing he could not control — the weather — defeated

22:27 him. About everything else, he was right.

The ships sail to Constantinople and

22:33 disperse. The military fleet, thirty-three warships, the so-called Bizerte Squadron,

22:39 sails on through the Mediterranean and drops anchor in French Tunisia. For four more years,

22:45 on the decks of those ships
in a North African harbor,
22:48 Russian sailors live under Russian law. Russian
schools educate their children. Russian priests
22:55 hold services. Russian newspapers are printed.
The Imperial Russian Navy quietly outlives the
23:01 Russian Empire by half a decade — in Africa.
The last officer of the Bizerte Squadron,
23:08 Anastasia Shirinskaya, did not die until
2009. She lived long enough to receive a
23:15 Russian passport from a Russian Federation
that her parents would not have recognized.
23:21 Wrangel himself dies in Brussels in
1928, age forty-nine, of suspected
23:26 poisoning by a Soviet agent placed inside his
own household staff. He is buried in Belgrade,
23:32 in a Russian Orthodox church, in exile.
He left behind no country. No monument
23:40 inside Russia until 2007. No
boulevard. No anthem. No holiday.
23:46 What he left behind was
something more uncomfortable.
23:50 He proved, in seven months on a single peninsula,
that there was an alternative. That a Russian
23:55 government could give peasants real land titles.
That it could legalize a free press in wartime.
24:01 That it could pay its foreign debts. That
it could be recognized by a great power.
24:06 That it could evacuate one hundred and fifty
thousand people without losing one of them.
24:12 He proved that what came after October
1917 was not the only possible Russia.

24:19 And that is exactly why, for seventy years,
his name was scratched out of the schoolbooks.
24:25 If you want to understand why he had to be erased
— and why his collapse, despite all of this, was
24:30 already locked in months before the Sivash froze
— you need to watch the first part of this story,
24:36 linked on the screen now. It explains how the
White movement won every battle that mattered,
24:41 until the day it lost the only one that did.
Until then. Keep asking the questions they buried.