



The Bolsheviks, the Red Army and the Russian Civil War

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In 1917 the working class took power in Russia with remarkably little resistance from the bosses. But shortly afterwards the capitalists regrouped and gathered support from the imperialist powers to wage a bloody war on the young communist regime that became known as the Russian Civil War. Ninety years ago in 1919 was a key turning point when the Red Army turned the tide on the reactionary Whites. Jens-Hugo Nyberg takes the opportunity to recount these events and consider the lessons for defending future workers' revolutions.

At the time of the October revolution, the Bolsheviks did not yet have a clear understanding of what type of army they would have to build. This is not really surprising, the more concrete elements in the programme of a revolution cannot be deduced from a few simple principles, but will constantly be modified by experience. Even the Soviets had not been invented by any thinker, and the actual Soviet power differed quite substantially from Lenin's vision in *State and the Revolution*.

Since the French revolution, the left in general had advocated replacing the standing armies with popular militias, to ensure they could not again be used against the people. Also, an over-romanticised understanding of the defence of revolutionary France in 1792-93 (the *levée en masse* or massed levy) against the invading armies of the feudal reaction, seemed to prove that democratic militias would be most efficient militarily as well.^[1] The Second International thus included the replacing of the standing armies by the arming of the people in their programme, and so did Russian Social Democracy.

It should be noted, though, that this was considered part of the minimum programme, and should not be confused with the concept of smashing the state. During the 1905 revolution, Lenin did stress the need for proper organisation, training and military knowledge, but he basically stuck to this perspective. In 1916, during the World War, he stated in no uncertain terms: 'violence in the name of the interests and rights of the majority is of a different nature: it tramples on the 'rights' of the exploiters, the bourgeoisie, it is unachievable without democratic organisation of the army and the 'rear'.^[2]

This perspective was not much altered, nor even much discussed, prior to the October revolution.

After the seizure of power, the Bolsheviks were faced with a new vital and pressing task: to actually organise the defence of the revolution. To meet the threats of the officer cadets' uprising in Petrograd and the approach of the Cossacks under General Pyotr Krasnov, they used what they had at hand: those parts of the army they could muster, the sailors and the Red Guard. That proved to be enough but it has to be recognised that this was largely due to the weakness of the counter-revolutionary forces at this point. The combat worthiness of the old Russian Army was dwindling fast and, while the Petrograd garrison would not move against the Bolsheviks, most of it was not too keen on actively defending them either. The decree on peace, and even more the permission to the units at the front to open local peace talks with the Germans, ensured the army could not be used against the Soviet government, but it also contributed to its dissolution.

The Beginning of the Civil War ^[3]

Even when something seems to have an obvious beginning, there are always causal events preceding and leading up to it. Several replies are possible to the question of when the Russian civil war started. After all, prolonged and open class struggle is, in Marxist terms, civil war. The year 1917 was filled by a rising tide of battles throughout the former Empire as well as direct military events like the Kornilov coup. However, in examining the civil war as a conflict between armed forces, we can start from the seizure of power.

Petrograd was, to be sure, the centre of the revolution but, thanks to the disintegrative effects of defeats at the hands of the Germans, and the nine months of revolution, Russia no longer had a state machine that could be seized in the centre and used throughout the land, even had this been the Bolsheviks' intention. Rather, the Soviets had to seize power all over the former Empire. This gives the lie to the claim of the right that October was some sort of military coup. Incidentally, it also disproves the favourite notion of some supposed Trotskyists like Alan Woods (Marxism and the State) that the October Revolution was bloodless.

Of course, the uprising in Petrograd was, indeed, almost bloodless, but the process of consolidating the revolution across Russia as a whole lasted for months and varied greatly between cities and regions. In some places, like Moscow and Irkutsk, it took days of street fighting to win, with hundreds of casualties. However, in most cities in Russia relatively little direct fighting was required for the Soviets to overpower their opponents? indeed in several places, there was virtually no fighting at all. The more industrialised a city was, that is, the more proletarian its population, the stronger was the revolution.

Naturally, the Bolshevik government did all it could to spread the revolution. Red Guards were sent from Petrograd, Moscow and other cities; sailors were sent from the Baltic and, to a lesser extent, the Black Sea fleets. The Baltic sailors from Kronstadt and Helsinki not only played a key role in the October uprising but were an invaluable resource in the early stages of the civil war. Army units were sent when they could be used, but this was increasingly rarely. The only Army units that could be taken over and used as first class troops throughout the civil war were the Latvian riflemen. Latvia was one of the most industrialised regions of the Russian Empire with, consequently, a high proportion of workers. The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP) had sided with the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks within the All Russian Social Democracy from 1905 onwards. In the course of 1917, a large number of the 40,000 men of the Latvian Riflemen Division came over to the Bolsheviks.

Troops were sent out by train to aid the local revolutionaries, but in no case was this alone enough to conquer Russia. Rather, the Red forces sent out were enough to tip the scales in places where local revolutionaries could not win by themselves. They helped in defeating counter-revolutionary forces such as the Ukrainian Rada, Kaledin's Don Cossacks and Dutov's Orenburg Cossacks.

Fundamentally, the revolution grew and won everywhere, from Archangelsk in the north to Ekaterinodar in the Kuban Cossack territory in the south, to Siberia and the Far East.

The revolutionary army reconsidered [\[4\]](#)

The successful spread of the revolution certainly proved its strength, but there was another factor: the initial weakness of the counter-revolution. Many revolutionaries concluded that the events of the first months provided a model for revolutionary warfare, confirming, moreover, the conception they had held before the revolution: small, voluntary, internally democratic units in the midst of mass support from the workers and poor, sweeping away the class enemy. The situation would be very different, however, when they faced a well-organised opponent, determined to fight.

The first major test the revolutionary forces faced was the renewal of hostilities with Germany. Until this point, the Bolshevik position had been to advocate a general, democratic peace with no annexations or indemnities. If the workers were able to seize power, as they now had, they were to refuse any peace on terms which endangered the revolution or surrendered its gains. If attacked, they would launch a revolutionary war against the aggressor, appealing to the latter's own working class and troops to rise up and overthrow their own capitalists and generals.

In the peace talks with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, lasting from early December 1917 to the end of January 1918,

Leon Trotsky, in charge of the Bolshevik delegation, spoke 'over the heads' of the German High Command to the suffering masses in Germany. And, indeed, there was a massive wave of strikes, not only against the cold and hunger the German population were suffering but also for an end to the war, for a positive response to the Soviet's peace offer.

However, when the strike wave ended, the High Command's demands stiffened. They desperately needed to transfer as many of their troops to the Western Front as possible for a final offensive to break through before the American armed forces arrived in overwhelming numbers. Also it was becoming increasingly clear to them that Soviet Russia had no army with which to carry through a revolutionary defencist war. The old one was dissolving fast, and the Red Guards and the sailors were hardly enough to defeat the German army. This was confirmed when it finally attacked on February 18th. Even the second rate units easily swept away the Russian defences, in what the German commander General Hoffman called 'The most comical war I have ever known'[\[5\]](#).

There had long been an assumption amongst socialists that increased democracy in any field would bring greater efficiency. The Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries clung to their belief that the new freedom after the February revolution would bring with it a more battle-worthy army 'surely an army that knew it was fighting for its own interests would be more effective?' The Bolsheviks used this argument as well, although they stressed that the proletariat must actually seize power; that alone would ensure the workers and poor peasants would fight to defend themselves.

In reality, however, it wasn't quite as easy. The overthrow of the Tsar, in fact, lowered the combat value of the Russian army, and October did not reverse that process, rather, it increased it. Before the mass of the soldiers came over to the side of the revolution, a relatively efficient army could be maintained through a combination of coercion and religious and nationalistic propaganda from the ruling class. Conversely, especially with a peasant army, when the soldiers had been won over by the slogans Bread, Peace and Land it was natural that they then expected an immediate return to civilian life and the promised redistribution of the land.

If a worker-soldier is conscious enough of his class interests, he can control his demoralisation and stay at his post at the front, but there will always be varying levels of revolutionary consciousness. Even the best revolutionary will find themselves hard pressed when suddenly facing machine guns and artillery. This means that, under most circumstances, revolutionary consciousness alone will not be enough to build a revolutionary army that can stand up to a better armed and organised enemy.

Military questions and politics

To a Marxist, military questions are subordinate to politics. In the famous words of Von Clausewitz; 'It is clear that war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means'. (On War) Revolutionary politics gives us the goal to fight for, welds together our troops, and can undermine those of the enemy. It would be completely wrong, however, to assume that politics can alone decide. Military victory will give the victor an opportunity to settle the political issues in their favour. If counter-revolution wins a military victory, and uses this to give the factories back to their former owners, dissolve the soviets and execute all the Communists they can find, this will obviously have a decisive impact on all questions concerning the class struggle. In an armed civil war, therefore, the military front becomes a question of life and death for the revolution.

It is not possible here to follow all the debates of the Bolsheviks about how to build an army. Key discussions may have been held informally and not preserved. However, it is clear that by the time of the Brest-Litovsk peace in March 1918, which spelled the end of Russia's involvement in the First World War, Trotsky had become convinced of several key principles for building the new army.[\[6\]](#) At this point, Trotsky resigned as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs and became People's Commissar of Military Affairs.

In the previous November, the Army had been completely democratised, with the election of all commanders, in accordance with the demands that Bolsheviks and rank and file soldiers had been agitating for. This was now abolished, as was the right to discuss battle orders before following them. This was clearly a step backwards for democratisation of the Army, but in a situation of brutal conflict it was entirely necessary. If every action had had to be discussed and

debated first, the army would have been completely ineffective. When faced with an armed opponent, the important thing is to defeat him, not to ensure everyone is consulted beforehand. If this was a step backwards for democratisation of the Army, in a situation of all out war it was nevertheless entirely necessary. In combat, orders must be executed immediately, without question, or it will be too late.

It could be argued that the soldiers could still have been allowed to choose who gave these orders but the problem is that a unit who were not keen to attack the enemy (a most natural reaction) would be likely to elect a commander that would not press them to do so. Again, this would gravely damage the strength and effectiveness of the Army as a whole; entire units could be led into retreat. In order to build a strong Army able to win the battle against the counter-revolutionary enemy, every single unit had to press forward in attack, which could not be achieved without both strong discipline and decisive and aggressive leaders.

There is also another aspect to this. Giving the armed forces full autonomy in deciding their own affairs would mean giving the men with arms the power to settle the crucial questions of the civil war alone. This is what Trotsky accurately termed 'military syndicalism'. It is clearly contrary to the Bolshevik model in which a political leadership imposes its control over all parts of the military and determines how arms are to be used.

This is not to deny the crucial importance of class-consciousness, politics and revolutionary leadership in a revolutionary army. Quite the opposite. Revolutionary agitation and propaganda plays an absolutely vital role in persuading the workers and peasants to fight. The Red army needed, and had, more than this: in every unit, at every front, cells of disciplined Communists played an essential role. As the most determined fighters, their job was to inspire and lead the troops. As Trotsky repeatedly stressed, they would have no privileges 'except to be the first under fire.

Inspiration was only one side of the coin, however. It proved impossible to build an army without stern discipline imposed on all reluctant soldiers. At the front, an order is not optional. It has to be obeyed, or the offender will be punished.

Return of the former officers?

Abolishing the elections of commanders and restoring discipline drew enough opposition, but the hardest thing to swallow was putting former Tsarist officers in positions of command. To build a combat-ready army, Trotsky explained, they simply had no choice but to make use of the existing military specialists, that is, the former officers. This was, in principle, no different from using bourgeois and ex-Tsarist specialists in other fields, say in production. The working class does not and cannot, at the moment of the revolution, possess all the skills which the capitalists and their state invest in training specialists.

Trotsky also rejected the notion, acceptable to most of his critics, that the former officers were to be employed strictly as advisors only. Throughout the revolution, Trotsky stressed giving specialists in different fields the opportunity to use their skills. In this, he argued against what he called 'communist deceit', the belief that, whatever the issue was, communists were better at it. Against the charges that the ex-Tsarist officers would inevitably betray the workers' army, Trotsky insisted that the acts of treason, if held in check by Communist vigilance, would be far less devastating than all the cases of incompetence and bad organisation that would result from not utilising the military specialists.

To ensure against acts of treason, a military commissar from the Bolshevik party was to watch over the commanders. Any order, to be valid, was to be signed jointly by the commander and the commissar. Military tactics were the job of the commander, however, the commissar could only refuse to sign an order if he had reason to suspect it was given with the intent to undermine the Red Army. If he had different opinions about the strictly military aspects, he could only appeal to a higher organ.

As part of this process, Trotsky had to curb the independence of Communist Party cells. The communists in the army in general believed themselves, as members of the ruling party and leaders of the revolution, better equipped to make decisions in all fields. In Trotsky's view, this attitude was a hopeless one, in an army. At the front, the military lines of command had to be obeyed. Communists would have no more right to overrule their commander than any other soldier.

At the centre, to be sure, the Bolshevik leaders could overrule the army High Command, but at the front, the task of the communist cells was to make sure orders were obeyed and attacks were made as efficiently as possible. If the communists disagreed with anything, the most they could do was to appeal to a higher party organ. This might, and did, seem very harsh, but it was based on a realistic assessment of military necessity and the rule that 'the safety of the revolution is the supreme law.'

Military opposition

Trotsky won a lot of popularity as the leader of the military effort. It should be noted, however, that he also drew considerable opposition. Several of the army reforms were quite unpopular, and it was above all Trotsky who pushed them through. The opposition in the military was never homogenous. One part came from leaders in the first, victorious months of the revolution, when the small independent units defeated their opponents. Another ideological element came from the Left Communist opposition, who had an idealist view of the irresistible march of the revolution, which the masses were bound to join, and did not quite see that even the revolution could be crushed by enough force. This led them to hold on to the old conception of full democracy in the military.

A different opposition group coalesced in Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad, now Volgograd) where Stalin had gone in the summer of 1918.^[7] Stalin and his cronies, like Voroshilov and Minin, were not happy with following orders from above. They were sure that they themselves knew best and, above all, they believed that they, as veteran revolutionaries, should not have to follow any instruction from former officers of the Tsar. After repeated disobedience and ignoring direct orders from the centre, Trotsky categorically demanded Stalin's recall from Tsaritsyn, which was granted. This did not completely end their opposition, however. Key members from Tsaritsyn continued their opposition to official military policy in general, and to Trotsky in particular. This opposition should not be confused with that from the more idealistic left communists. Stalin and his cronies simply did not like to be told what to do, there was nothing libertarian about their opposition. Indeed, there was nowhere a harsher Red regime than in Tsaritsyn.

The military question was to be discussed at the 8th party congress of the Bolsheviks, in March 1919. Earlier in the month, Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak's armies in the east, who were seen at that time as the main counter-revolutionary threat, advanced rapidly. Trotsky at once left for the front and, at first, requested that all military workers do likewise. However, he was criticised by army communists and, not wanting to be seen to curb the debate, he agreed that those who wanted to could stay for the congress.

Grigory Sokolnikov defended Trotsky's theses on the army, in his absence. The opposition was more limited than the year before. The more utopian notions of how to build the army had now been discarded. The contentious issues concerned limiting the powers of the officers, augmenting those of the commissars and the communist cells etc. In a closed session on the military question, the opposition gained a majority but, when Lenin threw his weight behind Trotsky's theses, the balance altered and they won at the full congress. A resolution with some criticisms of the army regime, aimed at Trotsky, was also pushed through, but in the main, Trotsky's policies had again won the day.

The birth of the Volunteer army ^[8]

The most important leaders of the counter-revolution were to assemble in South Russia, in the Cossack territories. The main individuals, including generals Anton Denikin, Segeii Markov, Alexander Lukomskii and Lavr Kornilov had been arrested in 1917 after the Kornilov coup and jailed together in the Bykhov monastery. However, their guards were sympathetic towards them and they could basically have escaped at any time. They did so when the Reds approached, and assembled in Novocherkassk, capital of the Don region where Mikhail Alexeev, former Chief of Staff to the Imperial Army was already based. He had not been jailed after the Kornilov affair, as he had not openly come out in favour of the coup during the few days it lasted. Although this led to severe frictions with Kornilov, eventually an agreement was struck in which Alexeev was made the political and diplomatic leader of the counter-revolution, and Kornilov the military commander.

The Don became the main gathering point for the most determined anti-Bolsheviks. Whilst some very capable military cadres assembled, to their disappointment, they were not as many as they had expected. Most officers, not to speak of the common soldiers, were simply not so keen on putting their lives at risk in an adventure they had a hard time

understanding anyway. Nor were the Cossacks too willing to engage. In December, the workers of Rostov rose in revolt and seized power, proving once again that the revolution was an all-Russian affair, and not decided by a clique in Petrograd. The Cossacks had not yet assembled an efficient army, and it was primarily the Volunteer army that subdued the workers and retook the Red city.

As the Reds drew near, there was another workers' uprising, this time in Taganrog. It received massive support from the non-Cossack peasants and even some amongst the poorer Cossacks in the north. The White Guard Volunteers were received with a high degree of apathy amongst most of the other Cossacks and they soon realised they had no chance of defending themselves. In late February, they escaped east, on what is known as the Ice March, ending up in the Kuban Cossack territory. With 36 Generals out of some 4 000 combatants, they were surely the most top-heavy army ever assembled, where colonels sometimes had to serve as privates. This was not without problems, but it did sometimes give them an edge over their red opponents.

The Ice march

The experience of the Volunteer army, still called that although they soon instituted conscription, proved once again that revolutionary consciousness is not sufficient to build a battle-worthy Red army when facing a well-organised opponent. Counter-revolutionary forces can also be determined to fight to the end, and then greater military skills can make all difference. Right from the beginning of the Ice march, there were several instances when the Whites could have been crushed if the Red forces had been more disciplined, and if orders to attack had been followed. For over a year, in fact, the Whites in the South were constantly outnumbered but they were better organised, so they survived, and were eventually able to grow. In Kuban, the Cossack response was better than it had been in the Don, although still not as good as the White Generals had hoped for.

Gradually, they did build up their forces. One crucial event was reaching an agreement with the anti-Bolshevik Kuban Cossack forces under Pokrovskii, in one blow almost doubling their forces. With some 8 000 troops under his command, Kornilov now decided it was time to attack the Kuban capital Ekaterinodar. In this they were outnumbered, but they were used to that. They were repulsed, and some of the other Generals wanted to call a retreat. Kornilov was adamant, however, and decided to put his forces at risk by continuing the attacks. Chance intervened in form of an artillery shell that hit his staff building and killed Kornilov on 13 April 1918.

Denikin was made the new commander, and he immediately ordered a disengagement. Ironically, if Kornilov, the White's most charismatic commander, had not been killed, perhaps the continued attacks on Ekaterinodar would have spelled doom for his army. Denikin led his army away from the main Red forces and again made contact with the Don, where Ataman (Cossack leader) Krasnov, under German protection, was building up his army.

The Cossacks

The Cossacks as a group had originated from runaway serfs, adventurers and freebooters and, in earlier centuries, had been a source of rebellions against the Tsars. Under the so-called Great Tsars, Peter and Catherine, they were gradually subdued as a force of rebellion, given privileges and turned into a pillar of the central power. From now on, whenever the peasants rebelled, Cossacks were sent to crush them. The Cossacks were far from a homogenous group, however. Privileged as compared to the other peasants, there were big differences between the richest Cossacks and the poorer Cossacks, as well as between the richer Cossack areas and the poorer.

That the Cossacks could not in all circumstances be used to suppress workers in struggle was shown during the February days, when the Cossacks in Petrograd largely absented themselves from the battles and, on occasion, even attacked gendarmes who fired on workers. The Cossacks of the Russian army, like all the other soldiers, were not at all keen on keeping on fighting as the army dissolved. Some of them, especially in the poorer Cossack district to the north of the Don, could even be sympathetic to the idea of soviet power. So, when the Ataman (chieftain) Alexei Kaledin tried to organise a strong force to stop the approaching Reds, he found a weak response. Some of them even joined the Reds, whose advance could not be stopped. When the Volunteer army, realising their weakness, fled east to the Kuban, Kaledin in desperation shot himself through the heart.

By February 1918, Soviet power had conquered most of Siberia, the Cossack areas in the South, Ukraine, Turkestan and the Baltic territories, that is most of the former Empire. On April 23rd, Lenin explained to the Moscow Soviet: "We can say with confidence that in the main the civil war is at an end."^[9] This was not mere propaganda. The Bolshevik leaders really believed that the worst was over. That was not so, however. The worst by far was yet to come.

In the South, one main problem lay in the disastrous policies pursued by the revolutionaries themselves. In early spring 1918, the Cossacks had been, to a large extent, neutralised as a counter-revolutionary threat to the rest of Russia. Hatred against them ran deep, however, both amongst revolutionaries, for whom they had always been a pillar of oppression, and amongst the non-Cossack peasants who comprised some 50 percent of the inhabitants in the Cossack areas and were held down in poverty by their privileges. Moving too fast to abolish all Cossack privileges, not to mention their traditions and way of life, or even revenge for past injustice, was likely to lead to uniting most of the Cossacks, including many who recently had been sympathetic, against the Bolsheviks. Sadly, that was what happened.¹⁰

The Czechoslovak legion

From 1914 onwards, Czechoslovaks were organised in armed units in the Russian army. The force was expanded with prisoners of war, so that by early 1918 it numbered about 40,000. Their goal in fighting the Central powers was a free Czechoslovakia, and the corps did not dissolve with the rest of the Russian army. After the Brest-Litovsk peace, the Soviet government agreed to let the Czechoslovak Corps be transported, as units, out of Russia by way of Vladivostok. The rebellion of the Corps in late May was one of the most important events of the civil war, opening up an eastern front. Thus far, White plots and the insurrection of the Cossack leader Semenov had not succeeded in gaining a foothold in Siberia. 40 000 disciplined troops made all the difference.

The rebellion had several causes, but it's clear that it was not just an imperialist plot. The Corps was worked on by Bolshevik agitators and the SRs also tried to win them to their cause. It was the local soviets that were most suspicious of the armed units passing by and there was frequent friction between them. In mid-May, after a brawl with Hungarian POWs resulted in a casualty, the local soviet had some of the Czechoslovaks arrested. When their fellow soldiers forcibly freed them, things reached fever pitch. Trotsky, in one of his least successful interventions of the whole civil war, demanded the immediate disarming of the Czechoslovaks, and threatened to shoot any who resisted. The local soviets had no troops to back up the threat, however. Instead, it triggered a wholesale uprising. Rapidly, the well-organised troops disposed of the soviets in town after town. In a few months, with the aid of Semenov's uprising plus Japanese troops, the soviets were overthrown throughout Siberia, the Urals and the Eastern part of the Volga region.

Democratic counter-revolution

The Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) were the biggest party in the Constituent Assembly elections, with 40 percents of the votes, strictly speaking, and up to 58 percent if you count the Ukrainian SRs and mixed lists. Because the lists were drawn up before the October revolution, however, they did not reflect the split with the left-SRs, who had the support of a considerable part of the peasantry and, at the time of the Assembly, were in the Soviet government. The fundamental problem for the SRs was that although the peasants had voted for the party they did not share the SR leaders' constitutional obsessions, they didn't really care too much about the Constituent Assembly, or even the central government. They basically wanted the land and to be left alone.

With the idealist outlook of members of the intelligentsia who "represented" the peasantry, the SRs had thought that the Bolsheviks would never dare to move against the Constituent Assembly. Ironically, they had spent most of 1917 steadfastly refusing to convene the Assembly and the Bolsheviks just as steadfastly demanded its immediate convocation. In neither case was this attitude based on constitutional formalities. The Bolsheviks knew that if it had met whilst the Provisional government was trying to carry on the imperialist war and refusing to distribute the land, to concede the rights of the nationalities or to take measures to control the capitalists, then in all probability the Assembly would have been a revolutionary body; one where their slogans "Bread, Peace and Land" and "All Power to the Soviets" would have received huge support. Now, after the congress of soviets had received the power and a Bolshevik-Left SR government was carrying out the above measures, the Constituent Assembly turned out to be simply a weapon against the Soviet government.

When the Bolsheviks and the left-SRs closed the Assembly down in January and hardly any protest actions took place across Russia, the SRs had to reconsider their position. They spent the next few months hatching futile plots, insisting they were the rightful government of Russia. The Czechoslovak rebellion handed them a golden opportunity. They convinced the Czechoslovaks, a majority of whom were sympathetic to their party, to help them to set up a government in Samara on the Volga – the Komuch (Committee of members of the constituent assembly). Their stated aims were to reassemble the Assembly to rule Russia, dispose of the Bolsheviks but safeguard the gains of the February revolution. The immediate interests of the workers were to be protected and land was to go to the peasants through due legal process, but the issues of socialism and nationalising the factories and banks were relegated to the future. In other words, their policies were based on a compromise between the interests of the workers, the peasants and the capitalists. The problem with this programme was that during a revolution it made no one happy. The workers resented the capitalists being allowed to re-establish themselves as owners of the factories, the capitalists distrusted the too strong position of the workers, not to mention all talk about socialism, and the peasants feared they would not get the thorough agrarian revolution they were implementing themselves under the rule of the soviets.

That was what most peasants meant when they supported soviet power: their own soviet, quite often looking very similar to their traditional village commune, was to be free to settle their own affairs. Therefore, all the electoral support of the SRs didn't translate into real power when they needed it. That was the fundamental problem that faced the Komuch. They had problems mobilising the peasants for their army, and their officers were usually unreliable reactionaries, without the kinds of checks on them the Bolsheviks created. When the Red army started to advance, the Komuch's People's Army had a hard time defending it.

The Red army starts to win

The foundations of the Red Army, formally founded in January, had actually been laid in the spring of 1918. It was re-organised in March with a Supreme Military Council at its helm, and Trotsky had outlined in some detail the principles it was to rest on. As a real fighting force, however, it was created on the Eastern front, after the Czechoslovak rebellion. From March onward, Trotsky had stressed that the revolutionary army could not merely be built on volunteers. In April, a decree instituted the general military training of the working population. That was quite basic training, however, 12 hours a week for 2 weeks. The first real call-ups came in June. Things started badly, however. The Commander of the Red Eastern front was Muraviev, a former Red commander in the Ukraine. He was a former colonel, as well as a left-SR, who in the winter had outraged even hardened revolutionaries with proclamations of terror against the rich. During the left-SR revolt in July, he declared in favour of the Bolsheviks. However, just a few days later, he raised a rebellion of his own. The damage was contained by local Bolsheviks who managed to shoot him.

The former commander of the Latvian division, Joakim Vatsetis, who just had secured Moscow for the Bolsheviks, was rushed to the Eastern front as the new commander, and was soon made commander in chief of the whole Red army. He started to whip the Red Army into shape. The reverses were not over yet, however. On 6 August, with the Reds still not acting as a disciplined force, Kazan fell.

Trotsky travelled in an armoured train to Sviiazhsk, close to Kazan on the Volga. By using revolutionary inspiration and stern discipline together, a combat worthy army was hammered into shape. A crucial battle was fought close to Trotsky's staff. A unit of Komuch's troops under the command of colonel Kappel attacked. Had they captured the Romanov bridge, holding the Kazan-Moscow railway, the rear of the Fifth Red Army would have been badly threatened and the road to Nizhnii Novgorod would have opened up. Beyond that lay Moscow. Troops from Trotsky's train took part, and the enemy was beaten back. The Red Army now went over to the offensive, winning its first crucial victories.

On September 10, the 5th Red Army, under former colonel Slaven, retook Kazan, and two days later Mikhail Tukhachevsky's First Red Army liberated Simbirsk, and then Samara one month later. For the first time, the Red Army showed itself to be an efficient fighting force.

The fall of the democratic counter-revolution

The Komuch was now hard pressed by the advancing Reds, with great difficulties in mobilising the peasants, as well as

in keeping the anti-Bolshevik camp together. The Komuch was the most left wing of the anti-Bolshevik governments east of the Volga, there were, however, up to 19 others. The most important of them was the Provisional Government of Siberia in Omsk. The PGS and the Komuch had a hard time getting along. Something had to be done, though, and on September 23rd a conference in Ufa opened to attempt to create one unified government. Out of this came a directorate of five people to govern until a Constituent Assembly could be convened. Different opinions continued to exist on this score between the partners. Unlike the SRs, the Cadets (liberals) with less than 5 percent electoral support, were none too keen on reassembling the old one. In fact, most Cadets were fine with postponing any new elections until order was re-imposed and the extremist leanings of the masses crushed. Another problem was that of location. Clearly, they could not move to Samara, as the Bolsheviks were approaching. Eventually, they settled for Omsk, which had some merits in having some sort of governmental apparatus. Unfortunately for the SRs though, it was also the Siberian capital of White Guardist intrigue.

Not all SRs were uncritical. Victor Chernov, who after the February revolution had swung to the right to join the Provisional Government, again turned left, and around him a sizeable group formed who were critical of the compromises with the bourgeoisie. Governing with the Cadets had not worked too well in 1917, why repeat that fatal mistake?

It was obvious that reaction was building momentum. The SRs, comprising 2 out of 5 of what was supposed to be Russia's governing directorate, were treated with contempt. Czechoslovak representatives approached the SR leaders, offering to clear out the reactionaries. The SR leaders, blinded by their constitutionalism, even under threat from monarchist reaction, declined. In the late hours of November 17, the inevitable occurred. The SRs were arrested, and the government was reorganised under the new Supreme Ruler of Russia (but only temporarily, of course!) Admiral Kolchak. Eventually, the SRs were set free and allowed to leave and none of them was shot, probably in an effort to look good in front of the Allied representatives who were bankrolling the counterrevolution.

White justice in Siberia would not continue to be so lenient, however. The Kolchak coup was no isolated incident. Rather, it marked the end of any democratic influence within the anti-Bolshevik camp. In Archangelsk, in northern Russia, the very mildly socialist government of Chaikovsky had been overthrown. He was briefly restored by Allied interventionist troops, but soon realised the hopelessness of staying, and was replaced by military rule under General Miller. For the next two years, the civil war was to be fought between Reds and Whites, with only faint hopes of other alternatives.

Kolchak's offensive and the Red counter-attack

On November 11 1918, the Germans, severely exhausted by the war and with a revolution looming at home, admitted defeat in the war. The German revolution was, naturally, greeted with much enthusiasm in Soviet Russia, and German withdrawal from the Ukraine and the Baltic countries opened up the prospects of new revolutionary victories. At the same time, however, the Bolsheviks realised that this meant the western Allies would be able to exert much more energy in aiding the Whites. As the German forces withdrew, Red forces were sent in to fill the vacuum and support local revolutions and again Soviet republics were formed in the Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania and Latvia. The most pressing threat was in the south and in the east, though, and the forces sent west were quite minor.

On the Eastern front as well, the initiative lay with the Red Army. In January 1919, the First and Fourth Red Armies took Orenburg and Uralsk and, further to the north, the Second Army had recently recaptured Izhevsk and Votkinsk. At the north end of the front, the Whites had taken Perm, but that didn't seem to be part of a general offensive. The Reds still seemed to be on the attack. Then, at the beginning of March, Kolchak launched what seemed to be the main White threat to date, rapidly pushing back the Soviet forces and capturing an area bigger than Britain.

The attack soon ran into problems, first with the spring floods and then, more importantly, with the Red counter-attack, which rapidly exposed the shaky foundations of Kolchak's military might. The Siberian Whites had some 112,000 men at the front, but precious little reserves. Mobilisation was difficult, with the population increasingly hostile to the Kolchak regime, which was constantly harassed by peasant rebellion. At the level of leadership, too, Kolchak's foundations were weak. Most of the determined White officers had gone to the south and, much as they hated the

Bolsheviks, the great majority of Kolchak's officers seemed to prefer a calmer position in some of the abnormally swollen staffs in the rear to service at the front. As to Kolchak himself, politically he was as little talented as Denikin. Additionally, as an example that the crisis of leadership of the ruling classes can be as severe as that of the proletariat, Kolchak, an admiral with little expertise in land combat, found himself military ruler in Omsk, thousands of kilometres from the nearest sea.

Under the overall leadership of front commander Mikhail Frunze, and spearheaded by Tukhachevsky's Fifth Red Army, Kolchak was beaten back. This was to continue, but for a brief White counter-attack, in what would turn out to be one of the longest sustained advances in military history. When forced to evacuate Omsk in November 1919, Kolchak moved his capital eastwards to Irkutsk. With the Red Army approaching the new capital, the White regime was overthrown by Mensheviks and the SRs who, however, soon had to make way for a Bolshevik-led committee. The Supreme Ruler himself, not having fled eastwards in time, soon found himself lacking enough authority to even secure a train going fast enough to escape, as the Czechoslovaks, fed up with Russia's civil war in general and the Whites in particular, gave themselves first priority on the railway. The Czechoslovaks consented to Kolchak falling into the hands of the Menshevik-SR committee in Irkutsk, which soon meant into Bolshevik hands.

He was in fact treated leniently, and the interrogations, intended to precede an open trial, have been published. When the remnants of Kolchak's army, still ahead of the Reds, neared Irkutsk to free their leader, the local Bolsheviks, understandably, disposed of him in the same manner as so many workers and peasants had been at the hands of the counter-revolution.

Denikin's advance on Moscow

The Don Cossacks were not so much interested in taking Moscow as in defending the Don. Under Krasnov, they had little problem in applying a rather generous definition of their region, and they repeatedly attacked Voronezh and Tsaritsyn. After the German capitulation, Krasnov's army lost their powerful backer. The Red Army went on the offensive against the Don army which, bereft of German aid, was severely pushed back, albeit not decisively defeated.

In the autumn of 1918, most of Denikin's troops were concentrated in the Northern Caucasus, where they constantly avoided defeat at the hands of numerically much superior Reds. One important factor was that the Red Army forces in the region, far from Moscow, had never quite implemented Trotsky's army reforms. In this connection, the disorganising influence of the Tsaritsyn Opposition should probably be mentioned. In August, the Whites retook Ekaterinodar, which the local revolutionary forces had won in March and, after a 28-day battle, Stavropol finally fell to the Whites in November. The last counteroffensive of the Reds came in January 1919, but this was beaten back. The Eleventh and Twelfth Red Armies, numerically the strongest of the revolution's troops, but weakened by indiscipline and typhus, melted away and fled.

Denikin, now with a secure rear, was able to move north with what suddenly turned out to be the most dangerous of the counter-revolutionary threats. As Krasnov's Don army suffered defeat, precisely at this time, Denikin's position emerged stronger than ever. The former general had until then stubbornly protected his independence but now had little option but to subordinate himself to Denikin. Or rather his successor did, as Krasnov himself had to resign after the defeats. This allowed the counter-revolution in the south to be reorganised as the Armed Forces of Southern Russia under a single command.

In March and April 1919, the Reds attacked again, attempting to win back the industrialised Donets basin. In this they failed, due to the spring floods, a strong White defence and, as Kenez points out, the Ukrainian partisans who made up the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Red Armies proved unequal to the White troops. The front did not move much until, at the end of May, Denikin launched an offensive. Several factors made this possible. Kolchak's offensive had diverted Red troops to the east, Bolshevik lines in the Ukraine were disrupted by the defection of their treacherous temporary ally, the self-proclaimed Ataman Nikifor Grigorev, and the commander of the Ninth Red Army, N D Vsevolodov went over to the Whites, after sabotaging orders. Not least, some of the Cossack areas in Northern Don that had previously gone over to the Reds now went the other way.

Again, incorrect policies toward potential allies amongst poorer Cossacks proved disastrous. Denikin could now start a rapid advance. On 1 July, Tsaritsyn fell to him, and rapidly the entire Don was cleared of Red Army forces. No less spectacular were the White victories in the west where, as Kenez points out, the Red Army became infected by the anarchy prevailing in the Ukraine. Makhno's troops, protecting the Red's right flank, were easily put to flight, forcing the Thirteenth Red Army to retreat. In the last days of June, Kharkov, Ekaterinodar and the Crimea were lost to the Whites. Celebrating his Tsaritsyn victory, on 3 July Denikin issued a new directive. By a three-pronged advance, with the main thrust in the centre via Kursk, Orel and Tula, they were to advance on Moscow.

Threatening as it was, Denikin's attack, like Kolchak's offensive in March, was in part an act of desperation. Bolshevik concentration in the still huge central part of Russia around Moscow improved their lines of communication. The manpower and industrial resources available to them were greater than the Whites in the rural borderlands could control. In the lands he occupied, Denikin faced a hostile working class and a rebellious peasantry, resistant to conscription. He thus needed quick victories, to strike while the iron was hot, and the Bolsheviks seemingly vulnerable.

There were several problems with Denikin's march on Moscow. One was with the Cossacks; most of whom were not interested in central Russia. Their combat effectiveness decreased the further they went beyond their native lands. Denikin made this problem worse by constant conflicts with Cossack aspirations, which included more autonomy than the Great Russian centralisers wanted to give. In the Kuban, things went as far as Russian White officers dissolving the Cossack Rada (parliament).

Another major problem was with the peasants. In the Don and the Kuban, the non-Cossacks were oppressed and supported the Reds. For peasants everywhere, the White Armies, with their former landlord officer caste, brought with them the threat of agrarian counter-revolution. No White Army was so stupid as to proclaim as their stated goal the restoration of the landlords, but neither would they give guarantees to the peasantry and, wherever the Whites advanced, the landed nobility tried to reclaim the land. As most White officers were sympathetic to their claims, they were often successful.

The White troops made the problem more severe by their rampant corruption and outright plundering. In the autumn of 1919, the rear of the Volunteers became immersed in peasant rebellions. Nowhere was this stronger than in the Ukraine, where the Whites at times lost control of entire provinces. Anarchist writers sometimes claim that Nestor Makhno played as important a role in defeating counter-revolution as did the Red Army. This is a gross exaggeration. Peasant rebellion in their rear forced the Whites to divert troops from the front and ruptured their lines of supplies. This, however, was only one factor, albeit important, in defeating the Whites. While Makhno was undoubtedly the most important peasant guerrilla leader in the Ukraine, there were several others. In fact, Bolshevik requisitioning of grain for the cities and the fear of the Whites' landlord nature created a series of peasant uprisings in 1919, forming Green armies, which fought or allied with the Reds at different times. Makhno, likewise, twice allied himself with the Bolsheviks and at other times fought them pretty ruthlessly.

Much as the peasants hated the requisitions of the soviets, most of them hated the landlords more, and this was surely one of the most important reasons for the ultimate Red victory.[\[11\]](#)

A crisis for Trotsky's leadership

In the middle of 1919, Denikin's offensive seemed to be going all too well for the Red Army. As a result, in the summer an important debate raged in the Bolshevik party around strategy. In the East, Commander-in-Chief Vatsetis wanted to halt the advance there against Kolchak, to divert troops to the more needy south. He also feared the Siberian Whites might have reserves beyond the Urals. Although Trotsky supported him, the commander of the Eastern front, Sergei Kamenev, and most of the leading front commissars, wanted to continue the chase. Even while diverting troops to the south, they asserted, they would be able to finish off Kolchak.

On the Southern front, Kamenev wanted the main Red counter-attack to strike from Tsaritsyn towards Rostov, through the Kuban. This plan made good sense from a strictly military standpoint, but other factors spoke against it. Trotsky, realising the importance of politics in determining military strategy, stressed the need to counter-attack not through

Cossack territory, where the Cossacks would fiercely resist, but through the more industrialised Donets basin, where the Bolsheviks had strong support amongst the workers. He supported Vatsetis' plan to that effect.

On July 3-4 the dispute erupted at a Central Committee meeting. The majority went against Trotsky and Vatsetis' plan and for Kamenev's. A barrage of attacks, often of a personal nature, hit Trotsky. Stalin tried to get Lenin to dismiss Trotsky from the post of War Commissar and on July 5, Trotsky offered his resignation. However, on Lenin's motion the Politburo rejected it unanimously. However, Vatsetis was replaced as Commander-in-Chief by S Kamenev and the first counter attack of the Red Army in August, using Kamenev's plan, was repulsed. The Whites continued their advance, soon clearing the entire Ukraine. In the North, too, the counterrevolution was on the march.

Yudenich

German volunteers had been organised in late 1918 with the consent of the victorious allies, to defeat the revolution in the Baltic areas. The German nobility there, used to seeing themselves as masters of the land, formed an uneasy alliance with the Baltic nationalists. This helped to defeat the Reds but was bound to lead to conflicts. In October 1918, a small White Russian force was organised at Pskov under German protection. After the German collapse, the force withdrew into Estonia after the White victory. In May 1919, with Estonian aid, the North-western army, as they were now known, crossed back into Soviet Russia, pushing the Seventh Red Army back. The situation seemed very serious and Stalin was sent there to save Petrograd. The advance was stopped, but the North-western army did secure a base on Russian territory. In Stalinist history writing, Stalin is painted as the saviour of Petrograd. One thing is overlooked though: the most serious attack against Petrograd came after his success. This time, Trotsky was sent. The offensive of General Nikolai Yudenich, who now had assumed direct command of the army, started in October. Given the closeness to Petrograd, a minor panic gripped the Bolsheviks. Lenin himself even discussed evacuating the proletarian capital.

Trotsky was adamantly opposed. Giving up Petrograd would be too serious a blow to the revolution to be contemplated. He was sent there, involving himself in the fighting to the point of himself on horseback convincing a retreating Red unit to return to the front-line. In his most detailed military planning of the civil war, he drew up arrangements for street fighting inside the city, should the enemy get that far, in which every building would be for them either a riddle, or a threat, or a mortal danger. Two or three days of street-fighting like this, Trotsky predicted, 'would suffice for the invading bands to be transformed into a terrified, hunted band of cowards who would surrender in groups or as individuals to unarmed passers-by'.[\[12\]](#)

Fortunately this plan was never tested. With reinforcements rushed in, on October 21-22 Red troops were able to repulse Yudenich, who only possessed some 15,000 men under arms. Given the threat to self-determination of any former part of the Tsarist Empire state posed by a White victory, the Estonians were none too keen to sacrifice themselves, and were ready to listen to Bolshevik peace proposals. Yudenich's army was chased back into Estonia, where they were disarmed and interned. The Bolsheviks, in dire need of peace and with no open revolutionary struggle there to assist, started negotiations that resulted in peace treaties with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland.

The turning point

In mid October 1919, the situation had looked gloomy for the revolution. Yudenich was advancing, and on 16 October captured Gatchina, only 50 kilometres from Petrograd. On 14 October, Denikin took Orel. Beyond Orel lay Tula, site of the main arms factories of Soviet Russia, and after that, Moscow. However, that was as far as Denikin's troops got. On 20 October, the Reds struck back, with Ukrainian cavalry under Primakov and the Latvian division retaking Orel. Four days later, Semyon Budyonny's Red cavalry, disobeying orders to go south-west, instead headed towards Voronezh, where he put Mamontov's and Shkuru's White horsemen to flight. From there, the Red Army advanced steadily. After the 30 day battle of Kamenskoe and the re-capture of Kursk, it turned into a rout for the Whites.

As in many other prolonged retreats, the army getting pounded desperately gathered strength for a brief counter-attack, and Rostov, recently won by the Reds, was retaken. That did not last for long. The armies that so recently had seemed to threaten Moscow were now dissolving rapidly and were pushed back to the Kuban. From Novorosiisk, the still organised parts of the badly mauled army were able to evacuate to the Crimea. In one of their biggest military errors of the civil war, the Reds didn't pursue it and finish it off. To be sure, they too were exhausted, but they missed an

opportunity to finish the White hordes off. In March, the remnants of the Volunteer army were not ready to fight. In a few months, they would be.

The war with Poland

After the World War, Poland, which had been divided and subjected by Russia, Prussia and Austria since the late eighteenth century, re-emerged as a state. In the eastern European borderlands, between the former German, Austrian and Russian Empires, ethno-linguistic boundaries were often not easy to establish. Towns usually had several nationalities, and few had an absolute majority, with the surrounding countryside having yet another. The small towns, shtetls, of eastern Poland had large Yiddish-speaking populations. A linguistic map looked like a patchwork quilt. Where should the new national borders be drawn? Nationalists appealed to 'natural frontiers' or historic states. Polish nationalists did not wish to restrict themselves to majority Polish areas. Their aim was rather to re-establish Poland as a Great Power, with the borders it had before 1772. This would have meant huge numbers of White Russians, Great Russians and Ukrainians in Poland.

Inevitably, the attempt to push Poland's borders east collided with the westward march of the revolution. In February 1919, the first armed clashes came. As the Red Army had to defend Soviet Russia on the eastern and southern fronts, the advantage lay with Polish expansionism. In April, Polish troops captured Wilno and, in August, Minsk, disposing of the quite shaky Soviet regimes. With no love for the Great Russian chauvinists, Polish military leader Josef Pilsudski was reluctant to help the Russian Whites to win. In April 1920, however, with that threat receding, and with an army partly supplied by the French, Poland attacked. The aim was not so much Moscow, as pushing back Soviet Russia and securing Poland as the leading power of the region. The Red troops were rapidly pushed back. Not for long, however, as the Red Army turned the tables. Now the Poles were retreating, and the Bolsheviks had to decide how far to pursue them.

Poland had no clearly defined borders. The crucial decision was whether to continue into Poland proper, that is, territory where the Poles were in a big majority. Poland had been a stronghold of the revolution in 1905, so was it not possible that, if the Red Army smashed Pilsudski's forces, the Polish workers might welcome them as liberators? The Soviet leaders decided to march on Warsaw. This was a major gamble. However revolutionary the traditions of Polish workers, no revolution was taking place in Poland at the time. So, to really find out if they could 'go in there, arm the Polish workers and depart from there at once?', as Lenin had put it, they had to make it to Poland's industrialised cities. Trotsky, not normally sceptical about the international spread of the revolution, opposed continuing the offensive into Poland proper.

Tukhachevsky was in overall command of the advance on Warsaw. As part of his plan he had ordered Budyonny's First Cavalry Army to march north towards Warsaw and Lublin but the latter disobeyed this order, due in part to military rivalries but also due to the prompting of Stalin, who was chief political commissar of the Southwestern Front. Stalin, was determined to win glory for himself by taking Lwów far to the south of Warsaw. This fiasco opened the way for a devastating counterattack by the Poles. The Red army defeated before Warsaw had its lines broken and thrown into headlong retreat. The Soviets were forced to sign a very unjust treaty ceding a huge swathe of territory in which Poles were only a third of the total population.

To be sure, many Poles perceived the Red Army as new Russian conquerors. Whether, if the Red Army had defeated the Polish Army before Warsaw, the workers would have risen is unknowable but Trotsky's strategy was militarily far less risky. In addition, had the Red Army halted at the river Bug, rather than pressing on to the Vistula, the defeat it had already inflicted on Pilsudski and the evident proof that the Red Army was not simply another Russian conqueror, might have indeed stimulated revolution in Poland. In the event of a rising by the Polish workers, a Red Army intervention would then have been amply justified.

Baron Wrangel

After his defeats, Denikin could no longer lead the army. To the fore came Petr Wrangel, formerly one of Denikin's leading Generals, who had been dismissed for questioning the authority of the leader. Wrangel was a more conservative and aristocratic candidate than Denikin, but he realised something had to be done about the corruption and the arbitrary

terror. He quickly gave new life to his army, and in a few months, he was ready to strike.

On 6 June, Wrangel's troops attacked from the Crimea, rapidly gaining ground. As Soviet Russia was at war with Poland, his White troops were able to cause considerable damage. His forces were limited though, and he did not manage to expand them sufficiently to be a real threat to Moscow. An expedition was sent to the Kuban, but did not succeed in again raising the war weary Cossacks. Once the war with Poland stopped in October, defeat was inevitable for Wrangel's armies. He withdrew again to the Crimea, and expected to hold out behind the strong defences at Perekop. Those were smashed in early November by Blücher's Fifty-First Red division. In the biggest evacuation by sea the world had seen, the leading Whites and 145,000 others fled, ending the last major White army with the exception of the Japanese intervention force in the Far East.

The civil war was still not quite over. In the year after the obvious counter-revolutionary threat vanished, the peasants of several regions rose in blind fury. In Turkestan, a variety of Muslim guerrillas, the Basmachis, carried on for some years still, with their peak in the autumn of 1922 under the leadership of Turkish ex-leader Enver Pasha. In the Far East, Japanese troops remained until forced out by the increasing cost of occupation and pressure from their imperialist rivals. This spelled doom for the remaining White forces, and on 25 October 1922, Vladivostok was again Red.

The Red Terror and the White

Anti-Communists often claim that the Red Terror was much more severe than the White, which was, it is further claimed, 'never systematic'. Before the October revolution, Marxists had, pretty much to a man, imagined that the violence of the working masses, applied against the few oppressors, would be much less severe than the violence required for the old ruling classes to hold the great majority of the population down. Experience, especially in as poor and violent a society as the Russian, does not entirely bear this out. Terror, rightly applied, can be important in subduing the enemy. Incorrectly applied, however, it can incite layers that could be neutralised into outright rebellion, as well as demoralise the revolutionary masses themselves by unnecessary bloodshed. Much of the Red Terror, therefore, came from below, and was not a result of Communist doctrine.[\[13\]](#)

This is illustrated by the undisciplined Red troops sent from central Russia to the Ukraine. As they approached, they were able to draw considerable support from the Ukrainian peasants, not to mention the workers, who were for the most part Russian. Quickly, they started to undermine that support by their undisciplined behaviour, not considering themselves subject to the soviets, and outright plunder and random repression.

Of course, the Bolshevik leaders then organised the terror from above. It is easy to understand why organised violence was necessary to protect the revolution. That is not to say, of course, that they were always right in how they used it. You can always discuss, as indeed the Bolsheviks did then, what level of force was most expedient, and it is clear the civil war contained many unpleasant instances, where undisciplined Red soldiers or overzealous officials of the Cheka (the Extraordinary Commission for combating counterrevolution) let revenge run away with them. But then, it is hard to see how it could be much otherwise in the Russia of the Tsars.

The anti-communist claim that the White Terror was never systematic was true in one sense: there was never one White regime, but several, and the levels of repression varied. The pro-White claims first of all demand that you overlook the bizarre reign of the Cossack Atamans in the Far East, operating under Japanese protection. No matter how hard they tried, liberals would struggle to find anything more severe than the terror of Semenov, Kalmykov and Ungern-Sternberg.[\[14\]](#)

In the rest of Russia, too, once the SR opposition had lost all influence, summary execution of all Bolsheviks found was the rule on the White side. That often meant that establishing who was a Bolshevik was done arbitrarily. According to General Graves, commander of the US troops in Siberia, to the White regime, the term Bolshevik 'applied to everyone who did not support Kolchak and the autocratic class surrounding him?'. [\[15\]](#)

As Smele points out in his analysis of the civil war in Siberia, entire Red regiments were not uncommonly executed en masse as Bolsheviks. While Red justice was severe, at least it 'seemed to follow some system and make sense; and at

least on the Red side, soldiers, officers and commissars alike were subject to it?[\[16\]](#). Roland Morris, US ambassador to Japan, seems to have concurred, reporting that all over White Siberia there was "an orgy of arrests without charges; of execution without even the pretence of trial; and confiscation without colour of authority."[\[17\]](#) It seems, then, "not systematic", when used to describe White violence, should be understood as "totally arbitrary".

Things were much the same in the counter-revolution of the south. Denikin and Kolchak, although they for sure saw the need for executing Communists were not, in fact, the most rabid reactionaries in their respective camps. Both were quite weak leaders, however, with little control over their subordinates, so any qualms of the military dictators was of little help to the victims of the White Terror.

Kenez describes some of Denikin's top Generals: Slashchev was a drug addict who encouraged looting, Pokrovsky a sadist, and Shkuro only little better than a bandit. "Mai-Maevsky was a corrupt drunkard" and in "territories under his control, terror and lawlessness reigned."[\[18\]](#) Kutepov, when governor of the Black Sea province in 1918, introduced a reign of bloody terror and corruption, and when he became military governor of Sevastopol, the town council told Wrangel that parents would not send their children to school, as they were terrified by seeing so many people hanged on the streets.[\[19\]](#)

As Anna Procyk explains, the first weeks of Denikin's rule in the Ukraine was marked by a "chilling wave of White terror", primarily directed against the Ukrainian intelligentsia, as their Great Russian chauvinism got full play. In Odessa alone, 3 000 men were summarily shot.[\[20\]](#)

Anti-Jewish pogroms

Perhaps the most vicious aspect of the entire civil war was the anti-Semitic violence. This is also where anti-Communist hypocrisy is most disgusting. Liberals love to tell us: anti-Semitism existed on both sides; Denikin opposed pogroms, besides these existed amongst the Reds as well. On some formal level, each claim may be true. Some of the Bolsheviks' (often temporary) Cossack allies did commit pogroms. However, it falls apart at any serious analysis. The revolutionary socialist movement had always fought anti-Semitism, whereas the nobility and the officers were imbued with it. When the Black Hundred gangs attacked Jews and socialists in 1905, Tsar Nicholas commended it as the spontaneous revenge of the Russian people against the extremists. The Tsarina's correspondence is full of obscene anti-Semitism. Both, by the way, are now saints of the Orthodox Church.

Denikin may have been opposed to pogroms as an inexpedient way of dealing with the problem, but he did admit he didn't like Jews, nor did any other leading White officer. And he did not stop his closest generals from openly supporting pogroms. Peter Kenez has described just how systematic the pogroms of Denikin's armies were, and often organised from above. White propaganda was full of anti-Semitism, and Kenez did not manage to find even one instance of denunciation of anti-Jewish violence in it.

On the Red side, in contrast, propagandists for pogroms were summarily shot. On the White side, the murdered Jews can be counted in tens of thousands, perhaps even up to 200 000. On the Red side, they numbered some hundreds.

One of the worst examples of an anti-Communist historian distorting the facts to prove that the Bolsheviks were as bad as the Whites is provided by Richard Pipes, in his collection of unpublished Lenin documents. Lenin had written on a report that units of the Fourth and Sixth divisions of Budyonny's First cavalry army, in the retreat in the war against Poland in 1920, had committed murders against Jews: "into the archives."[\[21\]](#) Pipes thinks this proves that Lenin did not care and refused to intervene. Unfortunately for Pipes, other documents reveal what actually happened. In fact, 387 persons, most of them from the Sixth division were arrested, including the divisional commander and two brigade commanders, equivalent to generals in the Red Army. After investigation and trial, 141 members of the division were shot.[\[22\]](#) The history writing of Pipes on the Whites falls apart completely on this score. The Reds fought anti-Semitism furiously, the Whites encouraged it: there is a difference.

After the Reds had been driven out of Ukraine by the Ukrainian nationalists under Semyon Petliura, a wave of horrific pogroms took place. To this must be added, the quite systematic organisation of pogroms, such as that in Proskurovin

where some 1,600 Jews were murdered on February 15 1919 and in Felshtin, a few days later in which 600 perished. At the very least there were tens of thousands dead.

Again and again, Pipes tries to clean up the Whites' record and besmirch that of the Bolsheviks.

In a review of his virulent Russia under the Bolshevik Regime in 1994, Robert Conquest, no friend of communism, evidently commented that 'over nine tenths of anti-Semitic pogroms and other excesses were committed by forces associated with the Whites.' Pipes rushed to set the record straight. Admitting that the pogroms claimed between 50,000 and 100,000 lives, he claims Conquest's accusation against the Whites 'is not supported by the evidence.' He then attributes the deaths himself as follows: 40 percent to the Ukrainian nationalists of Semyon Petliura; 25 percent to independent Ukrainian warlords; 17 percent to the White Armies and 8.5 percent by the Red Army. Thus, even if his figures are true, 92 percent were down to anti-Bolshevik forces. In fact, the pogroms only stopped when the Bolsheviks won.

Foreign intervention

Perhaps the most talked about aspect of the civil war is the foreign, imperialist intervention. To be sure, all capitalist governments were against the Bolsheviks, but that did not enable them to make a unified response. The Soviet leaders did fear that the Allies and the Central powers would close ranks to crush the workers' state, and imperialist intervention enabled them in turn to raise support in Germany, France and Britain against the intervention. However, the unified crusade of 14 countries that Winston Churchill bragged about never really materialised. Thus, the Red Army did not have to defeat all the Great Powers' armies. Rather, as Lenin repeatedly stressed after the civil war, they survived because the imperialists could not unite.

As long as the world war continued, all belligerent powers had that as their main priority. Foreign intervention was mainly justified by the war: the Allies, according to themselves, intervened to stop the Germans from seizing military supplies and resources, to support the patriotic Russians who would make good their promises to the Allies to fight the common German enemy, and to protect the Czech legion. After the armistice of 11 November 1918, the official reasons for allied military presence in Russia lost all credibility. Of course, they had other reasons. The French bourgeoisie had suffered hard from the Bolshevik cancellation of the Tsars' foreign debt. Hurt in its wallet, it was the most venomously anti-Bolshevik of the Allies. But they had also suffered more from the war than anyone else on the winning side and could thus ill afford any big military ventures. Besides, most of the French soldiers wanted to go home, not be sent to a completely different war. A mutiny in the French fleet in the Ukraine ports in 1919 highlights that point.

Great Britain had also suffered, albeit not as much as the French. Premier Lloyd George refused to make Russia the main priority. As he pithily explained to parliament, he would rather see Russia go Bolshevik than Britain go bankrupt. Britain did give the Whites some significant support in weapons, and the fleet played an important role in the Baltic. It was, however, much less than that imperialist fire-eater Churchill had demanded.

The US could better afford the costs of intervention than their allies. President Wilson, however, was aware of the negative effects of being seen as interventionists from without, if they could not mobilise support inside Russia, and he was anxious to keep the electoral support of the US liberals. Not that this stopped him persecuting the revolutionary antiwar militants at home. Also, a large part of the US bourgeoisie was isolationist at this point. The US troops in the North were limited, and the Siberian force never saw the frontline. Wilson did, however, find ways of aiding the Russian Whites, taking some steps in laying the foundations for the covert operations of coming decades.^[23]

The biggest number of foreign troops, after the Central powers had left the Ukraine, was by far the Japanese, with some 70 000 troops in the Russian Far East. They were also the troops who most acted like a conquering army, by far surpassing even the Germans in the Ukraine. Whereas the French and British commanders often were quite condescending towards Russians, and at least the US force in Siberia under General Graves tried to behave properly towards the common man, the Japanese troops had little qualms about plundering, burning villages and carrying out executions on the spot. This was connected to the interests of the Japanese ruling class. While Wilson wanted to

preserve Russia, under a lawful and orderly government, of course, Japan cared little about Moscow and wanted to extend their dominion into Asia, at least to Lake Baikal. This put them into conflict with the US. Wilson realised that Japanese control of the Russian Far East would be little better for US business than the Bolsheviks. In the end, US pressure was an important factor in convincing the Japanese to withdraw their last troops from Russia in the autumn of 1922.

Even if world imperialism did not put aside all its differences to throw all its might against the Bolsheviks, its contribution to Russian counter-revolution can in no way be overlooked. Chinese troops overthrew Soviet power in Harbin in the Far East, and Siberia was only won by the anti-Bolsheviks with the aid of the Czechoslovaks and the Japanese. In the west, Germany swept away the Soviets in the Baltic region, helped crush the Finnish revolution and, with Austria, occupied the Ukraine, cutting off vital food supplies and natural resources. In the process, they covered the west flank of the Don anti-Bolshevik forces, and by supplying weapons aided the Cossacks in building up an army. Some of those arms found their way to Denikin who, however, did not cease to believe the Bolsheviks were German agents.

After the defeat of the Central Powers in the war, German volunteer units, together with White Finns, Polish troops and the British fleet, aided the Whites of the Baltic countries to defeat the Reds. The intervention in the north never grew into a major theatre, but did tie up Red troops. Not least, of course, was the massive shipment of war materiel to the main White armies, those of Denikin and Kolchack, which each received some 250 000 rifles, ammunition, machineguns, cannons and some tanks and airplanes, and even British drivers. Thanks to this aid, in 1919, the main White armies were better supplied than the Red Army.

Why the Bolsheviks won

There were several reasons for the Red victory, which even the serious non-Marxist historian can often see, albeit not, perhaps, liberals in the mainstream media.

Reformists and liberals whine that democracy did not prevail, by which they mean parliamentary, bourgeois democracy. With their metaphysical understanding, they see democracy, in that sense, as something which can everywhere be brought about, just allow several parties, hold general elections and don't forget to protect private property, and you're ready to go. The problem with that, in Russia, was the lack of social forces to adopt such a perspective. The working class was much more interested in protecting their social and economic interests, and the democratic soviets that defended them, than in abstract liberal notions, and the peasantry wanted land and, preferably, to be left alone. The capitalists and the nobility wanted above all to protect, or regain, their possessions, and the old bureaucrats were not that big on democracy either. Crucially, the urban petit-bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia were under-developed and not nearly numerous enough.

To be sure, one main factor was the Bolshevik party. In 1917, it had been less centralised and disciplined than it later would become, disproving the notion that the party was always the same and rigidly controlled by Lenin, although enough so to win. They were forced to tighten up discipline considerably during the civil war however, and were by far the most unifying and disciplined force across Russia. In the Red Army, especially, the Communist cells leading their units and inspiring the men played a crucial role. It is, however, inconceivable that they would have been able to play this role without mass allegiance from below.

One does not need to idealise and exaggerate the level of well thought out Communist consciousness amongst the uneducated, poor and suffering workers, let alone the peasants, during the unending horrors of the civil war. It is clear, nevertheless, that few workers failed to support the Red side. The Mensheviks, critical as they were, also supported the Red army against the Whites. The Bolsheviks could give the workers hope of liberation through all their sufferings, the Whites simply could not. It may be added they were not even good at trying. Moreover, the Whites were correctly seen as protecting the privileged, a sure way of undermining mass support in the Russia of the times.

On top of that, the White leaders were worthless at politics. This is not least obvious in respect to the non-Russian nationalities. Anti-communist historians often use as a main argument that whilst the Bolsheviks controlled central

Russia, the Whites were largely operating in the borderlands, with several different nationalities with differing agendas. While there is a point to this, the Whites made this problem much worse. Lenin had long advocated the right of nations to self-determination. To be sure, this was not a metaphysical concept, meaning the working classes of every nation should fight their battles separately.

The Bolsheviks did repeatedly intervene to aid the revolutionary forces in non-Russian areas. When they were unable help bring about revolutionary victories, however, they were prepared to acknowledge the separation from Russia and enter into peaceful relations with their bourgeois governments. This the Whites just could not do. To their main leaders, there was no higher principle than Russia one and indivisible. Therefore, only temporary concessions were possible. This led to constant frictions with the non-Russians. A case in point is the Finnish leader and butcher of the Finnish workers, General Mannerheim. He offered to send 100,000 men against Petrograd if Kolchak would give him guarantees of Finnish independence and some territorial concessions in the north. This would surely have meant the fall of the second capital and a mighty blow against the Bolsheviks. Kolchak refused.

The results of a White victory

It is of course hard to say what would have happened if the Whites had won. There was no obvious strong leader, and even less a political programme. What is obvious is that a return to the situation in 1917 would not be possible, nor could that situation have continued indefinitely. In order for a capitalist economy to work, it needs order, stability and the possibility of enough profits. In order to guarantee this, however, it would have been necessary to do away with all workers' interference in the economy, the soviets, the excessive social legislation and all remnants of dual power. The workers had to be made obey again and, since they were quite reluctant to obey the capitalists, harsh measures would have been required.

The only alternative was to expropriate the capitalists, but that was the Bolshevik way.

Perhaps events in Finland furnish the best indicator of what a White victory would have meant. The Finnish bourgeoisie had not previously showed any particular viciousness, yet the civil war ended with the wholesale slaughter of thousands of workers. A sort of bourgeois democracy was built on the corpses of the Red Guardists, in which the Communists were banned and the workers subdued. There is no reason to think that the Russian ruling classes, who had always shown their willingness to repress the impoverished masses, would have been any more lenient. Rather, we would most likely have seen those reactionaries who killed with impunity in Siberia under Kolchak, in the Ukraine under Denikin and all over the White lands, indulge in a similar indiscriminate slaughter, as the capitalists subdued the workers, the nobility tried to regain their land, and the wrathful vengeance of ruling class Russia struck out at everything socialist and Jewish.

ENDNOTES

1 Interestingly, Engels in 1851 questioned this view more thoroughly than any Marxist, it seems, before Trotsky in 1918, see Martin Berger, *Engels, Armies, and Revolution* (Archon books, 1977), p 83-86

2 Lenin, V. I. ?Reply to P.Kievsky (Pyatakov)?, *Collected Works* volume 23, p 26

3 For general studies of this, apart from works mentioned below see Mawdsley, E. *The Russian civil war*, and Chamberlin, W. *The Russian revolution* (two volumes). Trotsky's longest accounts are in his *Stalin and My Life*

4 Two good books covering various aspects of this are Benvenuti, F. *The Bolsheviks and the Red army, 1918-1922*, and von Hagen, M. *Soldiers in the proletarian dictatorship*

5 Wheeler-Bennett, J. 1971 *Brest-Litovsk. The forgotten peace* Norton: London p.245

6 Trotsky, L. *How the revolution armed*, in 5 volumes for a wealth of his decrees, speeches and articles from the period. On this question volume 1 especially useful.

- 7 On this, see Markin, N. (Leon Sedov), "Stalin and the Red army" in Trotsky, L. The Stalinist school of falsification
- 8 On Denikin, the Cossacks and further narrative about the Whites in the south, see Peter Kenez's two excellent volumes Red attack, White resistance and Red advance, White defeat
- 9 Lenin, V. I. "Speech in the Moscow Soviet", Collected Works volume 27, p 230
- 10 This argument is forcefully developed in Sergei Starikov and Roy Medvedev, Philip Mironov and the Russian civil war
- 11 A point forcefully made throughout Orlando Figes' Peasant Russia civil war
- 12 Trotsky, L. 1979 How the revolution armed New Park: London pp.540-41
- 13 One of the few historians to give a reasonable account of this is Orlando Figes in A people's tragedy. See the section on "Looting the looters"
- 14 Bisher, J. White Terror. Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberian. The author repeatedly shows his anti-Communism, but that does serve to underline his contempt for the Trans-Siberian Whites
- 15 Lincoln, 1999 Red victory Da Capo: Cambridge, MA, p 259
- 16 Smele, 2006 Civil war in Siberia CUP: Cambridge pp.321-22
- 17 Lincoln. Red victory, op cit p.258
- 18 Kenez, 2004 Red advance, White defeat New Academia: Washington p.26 and p.34
- 19 Ibid., p 64 and 275
- 20 Procyk, A. 2005 Russian nationalism and Ukraine CIUSP: Toronto p 125
- 21 Pipes R. (ed), 1996 The unknown Lenin Yale University Press: New Haven, CT p.117
- 22 Murphy, A. B. 2000 The Russian civil war. Primary sources, MacMillan Press: London p.228, 231 and 238
- 23 Foglesong, D. 1995 America's secret war against Bolshevism UNC Press: Chapel Hill, NC

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