

Russian Civil War

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Summary

The Russian civil war was not simply a conflict between Red communists and White monarchists; rather, it involved a complex intertwining of military, social and political issues that were created or exacerbated by the Great War. It ended with the very costly victory of the Bolsheviks over the monarchists, general staff of the former Tsarist army, other revolutionary parties, foreign powers, some independence movements (notably Ukrainian) and the peasantry. The Russian civil war was as much a continuation of the First World War as it was a means to settle an irreparable ideological rift. It was pocked with the contradictions that accompanied the break-up of imperial Russia and the constitution of a strong state, the unleashing of violence and the shaping of society through political and cultural mobilization.

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Introduction

Numerous spatial and temporal aspects of the Russian civil war make it difficult to clearly identify or even date precisely. Between the winter of 1917-1918 and the spring of 1921,

forces that had been contained for too long were unleashed and fuelled political, ethnic and geographical (between cities and the countryside) discord – all of which were exacerbated by the First World War. Before taking an in-depth look at the continuity between the two conflicts, we need to first establish the boundaries of this multifaceted historical phenomenon and present the different forms of antagonism that deeply underpinned *Ancien Régime* Russian society.

The term Russian civil war generally refers to the confrontation between the proponents of restoring the deposed *Ancien Régime* (“Whites”) and those who defended the new socialist regime that emerged from the [October Revolution](#) (“Reds”). The conflict is said to have been sparked on 25 October 1917 (of the Julian calendar used at the time in Russia; equivalent to 7 November in the Gregorian calendar) – less so in Petrograd, where the Bolshevik coup d’état was quickly concluded, than in Moscow where violent and irresolute street fighting lasted several days. Moscow was the Romanov’s capital until the founding of Saint Petersburg in 1703 and it retained unique status until the Bolsheviks made it their capital on 5 March 1918. If our criteria involve a struggle between two armed and hierarchized factions, loyal to two existing civil powers, we can date the end of the civil war to the defeat of General [Pyotr Wrangel \(1878-1928\)](#), the last commander-in-chief of the White Army, on 10 November 1920 in Crimea. A purely military definition of the conflict is problematic, however, since the [Red Army](#) did not stop fighting until July 1921, when General [Mikhail Tukhachevsky \(1893-1937\)](#) annihilated [Aleksei Antonov’s \(1896-1962\)](#) “bandits” in Tambov – the last of the “Green” peasant armies in revolt in the rich agricultural regions of [Russia](#) and [Ukraine](#).

These internal conflicts would likely never have ignited had it not been for the military catastrophe that the First World War represented for Russia. The signing of the peace treaty between [Vladimir Lenin’s \(1870-1924\)](#) Russia and [Wilhelm II, German Emperor’s \(1859-1941\)](#) Germany in [Brest-Litovsk](#) on 3 March 1918 may also be seen as the starting point of the civil war. Indeed, the separate peace by the Bolsheviks turned Russia into an international outcast but also legitimated the partition of the [empire](#). Long brandished as a slogan, immediate peace did not actually correspond to Lenin’s plans, however, since, on 1 November 1914, he had called “for the imperialistic war to be turned into a civil war”. Having finally rescued the nation from the warmongering of monarchists and generals, the Bolsheviks were now ready to turn the proletarian forces against Russia’s elites. In reality, the peace conceded for want of a better solution indeed created a disparate armed opposition to the Bolsheviks who were busy selling off the empire.

The conflict between Russians was further complicated by the Great War’s pursuit on Russian soil and the conflicting interests of the various factions within the empire’s non-Russian population. Infringing on the terms of the treaty, the Germans pursued their [war aims](#). They

remained in Ukraine and protected its de facto separation from Russia – the effect of which was to embolden numerous concurrent Ukrainian independence movements on the one hand, and worry the Entente and rouse its poorly concealed ambitions on the other. Powerless until the war's outcome definitively tipped in their favour after the summer of 1918, [France](#) and [Great Britain](#) then allowed their forces to intervene militarily on the soil of their former ally. With cautious support for the White factions, the two colonial powers made their goal clear: to secure ample zones of influence. The un-victorious retreat of the French Far-East Expeditionary Force in April 1919, compensated on 13 August 1920 by the French army's assistance to the unhopd-for Polish victory at the Vistula, put an end to this final chapter of the First World War.

It is commonly stated that American President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\) Fourteen Points](#), laid out in a speech on 8 January 1918, instilled hope in numerous "nations" in Central and Eastern Europe. Centripetal forces had nonetheless long been agitating the mosaic of peoples shaped by the Tsars and had not spared at-war Russia. Indeed, Russians risked losing much more than the western and northern extremities, with the secession of the Caucasus and Siberia. In the name of revolution – which they saw as international – the Bolsheviks reconquered one part of Ukraine; they chased out the White troops, crushed the nationalists, followed by the anarchists, and then terrorized the [Cossacks](#). They also managed to quash [Georgian](#) and [Azerbaijani](#) independence, forcing them back into the colonial fold in February 1921. And yet by this point, the Russian empire was only a memory: [Finland and the Baltic territories](#) had become democratic nation-states (some only temporarily), and western [Belarus](#) and Ukraine were quickly part of the new [Polish state](#).

Military, international and inter-ethnic, the civil war was also a channel for settling problems between political parties. During the "seven years' war" Russia underwent more transformations than it had over the entire previous century: the fall of the monarchy, the steep learning curve of parliamentary and local democracy, the confiscation of power by a civil dictator, [Alexander Kerensky \(1881-1970\)](#), and a coup d'état that closely resembled a coup de grace. And yet, the night of 24 October/7 November 1917 was not immediately decisive. The electoral process that was underway to elect a Constituent Assembly was carried on until the results were announced, in which the Socialist-Revolutionaries were the clear winners. The first meeting of the representatives of the people resulted in the annulling of Lenin's decrees. Politically, the civil war began on 18 and 19 January (1 and 2 February) 1918 when Red Guards blocked the Constituent Assembly from convening a second time and turned into a bloodbath the peaceful demonstrations in support of elected officials in Petrograd and Moscow. This anti-democratic violence irremediably set the Bolsheviks apart from the other political parties. In March 1921, anarchist and Menshevik leaders were arrested in Moscow just as the uprising of Kronstadt sailors was quelled and the 10th Congress

of the Bolshevik party banned internal factions. This signed the end of political pluralism outside the Communist Party, which was now the sole authorised party.

The Russian civil war also involved a topic that is recurrent throughout the country's history, one whose limits were pushed to their extreme after the abolition of serfdom in 1861: peasant rebellion, meaning the vast majority of the population. Of all of the opponents the Bolsheviks had to confront, the peasantry was indeed the vaguest, least ideologically-identifiable adversary and the one that was hardest to hunt down. Acting in small groups or working as veritable units, the "Greens" were castigated as "bandits" by the new regime. The Red Army had to snub out one by one their strongholds of resistance to pillaging by armed groups from all sides and to the requisition of crops by government agents. This war broke out a few months after the demobilization of the Imperial Army in December 1917, with the remobilization ordered by [Leon Trotsky \(1879-1940\)](#) in June-September 1918; so began the first desertions, terror and requisitions. In Tambov, the last revolting peasants were defeated in July 1921, just as Lenin enacted a tax in kind that was no longer as confiscatory.

Rather than a civil war, it is therefore more appropriate to speak of civil *wars* in the plural, of armed conflicts that were more or less inter-connected, bound up with terrible social conflict and equally profound ethnic discord. Regardless of whether the conflict between numerous social groups from former imperial society began in late 1917 or early 1918, it definitely ended with the Bolshevik's total victory in the summer of 1921. The "continuum of crisis" ([Peter Holquist](#)) initiated in 1914 ended with the restoration of state authority (*gosudarstvennost*): i.e., the return of a strong state with a monopoly on violence, capable of imposing the law at all levels in the country and on all of its political, ethnic and religious groups. It was the desire for autonomy from a central authority deemed illegitimate and the more or less widespread ability to defend with arms a vision of the nation and to seek support from foreign powers that fuelled the civil war in Russia. The First World War created the conditions for this quasi-generalized conflict, firstly by undermining imperial authority and then by favouring local authority, thus legitimizing the revolutionary movements. Its legacy was also felt in the intricate military equation that the Bolsheviks had to solve as they dealt with the threat of foreign intervention, were forced to reinstate conscription and renew with the discipline of the Tsarist army, and inflicted violence through the "brutalization"¹ of society. Finally, the civil war used arms to deal with large social (peasantry) and ethnic issues, but it also relied on [propaganda](#) efforts that cashed-in on the precious lessons learned from the Great War in this field.

War as a Political Solution

“War to a Victorious Conclusion”: The sole Ideology of the Ruling Elite

The Bolsheviks faced opposition not only to the way they seized power, but also to the method chosen to settle the social problems that had been accentuated by the war. Their opponents were disparate and drawn from different political backgrounds both in time and geographically. The oldest, that of the elites who dominated the country and its population via political authority, justice, economic power and religious morals, was quickly reshaped following the fall of the dynasty which had become a deadweight.² All Whites were not steadfast monarchists; most wanted a return to the former order rather than to a regime. This order was based on a centralized authority, a strong army, an omnipresent Church and the economic exploitation of the working class. The Whites were content with the changes brought about in February 1917; the only uncertainty was the status of the Tsar. They did not intend to make any social concessions, despite the fact that the democratization of society had created a very strong desire for change. The main goal was to “lead the war to a victorious conclusion”, and so to honour the moral pact with the Entente, defeat rival German [imperialism](#) in Eastern Europe and consolidate Russia’s dominant status.

Yet the fall of the autocratic Tsar led to a mismatch between temporal power and spiritual power, and between civil and military authority. The void left by [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1845-1926\)](#) attracted dictators, both political (e.g., socialist lawyer Alexander Kerensky) and military, e.g. General [Lavr Kornilov \(1870-1918\)](#). While they shared a similar charisma – the former in high society circles and at the tribune of meetings, the latter among certain military units –, both suffered from a lack of audience in the other’s sphere of influence; and they were very different in their relationship to authority. To hold onto power for as long as possible, Kerensky did not hesitate to forge unnatural alliances and lead contradictory policies, while continuing the war to buy time. Kornilov, on the other hand, did not seek political compromise; he felt that action was the best solution and that people would support a dictator bent on “saving” Russia. His defeat on 31 August/13 September 1917 owed as much to the Bolsheviks (railway workers and soldiers) that stopped his progression as it did to the incredulity of elites (even military elites) over the “rescue” of Russia he claimed to be undertaking. His defeat also affected Kerensky. The national leader appeared to have no control over the army (which in turn two months later did not follow his orders to fight against the Bolshevik takeover) and, when he stopped repressing the Bolsheviks – who had helped him stop Kornilov –, he lost the support of moderates in his coalition. These two tacticians were unable to convince the very heterogeneous elite that supported the [Provisional Government](#) (for lack of a better alternative) of their ability to outline a new horizon for the Russian nation.

In 1917, the country’s general disorder and crisis considerably limited the influence of elites’

economic control and the scope of their ability to repress. The clergy, nobility, officers, landowners and industrialists had no choice but to take part in the new democratic game, but they all suffered resounding defeat in the elections, which were won by the revolutionary parties' professionals, seen as representing the public interest. This defeat in the political sphere explains – as much as the warlike nature of the conflict – the limited civil reach of the White camp. Of course, the Conference of Ambassadors, led by [Vasily Maklakov \(1869-1957\)](#), attempted to ensure the continuity of the Russian state from Paris, but it had very limited voice in Russia. The uprooting of elites chased from their factories, lands and [churches](#) did not affect the small portion of the army that decided to resist the new regime – often more for personal reasons than based on true political conviction. The most able and charismatic general of the Tsarist army, [Aleksai Brusilov \(1853-1926\)](#), finally chose to continue to serve the state and sided with the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1920; many officers (both socialists and non-socialists) had already reengaged and helped Trotsky establish the Red Army. Conversely, high placed aristocrats and especially military leaders undertook an adventurous endeavour that revealed the blind faith they had in their military knowledge and in the allies' support. The first to rebel, Kornilov was killed on 30 March/13 April 1918, leaving [Anton Denikin \(1872-1947\)](#) in the south, [Nikolai Yudenich \(1862-1933\)](#) in the north-west and [Alexander Kolchak \(1874-1920\)](#) in Siberia to vie for supremacy over what was left of former Russia. The latter's coup d'état on 18 November 1918 made Omsk the capital of a state without a regime that was largely supported by foreign governments.³

“Turning an Imperialistic War into a Civil War”

Although less long-standing in the political landscape and more diffuse, another very disparate group had also been around for several decades and offered an alternative vision to that of the traditional elites. The socialist revolutionaries (SRs), social democrats (RSDRP) and anarchists had very little local identity (which did not contradict with their strong presence in some determinate territories).⁴ They were geographically spread out, sometimes banished or in exile, and their ties with foreign ideologies and organizations were fundamental. While they were not all intellectuals, the revolutionaries countered economic domination with a specialization of their political and technical knowledge. The success of the revolutionary movements of 1917 can be explained by the existence of organizations with a public programme, which regularly debated in congresses, had a long-standing presence on the field and turned their specialization into expertise by getting involved in running the country. The Mensheviks in the cities and socialist revolutionaries in the countryside were at least as legitimate as the Bolsheviks (if not more so), and had also been subjected to violence (repression) and reacted (revolution). Numerous members had spent time in the Tsarist prisons (like the Shlisselburg fortress), were banished to the Solovetsky Islands, Sakhalin or

the depths of Siberia, or were even exiled, like the most influential figures such as [Georgi Plekhanov \(1856-1918\)](#) and Lenin. The Mensheviks in the cities (Petrograd Soviet, insurrection of the Presnya district of Moscow) and the socialist revolutionaries in the countryside played a leading role during the first Russian [revolution of 1905](#). Since February 1917, Lenin's party was critical of the other revolutionary parties for their collusion with the "bourgeois" parties of the Provisional Government and, especially, their support for the war. Nevertheless, given their common ideological rooting (socialism) and their shared experience, a confrontation did not seem inevitable in the immediate aftermath of the October coup d'état.⁵

And yet the Bolsheviks soon imposed a political dictatorship disguised behind the slogan "All power to the Soviets".⁶ They took control of communication channels in the capital and banned several large opposition newspapers. Moreover, Lenin's party broke with democracy by ignoring the vote cast by 41 million Russians that gave a majority to the socialist revolutionaries in the Constituent Assembly (370 out of 707 deputies versus only 175 elected Bolsheviks). On 18 January/1 February 1918, the Assembly elected the SR [Viktor Chernov](#) to be its chairman and annulled the October decrees. There was no second session, however, and the few thousand unarmed demonstrators in the streets of the two capitals to support the parliamentarians were brutally repressed. The world war enabled a social context that led to a change in regime, the amnesty of revolutionaries by the Provisional Government and their rise to power. But the war also condemned them since it was at the heart of their politics before the Constituent Assembly had time to begin its work and make the crucial decisions so longed for by the working class.

At this point, some revolutionaries joined the Bolshevik party, whereas others teamed up locally with anti-Bolshevik forces, and others still led insurrections to varying degrees of success. The SRs' results in the elections masked the vote's extreme disparity and the lack of a nationally structured party. Given the diffuse opposition, the Bolsheviks acted cautiously: they banned only one major party, in July 1918: the liberal Constitutional Democratic party (KD). The SRs were the first to face the communist terror following their uprising in Moscow on 6 and 7 July 1918, and again following the attempt to assassinate Lenin on 30 August 1918, attributed to the SR [Fanny Kaplan \(1890-1918\)](#). The favourite enemies of their former Bolshevik Party comrades, the Mensheviks tried to play by the rules of legality and build a sustainable opposition within the Soviets. But in February and March 1921, the Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (Cheka) arrested 2,000 of them, whereas the Red Army crushed the Democratic Republic of Georgia, governed by Mensheviks. The outcome of the anarchists varied. In Ukraine, [Nestor Makhno \(1889-1934\)](#) led a Black Army of about 50,000 men which fought variably with or against the Red Army. In

Moscow, [Vsevolod Mihailovich Eishenbaum \(1882-1945\)](#) and [Victor Serge \(1890-1947\)](#) (Viktor Kibalchich) advocated for Bolshevik party membership. But in April 1921, the Cheka decapitated the movement following a series of arrests in Moscow and violent clashes. Created in December 1917 by [Felix Dzerzhinsky \(1877-1926\)](#), the Cheka's military detachments, tribunals and special prisons had begun to unleash the Red Terror on 31 August 1918. Many high ranking Bolsheviks were strongly opposed to this state within the state, to the treatment afforded to revolutionary comrades they had met in prison or exile, and to the "[war communism](#)" that flouted party democracy.

The new Bolshevik Order: War as a Tabula Rasa

Indeed, the most recent and fragile, "bottom-up" form of political power – that of the Soviets –, changed over the course of the civil war into a top-down authority. Gradually taken over by the Bolsheviks in 1917, the Soviets ceased to be representative of the local population starting in 1918 and became the last link in the administrative hierarchy of the communist state. This shift had actually begun in the spring of 1917 when the Soviets replaced the local authorities in several areas;⁷ by 1919, the regime imposed its candidates in the key positions and, locally, those who were now labelled as "party-less" were discouraged. Elsewhere, the Party was rocked by a large-scale purge. Nearly 150,000 members (one third) were excluded, mostly among those who had joined in 1917 rather than 1918; excluded were those who had been recruited without enough attention to their social origin or whose political trustworthiness was deemed dubious. During "Party Week" in September 1919, 160,000 new, theoretically more proletarian members were hastily recruited. But a year later, when a wave of "re-registration" affected small towns, some people used the opportunity to leave the Party, disappointed by the turn it had taken or once their revolutionary fervour had dissipated.

For many members in the 1920s, the civil war was a formative experience that was much more important than the imperialist war experience or soldiers' committees.⁸ And yet these difficult years also put an end to many people's involvement. In the name of communism's necessary victory, Lenin's party launched into a bitter struggle against worker autonomy in a successful attempt to dull the vitality of the worker movement and put an end to its revolutionary chapter. The Party tightened its grasp on the working class by reintroducing the despised labour record book in June 1919. This was done not to garner their support but rather their effective participation in the Red war effort. Brought to heel, the rebellious Vikzhel railway union became a centralized department called Tsektran. Instituted in February 1920, Tsektran was a symbol of the "militarization of work" ordered by Trotsky. Popular discontent spread in the cities, including through bastions of Bolshevism like

Petrograd.

By late January 1921, protests and strikes had broken out in both capitals. On 22 February, workers in the large factories of Petrograd elected a Committee comprised primarily of SRs and Mensheviks calling for a general strike. On 26 February, the potent cocktail of February 1917 ignited again: Kronstadt's sailors mutinied and joined workers and peasants (from afar) who were uprising in the Lower Volga. They called for an end to the Bolshevik dictatorship, for free elections, the reestablishment of freedom of speech and equality in [rationing](#). On 1 March, 15,000 people attended a meeting; the Cheka arrested the worker leaders, thus cutting the mutineers off from their support base. On 8 March, the attack decided in Moscow and supervised by Trotsky was launched under the command of Tukhachevsky. It took ten days and a lot of casualties on both sides for Kronstadt to fall. Thereafter, the 10th Party Congress banned internal factions: the revolution was over, regardless of the internal (Worker Opposition, New Opposition) and external (worker revolts) efforts to get Russia back onto the track of 1917.

At the same time, Lenin announced the end of "war communism". Far from the quick disappearance of the state theorized by [Karl Marx \(1818-1883\)](#), Russia had seen the state take hold of its entire economy via the successive nationalizations that occurred, mostly in the spring of 1918. This economy mobilized for the war effort – in the name of the revolution – exacerbated the state's interference in business which had been occasional and not always very conclusive under Nicolas II, and better-equipped but very quickly paralyzed under the Provisional Government. Executive power imposed itself in Russia in a much more assertive manner than in other belligerent nations and began a long history of staunch interventionism in the field of health, culture and education.⁹ Above all, economics took the lead over politics and resulted in a government responsible for the everyday management of the entire country's activities: the success of the "socialist model" – with its war rhetoric dotted with "fronts" and "struggles" – depended on it. The war, its battles and over-mobilization persisted sustainably in Russia.

A War with Inverted Fronts

During the First World War, the Russian armed forces mostly fought outside of Russia: in Poland and the Baltic States, Turkey, Persia and even in France and Gallipoli. The civil war greatly affected the nature and topography of combat. In the north-west, General Yudenich's troops, assisted by [Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim's \(1867-1951\)](#) Finnish forces, turned eastward and threatened Petrograd, forcing the government to move to Moscow in March 1918. The General was from the Caucasus, where he had won several victories (in particular Erzerum on 16 February 1916) but his 20,000 men were familiar with the territory. In

Southern Russia, General Denikin succeeded Kornilov at the head of the Volunteer Army – the first “White” army organized around a few thousand officers; it fought the Reds right from the start of 1918.

Denikin was in direct contact with the French who, from Odessa, supported the Whites on the ground from late 1918 to April 1919. In early October 1919, after the victories in Kursk and Voronezh, Moscow appeared to be within firing range, but the Red Army’s counter-attack pushed the “Armed Forces of South Russia” towards the sea; on 27 March 1920, the last men left Novorossiysk to sail to Crimea. Finally, Siberia – the solid support base of the war effort in 1914-1918 – turned into a territory fragmented by combat and military fiefs: e.g., those of Admiral [Alexander Kolchak \(1874-1920\)](#), *Ataman* [Grigory Semenov \(1890-1946\)](#), the Czechoslovaks headed by [Maurice Janin \(1862-1916\)](#) and [Milan Stefanik \(1880-1919\)](#), and the eccentric Baron [Roman von Ungern-Sternberg \(1885-1921\)](#). While the Great War had primarily involved European nations on the Russian front, the civil war instead involved American and Asian troops.

The Return of the World War in the East

The strong influence of foreign intervention could be felt on each of the fronts. This was surely the most direct legacy of the ending World War and of the new world order that was emerging by the autumn of 1918. The Bolsheviks had signed the separate peace of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, in an abysmal military position which basically left them no other choice. The treaty deprived the empire of Ukraine, Finland and the Baltic States. This loss represented 800,000 square kilometers, 26 percent of the pre-war population, 32 percent of agricultural production, 23 percent of industrial output and 75 percent of extracted coal and iron. Despite what the treaty foresaw, the Germans remained in Ukraine and, with the Ukrainians, invaded Crimea, and then Georgia to “help” the Georgian people; [Romania](#), on the other hand, intervened in Bessarabia. Lenin’s revolutionary peace first resulted in the splitting-up of the Russian entity and marked the disappearance of an important ally for the Entente. One part of the German units fighting in the region remained in place to secure the colonized territories along the Baltic coast and the shores of the Vistula and Dnieper; the rest were transferred to the West and despite noticeable desertions on the way through Germany, the majority fought in France in 1918.

To continue the war and win, the empire’s allies needed to react in order to hold the second front. Roughly 2,000 British soldiers arrived in Murmansk in March 1918, in the north of the country, where British entrepreneurs were already involved in building a [railway line](#) to Petrograd.¹⁰ Yudenich was surrounded by military advisers and troops protected the Port of Arkhangelsk, although they had not yet fought the Red Army directly.¹¹ In the south, and

according to the cut-up of the Allied zones of influence, the French occupied Odessa from their positions in Romania. This was as much to support their Russian's allies against the revolutionaries that had signed the peace and were threatening Europe as it was to protect their own economic interests in southern Russia. The French were also present in Siberia via their command of the [Czech and Slovak legion](#) and sought to get a foot in the door by any means possible – e.g., bank loans to Kolchak, importing brand name products to Russia and cultural propaganda –; they did not hesitate to capitalize on the situation, for example, with attempts to buy up Tsarist gold at low prices or export raw materials (coal mined in Donbass). The American and Japanese allies were not to be outdone. Brandishing their [neutrality](#) in the Russian civil war, the former defended the Trans-Siberian to ensure that this vital artery remained open; the latter were more ambiguous and favoured the *Ataman* Semenov, then Kolchak, and sent far more troops than agreed to the Russian-[Chinese](#) and Russian-[Korean](#) borders. Foreign intervention varied in intensity based on numerous factors such as the competition between the powers for resources and zones of influence; the toss-up between the integrity of the empire as a war ally and the (opportunist) satisfaction of calls for independence; the lassitude of troops that had been fighting for five years; and the [Paris Peace Conference](#) which began in January 1919.

The ethnic upheaval across Europe was echoed in the epic legions of volunteers engaged in the civil war. Some 30,000 Czech and Slovak soldiers, including the writer and polemicist [Jaroslav Hašek \(1883-1923\)](#), as such revolted against the Bolsheviks on 25 May 1918 in Ekaterinburg.¹² [Prisoners of war](#) fed up with waiting out the war's end in camps had been granted the right to form a legion by the Russian general staff; they found themselves on the road to Vladivostok, from which they intended to join the French front to fight the Germans – and not their Slavic “brothers” still under the Austrian flag. Assisted by Milan Stefanik, General Maurice Janin's command of a legion of volunteers in France was comparable to General [Jozef Haller's \(1873-1960\)](#) army for the Poles. Their use against the Red Army was not always a sinecure, however, since some changed sides and many simply longed to return to their country to help found an independent republic. After taking control of several cities along the Trans-Siberian, they were finally defeated, disarmed and deported between April and September 1920. Small Italian and Hungarian legions also participated in the civil war alongside the Bolsheviks in support of revolution. On the other side, German [freikorps](#) – soldiers from the Great War who refused to disarm – volunteered to fight against Bolshevism. The Iron Division commanded by [Rüdiger von der Goltz \(1865-1946\)](#) unleashed violence in Estonia between January and July 1919.

One of the major arguments behind foreign intervention was the implementation of a “*cordon sanitaire*” – an expression allegedly coined by [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) – to protect Europe from Communist contagion. Inspired by the October Revolution, other movements

were not fully endorsed by the Bolshevik Party, however, as it was preoccupied with its own problems winning the war in Russia. The French revolutionary government had had to fight a defensive war to hold its ground against the counter-revolutionary influence of *émigrés* starting in 1791; the Provisional Government after the February Revolution had chosen to pursue the World War to defend the revolution. For his part, Lenin theorized the transition from an imperialistic war to a civil war starting in November 1914 and chaired with Trotsky the anti-war [Zimmerwald Conference](#) (5 to 8 September 1915) and Kienthal Conference (24 to 30 April 1916) before returning from exile on 3/16 April 1917 to preach “revolutionary defeatism”. As an international party based on Marxist theory, the Bolshevik party could only work for world revolution; however, it maintained only informal ties with the [revolutions](#) that broke out in Central Europe in 1919, which did not fit into mould of the Third International founded in Moscow on 2 March 1919. The Spartacus League had already been crushed in Berlin and [Bela Kun \(1886\)](#) was chased out of Budapest on 1 August. The centralizing nature of Bolshevism was particularly salient in fighting in the Baltic States, Poland and the Caucasus, which resembled a war of revolutionary conquest.

Two Distinct War Experiences

Despite the multiplicity of nations, ethnicities and parties involved in the civil war, there were two times fewer Russian combatants involved than in the Great War – and the veterans of 1914-1918 participated only partially. While the main leaders of the counter-revolution had served the country during the war, they reacted differently to the February revolution and Kornilov’s attempted putsch. After February 1917, Denikin refused to serve under Brusilov, whose famous Offensive he had led in 1916. One of Kornilov’s rare supporters, Denikin was arrested, escaped and then reunited with the General, who died on 13 April 1918 during the failed siege of Ekaterinodar by the Volunteer Army – 4,000 men, for the most part officers, quickly routed. Teaming up with [Alexey Kaledin’s \(1861-1918\)](#) and then [Pytor Krasnov’s \(1869-1947\)](#) Cossacks ramped up their strength and tipped the balance: the result was a sequence of victories against the Reds. Denikin only agreed to recognize Kolchak’s supreme power on 12 June 1919. Admiral Kolchak, a hero of the [war against Japan in 1905](#), had earned the highest command of the Russian navy, the Black Sea Fleet, during the Great War. He did not support Kornilov, whom he knew, and returned to Russia from a mission in the United States only for his putsch on 18 November 1918. He then had to hand the reins of power to Denikin on 4 January 1920, shortly before being arrested, tried and executed.

There were many officers within the White armies led by these great military leaders – an aspect largely underscored in the pro-communist historiography – but there were also rank and file soldiers with very diverse origins and war experience. There is debate over the officers’ military value, since some of them lacked tenacity and were poorly obeyed by their

troops. While lieutenant-general [Viktor Pokrovsky \(1889-1922\)](#), a star of the Russian air service in 1914-1918, retook Tsaritsyn from the Reds during the summer of 1919, General [Yevgeny Miller \(1867-1939\)](#) was less successful in the Arkhangelsk region. There were a few hundred thousand simple soldiers under their orders: at most 270,000 in the south, 150,000 in Siberia, 20,000 in the north-west and 10,000 in the north. Some former non-commissioned officers from the imperial army were rapidly promoted during this conflict to positions they had come to know. With regard to basic recruits, they sometimes found themselves in the White camp out of loyalty (or obedience) to leaders; sometimes they were put there by force. The ranks fluctuated greatly given the influx and outflow of prisoners from the Red Army reenlisted by force and of conscripts among peasants in the zones under White control. Photographs from the period show that there were a significant number of non-European ethnicities, notably in Kolchak's army.

In the Red camp, there was a certain break with the war experience. Only a minority of Red Army soldiers were the former deserters of 1917 that had played a role in igniting the countryside and toppling the Provisional Government, spreading rumours and importing weapons into the country.¹³ Both the spontaneous and authorized demobilization and the two waves of return from captivity (March-June 1918 and November 1918-January 1919) were very chaotic. In 1914, 1915 or 1916, soldiers had left for the front in groups, by unit; they returned almost one by one, each concerned with his own fate – in sum, the army had already ceased to exist. Trotsky created the Red Army by relying on the 10,000 men in the Red Guard, a “people in arms” that were indeed driven by revolutionary zeal, but who were also quite inexperienced in street combat and fighting in the open countryside, and above all who were quite poorly equipped. Volunteerism quickly showed its limits: in two months only 153,678 men went to the recruitment offices. Following the first military defeats of the civil war, the government ordered the remobilization of workers and non-employer peasants between twenty-one and twenty-five years old in fifty-one administrative divisions in the Urals and Siberia on 9 June 1918; then, on 11 September, the Bolsheviks recalled the entire annual contingent of 1918, still according to the same class lines. The ranks swelled from 360,000 men in July to 800,000 in November; there were 1.5 million in May 1919 and 5.5 million by late 1920. Desertion was a big problem in the Red Army, with two peaks in December 1918 and May-June 1919 due more to extreme conditions (e.g., cold, hunger) than to homesickness or a desire to return to farming. To counter these defections and enforce discipline, Trotsky called upon 50,000 former Tsarist officers who were skilled in this matter, but cautiously subordinated them in the units to the Bolshevik political commissars.

The Hefty Legacy of the War's Violence

Violence from the Great War represented a hefty legacy and provided the competing military

authorities with a whole gamut of forced displacements, ethnic segregation and mass murder, of which the Great Retreat from Galicia between May and September 1915 was an archetype. Jews, notably, were accused of [espionage](#) and were the victims of [pogroms](#) that bordered on genocide. They were treated poorly in the depths of the Russian provinces.¹⁴ The civil war also raged through the former Pale of Settlement: in Ukraine, Jews were the favourite target of riots against “speculators”.¹⁵ About 150,000 men, women and children were victims of serial pogroms in 1918-1920, i.e. murders or extortion preceded by physical and [sexual assault](#). The anti-communist military leaders were quite reticent to rein in the violence of the White Terror and punish its authors, who nonetheless caused the break-up of some units that had become nothing short of pillaging gangs. The unleashed savagery of a regular army against one part of the population – quite different from the rioting against neighbouring Jews that had regularly occurred under the *Ancien Régime* – was fuelled by the recurrent use of anti-Jewish slogans to mobilize soldiers that began during the Great War. Targeted for popular prosecution as German spies in 1915, they became synonymous with the Bolsheviks in 1919; Jews were always represented as the anti-national “Other”. The Red Army was not exempt from anti-Jewish violence either, as [Isaak Babel \(1894-1940\)](#) recounted in *Red Cavalry*, but it did convict people to set an example since the regime was staunchly opposed to [anti-Semitism](#).

The Bolsheviks did not hesitate to use the most brutal state violence. The political control and exclusion measures taken by the Tsarist government, and then systematized by the Provisional Government were the inspiration for their more radical measures. For example, in a decree in January 1919, the Bolsheviks decided to liquidate the “Soviet Vendée”¹⁶, i.e. to attack the Don Cossacks who supported the Volunteer Army.¹⁷ The future “decossackization” was underway and targeted these free peasant soldiers in two waves (February-March 1919 and October-November 1920). The Soviet political police destroyed Cossack towns and stopped, deported, executed or sent men to work in the mines of the Donbas; the rest of the population was subjected to forced displacement by convoys, with large-scale supply problems and many collateral deaths (from hunger, epidemics). Across the Soviet territory, peasants experienced the attacks of troops and state violence from 1914 to 1921.

The State and the Nation, from Collapse to Restoration

The civil war completed the disintegration of the central government’s authority in Russia, which had already begun with the increased autonomy granted to local authorities in 1917, followed by the regime’s rejection after the Bolshevik coup d’état. In June 1918, the insurrection of the Czech and Slovak Legion enabled a counter-power to emerge calling for a continuation of the Russian state: in Samara, a government was formed based on the

legitimacy of officials elected to the Constituent Assembly. This *Komuch*, with an SR majority, had armed forces which at first won a few victories and made it to Kazan, but were forced to retreat starting in September 1918. The Conference between the *Komuch* and autonomous local authorities held in Ufa resulted in the establishment of the Provisional All-Russian Government which was overthrown by Kolchak's putsch on 18 November 1918. From Omsk, the Admiral imposed military authority over civil and political authorities while supporting a right-leaning council of ministers under the authority of [Pyotr Vasilevich Vologodsky \(1863-1925\)](#). Kolchak claimed to want to restore the state of law and strongly punished the SRs that contested his authority. In the end, the admiral was betrayed by the Allies and delivered up to the communists by the Czechoslovaks who shot him after a brief trial on 7 February 1920. At this point, there was no longer a credible alternative to the central power of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

From Defeated Empire to the Communist Reunification of Russia

The new political entity – the RSFSR – nonetheless still needed to settle the “national question” that had consumed the country since the height of the Great War. Kazakh and Kyrgyz resistance to the new waves of mobilization in 1915 and 1916 had drawn an unprecedented response from the imperial government. Given the seemingly uncontrollable ethnic mosaic, it decided to create ethnically homogeneous zones by organizing forced displacements, resulting in mass death. National minorities had received special attention from the Tsarist authorities, who nonetheless let a myriad of national committees (Lithuanian, Polish, Armenian, Jewish, etc.) handle the influx of [refugees](#) from the border zones. In reality, the forced displacement and way the situation was handled actually intensified and helped structure national identities.¹⁸ The refugee issue also affected [Armenia](#), which was at the centre of the conflict between Turkey and Russia, and Poland following the [Polish-Soviet war](#). Finland and the Baltic States became more homogenous after communist uprisings that were fairly short-lived (although the military resistance mobilized units that could have served against Russia's Reds).

The destiny of the former empire played out in German-occupied Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, in the Caucasus, where the Turks had finally set foot. In Ukraine and the south of Russia, the Whites won the support of the Don Cossacks, who were up in arms against Bolshevik agrarian policy and were set on greater autonomy.¹⁹ The Ukrainians, too, had a different destiny in mind for their nation after the proclamation of independence on 23 June 1917. The Germans supported the coup d'état by hetman [Pavlo Skoropadsky \(1873-1945\)](#) against the government of the central Rada. This regime did not have popular support, however, and was overthrown on 14 December 1918 by nationalists hostile to the

occupation. Led by [Simon Petliura \(1879-1926\)](#), the Ukrainian People's Republic was born in February 1919. It sought to boot foreigners, Reds and Whites out of Ukraine, but was attacked by Nestor Makhno's anarchists. Tens of thousands of men from the Black Army, first opposed to the Bolshevik dictatorship, fought for a time with the Red Army against Denikin before being defeated by the communists in August 1920. Petliura ended up forging an alliance with the Polish general Jozef Pilsudski (1867-1935), who promised to preserve independence in exchange for Volhynia and Galicia; the Treaty of Warsaw of 20 April 1920 resulted in Petliura losing the last of his political and military support. The Poles entered the capital to federate an entity that would also include Lithuania and Belarus, under Polish domination, but Tukhachevsky's Red Army pushed them out by June and chased them all the way to the outskirts of Warsaw. The USSR and Poland finally signed a peace agreement that modified the border established in Brest-Litovsk in favour of the latter, to the detriment of the greater German Ukraine of 1918 and to the advantage of the re-found territorial unity of imperial Russia under communist control.

A Military Solution to the Eternal "Peasant Question"

The last opponent to the central government's authority in Russia resided at the heart of its countryside. The regular supplying of cities – of vital importance – was the reason behind the first requisition measures taken by the Tsarist government in 1916; these were later broadened by the Provisional Government. This was a crucial issue under "war communism", too. The regime's dependence on the countryside went alongside its need to massively recruit new soldiers for the Red Army under construction. The conscription of young peasants had the advantage of removing a portion of potential resisters from villages, but it also deprived the regime of a "modernizing" support base. Further, Lenin intended to annihilate the autonomy of peasant communes (*obschina*) which had been renewed and emboldened by the agrarian revolt of 1917. This social war within the civil war could only be fought by combining external intervention and internal complicity. The Food Supply Army (*Prodarmiiia*) was as such charged in May 1918 with carrying out the requisitions, with local support from committees of poor peasants (*kombeds*); this experience lasted only until the end of the year.²⁰ Only 10 percent of the set goals were met and little improvement was made with the move to planned requisitions (*prodrazverstka*) in January 1919. The massive use of force, the arbitrary nature and scope of the requisitions, and the mediocre compensation provided (depreciation of the currency, shortages of manufactured goods) are illustrative of the attitude of armies occupying enemy territory and fuelled a broad spectrum of resistance. This is what spurred the fierce hostility between the Bolsheviks and the peasantry, along with the violent practices used during the forced collectivization of the agriculture in 1929.

Indeed, the Reds' most complex battles were fought against the "Greens" – a myriad of

combatting groups of various size spread across the entire territory; they were more or less politically engaged, but rarely connected to a political party. Historians estimate that there were between 2 and 3 million rebels (including about 500,000 arrested by the Cheka),²¹ many of whom had deserted the Red Army in 1919 and 1920, in the regions most affected by crop requisitions. While many were able to elude their Red enemies for a long time, none was as renowned as Antonov in Tambov²². This former “expropriator” of 1905-1907 who called himself a socialist-revolutionary had only loose ties with the SR party; nothing confirms that its leaders ordered the insurrection. Antonov transformed the militia created to serve the Provisional Government in 1917 into a military unit (*druzhina*) to support the revolt against requisitions that broke out in the town of Kamenka on 24 August 1920. His 18-point manifesto of the movement called for the overthrow of Soviet power and a return to the freedoms of 1917. The Partisan Army created on 14 November controlled the south eastern third of the province thanks to a tight network of “Councils of the hard-working peasantry” that recruited troops and controlled the economy to ensure the supply of the movement’s four armies.

The Soviet authorities had trouble “liquidating” these local insurrections since they could not offer a credible alternative to the leaders and peasants that had taken up arms, as shown by the successive unsuccessful waves of amnesty. The debate amongst the Red Army’s general staff over the number of soldiers to send to Tambov (130,000 in the end) points up the very unclear estimation of enemy forces. When Tukhachevsky understood that he would have to contend with 30,000 men backed by the population, he decided against an encirclement strategy in favour of a military occupation of the territory and mobile pursuit which ended victoriously in June 1921. The counter-mobilization in Tambov, which anticipated some of the New Economic Policy’s (NEP) initiatives, helped with this success. The revolutionary committees (*revkoms*) distributed land and seeds, demanded individual oaths from repented fighters and collective declarations, and organized defensive militias. Fearing a return to war communism, peasants for the most part accepted this new deal, openly hopeful to see the end of the 130,000 additional mouths to feed, as well as the departure of occupying troops.

The new Role of Propaganda in the War

Resistance to communism was not the only thing the peasantry supplied: at the end of 1918, country folk represented 83.4 percent of soldiers in the Red Army.²³ Their loyalty to the regime was an issue, however: 917,000 of them had already deserted at least once in the first months of the conflict – meaning they did not show up when called up, left the ranks before the offensive, had returned home without authorization, etc. The Bolshevik leaders therefore implemented a three-sided policy of coercion, promotion and assistance. Rather

than targeting the elusive men themselves, troops put pressure on their families and villages; they were collectively held hostage and kept from housing and feeding men on the run. The Red Army also made sure to favour the best men of peasant background for promotions to positions of military and political responsibility, thus reinforcing the ranks of the army and Party. Finally, and more overtly than under the previous regimes, the state implemented a policy of material support for women deprived of support due to a soldier's absence. Nearly 380,000 soldiers had already returned to the ranks by July 1919, a sign of the efficiency of these methods even as the Reds found themselves in rough shape on all fronts, and proof that the Bolsheviks were successful in imposing a certain degree of state authority.

That is surely what the Whites were lacking to win: the unity provided by an ideology, an uncontested leader and a clearly defined project for a multiethnic nation in revolution. The White armies were courageous and won an equal number of battles before succumbing to their numeral inferiority, but also to lassitude. The chimeric uniting of various Bolshevik adversaries and the utopian desire to preserve national unity, as well as their abandonment by the foreign powers were final blows to the morale of troops and field officers. Already defeated during the Great War, the Russian Generals involved in the civil war suffered another defeat against an adversary whose actual victory could not have been predicted. This conflict ended with the forced exile of a disparate community in which men – notably the soldiers evacuated under the responsibility of Baron Pyotr Wrangel – represented a strong majority.²⁴ It was these eminent figures in the [refugee](#) associations and the authors of stories that recounted the unthinkable rout that set the tone within this group of émigrés united by constraint, at least during the first years. The Russians who emigrated via land were more likely to seek refuge in Germany (200,000 in Berlin alone) and Poland, and sometimes in the new republics ([Yugoslavia](#)); the last to escape by sea (in the south) were more likely to go to France (80,000). Far from reuniting the nation as most of the elites had hoped, the war begun in 1914 consumed the country for seven years, morphed into a civil war and finally resulted in a durable split between two Russias.

As violent as their opponents, the Reds distinguished themselves through their cohesion, which was bound up in the attractive strength and novelty of communist ideology, as well as via a system of effective propaganda. They were indeed able to counter-balance the repeated political violence with an educational approach aimed at the entire adult population defined as “political education”. Within the Red Army, a special department – the PUR – used human and financial resources to teach recruits to read, offer shows (theatre and cinema) and encourage physical culture.²⁵ Although we may question the claimed results and actual attendance at these types of events, military life was now quite different from imperial times, during which it was renowned above all for its harsh discipline. Meetings in part replaced

endless parades and created ties with the period of committee autonomy. Soldiers were taken into consideration and continuously stimulated by posters, short plays and agitation trials (*agitsud*). [Cinema](#) was finally permitted in the army as a leisure activity and as an educational tool, as a means to distract and mobilize. Political authorities, personified by political commissars, organized centrally things that had previously been done by a myriad of private and local initiatives.

Unlike its Tsarist predecessor, the new army was a sort of melting pot that unified ethnicities and promoted a new social model shaped during the civil war and despite the major obstacles posed by the revolution. Made of superimposed conflicts, the “seven years’ war” caused a certain ossification of Russian society (weakening of productive infrastructure and commercialization networks, inward-looking local communities) while it also powered the technocratic thrust of the state’s infrastructure. The population was subjected to major social and territorial upheaval: the cities found themselves deprived of workers who had escaped to the countryside, the aristocracy was forced to flee and intellectuals were exiled. These years also contributed to the massification of politics, thus imposing the permanent mobilization of minds and bodies that so deeply defined the Soviet Union.

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Notes

1. This term belongs to German historian George Mosse and was translated into French as “ensauvagement” (“ensavaging”); this concept cannot be dissociated from the less often employed trivialization of violence, derealized by dint of being not only incurred but perpetuated. [↑](#)
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 15. Budnitskii, Oleg V.: Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920, Philadelphia 2012. [↑](#)
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[Soviet Union--History--Revolution, 1917-1921](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[URSS -- 1917-1921 \(Révolution\)](#)

Key Person(s)

[Kornilov, Lavr Georgievich](#); [Kerenskii, Aleksandr Fedorovich](#); [Skoropadskiy, Pavlo](#);

[Tukhachevsky, Mikhail](#); [Antonov, Aleksei](#); [Maklakov, Vasily](#); [Plekhanov, Georgi](#); [Kaplan, Fanny](#); [Eishenbaum, Vsevolod Mihailovich](#); [Serge, Victor](#); [Dzerzhinsky, Felix](#); [Marx, Karl](#); [Semenov, Grigory](#); [Janin, Maurice](#); [Ungern-Sternberg, Roman von](#); [Hašek, Jaroslav](#); [Kaledin, Alexey](#); [Krasnov, Pytor](#); [Pokrovsky, Viktor](#); [Miller, Yevgeny](#); [Babel, Isaak](#); [Vologodsky, Pyotr Vasilevich](#); [Petliura, Simon](#); [Goltz, Rüdiger Graf von der](#); [Clemenceau, Georges](#); [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia](#); [Lenin, Vladimir Il'ich](#); [Trotsky, Leon](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Wilhelm II, German Emperor](#); [Piłsudski, Józef](#); [Brusilov, Aleksei Alekseevich](#); [Denikin, Anton Ivanovich](#); [Wrangel, Petr Nikolaevich, Baron](#); [Kun, Béla](#); [Haller, Józef](#); [Yudenich, Nikolaï Nikolayevich](#); [Kolchak, Aleksandr Vasil'evich](#); [Makhno, Nestor Ivanovich](#); [Mannerheim, Carl Gustaf Emil](#); [Štefánik, Milan Rastislav](#); [Pašić, Nikola](#); [Chernov, Viktor](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

Russian Civil War

Author(s)

[Alexandre Sumpf](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

Articles That Link Here

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