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International Responses to the Russian Civil War (Russian Empire)

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The Russian Civil War of 1917-20 was closely related to the World War in terms of its cause, conduct, and results. This article discusses the two distinct phases of the Civil War, which were divided by the collapse of the Central Powers. It examines the appearance of competing centres of power, the attempt of those centres to mobilize support, and the ultimate victory of the Communists.

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Introduction

The Russian Civil War had three dimensions: The first was the struggle between the new Communist government and its organised "counter-revolutionary" opponents, in which the issues were primarily political and social. The second was the attempt by peripheral regions of the Russian Empire to break away. Finally, there was internal resistance against Communist rule, in the towns and the countryside. Superimposed on these three conflicts were outside forces, the Central Powers and the Allies, which tried to exploit the situation in Russia to their advantage.

The Origins of the Civil War

The political and social forces that emerged in Russia between March and November 1917 produced the rival factions in the Civil War. The Tsar's abdication was followed by the creation of a Provisional Government in Petrograd, based initially on the Tsarist State Duma. Mass dissatisfaction against economic and social conditions, greatly exacerbated by the First World War, allowed leftist groups, on the fringes of legal politics before 1914, to establish a mass following. Yet across the country political authority remained weak. The peasant-oriented Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) party, especially its leaders, was prepared to support the Provisional Government. Others on the left, notably the Marxist Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), argued for a completely different form of government, based on local workers' councils ("soviets"). The Bolsheviks' demand for immediate social reform and for withdrawal from the "imperialist" war attracted increasing mass support. Slower to emerge were political groupings of the empire's ethnic minorities.

There were no open advocates of monarchist restoration, but senior figures from the State Duma, the Imperial bureaucracy and - especially - the army officer corps were dissatisfied with their marginalisation and with the breakdown of the old economic and social order; they also feared the consequences of Russia's possible defeat in the World War. [3] In August 1917 the Army commander-in-chief, General Lavr Kornilov (1870-1918), attempted unsuccessfully to assert military control over Petrograd in August and destroy the forces of the left.

Lenin was able to convince the Bolshevik leadership to take action against the Provisional Government. He stressed the possibility of revolution in war-weary Central Europe, the consolidation of popular support for the soviets and the danger that the Provisional Government might stabilise International Responses to the Russian Civil War (Russian Empire) - 1914-1918-Online

itself through the proposed Constituent Assembly. In early November 1917 the Bolsheviks seized power by force, first in Petrograd and then Moscow. With this began civil war.

First Phase of Civil War: 1917-1918

The "Triumphal March of Soviet Power"

Bolshevik control was initially confined to a few <u>urban centres</u>. A power vacuum existed in the interior of Russia - a vast and still very <u>rural country</u>. Other places rejected the authority of the new government, among them the army headquarters at Mogilev (in Belarus), the Cossack (*kazak*) territories of eastern and southern Russia, and some regions - notably in Ukraine - where a rival claim to power was based on national self-determination. [5]

The more conservative Russian opponents of the November Revolution placed their hopes in the Cossacks, especially the Don and Kuban "hosts" (*voiski*). Based on a pre-modern system of military settlement, highly militarised, and wary of Russian and Ukrainian in-migrants, the Cossacks appeared to be a reliable base for counter-revolution, like the *Vendée* of the French Revolution.

Much of the early fighting took the form of "soviet" detachments - revolutionary soldiers and armed workers ("Red Guards") moving out along the railway system from the industrial towns - to Mogilev, to Kiev, and to the Cossack regions. On the whole, they met little effective resistance. Lenin called the very first months of the Civil War a "triumphal march". This is an apt description. Communist control over Russia was still tenuous, but by February 1918 there were no major centres openly opposing the Petrograd government.

The Intervention of the Central Powers

The World War front line had meanwhile remained relatively stable as the Central Powers were content to await the collapse of Bolshevik power. Lenin's government opened peace negotiations. This was partly to fulfil domestic promises to end the war and partly in the hope of furthering the international revolution - it was believed that the demonstration of Germany's imperialist war aims would lead to revolution in Central Europe. The Central Powers certainly made great demands: the demobilization of the Russian Army, the ending of revolutionary agitation, and the abandonment of Russian control of the Imperial periphery, including Poland, Finland, the Baltic region, Belarus and Ukraine (on grounds of national self-determination). In February 1918, when the Bolsheviks withdrew temporarily from the talks, the Central Powers resumed military operations. There was little revolutionary response in Central Europe, and the Bolsheviks could do very little to resist the enemy armies. Lenin forced his comrades to accept the harsh enemy terms, based on the need for a "breathing space". Accordingly, on 3 March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed.

Despite profound political differences, the conservative politicians and generals in Berlin found Lenin's weak and pliable government temporarily preferable to alternatives. The Germans now controlled the Baltic region, Finland, and Belarus, and many of their troops could be transferred to the Western Front. With the Austro-Hungarians, the Germans were moving deep into the Ukraine, and with the Turks they were establishing a position in the Transcaucasus.^[6] The Germans installed a Ukrainian nationalist government in Kiev. Contrary to the opinion of many historians, it was the actions of the Central Powers which were the most significant "foreign intervention" in Russia. Direct action by British, French, American, and Japanese military forces in 1918 was confined to occupation of remote ports in the northern parts of European Russia and of Vladivostok on the Pacific.

The Soviet government did accrue some benefit from its humiliating situation. Lenin's party - which renamed itself the Communist Party - was granted some weeks' respite before the next period of the Civil War began. In the rump of European Russia, the Communists moved their capital to the less exposed city of Moscow, and began trying to organise a "professional" Red Army.

The Czechoslovak Corps and Allied Intervention

The Communist hold on power was still very shaky. Popular dissatisfaction remained as revolutionary turmoil exacerbated economic problems. Rival underground forces survived the "triumphal march of Soviet power". Some were based on conservative former army officers further outraged by the capitulation of Brest-Litovsk. The mainstream SRs and leaders of other centre-left parties, meanwhile, regarded themselves as Russia's legitimate rulers. They had won the most popular support in the November 1917 elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly (which the Bolsheviks had dispersed in January 1918).^[7]

The mutiny of the Czech Legion transformed discontent in Communist-held territory into renewed civil war. The corps had been formed from Czechs and Slovaks working in Russia in 1914, or captured in the war and, unlike Russian troops, it had maintained its military effectiveness. In May 1918 it was making its way out of Russia with the aim of joining the Allied forces in France. The regiments were strung out along the railway system, from the Volga river crossings to the Russian Far East (along the Trans-Siberian railway). Prompted by fears that they were about to be disarmed by the Soviet authorities and probably encouraged by Allied advisors, the Czechoslovaks mutinied. Their action allowed uprisings of local anti-Communist Russian elements, which took control of the central Volga region and the communications backbone of Siberia.

The "Democratic Counter-Revolution"

Under Czechoslovak protection a rival to the Soviet government was created in June 1918 in the Volga town of Samara, about 550 miles east of Moscow. [8] The Samara government was based on the democratic parties, especially the SRs, groups with a progressive social program and a claim to popular legitimacy through the Constituent Assembly; the government was originally called the "Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly" (abbreviated to Komuch). The Communists

branded Komuch the "Democratic Counter-Revolution" and the term is useful to differentiate the anti-Bolsheviks of 1918 from the politically reactionary "Whites" of 1919 and 1920.

Komuch had only limited power. It was divided on regional or political grounds and had limited military forces, mainly the foreign soldiers of the Czechoslovak Corps. The Komuch "army" nevertheless was able to advance up the Volga from Samara as far as Kazan - to within 550 miles of Moscow. The skirmish that took place near Kazan was an early test of the new Red Army, a force which had originally been established to defend the western and southern frontiers against the Germans. It was now rapidly redeployed to central Russia. Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) held the post of Peoples Commissar for War. [9] He was able, through a combination of revolutionary rhetoric and harsh punishment to rally the Red forces. Kazan was retaken in September 1918 and the Communist counter-offensive forced Komuch to abandon Samara.

Attempts by the anti-Bolsheviks to create a rival authority to Moscow had little success. A "state conference" was organised in Ufa, between the Volga and the Urals, in September 1918. Komuch and a number of smaller regional authorities were represented, and they created an uneasy coalition in the form of the "Provisional All-Russian Government" (PA-RG). This shadow government, however, was forced to abandon Ufa and withdraw further towards Siberia as Red Army units attacked east along the railway from the Volga.

South Russia: Russian Nationalists and Cossack Hosts

Very different forces were being created far away in the North Caucasus. In the summer of 1918 the Germans (now occupying the eastern Ukraine) supported the consolidation of a conservative government in the Don Cossack "host territory". This Don government in turn protected the territory of the Kuban Cossacks further south, where Russian nationalist forces of the Volunteer Army were gathering their strength.

The Volunteer Army, then led by General Kornilov, had been thrown out of the Don territory by Red Guards in January 1918. It was forced to take refuge in the empty steppe in an epic "Ice March". An early attempt to capture the Kuban capital of Ekaterinodar from Red forces resulted in Kornilov's death. General Anton Denikin (1872-1947) succeeded him, and during the summer the Volunteers were able, with counter-revolutionary Kuban Cossacks, to take control in the Kuban. [10] This was achieved without help from the Allies. Unlike the "democratic" Komuch, the Volunteers can clearly be seen as a "White" (militarist-nationalist) movement. Although not yet a force claiming "All-Russian" authority, they were headed by the elite of the Tsarist World-War high command. General Mikhail Alekseev, their political figurehead in 1918, had been chief of staff to Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia (1868-1918) from 1915 to 1917, and Supreme Commander-in-Chief himself after the March 1917 revolution. Denikin had commanded an army group in 1917. Highly motivated junior officers ("volunteers") made up the rank and file.

Soviet Heartland: Consolidation and Mobilization

The Communist government was able gradually to consolidate its hold on central Russia. Communist social and economic policies, such as the confiscation of gentry land, brought significant popular support, and the Party developed an effective propaganda apparatus. On the other hand, the participatory democracy of the soviets in towns and provinces was much reduced in favour of top-down Communist Party control.

The First World War and the Revolution caused massive disruption as well as the breaking of economic links in the course of Civil War campaigns (in particular the greatly limited access of central Russia to food and fuel). The Soviet government used extreme measures in the face of popular dissatisfaction with living conditions and political opposition to the Communist dictatorship. A powerful police organisation, the All-Russian Cheka (VChK), was created and "Red Terror" was declared after the attempted assassination of Lenin in September 1918.^[11]

The development of the Red Army was especially important. In the course of 1918 conscription became the main means of recruitment (coupled with various anti-"desertion" measures). Increasing use was made of former Tsarist officers, some of whom had been coerced into Soviet service.^[12] Attempts at state control of the economy must also be seen as part of a continuation of methods used in the First World War.^[13] It was to the advantage of the Communists that "their" territory - north-central and eastern European Russia - was the most developed part of the country as well as the location of many of the military assets built up during 1914-17.

The overall situation in October and November 1918, after a year of Civil War and at the end of the First World War, was complex. The Communists now controlled north-central European Russia as far east as the Ural Mountains. To the west and south they had been contained by regions under German wartime occupation - Finland, the former Baltic provinces, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, the Don Host (and further south in the Caucasus, the Germans and Turks had occupied Georgia and Azerbaijan). To the east the vastness of Siberia was controlled by the Czechoslovaks. Small Allied forces held the northern ports and Vladivostok. An anti-Bolshevik government (the PA-RG) - "democratic" and powerless, but claiming national authority - existed in Omsk.

Reds and Whites: 1918-1919

The Allies and Kolchak

November 1918 marked an abrupt and fundamental change. Firstly, the Allied victory radically altered the strategic geography. [14] The German and Austro-Hungarian armies began a hasty withdrawal, creating a vast power vacuum, most importantly in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic region. Allied fleets could now operate in the Baltic and Black Seas, not only the Far North and the distant Pacific. The Allies, especially the British and French, could give direct support to Russian elements which had been "loyal" to them during the World War. Paradoxically, however, victory

eliminated the main incentive and military potential for large-scale involvement in Russia. Allied intervention before November 1918 had included a political ("counter-revolutionary") motivation, but its role above all had been strategic and anti-German. That aspect now vanished.^[15] At the same time, war-weariness, rapid demobilisation of the armies, and a global range of commitments greatly limited the Allied forces that could be committed to operations in Russia. (The Japanese case was rather different.)

Secondly, in November 1918 an authoritarian, ostensibly all-Russian, government was created in Omsk (Siberia) under an Allied-supported leader, Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak (1874-1920). The admiral had been the energetic wartime commander of the Black Sea Fleet but had resigned because of the power of the revolutionary committees. When Kolchak arrived in Omsk in October 1918, he was prevailed upon to become War and Navy Minister of the PA-RG, and two weeks later a coup, carried out by local Cossacks and with the approval of local British military representatives, gave him dictatorial power. The admiral assumed the title of Supreme Ruler (*Verkhovnyi pravitel'*). His authority was "White" - Russian-nationalist and militarist - unlike the more broad-based Komuch and PA-RG. [16]

South Russia and Siberia

Some two thousand miles away the victorious Allies divided the territory of south Russia into two "spheres of influence", a French one in Ukraine and the Crimea and a British in the North Caucasus. France sent a considerable expedition, which began to arrive in Odessa by sea in mid-December 1918. The French faced difficulties because no one controlled the Ukrainian hinterland, and the Soviet troops were advancing rapidly into that territory from the north. The French surrendered Kherson (at the mouth of the Dnepr River) in March 1919 and Odessa in April. The direct involvement of the French Army ended with this fiasco. The emphasis in Paris was now on a *cordon sanitaire* along the western border of Russian territory. The British had an easier task on "their" stretch of the Black Sea coast, as a relatively firm authority had been established in the Don and Kuban Cossack lands, with the supportive presence of the Volunteer Army. The British did not send troops, however they did begin to ship in equipment and supplies.

One way to look at the ebb and flow of the Civil War in 1919 (and 1920) is as a series of attacks by a coalition of hostile forces again revolutionary Russia. In the later USSR, historians adopted Stalin's formulation of the first, second, and third "campaigns (pokhody) of the Entente", which stressed foreign intervention. The minority nationalists of the Russian Empire had a radically different perspective, seeing a series of "Muscovite" attempts to reverse the process of "national liberation". There was without a doubt a three-sided struggle involving Reds, Whites and minority nationalists. The White slogan, "Russia one and indivisible", was as antipathetic to the minority nationalist cause as Moscow's "internationalism" was. The Communist leaders, many of whom were not Great Russians, advanced policies over time that were more sensitive to the cultural demands of the minorities. The result was a remarkable federal structure, although with a tightly unified Communist

Party at its core. This was transformed into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922.

After the autumn 1918 retreat across the Urals of the Czechoslovaks and anti-Bolshevik forces, the Soviet position there had seemed more secure. Suddenly in early March 1919 the Siberian White armies launched an offensive through Ufa back towards the Volga. Kolchak received some British support in the form of military supplies, but he failed to set off an upsurge of anti-Soviet action in the regions his armies entered. Moreover, he was unable to create a secure political base back in Siberia. The Communists also benefitted from the scare that followed Kolchak's "Ufa offensive" - the consolidation of the Red Army. By mid-summer Kolchak had been defeated and his forces thrown back beyond the Urals, never to return.

Much the same thing happened in the south. In the summer and autumn of 1919, the combined forces of the Volunteer Army and the Cossacks - Denikin's "Armed Forces of South Russia" (AFSR) - were able to drive as far north as Orel, only 250 miles from Moscow, the so-called "second Entente campaign". (Smaller White forces also advanced on Petrograd from the direction of Estonia). The AFSR had a rudimentary - and essentially reactionary - political outlook, and it was unable to exploit popular dissatisfaction in the Soviet-controlled zone. [18] The anti-Communist cause in South Russia had also been bedevilled by internal conflicts between the Denikin's "White" leadership, on the one hand, and minority nationalists (especially the Ukrainians) and advocates of Cossack autonomy, on the other. The rapidly developing Red Army was able to halt Denikin's advance and drive it back. Paradoxically, the army of the industrial "proletarian revolution" had also assembled a large traditional force on horseback and this "Red cavalry" provided the main striking force used against the Whites.

Soviet Heartland: Consolidation and Mobilization

The Communist government in Moscow was able to maintain control over central Russia in 1919 through its combination of carrot and stick and the absence of viable alternatives. The 8th Party Congress in March 1919 was a significant moment, in which the Party declared that its aim was to create a social base among the "middle peasant" (*seredniak*) majority, an essential source of military conscripts and food. The Congress also solidified the structure of the Communist party and confirmed top-down control of the Red Army. Although there was a significant amount of internal dissent in both town and countryside in the Soviet zone, this could not challenge the Communist political hold.^[19]

Completing the Soviet Victory: 1919-1920

The Polish-Soviet War

The failure of the Orel offensive was followed by the collapse of the AFSR between November 1919 and January 1920. Throughout this period acute political conflict between the Volunteer Army and the Cossacks continued. When the White forces found temporary refuge in the Crimean peninsula,

Denikin was replaced by General Petr Vrangel (1878-1928). Meanwhile Kolchak's army endured a long retreat east along the Trans-Siberian railway, harried by partisan bands, riddled by typhus, and subject to the extremes of the Siberian winter. Omsk fell in November 1919. Kolchak's train retreated east to Irkutsk, where the admiral was handed over by his Czechoslovak bodyguards. In February 1920, after a brief trial, he was shot.

The collapse of the Whites in South Russia and western Siberia in the spring of 1920 seemed to indicate that the Civil War was over. However, another confrontation erupted, which has been interpreted either as a third "Entente campaign" or as further Soviet aggression. This was the Polish-Soviet War, which began with a Polish thrust into Ukraine in late April 1920, and was followed by the capture of Kiev in May. Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935), the head of state (and veteran revolutionary), intended to create a Polish-dominated federation of states including Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus (all of which had historical links with Poland and significant Polish minorities). The Poles claimed that their attack was pre-emptive and meant only to protect their borderlands from attack.

In June 1920 the situation was transformed, as the Red Army drove the Poles out of Kiev. Parallel offensives pushed west through Minsk in Belarus, and across western Ukraine. The rapid advance of the Red Army towards the Vistula River and Warsaw raised the stakes of the campaign. The Soviet goal became the destruction of the bourgeois Polish state and an advance into Germany - spreading the revolution with the bayonets of the Red Army. [20] In the end, the poorly co-ordinated Red thrusts were fended off, and by October 1920 the two sides were not far from the line they had held six months earlier. Moscow had overestimated the Red Army's ability to fight in central Europe, as it had underestimated Polish nationalism.

Vrangel: the Last of the Whites

The Red Army had also been distracted by a final campaign against General Vrangel. Vrangel's base in the Crimea was a readily defensible one, but the Whites lacked any significant military resources, aside from the old guard of the Volunteer Army. The Cossacks, who had been so important as the social base of the counter-revolution, were now under Soviet occupation on the far side of the Sea of Azov. As for the "Entente", the British refused to provide military aid, while the French were unable to do so. In the end, on the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Red Army broke into the peninsula, and the White survivors fled by sea. There was an irony at work. One of the main war aims of Imperial Russia in 1914-1917 had been the Turkish straits; now the bedraggled survivors of the White cause, having abandoned the territory of Russia, had to take refuge in Constantinople under Allied protection.

Internal Challenges

The Communist government in Moscow was able to maintain control over central Russia in 1919-1920 partly because it was more sensitive to popular demands than were its White enemies. The role of foreign interventionists and the Polish invasion had also allowed Moscow to play the International Responses to the Russian Civil War (Russian Empire) - 1914-1918-Online

nationalist card. Worsening economic conditions, however, created social turmoil. This came to a head after the final defeat of organised White military forces in the autumn of 1920 in rural regions, like Tambov, and at Petrograd and Kronstadt.^[21] The Communists were able to keep control, partly due to their monopoly of military power, partly due to the lack of the organised political leaders among the restless population, and partly due the effective abandonment of forced grain requisitioning following the adoption of the New Economic Policy.

Conclusion

Historians still debate when the Civil War ended. It would take the Communists some time to regain control of the edges of the old Empire, and the last Japanese troops were withdrawn only in 1922. The main fighting, however, was effectively over by November 1920, and the Soviet victory was not in doubt.

The Communists won the Civil War because they had a social and economic programme that enabled them to attract and keep mass (if not majority) support and because they combined this with powerful instruments of force in the form of the Red Army and the Cheka. They always controlled the heartland of the Russian state around Petrograd and Moscow, while their opponents were restricted to the periphery amidst competing political and ethnic interests. But from the point of view of Lenin, Trotsky, and their comrades, the outcome of the Revolution and the Civil War was only a half victory. The overall aim of these Marxist internationalists had been to transform the "Imperial" World War into a European revolution. This had failed. Russia's remote location, the strength of the victorious Allies, and the recovery of conservative forces in Central Europe left the socialist experiment isolated in a backward country devastated by internal conflict.

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Notes

- ↑ Badcock, Sarah: Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia. A Provincial History, Cambridge 2007, examines regional developments using Nizhnyi Novgorod and Kazan as case studies.
- 2. ↑ The most useful treatment of the Bolsheviks and their leadership remains Service, Robert: Lenin. A Political Life, vols 2-3, Basingstoke 1991, 1995.
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- 7. ↑ Smith, Scott: Captives of Revolution. The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Dictatorship, 1918-1923, Pittsburgh 2011.
- 8. † Swain, Geoffrey: The Origins of Russian Civil War, London 1995.
- 9. ↑ A full discussion of Trotsky as a military leader remains to be written. The best biography is now Service, Robert: Trotsky. A Biography, London 2010.
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- 11. † Rat'kovskii, I. S.: Krasnyi terror i deiatel'nost' VChK v 1918 gody [The Red Terror and activities of the VChK in 1918], St Petersburg 2006.
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- 13. ↑ Holquist, Peter: Making War, Forging Revolution. Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921, Cambridge 2002.
- 14. ↑ Pearce, Brian: How Haig Saved Lenin, New York 1987.
- 15. ↑ See Foglesong, David: America's Secret War Against Bolshevism. U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920, Chapel Hill 1995. In reality the American role in Russia was small. To suggest, moreover, that even the short-lived British and French intervention represented a new departure in armed international politics is unconvincing.
- 16. ↑ Smele, Jonathan: Civil War in Siberia. The Anti-Bolshevik Government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918-1920, Cambridge 1996.
- 17. ↑ A recent case study discussing Viatka Province, where the policies of Kolchak and Communists competed for peasant support, is Retish, Aaron: Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War. Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922, Cambridge 2008.
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- 19. ↑ Brovkin, Vladimir: Behind the Front Lines of the Russian Civil War. Political Parties and Social Movement in Russia, 1918-1922, Princeton 1994.
- 20. † For Lenin's hitherto secret support for a Red Army drive across Poland see Pipes, Richard (ed.): The Unknown Lenin. From the Secret Archive, New Haven 1996.
- 21. † See especially Landis, Erik: Bandits and Partisans. The Antonov Movement in the Russian Civil War, Pittsburgh 2007.

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