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Post-war Societies (Russian Empire)

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In contrast with the war in the West and its aftermath, the First World War in Eastern Europe did not come to an end in 1918, but instead gave rise to wars of national independence and to a prolonged civil war in the territory of the former Russian Empire. The social and ethnic conflicts, and geographically extended operations by military formations of different types, resulted in an unprecedented rupture of civilization. On the basis of a shattered economy and infrastructure, and a population polarized in manifold ways, the Bolsheviks forcefully established a new kind of party dictatorship. Driven by ideological visions, the dictatorship relied on party loyalty "hardened" during the Civil War (1917-1922). In addition, it was possible to compel an exhausted and generally recalcitrant population to cooperate through a system of state-controlled distribution of resources, providing privileges, the threat of punishment or its implementation.

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Introduction

From the summer of 1917 on, the Bolsheviks benefitted from war weariness in the population. After seizing power, they knew how to transform this into political violence against internal and external foes. With their calls for peace, the Decree on Land (26 October [8 November] 1917), Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia (2 November [15 Nov.] 1917) and the Decree on Workers' Control (14 November [27 Nov.] 1917), the Bolshevik leadership sought, or at least intended to respond to popular demands that up until October 1917 had constituted the aims and content of the quite differentiated mass movements in the country. From spring 1918 on, the Bolshevik claim to power was increasingly based on the militarization of the economy and society. It linked the call appealing to the revolutionary-proletarian ethos of the "workers" with unprecedented but targeted measures of violent repression, the openly declared policy of "red terror."

Before the final Bolshevik victory, the population of the tsarist empire would suffer through a multitude of political and military conflicts. The confrontations were shaped by a simultaneous conjunction of foreign interventions, military clashes between Civil War parties in the narrower sense - the Whites, the Reds and nationalist forces - as well as various social conflicts: worker strikes, peasant uprisings, interethnic struggles and ataman warlordism (*atamanshchina*) on the empire's peripheries, along with multifarious forms of criminality and a proliferation of gangs.

The Catastrophe in Numbers

World War One revealed structural weaknesses and various deficiencies in legitimacy in the tsarist empire. It led to an unprecedented collapse of civilization, a brutalization of domestic conflicts, a barbarization of the conduct of war, and a loss of authority of state institutions. Imperial Germany, the Russian Empire, France and Austria-Hungary suffered the greatest losses, both in terms of soldiers killed at the battlefront and those who later died of their wounds. Nonetheless, Russia experienced a period of demographic growth until 1917. The theaters of battle in World War One had been on the non-Russian peripheries of the empire. By contrast, with the exception of Central Russia, the subsequent Civil War engulfed nearly all areas of the former empire. Troops on all sides had to contend with huge distances to be traversed. The death toll rose from losses in armed conflict and even more as a result of its extended consequences: destruction, epidemics and famines. The civil population bore its brunt. In the Central Russian territories, civilian fatalities were the result of malnutrition, starvation and epidemics. On the peripheries, they were a consequence of the shifting mobile war fronts and repeated changes in territorial control.

According to various different calculations, the population in the territories bound together as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) declined from some 142 million in 1917 to 132 million in 1922. Losses due to the Civil War and famine are estimated at 2.5 to 3 million for Russia, and 1 to 1.5 million for Ukraine. Furthermore, between 22 and 30 million people suffered in the subsequent famine 1922/23. Estimates for the death toll from starvation in the Volga area and Ukraine are

approximately 1 million each. Figures on the number of orphaned and homeless children range between 800,000 and 4 million. In addition, Russia lost after 1917 between 1.5 and 2.5 million inhabitants as a result of emigration.[1]

The Bolsheviks and their Adversaries

Old and New Elites

The October Revolution and the Civil War accelerated the exchange of elites in Russia. Experts whose advancement had in part been blocked in the old regime now supplanted the civil service nobility and still influential land-owning aristocracy in government offices and the military. The political institutions after 1917, by contrast, were largely staffed by members of the revolutionary intelligentsia, who had previously been frequently marginalized. Contemporaries took special note of the changes in the ethnic composition of the new elites. Although members of Russian nationality comprised the majority in both regimes, there was a striking shift in the case of the non-Russian elites. Since the 18th century, it had almost always been Germans, largely from the Baltic nobility, and members of the Polish nobility, who had occupied the second or third tiers after the Russians in leadership positions. Now they were replaced by peoples previously regarded as subaltern, especially Jews, as well as Latvians, Georgians and Armenians. Seen from an anti-communist vantage, this new constellation was open to interpretation as a further variant of a Jewish world conspiracy, due to the marked presence of Jews. Together with members of the educated strata in the tsarist empire, the revolutionary intelligentsia had formed a counter-culture that tended to be largely indifferent in terms of national distinctions. A further feature was the varied lives that members of this group had led, marked by confinement in prisons, banishment or residence abroad. Despite their ideologically grounded “internationalist“ outlook, many of the leading party cadre under Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and Joseph Stalin (1847-1953) had begun careers in politics, the police or military in dealing with national problems on the embattled non-Russian peripheries. This cadre generation was characterized by their unusual degree of geographical and social mobility. A distinctive characteristic was their lack of interest in or distance from social and ethnic origin. “Home” was neither a particular place nor a national *milieu*. Rather it was the network of revolutionary counter-culture, and later the party with its demands for higher “consciousness” (*soznatel’nost’*), discipline and obedience. This did not exclude the possibility of forming nationally based cliques.

The international ethos of the party elite at the time of the Civil War was not completely in keeping with the national profile of the majority of party members. In many non-Russian territories, Russians, Latvians and Jews comprised the party activists. For example, Russians among the party members in Ukraine in 1922 made up 52 percent although they constituted only about ten percent of the population. Inside the local parties, people seem to have concluded that Russian culture and the Russians represented the internationalist and proletarian principle, while the peasants and nomadic peoples represented the “fluctuating” or perhaps even counter-revolutionary principle.

The political elites that had risen from the underground to the reigns of power learned their new tasks by training on the job, accompanied by a high level of self-righteousness, dogmatic assertiveness, illusions and quite serious blunders in all spheres of politics and the economy. The unguided transition to a demonetized war economy, mythically inflated as the "proletarian barter economy," allowed them to mobilize all necessary resources for the war. During this phase, the Bolsheviks learned the techniques of running an economy of power and war, and acquired the ability to mobilize a population that was opposed to the war. In short, they learned how to rule by force and use of violence. During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks changed into a party of bureaucracy and the military; it offered the members of previously subaltern strata and ethnic groups substantial opportunities for advancement.

Before October already, the soviets or councils - functioning more as bodies of approval and acclamation than of democratic decision-making - became merely decorative organs in the Civil War, or were replaced by military-revolutionary committees with unlimited powers. Only after the end of the Civil War soviets were built up once again, albeit at this juncture as an appendage of the party dictatorship and administration. These soviets now had little in common with the workers' and soldiers' councils created in 1917.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Adversaries

While after seizing power on 25/26 October [6/7 November] 1917, the Bolsheviks proved able to expand Petrograd and Central Russia into their power base, their opponents were forced to operate from the periphery. The front of the anti-Bolshevik forces was geographically split and in political terms highly heterogeneous. Gathered together were representatives of the national movements from the Caucasus to Finland, socialists of all stripes, and groups extending in political persuasion all the way to openly counter-revolutionary elements, bent on undoing not only the October Revolution but the February Revolution as well.

In Russia's geographical heartland, the Bolsheviks proved able to exploit the internal lines of operation to their advantage. They had control of the centers of industry and armaments manufacture in the country. The temporary loss of the agrarian surplus territories, which functioned in a certain sense as a kind of Russian (counter-revolutionary) Vendée, led to their ruthless approach to the peasantry. The "proletarian barter economy," later called "War Communism," combined utopian ideas of a direct transition to socialism with the constraints of a war economy. The fundamentals of wartime communism entailed the elimination of free trade and the dissolution of the monetary economy, in any case shattered, the regulating of agricultural surpluses and reserves and the militarization of factory work.

The ruthless requisitioning on both sides of the Civil War front, the class war between the poor and rich fomented by the Bolsheviks in the villages, and the reintroduction by the Whites of estate ownership, in part feared and partially implemented, provoked innumerable peasant uprisings. The Makhno movement in Ukraine and the peasants' army of Aleksandr Stepanovich Antonov (1889 –

1922) in the Tambov province became the symbol of militant "green protest." But the peasant movements remained splintered. They were subject to the strategy of their adversaries, who were politically and militarily superior. It was not until the sailors' Kronstadt rebellion (2-18 March 1921) that the general sense of dissatisfaction became associated with the political and economic dictatorship the Bolsheviks had established. Despite the bloody suppression, the peasant uprisings and the Kronstadt mutiny led to a volte-face, with a shift from "War Communism" to the "New Economic Policy" (NEP). However, its prerequisite was victory over counter-revolutionary forces and the foreseeable end of foreign intervention.

Violence and Compulsion

Violence has been treated in different ways in the historical literature. In recent decades, its investigation has gone through a substantial change. Today the short- and long-term causes, as well as the social context of violent perpetrators are still the main focus of inquiry. However, in recent years violence has also been analyzed as a form of communication. Questions are now raised not only about the "why," or the motives of the perpetrators and the behavior of the victims, but also about the "how", namely the forms it assumes, its expressions and symbolism, and who the targets of such violence are.[2]

Although before 1914 it is possible to identify traditions of violence in various segments of Russian society, the Civil War constituted new forms and very different modes of military, state and popular violence than had existed earlier. The Russian army became a disorganizing factor (by desertion, plundering and violence) and accelerated the downfall of the old regime and in particular the collapse of the Provisional Government. The wave of mass desertions from the autumn of 1917 on reflected the ongoing collapse of the authority of the state. Desertion remained a substantial problem both for the Bolsheviks and the anti-Bolshevik forces. This was closely associated with the situation in the villages, malnutrition, a lack of equipment, poor sanitary conditions and the high level of mobility of the troop formations. In addition, the Bolsheviks tended to conscript more recruits than the army was able to maintain, equip and arm. Conscription and the capture of deserters became a veritable building block in constructing the state in the countryside, which was more under the control of mobile military detachments than stable institutions.

The winter of 1917/1918 was a time of drunkenness and violence by local military band, criminals and other civilians. From mid-1918 if not earlier, anarchic excesses existed side by side with organized violence. The latter acquired the upper hand in Bolshevik-controlled territory, from autumn 1918 on. It was challenged once more by the sailors' rebellion in Kronstadt (March 1921), the numerous peasant revolts and Cossack resistance in the areas of crop surpluses in the Russian south and east, Ukraine and Siberia.

The areas outside the Russian heartland were the actual theaters of battle in the Civil War. Constantly changing armed formations traversed the area. There were White, Red and nationalist detachments on the rampage in the Cossack territories, Siberia and Ukraine, as well as the

paramilitary units of the Atamans. As a rule, the changes in control over an area went hand in hand with looting and punitive operations. The armed formations of the peasants, Atamans and other warlords were characterized by weak levels of cohesion and organization. In the long run, they did not constitute a serious adversary, neither for the Whites nor for the Reds, but they harassed the population just as severely as those better organized forces.

Groups of victims and perpetrators during the Civil War cannot be easily distinguished when it comes to correlating these with ethnic groups, social strata or classes. For example, Jews were both perpetrators on the Bolshevik side and victims in pogroms; peasants were active in rebellions and in acts of revenge, while they were victimized by White and Red looting and pillage. Workers were active in the Red Guards and later as commissars, and they became the victims of White and even of Red violence. Members of the wealthy and educated classes, the so-called "former people" (officers, specialists etc.) were actors and victims on both sides. Only former bourgeois elements (entrepreneurs, merchants, estate owners etc.) as well as members of the higher clergy were exclusively victims of the Bolsheviks.

Along with numerous examples of indiscriminate violence, there were also expressive acts that sent a message to the antagonists and spectators. In most cases, acts of violence were public or announced in public. Among the Bolsheviks, the arsenal of "self-confessed" terror consisted of the threat and declaration of executions, hostage taking, mass arrests, the establishment of concentration camps and mass shootings. Notorious are the Bolshevik massacres of strikers and soldiers in Astrakhan (March 1919), deportations and massacres of Cossacks at the Don and Kuban rivers (1919 and 1920) and, after the withdrawal of general Petr N. Wrangel's (1878-1928) troops from Crimea, mass shootings and deportations of Whites, officers and civilians (end of 1920). In the prisons, inmates were often maltreated.

Violence of a more symbolic, non-physical nature included acts of humiliation and coercion to induce individuals to make public confessions. Another was the violence implemented in the form of resolutions that compelled people to either the allegiance or the denunciation of others, such as when villages were forced to hand over kulaks or to exclude rebels from their community. Factory workers had to publicly condemn their "ringleaders" and to swear an oath of loyalty. We can readily imagine the intended polarizing consequences of such acts of compulsion: the destruction of solidarity and community in villages, in the workforce of enterprises or in the military crews and staffs. Enmity, mistrust and fear became the rule.

Forms of redistributive violence, that is, requisitions, confiscations and pillage, were carried out on all sides. Taking booty is a common practice in almost every war until the present day. For the Bolsheviks, the procurement of food supplies and materials of all kinds had an additional strategic, ideological-political meaning: it served to stigmatize, significantly weaken or even destroy the class enemies, the bourgeoisie and the kulaks. This policy was a part of the socialist project whose aims would later continue to be pursued using other means. The nationalization of industry, control over the sphere of circulation, the forcible requisitions and numerous other forms of "extraeconomic

constraint," including the "weapon of food," provided the Bolsheviks with a multitude of instruments for compelling the population to cooperate, their opposed political convictions notwithstanding.

On the whole, the White armies were no less violent than the Red Army. Their behavior toward peasants and workers confirmed the charge that they represented the old higher classes. The excesses committed by the White and nationalist formations and the Ataman units, especially against the Jews in the cities and *shtetls*, had neither a political nor an economic goal. They were an expression of demoralization of the armed forces and did not implement any political aims. These acts of violence continued the erosion of state institutions. Cities and entire regions were transformed into spaces of brute violence.

The peasant rebels often utilized highly expressive forms of counter-violence in the struggle against the requisitions and reprisals of the Bolsheviks and their adversaries. For example, members of procurement detachments were seized, their stomachs were slit open and then stuffed with grain or straw. Since the peasants were often poorly armed, they used cut and thrust weapons, such as meat chops and sticking knives. Consequently, their victims were literally butchered.

Insurrection in the Countryside and City

The end of the war, the dissolution of the old imperial army and the collapse of the institutions of the old regime led in the countryside to the emergence of spaces removed from state control. The village communities withdrew into themselves. The distribution of land among the peasants in 1917/18, the expropriation of all so-called private land (that is, former noble estates, farms separated from the peasant community, land of the church) and finally, the restoration of the traditional Russian peasant community (*mir*, *obshchina*) went hand in hand with a dedifferentiation of the rural structures. Intertwined with this was a decline in exchange between city and countryside and between the agricultural zones, the Black Earth Region and the commercial zones in Central Russia.

On the Bolshevik side, the collapse of commerce threatened the survival of the urban and industrial population in Central Russia, and the provisioning of the Red Army. In the summer of 1918, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the "food-supply dictatorship," that is, the transition to an administered distribution economy in the cities and to forcible requisitions in the countryside. In mid-1919, some 26,000 persons were active in special requisition units (*prodotriady*). The Bolshevik requisition squads were assigned the task of carrying the class war into the village. According to the Bolshevik reading, it was the purported intention of the representatives of the village bourgeoisie, the kulaks, to starve out the cities and the Red Army. Yet the Committees of Poor Peasants (*komitety bednoty*) in the villages created for the purpose of expropriation and redistribution proved to be a failure. They continued to operate in Ukraine until 1923, there serving in actuality as a Russian control apparatus to ensure the delivery of goods.

The often violent requisitions carried out by Bolshevik detachments led to a situation where by 1920/21, many districts of the Black Earth Region — in southern Russia, western Siberia and

Ukraine — were in a state of insurrection. That was particularly the case in the Tambov province and regions along the central Volga and in western Siberia.

The fighting in Ukraine assumed somewhat different forms among the insurgents. These are subsumed under the term "*atamanshchina*." Charismatic atamans organized an armed retinue which, over the course of smaller-scale and larger campaigns, attracted people from the countryside to join its ranks. Violence here was partially an instrument used for resistance or plunder, and in part sprang from the habitus of the perpetrators when it targeted Jews or other minorities. One can discern elements of a cult of the leader as practiced by many atamans; this also emerged among the Red forces, particularly the cavalry. On both sides, violence spurred a sense of community. Among the Bolsheviks, a cult arose after victory around the partisan leaders and commanders. It is not by accident that the cult around Lenin and later Stalin had its roots in the milieus of the militarized party.

The demands of the peasant insurgents did not differ fundamentally from those of the striking workers or the rebellious sailors of Kronstadt: equality, a just distribution (as opposed to the privileges of the party bosses that could be observed), acceptance of nationalized state industry, socialism in its broad sense - and soviet democracy in the spirit of 1917 - emerged as the basic principles popular in the countryside and the urban centers. The peasant uprisings and a number of strikes against the forced economy of the Bolsheviks should thus also be seen as a mode of "collective bargaining by riot" [3] with a foe with whom one shared certain fundamental values.

The Bolsheviks also gradually realized that they could not achieve their political goals solely by means of compulsion and violence. In view of the general hardship and destruction, in many questions they were compelled to yield to popular pressure. This related to the need to restore commerce. The requisitions were replaced by a tax on natural produce. The often terrible anti-kulak campaigns were halted. The widespread program of forced labor and work armies was abandoned. It was important for political legitimacy to grant the soviets greater latitude again. In the meantime, all the competing socialist parties had been ousted from the soviets. Many of their members were behind bars or had emigrated.

Given the array of different currents in the party in 1921/22, it cannot be unambiguously determined whether the concessions were only tactical in nature or derived from basic realizations. Yet the ban on factions and adherence to a political monopoly of the Bolsheviks, proclaimed at the 10th party congress in 1921 - "dictatorship of the proletariat and the poor peasantry" in Bolshevik parlance - made it clear to the population who was in charge.

Conclusion

In Western Europe, the end of World War One did not lead to a fundamental destabilization of the state. However, in Eastern Europe the Paris Agreements did not bring about a satisfactory solution. The struggle for national statehood determined the armed conflicts from Finland to Turkey (and the Near East). A very specific combination of class struggle, namely proletarian internationalism as a

new variant of imperialist thinking, and national state-building was implemented in Russia. The most important actors on this stage, the Bolsheviks, did not have the primary goal of building a new state or empire. Yet in the process they became the blood-soaked architects of a new species of statehood.

The institutional arrangements that crystallized during the Civil War were quite original. There was a new type of party: as a supranational, non-propertied yet nonetheless ruling political class. It governed the new empire dictatorially, holding it together. This permitted organizing the state as a union of republics, that is, prospective nation-states. By contrast, the party had to remain "international." It proved itself as an alterable multifunctional organization. The party governed the country after a fashion. Despite changes in the profile of its personnel, politics and mentality, and the ever shifting tasks it was confronted with, it remained the backbone of the empire. It is difficult to determine the degree to which it was bolstered in this venture by its ideal convictions and ultimate goals, and to what extent with the outbreak of the Civil War it was driven solely by an insatiable hunger for power. That is particularly evident in the discussions about the significance of violence. There is no doubt that it remained constitutive for Bolshevik rule. The party had learned that political aims could be achieved by violence against a "backward," recalcitrant population; it had determined that progress could only be realized by exercising brute force. Here, in a highly specific manner, the exercise of violence and a fundamentalist-radical variant of enlightenment joined hands.

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Notes

1. ↑ Schramm, Gottfried (ed.): Handbuch der Geschichte Russlands, vol.3/II, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 1079-1087; Poliakov, Yu. A. et al. (eds.), Naselenie Rossii v XX veke v trekh tomakh [Population of Russia in 20th century in three volumes], vol. I. Moscow 2000, pp. 94-95; Narskii, Igor, Zhizn v katastrofe. Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917-1922 gg. [Life in the catastrophe. Everyday life in the region of the Ural in 1917-1922], Moscow 2001, 122-139; annexes 2 and 3.
2. ↑ Heitmeyer, Wilhelm/Hagan, John (eds.) Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung, Wiesbaden 2002; Trotha, Trutz von, The problem of violence: Some theoretical remarks about „regulative orders of violence", polical heterarchy, and dispute regulations beyond the state, In: Klutz, Georg (ed.): The problem of violence: Local conflict settlement in contemporary Africa, Cologne 2011, pp. 31-47.
3. ↑ Hobsbawm, Eric: The Machine Breakers, in: Past & Present 1 (1952), pp. 1, 57-70, 59.

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