

The Russian Civil War

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The Russian Civil War was one of the bloodiest conflicts on Russian soil. Its results led to the formation of the Soviet Union and forever changed the development of the country's future. During the Russian Civil War Lenin and the Bolsheviks solidified their position in power and conquered the Whites through the expulsion of opposing party members, and militarization of the economy and peasants.

The beginnings of the Russian Civil War occurred after the Bolshevik Revolution in October of 1917. After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, a Provisional Government was arranged to govern Russia. This new government towards the end of its existence was led by Alexander Kerensky.¹ However, the group was confronted with several issues. For instance, several people were upset about Russia's continuing involvement in World War I despite the devastation it caused domestically and economically. People also noticed their lack of decision making and new changes to better Russia. In response to this the Bolsheviks, led by party front-runner Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, stormed the Winter Palace which was the headquarters of the administration. The attack was successful, and the party effectively dismantled the Provisional Government on October 25, 1917.² A new government dominated by the Bolshevik's also known as the Sovnarkom was then created with Lenin as the appointed leader.³

Yet not everyone became satisfied with Bolshevik control. This was especially seen after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918. Though it officially ended Russia's

1. Foley, Michael. 2018. *Russian Civil War: Red Terror, White Terror, 1917–1922*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military.

2. Suny, Ronald. 2010. *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*. Oxford University Press.

3. Wright, Alistair S. 2016. "The 'First Phase' of the Russian Civil War: Soviet Karelia, October 1917-May 1918." *Europe-Asia Studies* 1693-1711.

involvement in World War I several became angry at Lenin for giving up extensive amounts of territory in Eastern Europe. This became one of the main points of tension between the White Army and the Red Army. To oppose complete Bolshevik control the White Army began to form. The White's comprised of multiple individuals from varying backgrounds. Members included alienated Left Socialist Revolutionaries, Right party members, minorities fearing Russian rule, peasants, Tsarist supporters as well as assistance from the Allied Powers.⁴ The wide variety of members and leadership was later proven to become one of the army's weaknesses.

After the Bolshevik's took power and the conclusion of the country's involvement in World War I, battles and anti-Bolshevik uprisings occurred all over Russia. One of the first considered acts of aggression by the White Army was the take over of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In May of 1918 a Czechoslovakian legion, in retaliation to Trotsky's demands for surrender, incapacitated the Bolshevik's use of the railway system. In June 1918 the legion had an armed conflict against the Reds in Chelyabinsk. Losing control of the railway was a great loss for the Bolsheviks and altered the army's ways of communication and transport.

Other contributing factors to the Red and White conflict included the assassination of the Romanov's. Viewed as a symbol of hope for Tsarist supporters in the White Army, Lenin, and the Bolsheviks feared the liberation of the imperial family. On July 16-17, 1918 Lenin ordered that the entire Romanov family was to be taken to their prison-house cellar and shot.⁵ This became a huge blow to morale for parts of the White Army and shocked the civilians in Russia.

4. Zivich, Edward A., and Richard D. King. 2019. "Russian Civil War." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

5. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2017. "Russian Civil War." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. January 3. Accessed April 15, 2019.

The meeting of the Fifth Russian Congress of Soviets from July 4-10, 1918 also created strains among the incompatible sides. At this meeting the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic is ratified July 10, further sanctioning the Bolsheviks position in power. Tensions between the two armies were exponentially raised after Vladimir Lenin's failed assassination. On August 30, 1918, Fanny Kaplan, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, attempted to murder Lenin.⁶ While he suffered two gunshot wounds the Bolshevik leader lived. However, this created ample paranoia and fear among the party. Overall multiple events not directly connected to combat heightened the pressure between the Red and White armies and contributed to the ongoing Civil War.

Significant battles included the Battle of Yekaterinodar which occurred in April of 1917. This was the first major battle between the two armies. General Kornilov associated with the Kornilov affair dies in combat. He is then replaced with General Denikin as commander of the Southern front. Another important fight was the Battle of Kazan from September 5-8, 1918.⁷ Fighting against the Czech Legion and the People's Army of Komch the Red's take back control of the city. Other important encounters include the Battle of Orel and the Battle of Peregonoka. For most of the war, the Whites were a serious threat and concern to the Bolsheviks. A turning point, however, was in November 1918 with Kolchak's military coup d'état. By setting up his own dictatorship of all non-Russian territory, tensions cultivated within the White leadership.⁸ After his ousting in December 1919, the government of the Whites weakened because of their

6. Suny, Ronald. *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*.

7. Foley, Michael. *Russian Civil War: Red Terror, White Terror, 1917–1922*.

8. Mawdsley, Evan. 1987. *The Russian Civil War*. Winchester: Allen & Unwin Inc.

lack of direction. They began losing influence and the Allied powers withdrew troops and resources while the Bolsheviks began mobilizing theirs.

The concluding battles of the Russian Civil War were the Battle of Tsaritsyn and the Siege of Perekop. Lasting from 1918 to 1920 the Battle of Tsaritsyn was one of the longest conflicts in the war and fought for control of the Volga River. It resulted in a Bolshevik victory. The Siege of Perekop was the concluding battle on the Southern front which occurred from November 7-15, 1920 against Wrangel's forces.⁴ Leon Trotsky's essay "Don't Let Them Get Away!" was written right before the battle as a call to action against the Whites. Ordering the Red army troops to "at all costs crush" Wrangel's army and prevent their retreat.⁹ Trotsky also accurately predicts the importance of this siege asserting that "the next few days will decide the fate of Wrangel and his army."¹⁰ In the end, the skirmish devastated the White army and resulted in its collapse. While other conflicts still occurred in the East these battles concluded the majority of the Russian Civil War and secured the Bolsheviks position in power.

The Red Army won the Civil War for a few key reasons. The Bolshevik party's victory was made possible by the expulsion of opposing ideologies which lead to widespread control. While they became the majority, some individuals spoke out against them. One notable differing group was the Workers Opposition movement led by Aleksandr Shliapnikov and Aleksandra Kollontai.¹¹ They protested the bureaucratic tendencies of the party and their dealings with the working class and trade unions. The coalition was "indicative of considerable working-class

9. Trotsky, Leon. 1920. "Don't Let Them Get Away!" October 27.

10. Trotsky, Leon. "Don't Let Them Get Away!"

11. Siegelbaum, Lewis. n.d. "Worker's Opposition." *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. Accessed April 29, 2019.

disenchantment” with the party’s regulations and presented differing objectives to the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921.¹² In response to this proposal at the Congress, Vladimir Lenin officially outlawed any form of party deviation in his essay “On the Syndicalist and Anarchist Deviation in our Party.” Stating that only the Communist Party is “capable of withstanding the inevitable petty-bourgeois vacillations” who Lenin claims created the division itself.¹³ Primarily written to refute the Workers Opposition movement and the White army Lenin states that different political ideology than the Bolshevik’s is “radically wrong” and a “direct political danger to the very existence of the dictatorship.”¹⁴ In other writings, he claims that contradictory Left Revolutionaries’ “conception of Marxism is impossibly pedantic” who “failed to understand” core concepts.¹⁵ Lenin’s Cult of Personality and intolerance for opposing viewpoints is evident in this writing. The party’s attitude was reflective of Lenin’s and the treatment of wavering or conflicting members was apparent. Censorship and intolerance for variance in opinions not only occurred in the years of the Russian Civil War but throughout the history of the Soviet Union.

Extreme measures were taken to secure a unified political system. This can especially be seen in Lenin’s secret letter to the Politburo in March of 1922. Here he states that if it is “necessary for the realization” of a political goal to commit “brutal actions then it is necessary to

12. Siegelbaum, “Worker’s Opposition.”

13. Lenin, Vladimir. 1921. "On the Syndicalist and Anarchist Deviation in our Party." March 16.

14. Lenin, “Deviation in our Party.”

15. Lenin, Vladimir. 1923. “Our Revolution.” *Pravda* (No. 117). May 30.

do them.”¹⁶ He describes the devastation of war throughout the country and how the party can take advantage of it for the plan he “envisions.”¹⁷ Those who opposed his apparitions needed to “be taught a lesson” so significant that they would not “dare to think about any resistance whatsoever for several decades.”¹⁸ Lenin also writes in this secret letter his plan on dismantling the church, using their resources for the party’s gain, and the elimination of Cossacks through the Red Terror. During the time of the Red Terror “summary executions, tortures and desecrations of churches [were] committed by the Bolsheviks.”¹⁹ His stance on the use of brutality and horror in order to achieve his mission is evident and the members of the Politburo stood by him. Comrade Molotov even replied that they should “extend the campaign” of violence to additional areas “concentrating the forces and attention of the party.”²⁰ Overall this letter is extremely revealing of not only the actions the Bolsheviks committed in order to secure control but the Politburo’s blind allegiance to Lenin.

While the Red’s political standing was collective the White’s was the complete opposite. What unified them together was the belief that fighting the Bolshevik’s was “a basic patriotic duty incumbent on all Russians.”²¹ However because of the variance of political ideologies and views on leadership the management of the army was extremely poor. As stated in Lazarski’s

16. Lenin, Vladimir. 1922. " Secret Letter from Lenin." March 19.

17. Lenin, “Secret Letter.”

18. Lenin, “Secret Letter.”

19. Lazarski, Christopher. 1992. "White Propaganda Efforts in the South during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1919 (the Alekseev-Denikin Period)." *Slavonic & East European Review* 688-707.

20. Lenin, “Secret Letter.”

21. Lazarski, Christopher. “White Propaganda Efforts.”

journal article the White Army suffered from “inner contradictions within the anti-Bolshevik movement” which led to the “absence of appealing ideology” and disparity between their “words and deeds.”²²

The Red Army also won the Civil War because of the militarization of the economy and peasantry. After World War I Russia’s economy, labor force, and resources were devastated. Going from one war to another immediately created a strain on remaining soldiers and supplies. The Red’s Commissar of War Leon Trotsky’s essay “The Manpower Crisis and How to Solve It” identifies some of these issues. He acknowledges that there has been a “sharp economic decline of the country” resulting from these wars and in effect “excessive shortages.”²³ Within this writing, he outlines a plan to revive the Red Army as well as Russia’s standing economically. The most notable solution presented by Trotsky is the militarization of the economy. Asserting that the states greatest weapon is “compulsion [and] military force.”²⁴ Problems affecting the present economy included “labor intensity, careful handling of machinery and tools, [and] conscientious use of material” which could be solved if workers and factories were treated as if in “military combat.”²⁵ Important positions in power to oversee the start of “War Communism” were given to Bolshevik party members, which further extended the party’s control.²⁶

Militarization and mobilization of the peasantry were also essential to Bolshevik victory. Morale during the Civil War amongst the peasants was extremely low. Bitter about the

22. Lazarski, Christopher. “White Propaganda Efforts.”

23. Trotsky, Leon. 1920. "The Manpower Crisis and How to Solve It. Theses adopted by the Party Central Committee." January 22.

24. Trotsky. “Manpower Crisis.”

25. Trotsky. “Manpower Crisis.”

26. Zivich and King. “Russian Civil War.”

continuation of fighting during the first world war many peasants even deserted or refused to fight.²⁷ However to counteract this the Bolshevik's mobilized the peasants into labor forces and army units. Famine and destruction were widespread throughout the country and Lenin took advantage of this. Stating that by "putting down the opposition" and giving the promise of a better life the "vast majority of peasants will either be on our side" or not powerful enough to compete with.²⁸ Other tactics like the Red Terror also contributed to the mobilization of the peasants. However, while mass coercion was used many people joined out of hatred of the White Army. While they still feared complete Bolshevik control the Whites "embellished the old regime" which they feared more.²⁹ When White army General Kolchak began encroaching into Russian territory in the East many deserters returned to the Red Army.³⁰ This, as well as coercion, led to the army increasing exponentially. In January of 1920, the White Army of two hundred and fifty thousand hardly compared to the Red's three million, a clear reason for the Bolshevik victory.³¹

In conclusion, the Red Army was able to defeat the Whites because of the expulsion of opposing party members and the militarization of the economy and peasantry. Effectively organizing the country's resources is how the Bolshevik's were able to weaken and eventually

27. Osinsky, Pavel, and Jari Eloranta. 2014. "Why Did the Communists Win or Lose? A Comparative Analysis of the Revolutionary Civil Wars in Russia, Finland, Spain, and China." *Eastern Sociological Society* 318-337.

28. Lenin, "Secret Letter."

29. Osinsky and Eloranta. "Why Did the Communists Win or Lose?"

30. Osinsky and Eloranta. "Why Did the Communists Win or Lose?"

31. Osinsky and Eloranta. "Why Did the Communists Win or Lose?"

destroy the remains of the White Army. By securing their position in power Lenin and the party established the Soviet Union, changing the course of Russian history.

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