

Russian Civil War Overview / Historiography

This overview has been compiled by Patrick O'Shaughnessy (@historychappy) using the works below. When quotes are used, they correspond to the relevant colour. The majority of this overview is based on the work by Orlando Figes.

- **Orlando Figes, Revolutionary Russia, 2014.**
- **Stephen Lee, European Dictatorships, 1987**
- **Bunce, et al, Communist States, 2015.**

Russian Civil War

“Lenin was prepared for a civil war and perhaps even welcomed it as a chance to build his party’s power base.”

- ***Rationale - Civil War would polarise ‘revolutionary’ & ‘counter-revolutionary’ elements in Russia & extend the state’s military & political power, & use of terror. By signing Brest Litovsk, he could focus on the Whites rather than the German’s.***

“The rank & file were particularly opposed to Trotsky’s conscription of ex-tsarist officers ... Trotsky ridiculed his critics’ arguments: revolutionary zeal was no substitute for military expertise.”

- ***75,000 ex-tsarist officers were recruited.***

“... the Red Army was too big to be effective. It grew faster than the devastated Soviet economy was able to supply it ...’

- ***Conscription introduced in June 1918. In 1918, Bolsheviks control less than 1/6 of Russia.***
- ***Red Army; 1919 = 1 million men. 1920 = 3 million men. End of war = 5 million.***

- **Desertions, supply issues, shortages & conscriptions = Triggers for War Communism.**

War Communism Cause Theories (Neither is right)=

“... pragmatic response to Civil War exigencies”?
‘War Communism was rooted in Lenin’s ideology’?

Rather = “War Communism was not just a response to the Civil War. It was a means of fighting civil war, a set of policies to make class war against the peasantry & other social enemies.”

- War Communism = political response to exodus of workers from starving cities & urban food crisis. Requisitioning of surplus harvest in May 1918. Lenin = “the Kulaks / blood-suckers ... have grown rich on the hunger of the people ...’
- Food Levy = keeps workers at the factories & helps overcome urban hunger.
- Nationalisation = keep workers where they are needed (cities) for the purposes of War.
- Rationing = helped “... the Bolshevik dictatorship tighten its grip on the people”

“The totalitarian state had its origins in War Communism, which attempted to control every aspect of society ... the Soviet bureaucracy ballooned spectacularly during the Civil War.”

Tsarist state = could not impose itself on the majority.

Soviets = managed to achieve what the tsar had failed to do in this regard - 1920 = 5.4 million people worked for the Gov.

“This was not a Dictatorship of the proletariat but a Dictatorship of the Bureaucracy.” Joining the party = best way to get promotion within this system. Influx of the uneducated was a result - but they were more willing to follow the Party without critiquing it, so this suited the Party leadership.

The Party grows = they come to dominate local Soviets. These go from local revolutionary bodies controlled by assembly to “bureaucratic organs of the Party-state ...”

The Party increasingly becomes a ‘party-state’ based on the Communist Party. Lenin relies on Politburo to act quickly as opposed to the Sovnarkom, as it was smaller and contained his most loyal supporters. Sovnarkom will still exist to ‘rubber-stamp’ decisions already made, but no longer as the centre of government which it once was. Indeed, “The Politburo clearly provided clear and effective leadership during the Civil War.”

Local level - Senior Communists bypass local *soviets* in favour of the local *Communist Party*; Soviets had Mensheviks & SRs as members, so not as reliable. *Nomenklatura* takes root - using trusted Communists to implement policy. 1921 = increasing Party dominance over the Soviet-state.

Pre-September 1918 (attempted assassination) = Lenin not widely known. His quick recovery spawns the 'Christ-like' status the press gives him. **"It was the start of the Lenin cult."**

Red Terror - need for constant struggle against internal & external enemies causes the terror to turn within; **"constant civil war"**. Carries on into Stalin's years.

Terror causes protest - Cheka uses torture. Lenin Trotsky & Stalin stand by the Cheka.

Lenin; **"How can you make a revolution without firing squads?"**

Trotsky: (1920); **"Without Red Terror, the Russian Bourgeoisie, together with the world bourgeoisie, would throttle us long before the coming of revolution in Europe."**

"Terror was an integral element of the Bolshevik regime from the beginning."

Why did the Reds win?

- Reds had more men.
- Controlled the central terrain, the key industry, the core of the railway network - this gave them mobility. **"Bolsheviks were defending the heart of the homeland."**
- **"The rural populations tended to support the Reds as the lesser of two evils."**
- Politburo functions quickly and effectively.

Why did the White's lose?

- Divided between several fronts, lack of coordination, reliance on allies for supplies. No war council. **"...Allied intervention, where it did occur, was half-hearted and uncoordinated."**
- **"The root of the defeat was a failure of politics. The Whites proved unable and unwilling to frame policies capable of winning mass support."** No propaganda, symbols, politically divided due to a lack of political vision. **"Their sole idea was to put the clock back to before October 1917. They failed to adapt to the new revolutionary situation ... But the main cause of their undoing was their failure to accept the peasant revolution on the land."** **"They had no 'body of doctrine' and no overall leader."**

Peasant support for Reds - diminishes once White's were beaten (Red's lesser of two evils at the time - temporal support borne out of circumstance).

" ... the Bolsheviks ... had brought much of rural Russia to the brink of starvation."

“By 1920, the whole of the country was inflamed with peasant wars.” Peasants began chasing the Soviets out & destroying their infrastructure.

- Peasants - blamed the ‘Communists’, thinking that the ‘Soviets’ and ‘Bolsheviks’ were not to blame for the hardship - the change of Party name in March 1918 had not been communicated to them.

“By 1921, Bolshevik power had ceased to exist in much of the countryside.”

Workers were angry = communist attempt to subordinate Trade Unions to the Party-state.

- Moscow rebelled first. Feb 1927 = Kronstadt Naval base rebelled - they had played a key role in helping the Bolsheviks gain power. Trotsky took command of the armed response.

“This was the crisis situation in which the Tenth Party congress assembled in Moscow on 8 March 1920.”

- Bans factions - **“Henceforth the Central Committee was to rule the Party on the same dictatorial lines as the Party ruled the country ... Stalin’s rise to power was a product of the ban (on factions).”**
- Foundations of NEP - abandons food requisitioning - peasants can sell produce on the free market once a ‘tax in kind’ was paid - **“Lenin insisted that this was needed to quell the peasant uprisings.”**

The Civil War **“... shaped their political habits for a generation - until 1941, when another example of military success supplanted it.”**

Civil War = Bolsheviks gain = cult of sacrifice, military style of government with its constant ‘battles’ and ‘campaigns’, need to struggle permanently against enemies of the revolution, mistrust of the peasants, prototype of a planned economy with its militarization of labour & utopian visions of the state as the maker of a new society.