

WILEY

The Editors and Board of Trustees of the Russian Review

Russian and American Civil Wars

Author(s): William Henry Chamberlin

Source: *Russian Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Oct., 1952), pp. 203-210

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The Editors and Board of Trustees of the Russian Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/125555>

Accessed: 09/12/2013 14:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and *The Editors and Board of Trustees of the Russian Review* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Russian Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Russian and American Civil Wars

BY WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

THE Civil War that went on in Russia with varying degrees of intensity from the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in November, 1917, until the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt and the gradual elimination of peasant guerrilla resistance in 1921 has been almost forgotten in the United States. There is a considerable historical literature on the subject in Russian, written both from the Red and the White standpoints.

A few histories and books of memoirs have been translated into English. But to most Americans the outline of the Russian Civil War is dim and faded. This is unfortunate, because several valuable historical and political lessons may be drawn from this first great victory of international Communism.

First, it is noteworthy that Communism was not accepted enthusiastically, or even passively. The Soviet government only established its power after fighting a very fierce and implacable war, after mobilizing millions of men into the Red Army, after building up a tremendous apparatus of police terror.

Second, and this is a point of some topical importance, while the strongest military resistance to the Soviet régime was led by Russians, animated by patriotic, nationalist, and conservative sentiments, the most intense popular resistance was to be found in areas of the former Russian Empire where the majority of the people were non-Russian. This is especially true as regards the Ukraine, most of the Caucasus, and Central Asia. This same observation holds good for the new nations which established independent existence, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland.

Third, Communist political tactics during the Civil War were a preview of the tactics which were subsequently employed both in consolidating power in Russia and in extending that power over large areas of Europe and Asia during and after the Second World War. As often happens with doctrinaire fanatics, convinced of the rightness and inevitability of their ultimate end, the Soviet leaders showed themselves shrewd, realistic, and utterly unscrupulous in their immediate means.

They would give any number of false promises; they often made temporary coalitions with groups which they proposed, in the end,

to destroy. They used the jujitsu methods which have been very characteristic of Stalin's foreign policy in more recent years. Jujitsu, it may be noted, is a Japanese art of self-defense in which the opponent is induced, by various sleight-of-hand tricks, to throw himself by his own weight. The Soviet government exploited to the utmost the fission between the Russian and non-Russian elements in opposition, soothing the non-Russians with promises of autonomy or even independence which there was no intention of keeping. The Communists also proved expert in taking advantage of every weakness, every failure of the Whites in the field of political and economic reconstruction.

The final Communist victory was a product not so much of Soviet strength as of White weakness. This is how Stalin likes to win victories in the arena of international politics. The two masterpieces of Stalin's diplomacy were the pact with Hitler, which gave the Soviet Union some twenty-four million new subjects and a considerable accession of territory with a minimum expenditure of blood, and the acquisition of a controlling position in the Far East at the cheap price of a few days of token warfare with a collapsing Japan.

The Russian Civil War suggests several points of similarity, and other points of contrast with the American Civil War, which many Southerners still prefer to call the War Between the States. Both were large-scale conflicts, extending over vast areas and profoundly affecting the future destinies of the Russian and American peoples.

The two sides in both civil wars started almost from scratch in building up regular armed forces. Russia was in a state of profound military disorganization, following the greatest mutiny in history, when the huge Russian army simply melted away and streamed homeward in the summer and autumn of 1917, as a consequence of the complete breakdown of military discipline and state authority. The United States, unlike Russia, had no tradition of a large standing army or of military conscription. The first armies of the American Civil War were largely composed of raw recruits, many of the officers knowing little more than the men. In years of struggle these armies developed into the battle-hardened veteran forces which fought out the last grim campaigns in Virginia under Grant and Lee.

In the American Civil War the cleavage was clearly geographical, the Northern states against the Southern states, with a fringe of border states (Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, for instance) where sympathy was divided. There was an enclave of Union sympathizers in the South, in the mountainous region of Eastern Tennessee

and there were Southern sympathizers in the North. But in the main, and with the exception of certain regions where sympathy was divided and where there was guerrilla warfare, Lincoln could count on the loyalty of the North and Jefferson Davis on the loyalty of the South. The American Civil War was fought very much as a conflict between two separate nations, with some added element of "fifth column" activity on both sides of the fighting lines.

In Russia also there was a North-South cleavage. The area which remained constantly under Soviet rule was the northern and central part of European Russia. In this area were the two largest cities, Moscow and Petrograd, and a fairly homogeneous Russian population.

The most formidable military effort of the Whites came from the South and was represented by the Volunteer Army of General Denikin. The hard core of this army was composed of irreconcilable former officers of the Imperial Army, who in some cases, in the beginning of the struggle, formed whole units themselves, such as the famous Markov and Drozdovsky regiments.

This force, later renamed the Armed Forces of South Russia, swelled considerably in size in the first months of 1919 as the Kuban and Don Cossack regions, in the Southeast, rose in rebellion against Soviet requisitions and persecution of religion. By October, 1919, at the time of his greatest success, Denikin's vanguard was beyond Orel, within 175 miles of Moscow, and the Red Army had been driven from the Ukraine. The Whites then held all the main cities of South Russia, while the countryside was an uneasy no man's land, in which marauding local bands, with or without political coloration, were the most effective power.

The largest and perhaps most decisive campaigns of the Civil War took place in the last months of 1919, when Denikin's armies, spread out too thinly over too wide a territory, collapsed, as much from internal discontent and friction as from the strength of the Red Army. By the spring of 1920 the territory under White rule had shrunk to the Crimean peninsula, where General Baron Peter Wrangel put up the last organized stand of Old Russia. Wrangel was defeated and forced to evacuate his forces in November, 1920.

Another common feature of the two civil wars was the widespread and effective use of cavalry. The Cossacks were superb natural horsemen, with centuries of tradition as the crack cavalry of the Imperial Russian Army. The dashing raids of Wrangel, himself a

cavalry officer, Mamontov, and Shkuro contributed much to Denikin's spectacular territorial gains.

Cavalry also played a considerable part in some of the successes of the Confederates. Southern plantation life made for good riding and such Confederate Generals as Jeb Stuart, Forrest, and Morgan displayed a genius for the quick raid that would wreck a railway, raid a munitions or clothing center, or collect valuable information. Morgan's dash across Union territory north of the Ohio River suggests a comparison with Mamontov's sweeping raid behind the Red lines deep into Soviet territory in the early autumn of 1919.

In each case the side that was ultimately to lose the war was the first to develop proficiency in the use of cavalry. And the Red Army, like the North, finally developed cavalry forces superior to those of its opponent.

Trotsky, Commissar for War during the years of civil conflict, published a famous appeal: "Proletarians, to Horse!" under the provocative stimulus of the Mamontov raid. Probably few authentic proletarians took to horseback riding. But the Red Army Command succeeded in building up powerful cavalry armies, largely recruited among the minority of Cossacks who took the Red side and among the so-called *inogorodnii* (outlanders), non-Cossack peasants in the Southeast whose antagonism to the Cossacks was cleverly exploited by the few local Communists.

These armies, led by a former Tsarist sergeant-major, Semyon Budenny, the Ukrainian Primakov, and another chieftain named Zhloba, finally overcame the crumbling Whites and repeated, in reverse, the raids which the White cavalry carried out behind the Red lines. In the same way, Sheridan, Custer, and other Union cavalry leaders played havoc with the Confederate rear and lines of communication in the last phase of the Civil War.

Both in Russia and in America the heaviest battalions, using that expression in its broadest sense, prevailed. The superiority of the North to the South both in manpower and in industrial resources almost predetermined the issue of the Civil War. Grant's final relentless pounding campaigns were based on a theory of attrition, on the knowledge that the Confederacy was at its last gasp in manpower, whereas Union reserves were still substantial.

The same pattern was repeated in the Russian Civil War. At all times the Soviet government had a larger population to mobilize and more troops on the fronts. Most of the munitions factories were in Soviet territory; a factor which considerably outweighed the limited

and sporadic aid which the Whites received from abroad. Another important advantage of the Red Army was the possession of interior lines of communication. The principal White armies, those of Denikin in the South, of Kolchak in the East, the smaller forces of Yudenitch in the neighborhood of Petrograd, and Miller in the North, were separated from each other by thousands of miles. The Red Army Command was able to move troops as they might be needed to the most critical point. Unlike the separated White areas, the Confederacy in the beginning was a solid mass of contiguous territory. But it was gradually cut to pieces, first by Northern domination of the Mississippi River, then by Sherman's drive to the sea through Georgia.

If there are a number of superficial similarities between the American and Russian Civil Wars, the contrasts are more numerous and deeper. Most striking and probably most important of these contrasts was the incomparably more uncompromising and ferocious nature of the struggle in Russia.

The Civil War inflicted deep scars upon American unity. The destruction that accompanied Sherman's march to the sea and Sheridan's devastation of the Shenandoah Valley are still bitter memories in the regions affected. But the fiercest acts committed by either side in the struggle fall far short of the horrors of systematic Red and White terror, or of the tremendous pogroms against the Jews (infinitely worse and more extensive than any that took place under the Tsarist government) which took place in the Ukraine.

Despite the folly and vindictiveness of the so-called Reconstruction Period, the United States gradually became one country again in patriotism, ideals, and common loyalty. There was no bloody proscription of the vanquished. General Lee became the revered President of a university which still commemorates his name; Jefferson Davis, after a short period of imprisonment, was able to compose his history of the Confederacy; very few Southerners quit the country.

For the Russian Whites, on the other hand, defeat meant in many cases summary execution, to which the alternative was often life-long exile from their native country. There was no reconciliation, such as occurred in the United States. No doubt many former Whites, in time, found their way into Soviet service; but they could never be free from the lurking fear that their past would make them the first victims of the newest purge.

While the American Civil War was, in the main, a struggle be-

tween two sections of the country, in which there was little element of class struggle, Lenin had proclaimed the Bolshevik Revolution as one of relentless class war; and Soviet actions matched Soviet theory. Consequently the line of cleavage in the Russian struggle was horizontal, the poor against the middle class and the aristocracy, not vertical, a war of one section against another.

A natural consequence was that the armies and the fronts on both sides were much less stable than those of the Union and the Confederacy. There were no gigantic battles in the Russian Civil War, no Gettysburgs, Shilohs, Chancellorsvilles. But mutinies and desertions were much more frequent, and there were far more flare-ups of revolt in the rear.

All sense of firm state authority had been destroyed by the tremendous upheaval of 1917. The old régime was destroyed, and the White's attempts to restore its institutions or to set anything in their place were not successful. The new Soviet régime was still to a large part of the people a dubious experiment and the Soviets, under the pressure of Civil War, soon lost all independence and became mere organs of administration for the Communist Party, an organization which at that time numbered several hundred thousand members.

In view of these circumstances, the mood of what was then the large peasant majority of the country exerted a powerful, although negative outcome on the issue of the war. The peasants were divided among themselves, with the poorer inclining toward the Soviets and the more well-to-do regarding the Whites as the lesser evil.

The majority of the peasants undoubtedly disliked certain features both of Red and of White rule. They did not like the Communist requisitions of their surplus produce, without giving anything in return, or the Soviet anti-religious attitude. But they did not want the landlords to come back and they feared a restoration of the old régime which would mean loss of the land which they had seized and probably stern retribution for the excesses of 1917.

One of the most important reasons for the final victory of the Soviets in the Civil War was that the Communists, as a general rule, were more adept in propagandizing, organizing, and regimenting the peasants than were the Whites. Perhaps a psychological key to this success is to be found in the analysis of the mood of the peasants by a shrewd White observer in Siberia:

“Reds and Whites are both scoundrels. But the Reds are our kind of scoundrels. The Whites are alien scoundrels.”

Out of the confused chronicle of the Russian war one can discern three periods of extreme crisis, when the very existence of the Soviet régime was threatened. One of these was in August, 1918. Soviet territory at this time had shrunk almost to the proportions of the medieval grand duchy of Moscow. The Germans were in the Ukraine, the White General Krasnov in the Don Territory; Siberia and most of the region east of the Volga had been lost as a result of the intervention of the Czecho-Slovak Legionnaires, supported by discontented Russians. Kazan, on the Volga, had fallen to an army which was fighting in the name of the dissolved Constituent Assembly. There were starvation conditions in Moscow and other large cities; the villages were rent with fierce fights over requisitions of the peasants' grain.

A very small push would have upset the Soviet régime at this time; but the small push was not forthcoming. Trotsky, by a combination of inspirational oratory and such ruthless measures as the shooting of every tenth man in retreating units, whipped the raw recruits of the Red Army into a fighting force. The collapse of Germany in the autumn broke the iron ring around the Soviet Republic for the time being.

The second great crisis occurred in the autumn of 1919, when Denikin was at Orel and another White General, Yudenitch, reached the suburbs of Petrograd. But the Red fronts held. Once Denikin's forces began to retreat the whole very fragile political order set up by the Whites rapidly crumbled. The principal leaders of the anti-Bolshevik military movement, Denikin and Kolchak, were defeated by the end of 1919, although Wrangel held out in the Crimea until November, 1920.

The third crisis occurred in March, 1921, when the sailors and workers in the fortress of Kronstadt, near Petrograd, rebelled, calling for free Soviets and an abolition of special privileges for Communists and high Soviet officials. Overt military opposition had been crushed, but the Kronstadt uprising was an acute symptom of the mood of profound discontent among the very masses in whom the Communists professed to see their main support. The Kronstadt revolt and scattered peasant uprisings, especially severe in Western Siberia, parts of the Ukraine and Tambov Province, were put down and the causes of peasant discontent were alleviated by the introduction of the New Economic Policy, which legalized freedom of internal trade and substituted a fixed tax for the arbitrary requisitions.

Old soldiers like to discuss old campaigns. No doubt veterans of the White armies sometimes discuss whether the Civil War could have ended differently. If Denikin had concentrated all his forces on one big drive along the main railway to Moscow, instead of spreading out so widely in the Ukraine. . . . If the western powers had supported Kolchak and Denikin as vigorously as Germany and Italy supported Franco. . . . If Poland had launched its attack on the Soviet Union when Denikin's drive was at its height, not after the White armies had been defeated. . . . If, if, if . . . No doubt veterans of the Confederacy occupied some of their spare time in the postwar years with similar reflections.

But the most reasonable historical judgment seems to be that the outcome of both American and Russian Civil Wars was determined by a whole combination of political, economic, social and military causes, not by any single decisive battle or conspicuous success or blunder of strategy.