

Red, White and Green involvement: the Russian Civil War was, in essence, a struggle between three sides

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Summary: The traditional view, which sees the Russian Civil War as a battle between Reds and Whites, is inadequate. In fact, there were two civil wars. In one, the Bolshevik Red Army did indeed fight White forces under Denikin, Kolchak, Iudenich and Wrangel. In the other, Socialist Revolutionaries, initially with the backing of the Czechoslovak Legion, formed the People's or 'Green' forces, which fought against the Reds, against the Whites in alliance with the Reds and, finally, against the Reds again. The Greens were defeated in the end, though the New Economic Policy may be seen as a concession to their economic demands.

Questions to consider

- ♦ Why did the SRs decide to revolt against Bolshevik rule?
- ♦ How did the Green forces come to fight on the side of the Reds from November 1918?
- ♦ In what ways did the land policies of both the Whites and the Reds alienate the Greens?
- ♦ In what sense was the replacement of War Communism by the New Economic Policy a result of the Greens' stance during the civil war?



Trotsky, the gifted commander of the Red Army, the eventual victors in the civil wars that secured Bolshevik power

TRADITIONALLY, HISTORIES OF THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR have concentrated on the struggle between the Bolsheviks' Red Army, led by Trotsky, and the various White Armies, led by Admiral Kolchak in the east, General Denikin in the south and General Yudenich in the west. What has become clear, as historians have accessed new documentation made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is that this picture needs to be drastically revised. The Red-White Civil War was only part of the story. In fact, there was not one civil war in Russia, but two civil wars. This was very clear to those at the time. Britain's most successful secret agent in Russia during 1919 was Paul Dukes, code named ST25. He noted:

It must never be forgotten that in the Russian revolutionary wars there were *three* parties in the struggle - the Reds, the Whites and the People - and that, as much as the populace detested the Red regime in its earliest form, they came, during the revolutionary wars, to regard the Whites with even greater repugnance.

The political groups representing what ST25 called the People had their own colour at this time, they were the Greens.

Red-Green Civil War

Russia's civil wars began in May 1918, but the spark

which ignited them was the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. The Bolsheviks, it should be recalled, seized power in the name of the Soviet and formed what they described as a provisional administration which would oversee elections until the Constituent Assembly met. When these elections were held, in November 1917, the Russian populace did not back the Bolsheviks, but gave 55 per cent of their votes to the Socialist Revolutionary party (SRs). To retain power, the Bolsheviks exploited divisions within the SRs, forming an alliance with that party's left wing, which dissolved the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Some SRs would have started an insurrection against the Bolsheviks there and then, but caution prevailed. Peace talks with Germany were under way and less than a month after the dissolution these talks broke down and war with Germany resumed, forcing the Bolsheviks to sign the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918. Such was the opposition to this treaty that many were convinced it would be torn up within weeks. In a situation of great political fluidity, the left-wing SRs abandoned Lenin in protest at the treaty and Trotsky began negotiating with the British and the French about possible joint action against the Germans.

It was only in May 1918, that Lenin finally persuaded the Bolshevik Central Committee that the Brest-Litovsk Treaty should be considered permanent and

TIMELINE	Civil War in Russia, 1918-21
1917	24-5 Oct Bolshevik seizure of power
	14 Nov Elections to the Constituent Assembly
1918	6 Jan Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly
	3 Mar Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed
	May Bolsheviks resolve to abide by Treaty of Brest-Litovsk; SRs resolve to carry out insurrection
	8 June Samara captured by SRs and Czechoslovaks: <i>Komuch</i> set up. Red-Green Civil War begins
1919	18 Nov Coup by Admiral Kolchak; Red White Civil War begins
	End Dec Kolchak captures Perm
	March-April Kolchak's offensive
	14 Mar Start of Don rebellion
	May Denikin in contact with Don rebels
	June Denikin links with Don rebels
	June, by end of June in control of much of southern Russia
	July Kolchak loses Perm Crisis in Red Army command over Denikin counter-offensive
	14 Aug Red Army counter-offensive launched
	15 Sept Red Army counter-offensive fails
1920	14 Oct Denikin takes Orel, 200 miles from Moscow
	20 Oct Red Army takes Orel, start of Denikin's retreat
	Nov After bitter fighting on the Kursk-Voronezh railway. Denikin retreats to the Black Sea
	Jan Kolchak detained by SRs, subsequently shot by Bolsheviks
	January-March Harried by Black Sea Greens, Denikin first abandons the Don and then flees to Crimea
	25 Apr Outbreak of Russo-Polish War
	6 June Wrangel breaks out from Crimea
	12 Oct Armistice with Poland, followed by assault on Wrangel
	7 Nov Red Army enters Crimea; Wrangel flees on 14 November
	1921
June Show trial of SR leaders	
1922	June Show trial of SR leaders

fulfilled to the letter. In response, the SRs decided to launch an insurrection against what was now Bolshevik one-party rule. The SRs had always drawn their greatest support from the lands along the banks of the River Volga. Here the local deputies to the Constituent Assembly had a strong basis of support and had established their own militia. They were persuaded to act sooner rather than later by one of those chance events in

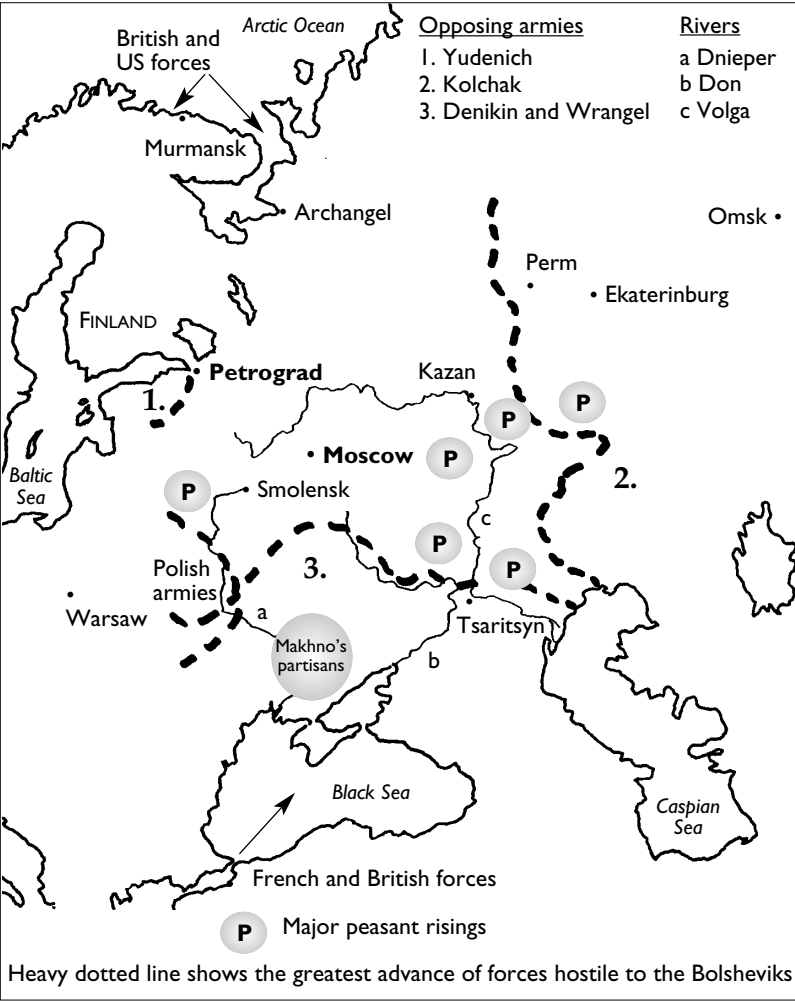
which history abounds. Even before the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917 it had been the policy of the Russian government to persuade those PoWs captured from the Austrian Army, who were Czechs or Slovaks by nationality, that they should change sides and join a Czechoslovak Legion which would fight not simply for the defeat of Austria but for the creation of a Czechoslovak state. By spring 1918 this Czechoslovak Legion constituted a considerable force, but under the logic of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk it had to leave Russia. The Czechoslovak Legion had therefore begun a very slow evacuation across the length of Russia, from its former positions in Ukraine, across the Volga and into Siberia, with the ultimate aim of embarkation in Vladivostok and transfer via the United States to France. At Samara, on the lower Volga, the SRs persuaded the local Czechoslovak commander that, rather than continuing this daunting journey half-way around the world, an easier way to fight the Germans would be to join the SRs in overthrowing the Bolsheviks and establishing a new democratic government in Russia which would immediately tear up the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Together the Volga SRs and Czechoslovaks seized Samara on 8 June and there established an anti-Bolshevik government called the Committee of the Constituent Assembly, known by its Russian acronym *Komuch*.

Initially, *Komuch* was extremely successful. On the basis of the old SR militia it established a People's Army which soon had the Red Army on the run. On 8 August the People's Army captured Kazan, and with it the entire Russian gold reserve and, for a while, its advance up the Volga seemed unstoppable. However, *Komuch* did not become a rallying point for all those opposed to the Bolsheviks. The SRs were very clear that they represented a socialist party which had won an outright victory in the Constituent Assembly elections. British and French observers were bemused to find as many red flags and committees in Samara as had been in evidence in Moscow. They were also horrified that the SRs dogmatically refused to broaden the base of their administration to include liberal opponents of the Bolsheviks, even when, in the wake of more fighting on the part of the Czechoslovak Legion, a new anti-Bolshevik administration was established in Siberia at Omsk under liberal auspices. By September a majority of SRs had accepted the need for compromise, and agreed to establish a coalition administration known as the Directory, in which liberals participated but the SRs retained a majority. However, this disagreement in the rear of the People's Army left it short of reserves, forcing it to surrender first Kazan, on 8 September, and then Samara on 6 October. But this retreat was far from fatal. By the beginning of November 1918, when the Directory had found its feet, it was the turn of the Red Army to retreat before 'overwhelming force'.

Red-White Civil War

Thus, this first of Russia's civil wars was unresolved when the second Red-White Civil War began. On the night of 17-18 November Admiral Kolchak staged a coup in Omsk and overthrew the Directory; a month

later many leading SRs were shot in an horrific massacre. Those SRs who survived announced that they would suspend their war on the Bolsheviks and support all groups fighting counter-revolution. Kolchak had succeeded in doing what General Kornilov had failed to do in August 1917, take revenge on the SRs for reducing once mighty Russia to anarchy. Russia's second civil war was straight forward, between revolutionaries, both Red and Green, and counter-revolutionary generals who wanted to restore order and establish an authoritarian military dictatorship which would restore private ownership in industry and return land to the landlords. This civil



extremely unpopular with the peasantry. Lenin was already doubting its wisdom when Perm fell yet, despite his public calls for a change of peasant policy throughout spring 1919, there was no change of policy. The defeat of Germany in the First World War, and the subsequent annulling of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, restored Russia's influence over Ukraine and southern Russia. As Bolshevik control was asserted in these regions, so 'class war among the peasantry' was unleashed. The inevitable consequence was peasant unrest, which became most widespread in the Don Rebellion of March 1919.

The Don Rebellion was spontaneous, but by mid-May 1919

war was very nearly over before it had started. Kolchak captured the strategic town of Perm at the end of 1918 and in spring 1919 advanced into the Volga area. However, soon after this dramatic advance, his army began to disintegrate. His land policy was of no interest to peasants brought up on decades of SR propaganda. Troubled by peasant insurrections in his rear, Kolchak was forced to retreat, losing Perm six months after he captured it. Isolated thereafter in Siberia, Kolchak posed no further threat to the Bolsheviks. In the end, he was brought down by a successful Green insurrection led by SRs. In January 1920 the People's Revolutionary Army seized control of Irkutsk, arresting Kolchak and putting him on trial. Elsewhere in Siberia the insurgency was led by independent peasant leaders who formed their own People's Armies.

That Russia's Red-White Civil War was not won when Kolchak retreated in spring 1919 was the fault of the Bolsheviks themselves. Deserted by left-wing SRs after signing the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, Lenin had insisted that the Bolsheviks would rule alone, introducing their own version of socialism. Their biggest problem was to feed the towns, and to ensure food for workers, the Bolsheviks encouraged 'class war in the countryside'. They closed down village soviets and established in their place 'poor peasant committees'. These poor peasants then seized grain from the rich 'kulaks' for transportation to the city. This policy of state-sponsored brigandage - the key feature of what ST25 called 'the Red regime in its earliest form' - was

it was being regularly supplied by General Denikin, who linked up with the rebels early in June. Isolated in the distant Kuban region of Russia since the Bolshevik seizure of power, Denikin was able to leapfrog across the Don river basin and enter Ukraine. There he could profit from the chaos caused by the Bolsheviks' attempts to discipline Ukraine's unruly Green peasants led by anarchist Nestor Makhno. Denikin's advance was therefore dramatic. By the end of June Kharkov and all the major cities of the south had fallen, including Tsaritsyn, the key to the Volga. Defeat prompted a political crisis on the Bolshevik side. Trotsky was forced to sack the Red Army's first commander, but when his replacement launched a two-pronged offensive at the end of July aimed at splitting the White Army, it was only partially successful; by mid-September it had stalled, partly because the Red Army had become embroiled in disciplining another Green peasant leader, the Don Cossack Filip Mironov. When Denikin's White Army resumed its advance in October 1919, Orel was captured by the middle of the month and Moscow was just over 200 miles away.

Ultimately, Denikin could not hold on to his territory for the same reason that Kolchak could not hold on to his. Denikin's land policy meant peasants surrendering all the land they had gained during the revolution in the hope that some of it would be returned to them, if they paid suitable compensation. It was hardly surprising that disenchantment quickly grew. Behind the lines the Green commander Makhno was able to



The Bolshevik's drive to defeat opponents to their power is indicated by this depiction of life before revolution, where the Tsar in combination with the Church are carried on the backs of the toiling people launch a powerful peasant insurgency. At the same time, the Bolsheviks at last dropped their hostility to other Greens. Not only did they now form a tactical alliance with Makhno, but after sentencing Mironov to death as a traitor, reprieved him and gave him a command on the southern front. Even farther to Denikin's rear, in the mountains above the Black Sea coast south of Kuban, there were Green partisans fighting, led by a former member of *Komuch*. Together with the Red Army, they advanced northwards as Denikin retreated southwards, forcing Denikin to evacuate his forces to the Crimea.

Disciplining the Greens

The Bolsheviks showed no gratitude to the Green commanders who had helped defeat the Whites. The Black Sea Greens, though welcomed by the Red Army as heroes at first, soon found that their units were incorporated into the Red Army and redeployed to distant parts, while their leaders were put under house arrest. In Siberia, those Green partisan units which had helped overthrow Kolchak were persuaded to become reserve units in the Red Army, thus bringing them too under Bolshevik control. A similar fate was planned for Makhno. In early January 1920 he was ordered to regroup his forces on the distant border with Poland. Arguing that he headed his own Insurgent Army, which was in alliance with the Red Army but not a constituent part of it, he refused. For this mutiny he was outlawed by the Bolsheviks.

When the Russo-Polish War broke out at the end of April 1920, General Wrangel, the last of the White

Words and concepts to note

Constituent Assembly: when the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917 the new Provisional Government had promised it would call a democratically elected assembly, in the election of which both men and women could participate, which would draw up a constitution for Russia.

Czechoslovak Legion: it was the joint policy of Britain, France and Russia to encourage Czech and Slovak nationalism in the struggle against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russia's contribution to this effort was to form a Legion from nationalists found among Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war. When the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, the Legion was placed under the nominal command of the French and required to leave Russia. The decision to support the SRs in their insurrection on the Volga was taken by local commanders independently of parallel moves by the British and the French to persuade the Czechoslovak high command to commit themselves to the anti-Bolshevik campaign. Once this was done, the Bolsheviks rapidly lost control of the Trans-Siberian Railway, along which the two corps of the Czechoslovak Legion were deployed.

Directory: the negotiations for the formation of this SR-liberal government were long and tortuous, for there was little trust on either side. Both Soviet and Western scholars have tended to dismiss the Directory as doomed, but material from the SR records held in Moscow suggest that, despite all the difficulties, the Directory was operating effectively by mid-November 1918. Indeed, Kolchak's coup was necessitated not because the Directory was too weak, but because it was beginning to confront those counter-revolutionary officers who had been involved in political assassinations.

Komuch: the shortened form *Komitet uchreditel'nogo sobraniya* or the Committee of the Constituent Assembly. This was established in Samara from June to September 1918 as the core of an anti-Bolshevik administration. All deputies to the Constituent Assembly were automatically members of it. All its prominent members were SRs, except for I.S. Maisky, a Menshevik who later became Soviet ambassador to Great Britain.

Kornilov: in August 1917 General L. Kornilov, the commander in chief of the Russian Army, tried to stage a coup against the Provisional Government. He had been plotting with landowners and representatives of industry 'to restore order'. He was involved in an earlier attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government in April 1917 and on that occasion one of his fellow plotters had been Admiral Kolchak.

Kulaks: term used by Bolsheviks to describe supposedly rich peasants. In practice it was used to describe any peasant who did not support the Bolsheviks.

People's Army: the army established by *Komuch*. It was commanded by V.I. Lebedev, formerly Kerensky's Minister of the Navy. In 1920 and later many of the SR inspired peasant armies, particularly in Siberia and by the Black Sea, named themselves the People's Army or the Revolutionary People's Army.

Generals, forced the Bolsheviks once again to turn their attention to the counter-revolutionary enemy. Breaking out from the Crimea on 6 June, when the

