



The Russian Civil War

Between 1914 and 1921 the number of Russians killed in war runs into the millions, with many more wounded. Disaster quickly followed the decision of Nicholas II to enter the First World War. Early defeats in 1914 at the battles of Tannenburg and Masurian Lakes indicated that the Germans outmatched the Russian army. This proved to be the case and although there were some improvements and successful campaigns against the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish armies the war was a failure. By 1917 the Germans were advancing deep into Russia and had occupied all of Russian Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Defeats, desertions and food shortages sparked revolution and in February 1917 the tsar abdicated.

Brest-Litovsk

Many workers and soldiers greeted the Provisional Government that took over Russia in February 1917 with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, in June it made the mistake of launching a summer offensive that went badly wrong. Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky saw his support ebbing away as he faced threats from the army (an attempted coup by General Kornilov in September) and the Bolshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties.

In October the Bolshevik party under Lenin seized power in Petrograd. They allowed elections to a Constituent Assembly in November but then dissolved it. In negotiations with Germany over the

winter of 1917 one of the Bolshevik leaders, Leon Trotsky, failed to win any concessions and so was forced to sign a humiliating peace in the fortress town of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.

Civil war

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk cost Russia a third of its pre-war population, a third of its agricultural land and three-quarters of its industry. Russia lost Poland, Finland, the Baltic States, the Ukraine and Transcaucasia. The treaty also sparked a civil war that would further degrade and destroy the Russian state and society killing millions in famine and fighting.

Source B

Leon Trotsky explains why he signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty:

On 21st February, we received new terms from Germany, framed, apparently, with the direct object of making the signing of peace impossible. By the time our delegation returned to Brest-Litovsk, these terms, as is well known, had been made even harsher. All of us, including Lenin, were of the impression that the Germans had come to an agreement with the Allies about crushing the Soviets, and that a peace on the western front was to be built on the bones of the Russian revolution. On 3rd March our delegation signed the peace treaty without even reading it. Forestalling many of the ideas of Clemenceau, the Brest-Litovsk peace was like the hangman's noose.

Source A

Trotsky and the Red Army

1 Alexander Kerensky, prime minister of the Provisional Government in 1917, made the disastrous decision to continue the war. What other mistakes did Kerensky make in 1917?

2 Study Source B. Do you think Trotsky had any choice other than to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk?

Source C

Tsar Nicholas II and his family

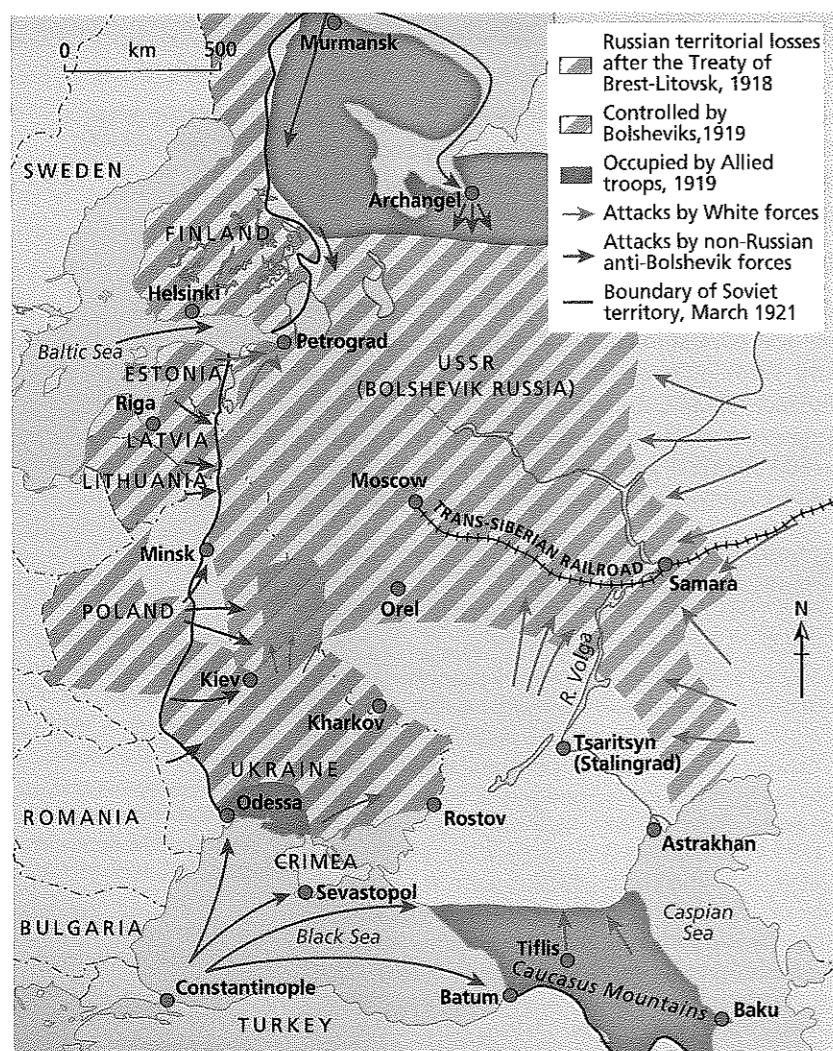


3 Study Source C. Why do you think the tsar and his family were executed? Could they have been rescued?

4 Study Sources A and E. How important do you think Trotsky was in securing victory for the Red Army?

Source D

Map showing the various offensives of the Russian Civil War



The Russian Civil War is a confusing mix of conflicts between Bolshevik forces and their supporters (the Reds) and anti-Bolsheviks made up of pre-war generals and their armies, Tsarist supporters, Western forces sent to aid them

and others (the Whites). Added to this there were also peasant armies that attacked both forces (the Greens) and rogue militias and bandits who used the chaos to run amok and enrich themselves.

Reds vs Whites

The first real threat to the Bolshevik government came from the Czech Legion. This was a force of volunteers from Czechoslovakia that formed a brigade in the Russian imperial army in the First World War. Over the war it grew in size to about 40,000 men and was due to return home after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty.

In a bizarre set of circumstances it was decided to evacuate the legion east through Siberia. While being transported across Russia it ran into conflict with the new Bolshevik leaders who wanted to disarm it. The legion refused and after some scattered fighting along the Trans-Siberian railway it regrouped and instead of evacuating east it headed west back towards Moscow and Petrograd picking up anti-Bolshevik forces along the way. This large military force had occupied the strategic city of Kazan on the Volga by August 1918.

The Red Army

Leon Trotsky had set up the Red Army to defend Russia against the Germans but soon had to deploy it to defend Bolshevik territory from the Czech Legion. He also had the support of the Kronstadt sailors, fairly well-trained naval forces based near Petrograd. He used them to help retake Kazan, halting the Whites' advance west and allowing the Red Army to pursue them. In a parallel development the Bolshevik Soviet of Yekaterinburg had executed Tsar Nicholas II and his family on 17 July fearing they would fall into White army hands and thus rally further opposition.

Source E

Leon Trotsky describes the importance of his 'armoured train' to the success of the Bolsheviks:

The train was not only a military-administrative and political institution, but a fighting institution as well. In many of its features it was more like an armoured train than a staff head quarters on wheels. In fact, it was armored, or at least its engines and machine-gun cars were. All the crew could handle arms. They all wore leather uniforms, which always make men look heavily imposing. On the left arm, just below the shoulder, each wore a large metal badge, carefully cast at the mint, which had acquired great popularity in the army. The cars were connected by telephone and by a system of signals. Armed detachments would be put off the train as 'landing parties'. The appearance of a leather-coated detachment in a dangerous place invariably had an overwhelming effect. When they were aware of the presence of the train just a few kilometres behind the firing-line, even the most nervous units, their commanding officers especially, would summon up all their strength.

The Russian Civil War saw all sides commit atrocities in the vicious fighting that followed. The Bolsheviks had some advantages though: they controlled the industrial heartland of Russia and had a unified geographical position, which allowed them to strike the White forces from a central base. Trotsky also proved to be an able battle commander and quickly set about instilling a degree of professionalism in his conscript forces.

Foreign intervention

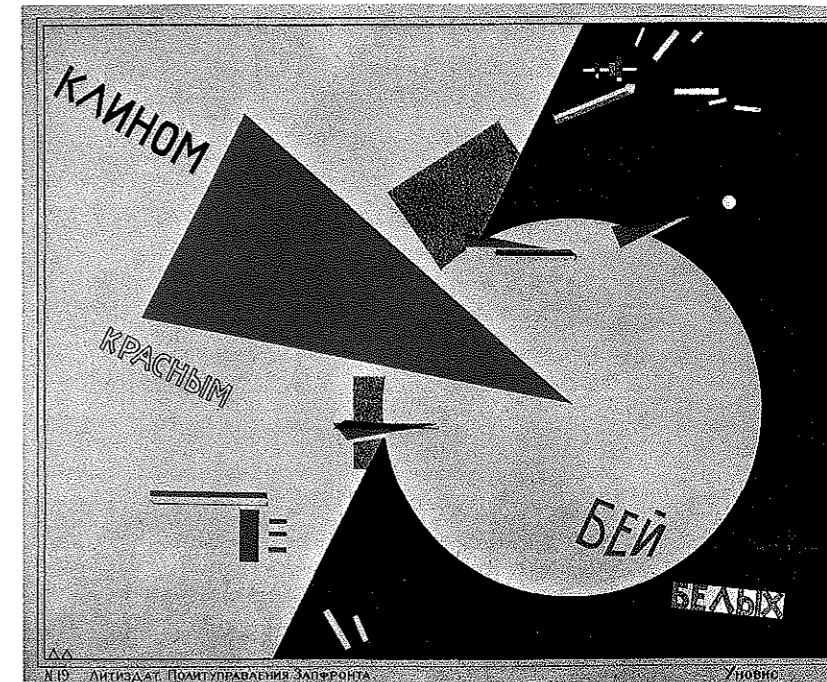
Although the Whites had been defeated at Kazan, the end of the First World War in November 1918 allowed the victorious powers of Britain, France, the USA and Japan to interfere in the emerging civil war. They decided to supply the anti-Bolshevik armies with men and material through ports such as Archangel (in the north) and Odessa (in the south):

- Admiral Kolchak attacked Bolshevik forces across the Urals from Siberia
- General Denikin moved along the Volga and into the Ukraine
- General Iudenich attempted to capture Petrograd from its base in Estonia

The Red Army was forced to defend its territory from successive attacks and to organise its economy for total war. The policy adopted — 'war communism' — saw the Bolsheviks seize grain, take

Source F

Lenin discussing the policy of war communism in 1921: *War Communism saved the revolution but destroyed Russia.*



over all industries and force workers and soldiers to support them.

Victory

The policies of war communism, the disunity and savagery of White forces and the leadership of Trotsky and the Red Army were all factors that helped the Bolshevik forces win the civil war. By the end of 1920 the White armies were defeated and their forces exiled, imprisoned or executed.

The legacy of the civil war was complex. The chaotic fighting had disrupted food production and famine spread across the Volga and Ural regions killing up to 6 million people. The famine triggered one of the first international aid appeals and relief agencies from the USA and Red Cross attempted to alleviate some of the worst conditions.

The policies of war communism had also alienated many of the party's supporters and a mutiny by the Kronstadt sailors (key supporters of the revolution of 1917) near Petrograd in February 1921 looked like it might derail Bolshevik attempts to centralise and consolidate their power. The Red Army was forced to attack the Kronstadt naval base and its forts across the frozen Gulf of Finland twice in early March before it defeated the sailors. Victory cost the army over 10,000 dead.

In March 1921 the Bolsheviks were also forced to sign the Treaty of Riga after an unsuccessful war against Poland that cost them land in Belorussia. They needed a period of stability and peace and the fact that the sailors had mutinied shocked the Bolshevik leadership. It was probably instrumental in persuading Lenin to adopt the New Economic Policy that same year. HS

Source G

A famous abstract piece of Bolshevik propaganda showing the Red Army 'spearhead' destroying the Whites

5 Study Source G. Do you think this type of propaganda was effective? What makes it hard to understand? Can you find any better examples on the internet?

6 Study all the sources. Was the Red victory in the Russian Civil War inevitable? Do you agree with Lenin's statement in Source F?

7 Read Trotsky's account of the war at www.tinyurl.com/d2krkzb. Should we believe it?

8 Read the article on the Russian Civil War at www.tinyurl.com/crd5kp9. What was the most important reason for Bolshevik victory?