

Why did the Bolsheviks Win the Russian Civil War?

Peter Anderson compares the tactics and resources of the two sides.



Boris Kustodiev's 1920 painting "Bolshevik"

Reds versus Whites: an Overview

At one point during the Civil War, Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Communist Red Army, became so amused by the black market trading of weapons by his opponents, the Whites, that he sent a letter to his enemies thanking them for their help in supplying the Red Army.

The story speaks volumes about the failures of the corrupt White forces, for whom the heavy consumption of vodka and cocaine became commonplace. The dissolute lifestyle did not help White tactics: even a White minister of war declared that the White Army was characterised by 'ignorance and incompetence'. This contempt seemed to rub off on those who, in theory, were supporting the Whites. The British military official attached to the White forces became so disillusioned that he grew indifferent to the White fate and stated the cause was not 'worth the life of one British soldier'. The British prime minister, David Lloyd George, became so unwilling to fund the Whites that he declared he would rather see 'Russia Bolshevik than Britain bankrupt'. In any case the degree of attention that Lloyd George was prepared to devote to the issue must be subject to question, as he was to mistake the town of Kharkov for what he believed to be the name of a White general.

Perhaps the biggest failure of the Whites was to ignore the demands for land of the peasantry, who made up 80 per cent of the population. As one of Kolchak's generals complained, the Whites failed to 'give the peasant the bird in the hand; they were even afraid to promise him the bird in the bush'.

The Bolsheviks, meanwhile, in the Land Decree of October 1917, recognised the land seizures carried out by the

peasants. Lenin came to be known as the 'Tsar Deliverer' by the peasants in remembrance of this act. The Land Decree was typical of the greater political skill of the Bolsheviks. When the Reds realised that they were losing the support of the peasants, they were able to adjust their policies to retain the co-operation of the rural community. In addition, when all else failed, they proved ruthless in their repression of peasant revolts. The Bolsheviks' more thorough control of the peasants enabled them to create a stronger army and permitted the development of more powerful tactics.

The contrast in political skill was plain to see in other areas too. While the Whites were failing to win the full support of foreign powers, they also found that their Russian nationalism worked against them at home. The White leader General Denikin denied that there was such a place as the Ukraine, which he described as 'Little Russia' and found that, as a result, the different national groups were reluctant to support the Whites. Ironically, the ostensibly antinationalist Bolsheviks were presented with an opportunity to exploit nationalism as a result of the limited White alliance with the foreign powers by organising patriotic parades where effigies of the British foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, were burned. The Bolsheviks also succeeded in developing a more effective policy towards the different national groups within Russia. Lenin stated his belief that the Reds should 'find a common language with the Ukrainian peasant'. In short, the Bolsheviks were able to win the Russian Civil War because the Whites failed to secure the support of the different national groups, key foreign powers, and the peasantry, while Bolsheviks enjoyed much more authority within Russia and were therefore able to assert their power over the Whites.

The conflict

The War was essentially contested on two fronts. In the south a group of army officers under General Denikin allied with Cossack forces and launched a series of offensives culminating in the plan, known as the Moscow Directive, announced in July 1919, to capture the Bolsheviks' capital. By October 1919 Denikin's forces had reached Orel, close to Moscow, and Denikin's attack was being supported by an assault on Petrograd by General Iudenich.

The second main front was in Siberia where members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party joined forces with Czechoslovakian soldiers seeking to escape from Russia. This group set up a government known as the Komuch, based in Samara, and was allied to a Siberian nationalist government based in Omsk. However, both were replaced by a military coup carried out by Admiral Kolchak in November 1918. Kolchak launched an assault against the Bolsheviks from Ufa in March 1919, but was rapidly overwhelmed by the Bolsheviks and was executed in February 1920.

Denikin's army was crushed following Kolchak's death and Denikin was forced to abandon Russia in March 1920. General Wrangel, who held the Crimea while the Bolsheviks fought a short war with the Poles, briefly replaced Denikin. Wrangel was then defeated and he too was forced to evacuate Russia in November 1920. Both Denikin and Kolchak received aid from the British, Americans and French, who wished to protect their interests in Russia and prevent the Bolsheviks from securing power in Russia.

Nationalities

The Whites' failure to gain the support of different national groups fatally undermined their campaign. A clear example is Iudenich's assault on Petrograd. The Finns refused the Whites' General Iudenich the right to attack Petrograd by the direct route through Finland because his commander, Kolchak, refused to recognise Finnish independence. The Finns had a well-led army of 100,000 trained men and not to be able to call on these forces was a crucial failure - all the more so since the attack on Petrograd was launched at the time of Denikin's furthest advance in October 1919, and it is doubtful whether the Bolsheviks would have been able to resist a joint attack with the Finns.

Similarly, in October 1919 Denikin failed to bring the Poles into battle against the Bolsheviks, as they were not prepared to come to the aid of a figure whose declared policy was that Russia was one and indivisible, meaning that he would not grant any degree of independence to the national groups. The poignancy of this error is all the greater given the strength and skill of the Poles, which is demonstrated by the failure of the much larger Red Army to defeat the Poles in 1920. The problem was further compounded by the alienation of the Estonians by Denikin's

inflexible Russian chauvinism and their refusal to fight with Iudenich.

The Bolsheviks, by contrast, were more skilful in dealing with the different national groups. The Bolsheviks negotiated an agreement in July 1919 with the Poles, whereby the Bolsheviks would recognise the Polish border so long as the Poles did not assist Denikin in his Moscow Directive. The second benefit of this agreement was to permit the withdrawal of 43,000 Bolshevik troops from the Polish front. The Bolsheviks had already demonstrated that they could accept the dismemberment of Russia in order to guarantee their own survival. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk made with Germany, the Bolsheviks had accepted the independence of Estonia, Latvia, Finland and even the Ukraine. In 1920, the Bolsheviks were prepared to formally recognise the independence, by treaty, of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in order to have the flexibility to defeat the Whites and to prevent further fronts from emerging. Moreover, in 1919 Lenin demonstrated his flexibility by allowing the Ukrainians to use their own language within the Soviets as a means of preventing a nationalist revolt. In 1920, he also allowed the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries a role in the Ukrainian Soviet as a means of gaining the support of Ukrainian peasants.

Allies

Just as the Whites failed to win the real support of national groups within the former Russian Empire, so they also failed to win the committed support of the foreign powers. Britain and the United States were reluctant to support groups they considered to be supporters of the autocratic Tsar. Lloyd George declared Iudenich to be a 'notorious reactionary' and refused to send the significant number of British troops to his aid that might have made his operation a success. In 1918 the Bolsheviks had not yet formed the Red Army and were reliant on 35,000 Latvian riflemen, most of whom had been sent to Siberia to deal with the Czech uprising. At the time a rumour in Moscow spoke of a substantial allied landing in the north, and the Bolsheviks began to prepare to evacuate. However, the British failed to send substantial forces and did not seek to overthrow the Bolsheviks by marching on Moscow. In addition, the British foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, later advised the Finns not to support Iudenich. As a result when Iudenich attacked Petrograd the Bolsheviks were able to gain a five to one advantage in terms of soldiers against the Whites.

The president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, was also suspicious of Russian reactionaries such as Admiral Kolchak. Wilson was extremely reluctant to provide aid to Kolchak. When he launched his Ufa Offensive in March 1919, Wilson was slow to respond and by the time US aid did arrive, in August 1919, it was already too late.

Both Lloyd George and Curzon were fearful of creating a strong Russia which could threaten British imperial possessions in Asia and were therefore half-hearted in their support for the Whites. Indeed in November 1919 Lloyd George declared in a speech to Parliament that a White victory would not be in British interests, and from this point on the British stopped supplying arms and began negotiations with the Bolsheviks. After Lloyd George's speech to the House of Commons, British observers with Denikin's forces reported that morale collapsed. Kolchak simply lacked the forces to resist the 'maximum effort' being dedicated to the eastern front by the Bolsheviks. The problems continued and in 1919 Lloyd George refused to support Denikin on the grounds of cost and in April 1920 Wrangel was warned that the British were not prepared to help him if he launched an attack against the Bolsheviks.

The result was that the Bolsheviks enjoyed superior firepower. The Reds were fortunate in inheriting the arsenals and arms factories of the old Tsarist armies. The Red Army had 2.5 million rifles in 1917. The Whites, on the other hand, failed to convince the allies to supply them with the necessary numbers of troops or weapons. Moreover, they proved incapable of making effective use of the 850,000 rifles supplied by the allies. Kolchak's army had a supply line of 4,000 miles with a single-track railway that suffered badly from a lack of control: left-wing rail workers diverted whole trainloads to the Reds

Peasant Armies

The Whites not only failed to win support abroad, but they were also unable to secure vital approval of the peasantry. In the south Denikin's forces refused to sanction any land seizures by the peasantry and control of the countryside was returned to former Tsarist officials, many of whom took savage revenge against peasant rebels through floggings and executions. In the east too the Whites failed to recognise the importance of the peasant

revolution.

The SRs (the peasant based Socialist Revolutionary Party, which the Bolsheviks had repressed) had expected to be able to rally peasant support behind the call for the reconvening of the SR-dominated Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks had closed. However, the peasants were more concerned with possession of the land than political institutions and the Bolshevik October 1917 Land Decree had recognised the peasant seizure of the land. The Komuch (the short-lived SR government) then went on to exacerbate the problem by refusing to discuss land reform until the Constituent Assembly was reconvened and even used troops to reverse one-third of land seizures in its territory. Kolchak failed to learn the lessons of the Komuch's failure. In the Volga region, which formed Kolchak's furthest point of advance, Kolchak proved incapable of recruiting vital new soldiers. The reason was that Kolchak refused to allow any land seizures except for those of unused land.

As a result on the southern and eastern fronts the White regimes failed to recruit a sufficient number of soldiers. In the summer of 1918 the Komuch found it very difficult to recruit peasants, who saw no reason to fight the Bolsheviks, and could only muster an army of 10,000 men. Four out of five of the peasants conscripted into Kolchak's army deserted. Many simply transferred to the Reds: observers noted that many of the Red soldiers on the eastern front were wearing the uniforms of Kolchak's forces.

On Denikin's southern front at the time of the Moscow Directive the cavalry leader General Marmontov found himself just 250 miles from Moscow with a force of 9,000 men. At this time a peasant rising would have provided the ideal context for the defeat of the Bolsheviks. Yet the revolt against the Reds failed to materialise and instead Denikin was forced to transfer crucial troops to deal with a peasant revolt led by Makhno against the Whites in the Ekaterinoslav Province, which threatened Denikin's own headquarters. The scale of the problem is amply illustrated by the fact that Marmontov's forces engaged in rape and looting against the peasants instead of fighting, and many of his men simply returned home with possessions stolen from the peasants. Denikin's failure to recruit more peasants and to prevent anti-White revolts meant that his troops became too thinly spread on the southern front and became vulnerable to counterattack. In hindsight Denikin confessed that his regime's attitude towards the peasantry was a crucial failure.

The Whites were caught by the paradox that the attempt to re-establish Tsarist style power over the peasantry led to a loss of authority and control, while the Bolsheviks destroyed the Tsarist system of power in the countryside and consequently gained in authority and power. From their seizure of power the Bolsheviks were careful to ensure the support of the peasantry through the October 1917 Land Decree, which recognised the peasants' occupation of the land. In addition, the Bolsheviks destroyed the Tsarist state's restriction on the peasants in the countryside: the Bolsheviks replaced the provincial governors, police officials and land captains with peasant committees. The peasants had achieved their goal of self-government.

The peasantry largely wished to be left to its own devices and preferred the self-government granted by the Bolsheviks to the restoration of Tsarism offered by the Whites. The Bolsheviks were successful in mobilising the peasantry's greater distrust of the Whites. In the first four months of 1919 the Red Army doubled to 1,600,000 with many of the recruits coming from the Volga region where many peasants had most to fear from a White victory. In July and September 1919 the Bolsheviks recruited two million peasants in Orel and Moscow where the peasant use of land had increased by between 28-35 per cent. The Whites threatened to take this land and by 1920 the Bolsheviks had an army of five million, with three-quarters of these soldiers coming from the peasantry. The peasants' greater fear of the Whites can be seen by the way the 20,000 strong independent peasant army under Makhno in the Ukraine preferred to ally with the Bolsheviks against Denikin and Wrangel than fight the Bolsheviks when the White threat was at its height.

The Bolsheviks also proved more flexible than the Whites in retaining the peasantry. The peasants tended to desert from both armies particularly at harvest time. For example, by 1921 four million peasants had deserted from the Red Army. However, the Bolsheviks were more successful in returning deserters to the army. Between July and December 1919 the Bolsheviks were able to return 1,426,000 deserters to the army. Amnesty weeks were organised where deserters could return without punishment. One reason why peasants might have wished to return was that the Bolsheviks were able to improve their authority through the flexibility of their rhetoric. In the March 1919 Eighth Party Congress Lenin had stated that the Bolsheviks should move away from attacks on the

richer peasants and seek to win over the 'middle peasants'. The Bolsheviks also pulled back from their unpopular policy of forcible collectivisation.

White attempts to control the peasantry had led to a crucial loss of potential support. The Bolsheviks, however, were able to complement their concessions to the peasants with the effective deployment of power, which crushed peasant opposition when it occurred. Systematic round-ups of deserters were instituted and in the autumn of 1919 the Bolsheviks' secret police, the Cheka, created special cordon detachments just behind the front line with a brief to shoot deserters. The Bolsheviks were also much more successful in dealing with peasant rebellions behind their own lines: in 1919 alone the Bolsheviks had 7,500 concentration camps, 4,100 labour camps and the Cheka had suppressed 39 uprisings. The Bolsheviks' seizure of grain to feed the Red Army angered many peasants; but the Bolsheviks were able to crush risings such as the ones carried out by Makhno in the Ukraine in October 1920. The Bolsheviks had shown their greater flexibility by allying with Makhno at a time of threat and crushing his forces when the Red Army was in a stronger position.

The Bolsheviks were also able to use their power and authority to recruit desperately needed military specialists from the former Tsarist officer class. During the course of the Civil War they were able to recruit 75,000 former Tsarist officers. Many of these needed the employment, while others hoped to avoid imprisonment or were attracted by patriotism to fight the Poles. Once serving in the Red Army, they were closely supervised by communist commissars and were warned that treachery could lead to the arrest of their families. In addition, the Bolsheviks were able to train 38,000 officers between 1918 and 1920. The Bolsheviks' approach contrasts strongly with the refusal of Kolchak's forces to conscript soldiers who had fought in the First World War for fear that they would have been contaminated by revolutionary ideas in the Tsar's army. Equally, Kolchak found that of 17,000 officers only 1,000 had enjoyed proper training. The basic differences in numbers made a huge difference: the Whites never had a combined total of more than 656,000 to the Bolsheviks' five million men.

State and Leadership

The success of the Reds in securing the support of the officer class reflected their ability to construct a strong state to support the army. One of the ironies of the situation was that the Whites were ridiculed for being a bourgeois force, yet the Reds created a strong state staffed by the petty bourgeoisie. A study has found that 50 to 80 per cent of officials of the Soviet government had worked for the Tsarist state and that in 11 out of 15 leading state institutions the petty bourgeoisie made up more than 50 per cent of the staff. In addition, party membership offered an opportunity for employment and social mobility: by the end of the Civil War party numbers had risen from 150,000 to 600,000 new loyalists. By contrast the Whites constructed a weak state with an overlarge bureaucracy which wasted vital supplies. One White army claimed supplies for 275,000 men when only 30,000 were fighting.

The Reds' ability to recruit those from the higher social classes and maintain better discipline resulted in a marked superiority in Bolshevik tactics over the Whites. The Whites' offensives were marked by a series of mistakes. Kolchak's Ufa offensive included an attempt to encircle the Reds at Cheliabinsk, which failed due to the inability of the poorly trained troops to co-ordinate their movements and the poor planning conducted by the officers. Denikin too made a set of mistakes, as seen by his spreading of troops too thinly during the Moscow Directive and his slowness to grasp the potential of massed cavalry. By contrast Red commanders such as Tukhachevsky clearly outfought the Whites in the summer and autumn of 1919 with skilful manoeuvres such as the capture of Cheliabinsk.

Conclusion

The Bolsheviks were able to win the Civil War because they were more politically flexible and skilful. The greater degree of authority and power possessed by the Bolsheviks is seen in the Reds' relationship with the peasantry. They were able to win greater peasant support than the Whites through measures such as the Land Decree and control the peasants through cordon detachments and the Cheka. The Whites, however, were unable to recruit peasants to their armies in the numbers needed to overthrow the Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks enjoyed the power advantage of having a larger number of arms, the Whites' lack of authority prevented them from gaining the necessary support from foreign powers to defeat their enemies. Without authority the Whites could not enjoy power, and their failure to reach an understanding with the national groups fatally undermined their war efforts.

Further reading:

- Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (1995): this provides a good overview of the Civil War, and is very good on the strategic advantages enjoyed by the Bolsheviks.
- Evan Mawdsley's *The Russian Civil War* (2000): the standard textbook, containing a detailed narrative of the events and some useful information on the mistakes of the Whites.
- Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (1996): has some excellent material on the peasantry.
- Ilya Somlin, *Stillborn Crusade: the Tragic Failure of Western Intervention in the Russian Civil War 1918-1920* (1996): a right-wing slant on the failure of the allies.
- Michael Lynch, *Reaction and Revolutions: Russia 1881-1924* (2nd edition, 2000): the best A-level text on the period.

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