

**THE SEARCH FOR HISTORICAL CONTINUITY
IN THE ASSESSMENT OF THE CIVIL WAR IN RUSSIA***

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Abstract. A century has passed since the beginning of the tragic events of the deadly Civil War in Russia in the early twentieth century, which not only dramatically changed the country, but also affected (albeit to a lesser degree) nearly all regions of the world. It is obvious that the debates among historians and scholars of neighboring disciplines on various aspects of the Civil War will not be resolved any time soon, and that many lacunas within this study remain to be filled in. We still lack a consensus on the answers to fundamental questions in the history of the Russian Civil War and its meaning. This work presents the views of Elena Iur'evna Prokofieva—Candidate of Science (History), Professor in the Russian History and Public Records Department at Belgorod National Research University—regarding several key aspects of the Civil War, including the transformation of the term “civil war” in the context of the traumatic developments of 1917–1922 (there are also other variants to this chronology), the reasons why the “third force” became insolvent over the course of this acute civil conflict, and the conflict’s periodization.

Keywords: Civil War in Russia, early twentieth century, debates among historians.

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ПОИСК ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТИ В ОЦЕНКАХ ГРАЖДАНСКОЙ ВОЙНЫ В РОССИИ

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Аннотация. Минуло столетие после начала трагических событий кровопролитной Гражданской войны в России, которая коренным образом повлияла не только на страну, но и в заметной степени на весь мир. Очевидно, что не скоро прекратятся дискуссии историков и представителей смежных дисциплин по различным аспектам истории Гражданской войны; при этом ряд лакун ещё только предстоит заполнить. К настоящему времени не вполне сложился консенсус и относительно трактовки основных вопросов истории Гражданской войны в России и её значения. В данной работе представлено мнение Елены Юрьевны Прокофьевой – кандидата исторических наук, профессора кафедры российской истории и документоведения историко-филологического факультета Белгородского государственного национального исследовательского университета (НИУ «БелГУ») – о трансформации термина «гражданская война» в контексте трагических событий 1917–1922 гг. в России, причинах несостоятельности «третьей силы» в ходе острого гражданского противостояния, периодизации и по иным аспектам истории Гражданской войны.

Ключевые слова: Гражданская война в России, начало XX века, дискуссии историков.

1. Transformation of the concept of “civil war” in Russia: from Lenin's definition to modern interpretations

There is no single agreed definition for the term “civil war,” not only in modern historiography, but for Bolshevik leaders as well. Thus, Lenin's assessment of the essence of the civil war as the sharpest form of the class struggle, which is an armed struggle for state power between classes and social groups within one state, is generally known. However, to some extent he was opposed by Trotsky, who believed that “the Civil War represents **a certain stage of the class struggle** [author's bold type—E. P.], when the

latter breaks through the framework of legality and passes onto the open plane, and, to a certain extent, the physical balance of forces. In this interpretation, civil war also includes spontaneous insurrections on private occasions, bloody revolts of counterrevolutionary gangs, a general revolutionary strike, armed insurrections in attempts to seize power, and a period of suppression of attempts at a counterrevolutionary uprising. All of these factors are part of the concept of civil war. **This is all broader than an armed insurrection, and yet narrower than the notion of class struggle** [author's bold type—E. P.], which runs through the whole of history” (Trotsky 1924, 10).

Despite disagreements among Bolshevik theorists in defining the concept of “civil war,” initially (in the 1920s) Soviet historiography believed that the revolution itself was essentially a civil war, since the struggle for power assumed an armed character, and they qualified the violent overthrow of the old government during the revolution as a form of civil war (see *Russian Civil War* 1994, 43–44).

In the 1930s, under the conditions of the “offensive of socialism along the whole front” and the repressive policies of the Stalinist leadership, the connection between the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and the Civil War was “torn apart.” The period from October 1917 to February 1918 began to appear in historical literature as a “triumphal procession of Soviet power,” which established the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, and the outbreak of the Civil War was linked with the uprising of the Czechoslovak Corps at the end of May 1918. This allowed the Party leadership to blame the unleashing of the Civil War and the tragic losses of Soviet Russia entirely on the Entente and internal anti-Bolshevik forces.

In the latter half of the 1980s—1990s the ongoing dispute about the expansion and refinement of the notion of “civil war” among professional historians and political scientists resumed with renewed vigor after a series of civil conflicts that abounded in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, as Iu. Igritskii has rightly noted, “the end of the twentieth century highlights in many respects a new place for civil wars in social development” (1994, 55).

In modern Russian historiography, the general definition of the Civil War has substantially broadened. For example, L. A. Mozhaeva defines the Civil War as “the legitimate outgrowth of a nationwide revolutionary crisis and a deep split in society, a multifaceted and controversial social crisis that had multifaceted long-term consequences for the development of our country and beyond” (Danilin, Evseeva, Karpenko 2003, 55). This definition is compatible with that of Iu. A. Poliakov, although the latter provides a more detailed interpretation. He argues that the Civil War in Russia was

“a roughly six-year-long armed struggle between various groups of the population that was based on deep social, national, and political divisions. It included the active intervention of foreign forces at various stages. The conflict took on various forms, including insurrection, riots, scattered skirmishes, and large-scale military operations by regular armies, as well as guerilla actions in the rear of existing governments and states, and acts of sabotage and terrorism” (Poliakov 1994, 43). Discussions on this issue continue into the present.

2. Beginning and end of the Civil War: issues of periodization

Modern scholars’ ideas about the Civil War in Russia are based on the results of study by several generations of Russian researchers. Of course, the periodization of the Civil War has evolved during this time.

In the domestic historiography of the 1920s, the Civil War, primarily in accordance with interpretations by V. I. Lenin and L. D. Trotsky, was viewed as a direct continuation of the October coup of 1917. Based on an analysis of speeches and written works by Lenin and Trotsky, historians, participants and even eyewitnesses of the events who studied the period sought to explain the respective defeats and victories of the “Reds” and “Whites” through the proportion of class forces inside and outside of Russia. One of the main conclusions made by researchers in these years was that a vacillating mass of middle peasantry, including Cossacks, and Entente interventionists provided necessary temporary support for the White movement. At the same time, outside invaders primarily pursued their own mercenary purposes and helped the White movement only to the extent that it coincided with the interests of the alliance.

In the 1930s, the periodization of the Civil War was “corrected” by Stalinist authorities. They pushed back the beginning of the Civil War to May 1918, when the mutiny of the Czechoslovak Corps began. The period from October 1917 to the spring of 1918 was reinterpreted as the “triumphal procession of Soviet power,” and established the victory of the October Revolution in most of Russia. This made it possible to accuse the White movement and the Entente of unleashing the Civil War and the catastrophic losses of Soviet Russia during that war, and to assign them responsibility for the “forced” introduction of the policy of “military communism.” In this context, the history of the Civil War was reduced to the victories of the Red Army on the fronts, that is, to the defeat of the “three combined campaigns of the Entente” against the Soviet state. Many socioeconomic, political (and other) processes were simplified or completely emasculated by this interpretation.

During the Cold War, the attention of Soviet historians focused on foreign military intervention and the role of the Entente in particular the United States, as the main enemy of Bolshevik Russia, and as the main culprit for unleashing such a large-scale Civil War in the country. The actions of France and Britain were characterized as consequences of US dictates. It is interesting that in a number of monographs from the Stalin era, the period of 1918–20 was characterized even as “the Patriotic War of the Soviet people against the interventionists and White Guards” (Karpenko 2004, 24).

In the late 1980s and 1990s, due to fundamental changes in society, the collapse of the USSR and the aggravation of socioeconomic and political tensions in the post-Soviet world and within the Russian Federation, which grew out of the weakness of the central government into armed conflicts, the scientific and social rethinking of the Civil War reflected a deeper study of history. Scholars paid particular attention in these years to the ideology and policies of Bolshevism, which they deemed “the main factor” in the emergence and development of the tragic events of the Civil War in Russia. It should be noted that while the research of the late 1980s and 1990s exposed the “ideological engagement” of Soviet historians (and in line with the ideological attitudes of his time, included an overall critique of the Soviet system), it still left much to be desired both scientifically and in terms of reliability.

A. B. Danilin, E. N. Evseeva, and S. V. Karpenko rightly point out that in order to understand the course of the Civil War, it is worthwhile to periodize events based on “turning points” during which, for various reasons, the balance of political forces changed quickly and spontaneously (2003, 56). The first of these “turning points” was the forcible seizure of state power by the Bolsheviks on October 25–26, 1917, which gave impetus to the formation of the White movement. Throughout the war, victories and defeats (regardless of the number of fronts and the number of participants) were determined precisely by the correlation of the “White” and “Red” forces. These outcomes, in turn, directly depended on economic resources, massive social support, the help of foreign allies, and other factors. Subsequent “turning points,” according to Iu. Igritskii’s well-reasoned view, include the Bolsheviks’ disbandment of the Constituent Assembly, the conclusion of the “obscene” Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and the introduction of the *prodrazviorstka* (food surplus requisitioning) in the countryside (1994, 61).

In accordance with the facts outlined above, the chronology of the Civil War can be best represented in the following form:

In the first period of the Civil War (November 1917—February 1918), Soviet power was established relatively quickly and easily, and was

able to suppress focal points of resistance to anti-Bolshevik forces near Petrograd, Moscow, Ukraine, the Don, Kuban, and elsewhere.

The second period (March–November 1918) is characterized by a radical change in the correlation of social forces within the country, a direct result of policy decisions by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin, in particular the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the introduction of a grain monopoly, the creation of committees of poor peasants, the “Red Terror,” and others.

The third period (November 1918—March 1919) saw an escalation of the Civil War in Russia and the expansion of foreign military intervention. This was largely facilitated by the introduction in January 1919 of the *prodrazviorstka*, as well as the capitulation of Germany and its allies, which entailed revolutionary events in Germany and the breakup of Austria-Hungary. This, in turn, gave the Entente an opportunity to engage in a significant intervention on the territory of Russia.

The fourth period (March 1919—March 1920) is characterized by the most large-scale military operations on the fronts of the Civil War. At this time, radical changes took place in the alignment of forces within Russia, namely the “union” with the middle peasantry and abroad (the Bavarian, Hungarian, and Slovak Soviet republics), which predetermined the defeat of the “Whites” and the victory of the “Reds.”

The fifth period (April–November 1920) includes military operations against the “White Poles” and the liquidation of the remnants of the Armed Forces of South Russia.

The sixth period of the Civil War (December 1920—October 1922) is the final period. In these years, on the one hand, the largest struggle of the Bolshevik dictatorship with the largely peasant “insurgent” movement against “military communism” (Makhno, Antonov, etc.) took place. On the other hand, with the help of the Red Army forces, the process of “Sovietization” of the national periphery—Transcaucasia, Central Asia and the Far East—came to an end. Moreover, in the end, the military success of the Bolsheviks and its triumph over the political crisis of the spring of 1921 were largely due to a realization of the danger of continuing “military communism” and the transition to new social and economic policies (see Danilin, Evseeva, Karpenko 2003, 56, 58, 65, 68, 78, 86).

3. *In search for the “third way.” The reasons for the historical insolvency of the “third force” in the context of armed confrontation between the “Reds” and “Whites”*

Interest in the possibility for Russia to have chosen a “third way” and the prospects for such a “third force” to have come to power in 1917 have been a steady feature in scholarship on the Civil War. Indeed, in the Russia of 1917 some political trends did suggest possible alternatives to military confrontation and a way out of the crisis of power through a coalition of the Social-Democratic bloc and democratic reforms. The **“third way”** was proposed by both Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. The **“third force”** is traditionally considered, in a broad sense, the movement of the middle peasantry, which constituted the greater part of the Russian village population by the end of 1918 (after the redistribution of land and property by the Decree on Land).

The Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik programs seemed reasonable and quite democratic. However, according to many researchers, the “third way” was impossible in Russia for several reasons. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, the main adherents and spokespeople for a “third way,” did not suit either the Bolsheviks or the “counterrevolutionary camp.” Most importantly, they did not receive mass support from the people (see e.g. Poliakov 1994, 51–52).

There is yet another side to this problem, namely, the search for a possible political compromise through the creation of a coalition between the Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. The creation of such a bloc would have significantly strengthened the position of the Soviets and made the Civil War less prolonged and bloody. Contemporary scholars agree that the prerequisites for a political compromise in the ranks of the Social Democrats were formed by the end of the summer of 1917.

After the defeat of L. G. Kornilov near Petrograd in August 1917, delegations of Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks in the Petrograd Soviet announced their refusal to cooperate with the Kadets (Constitutional Democrats). Thus, Lenin had a real opportunity to create a “social-democratic coalition.” Indeed, he produced a paper, “On Compromises,” which indicated that the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks could create a socialist government responsible to the Petrograd Soviet, while the Bolsheviks, without entering this government, would abandon “revolutionary” methods for obtaining the transfer of power to the proletariat and the poorest peasantry, and instead leave it up to the discretion of the Constituent Assembly. However, the intrigues of Kerensky and the dual position of Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik leaders at the newly

opened Democratic Conference in September 1917, which was basically hostile to the Bolshevik position, as well as Lenin's intransigence, buried this opportunity.

Even after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the leaders and the main party contingent of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks continued to proclaim their adherence to the so-called "constituent" democracy. They actively opposed the creation of a one-party Bolshevik Soviet of People's Commissars. They also were the initiators of the Vikzhel (All-Russian Executive Committee of the Union of Railway Workers) ultimatum to form a "homogeneous socialist government" in Russia. Further, they actively advocated for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, and opposed the negotiations for the conclusion of the Brest Peace.

However, the course taken by the Bolsheviks to create a one-party political system under the slogan of "dictatorship of the proletariat" finally alienated the Bolsheviks from other socialist parties and democratic public associations that had formed by 1917. As a result, the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks became the basis of the so-called **"democratic counterrevolution."** The leaders and main body of the center-right contingent of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks moved toward open military confrontation with the "Reds" and joined the White movement. The mutiny of the Czechoslovak Corps in May 1918 consolidated all anti-Bolshevik forces, including the forces of the "democratic counterrevolution." In Samara, under the leadership of the Socialist Revolutionary Vladimir Volskii, a Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly (KomUch) was formed. Similar developments followed in Omsk, with a provisional Siberian government headed by Petr Vologodskii, and in Arkhangelsk, with a Supreme Government of the Northern region headed by Nikolai Tchaikovskii. However, the establishment of the military dictatorship of Admiral Kolchak in Omsk in the fall of 1918 led to the split and disorganization of the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik leaders. At this point, the "democratic counterrevolution" as Russia's "third way" finally lost any significant political influence.

In addition to the main opposing parties (the "Reds" and "Whites," as well as the "democratic counterrevolution," which championed the idea of a "third way") a so-called "third force" acted in the Civil War in Russia, mainly constituted by middle peasantry and the Cossacks. "Third force" troops have sometimes been described as the "Green" movement. Later, the name became common to all paramilitary rebel forces.

The actions of this "third force" at different stages of the Civil War varied, and their role remains ambiguous. Insurgent troops acted in both

the “White” and “Red” rear on the principles of partisan detachments, entering into temporary alliances with both. The most vivid representatives of this “third force” during the Civil War were: the peasant movement in southeast Ukraine under the leadership of Nestor Makhno, ideologically similar to anarchists (uniting up to 30,000 people); the peasant uprising in Tambov province, led by Socialist Revolutionary Alexander Antonov (up to 50,000 people); and the peasant army in Western Siberia under the leadership of Vladimir Rodin (up to 100,000 people) (see Karpenko 2004, 47, 75).

Soviet historiography unambiguously regarded the “Greens” as ordinary bandits, and their “illegal bandit formations” as an element to be destroyed by the regular forces of the Red Army. In the post-Soviet period, assessments of the “Greens” have relaxed. Today, historians qualify the actions of the “Greens” as an attempt to create a free (both from “White” and “Red”) self-governing zone in occupied territory without requisitions or surplus appropriations. A distinctive feature of the “Green” movement was the absence of a single control center. This is understandable, since most participants ideologically identified with anarchism, that is they opposed any power. The movement of the “Greens,” that is, the “third force,” was finally rather harshly suppressed by the Bolsheviks toward the end of the Civil War.

4. Causes of the Civil War in Russia. The historical “fault” of political forces for unleashing the Civil War

It is difficult, and from our standpoint impossible, to give an unambiguous answer to the question of why Russian society after October 1917 became divided into “Reds” and “Whites,” or “revolutionaries” and “counterrevolutionaries,” and who is to blame for unleashing the bloody Civil War in Russia. Summarizing a somewhat simplified review of domestic researchers (based primarily on analysis by Poliakov), we can distinguish the following main causes of the Civil War:

1. These are primarily deep and irreconcilable contradictions within the institutions of power, as well as a wide gap between power and society in the Russian Empire, which was sharply aggravated by World War One and reached its apogee by 1917.

2. The armed coup organized by the Bolsheviks in October 1917, the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the forcible redistribution of property throughout the country provoked fierce resistance not only by the overthrown classes, but also by international capital in the form of the armed contingents of the Entente.

3. The increasingly acute military and political situation forced the Bolshevik leadership to implement the methods of “military communism,” relying on legalized “Red terror,” which in turn led to massive armed resistance of the peasantry, which accounted for more than 80 percent of the population.

4. Reluctance, and later the impossibility of Bolshevik leaders to broker political compromise, originating from the slogan (and goal) proclaimed by Lenin and Trotsky “to turn the imperialist war into a civil war” (Poliakov 1994, 54).

The general conclusion is disappointing: the desire of the Bolsheviks to forcibly gain and stay in power by establishing a one-party dictatorship, to build a socialist society in Russia based solely on their own theoretical attitudes conditioned by their own political goals, provoked fierce resistance from a wide range of political opponents. This, in turn, made the Civil War not only inevitable, but also large-scale and bloody.

Speaking about the degree of “historical guilt” for the unleashing and scale of the Civil War in Russia, one cannot give an unambiguous answer. For more than seventy years, this issue was considered from the standpoint of the “winners,” then from the standpoint of the “losers.” Both sides suffered from such ideological engagement.

An important component of Bolshevik propaganda and of later writings by most Soviet historians was the assertion that only the Bolsheviks’ opponents were responsible for the Civil War tragedy. However, an unbiased study of this problem easily refutes this thesis. Lenin called for the deployment of the Civil War in his speeches and writings in 1908, 1914, and 1917 (Lenin 1973, 453; 1969a, 32; 1969b, 321; 1974, 475). Following his leadership, his prominent associates justified the necessity of “revolutionary violence.”

The seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 was undoubtedly an act of the Civil War. However, the most active part of the “revolutionary masses,” who fully supported the Bolsheviks in 1917 and early 1918, accounted for no more than 5 to 10 percent of the employed population of Russia. To maintain the one-party dictatorship’s hold on power, this was clearly insufficient. That said, the slogans “Expropriate the expropriators” and “He who was nothing shall become everything,” put forward by Bolshevik leaders, considerably contributed to the ranks of their supporters. Often these individuals were lumpenized and even sometimes criminal elements of society. Such slogans, coupled with the Bolsheviks’ promise to give nations the right to “self-determination up to state secession,” also attracted (as temporary fellow travelers) the national minorities of the former Russian Empire.

Thus, the historical “fault” of the Bolsheviks in unleashing the Civil War, on the one hand, was due to the radical ideology of Marxism, the cornerstone of which is armed violence, the “class struggle,” and Lenin’s rejection of social compromise and wager on forced coercion. On the other hand, the expansion of the “Red Terror” was determined by the concrete economic, social, and military-political conditions prevailing in the country.

Still, the Bolsheviks’ opponents do bear some historical responsibility for unleashing the Civil War on its unprecedented scale. After all, the division of Russian society could be stopped neither by the helpless tsarist government, nor even by the “liberal democracy” in February 1917, represented by the Provisional Government and the Socialist-Menshevik leadership of the Petrograd Soviet. The fierce resistance of the overthrown political forces, which widely employed “White Terror,” also contributed to the expansion of active participants in the Civil War. Overall, the bloody events of 1917–22 in Russia involved the forces of the “Red,” “White,” “Green,” and the national periphery, that is, the bulk of the people, who fought with the shared degree of exasperation.

Translated from Russian by Alexander M. Amatov

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