

War and Revolution in Russia 1914 - 1921

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Russia signalled her withdrawal from World War One soon after the October Revolution of 1917, and the country turned in on itself with a bloody civil war between the Bolsheviks and the conservative White Guard. Jonathan Smele charts this turbulent episode in the forging of post-tsarist Russia.

The auguries for war

In 1913, Tsar Nicholas II celebrated the tercentenary of Romanov rule in Russia. He and his dynasty ruled over a huge empire, stretching from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic to the borders of Afghanistan.

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This mighty imperium covered one-sixth of the land surface of the globe, and was populated by almost 150 million people of more than a hundred different nationalities.

However, the Russian Empire was riven by many tensions. Just five years after the celebrations, Nicholas and his family would be dead, executed by the Bolsheviks, while his empire would be defeated in the World War and wracked by revolutions, civil wars and foreign interventions.

By 1921, after a period of great unrest, the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia, and largely reunited the old empire (formally constituted as the USSR in 1923). The repercussions of the events that took place on the Eastern Front, from 1914 to 1921, however, would have a profound impact upon world history for the remainder of the century and beyond - although it was the battles of the Western Front that eventually achieved greater fame.

Campaigns and crises: 1914-1916

In 1914, Russia was hardly prepared for war. Just nine years earlier she had been defeated in a war with tiny Japan. The Revolution of 1905, when revolts and uprisings had forced the Tsar to concede civil rights and a parliament to the Russian people, had also shaken the empire.



Russian prisoners after defeat in East Prussia, 1915 ©

The subsequent reforms and rebuilding were far from complete, but as workers and land-hungry peasants rallied to the Russian flag and marched off to fight against the Central Powers, the initial auguries for both war and national unity were not bad.

This failed Russian advance...signalled the beginning of an unrelenting Russian retreat

National unity, however, could only be built on victory and, in that regard, Russia's hopes were dashed early in the Great War. At Tannenberg and the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes, in 1914, Russia lost two entire armies (over 250,000 men).

This failed Russian advance into East Prussia did disrupt Germany's Schlieffen Plan and thus probably prevented the fall of Paris, but it also signalled the beginning of an unrelenting Russian retreat on the northern sector of the Eastern Front. By the middle of 1915 all of Russian Poland and Lithuania, and most of Latvia, were overrun by the German army.

Many factors - including the militarisation of industry and crises in food supply - threatened disaster on the home front

Fortunately for the Russians, they did better in 1916. The supply of rifles and artillery shells to the Eastern Front was vastly improved, and in the Brusilov Offensive of June 1916, Russia achieved significant victories over the Austrians - capturing Galicia and the Bukovina - and she was also more than holding her own in Transcaucasia, against Turkey.

However, the country's political and economic problems were greatly exacerbated by the war. Many factors - including the militarisation of industry and crises in food supply - threatened disaster on the home front.

Added to this cocktail were rumours that the tsarina, Alexandra, and her favourite, the infamous Rasputin, were German spies. The rumours were unfounded, but by November 1916 influential critics of the regime were asking whether Russia's misfortunes - including 1,700,000 military dead and 5,000,000 wounded - were a consequence of 'stupidity or treason'.

This was a rabble-rousing exaggeration, but certainly the outdated strategies of Russia's General Staff had cost hundreds of thousands of lives, while the regime seemed careless of such appalling losses.

1917: From February to October

Food riots,



Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, leader of the Provisional Government, 1917 ©

demonstrations and a mutiny at the Petrograd Garrison in February 1917 forced Nicholas II to abdicate as war still continued. A Provisional Government led by liberals and moderate socialists was proclaimed, and its leaders hoped now to pursue the war more effectively.

Real power in Russia after the February Revolution, however, lay with the socialist leaders of the Petrograd (later All-Russian) Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, who were elected by popular mandate (unlike the ministers of the Provisional Government).

Anarchist and Bolshevik agitators played their own part in destroying the Russian Army's ability to fight

The Soviet leaders rather half-heartedly supported a defensive war, but were more committed to an unrealistic programme of ending the conflict, through a general peace 'without annexations or indemnities' – a formula that neither the Allies nor Germany would ever accept.

Against this background, the war minister (later Prime Minister) Kerensky of the Provisional Government hoped to strengthen Russia's hand with a new Russian offensive on the Eastern Front in June. But by then the ability of Russia's officers to induce their men to obey had been entirely negated by the hopes of social transformation and an end to the war that the February Revolution had unleashed in the trenches - leading to what historian Alan Wildman has termed 'trench bolshevism'.

Anarchist and Bolshevik agitators played their own part in destroying the Russian Army's ability to fight. Many anti-war radicals, along with the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, were ferried home from exile in Switzerland in April 1917, courtesy of the German General Staff (which had spent roughly 30 million marks trying to foment disorder in Russia by the end of 1917).

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The summer offensive was a disaster. Peasant soldiers deserted en masse to join the revolution, and fraternisation with the enemy became common. Meanwhile, in an attempt to restore order and resist the German counter-offensive, most of the generals and forces of the political right threw their weight behind a plan for a military coup, under the Russian Army's commander-in-chief, General Kornilov.

The coup failed, but had two important consequences: on the one hand, the generals and the conservatives who had backed Kornilov felt betrayed by Kerensky (who arrested Kornilov after having appeared to have been in agreement with him) and would no longer defend the government; on the other, Kerensky's reputation with the moderate left and with the population at large plummeted when it became clear that he had initially supported Kornilov's plans for the restoration of the death penalty and for the dissolution of soldiers' revolutionary committees.

The only winners were the Bolsheviks, with Lenin at their head, who were able to topple Kerensky and take power in the October Revolution of 1917- without significant resistance from either the government or the army.

Brest-Litovsk and its consequences

After taking power, the Bolsheviks promised to deliver 'Peace, Bread and Land' to the beleaguered people of Russia. With regard to the first of these, a 'Decree on Peace' (26 October 1917) was dashed off by Lenin, calling upon all belligerents to end the slaughter of World War One.



Delegates at negotiations for the Brest-Litovsk treaty, March 1918 ©

Not that Lenin was a pacifist: rather, his hope was to transform the world war into an international civil war, when the 'imperialist' powers refused to cease fighting and thereby revealed their rapacious ambitions.

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However, the Central Powers responded to the Bolsheviks' appeal by agreeing to an armistice on the Eastern Front, and Lenin's lieutenant, Trotsky, found himself in the uncomfortable position, during the winter of 1917-18, of negotiating a separate peace treaty with Imperial Germany and her allies at the Polish town of Brest-Litovsk.

Trotsky tried to delay matters and to inculcate revolution in central Europe by refusing the harsh terms presented to him. When Germany, however, merely resumed its invasion of Russia on the Eastern Front, pushing further east in five days of February 1918 than it had in the previous three years (the German soldiers, to Trotsky's consternation,

continued to obey their officers), the Bolsheviks were forced to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918.

This punitive treaty effectively handed over Finland, Poland, the Baltic provinces, Ukraine and Transcaucasia to the Central Powers, together with one-third of the old empire's population, one-third of its agricultural land and three-quarters of its industries.

Outraged by this, the anti-Bolshevik Russians who had remained loyal to the Allies now took up arms in earnest against the Bolsheviks. They were actively assisted by Allied forces in Russia, who hoped to rebuild the Eastern Front. Notable in this regard was the Czechoslovak Legion, a 40,000-strong army made up of former POWs, who in 1918 seized the entire Trans-Siberian Railway, from the Volga to Vladivostok.

Civil War: Whites v Reds

During the civil war thus unleashed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Bolsheviks (Reds), who controlled Petrograd, Moscow and the central Russian heartland, soon found themselves surrounded by hostile forces (Whites) - made up of the more conservative elements in Russia - who launched a series of campaigns in 1919 that threatened to crush the revolution.



Leon Trotsky saluting in the street, October, 1917 ©

During these campaigns Admiral Kolchak, the 'Supreme Ruler' of the Whites, attacked across the Urals from Siberia; General Denikin advanced on a broad front up the Volga, into Ukraine and to the town of Orel (within 250 miles of Moscow); and General Iudenich's North West Russian Army, based in Estonia, twice reached the outskirts of Petrograd.

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The Reds, however, rebuffed these attacks, and survived, and by late 1920 had driven the Whites back into the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Pacific - causing hundreds of thousands of White soldiers and civilians to emigrate.

The Reds were able to take advantage of internal lines of communication and could utilise the railways, arsenals and the economy of the most populous provinces of the former empire. In this way they managed to arm, man and manoeuvre an army that by 1921 had grown to almost five million soldiers.

The Whites, in contrast, never commanded forces totalling more than 250,000 men at one time, were separated from each other by huge distances, and were based around the less developed peripheries of Russia. Also, crucially, the Whites underestimated the Bolsheviks' capacity to resist.

The White armies, in contrast, exhibited only brutality, venality, disorder...

It still seems surprising that Trotsky was able to fashion a Red Army more effective than that of the experienced White generals ranged against him. He, however, enjoyed the material advantages mentioned, and he also introduced some revolutionary innovations: notably the network of Political Commissars - devout Bolsheviks who offered political guidance to the Red Army and who watched over the loyalty of the 50,000 imperial army officers the Reds employed to help command their forces. He also used terror most ruthlessly.

The White armies, in contrast, exhibited only brutality, venality, disorder and a lack of political and military direction. Even their most effective fighters, the Cossacks, were more interested in booty and in securing their own regional autonomy than in driving Lenin from the Kremlin.

Allied intervention

Despite their strength in Russia itself, the Reds were internationally isolated, but neither did the Whites enjoy unlimited Allied support. The liberal British leader Lloyd George, the socialist French prime minister Clemenceau and the American Democratic president Woodrow Wilson were no friends of Lenin - but neither were they particularly enamoured of the White generals, whom they suspected of reactionary aims.



Liberty, Equality and Fraternity: a banner of the Russian Revolution, 1917 ©

In fact, although anti-Bolshevik sentiments were not altogether absent from Allied leaders' minds when they made the decision to intervene in Russia in 1918, their main interest was in the Great War, not the Russian civil war, and their desire was to try and reconstitute the Eastern Front, to ease the pressure on the Western Front. That motivation disappeared on 11 November 1918.

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Moreover, none of the western powers had any great interest in helping to build a united Russia - they preferred to keep that huge country weak - and in any case, they had enough on their plates in 1919. With domestic war weariness, the Paris Peace Conference, the division of the German and Ottoman Empires, and the economic crises of central Europe to contend with, they had no wish to sink further into the Russian quagmire. The only power with the capacity to intervene effectively in Russia was Japan, but with memories of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 still fresh, her intervention was unlikely to be welcomed by the Russians.

Consequently, although the matériel the Allies sent to Russia was crucial in allowing the Whites to mount the campaigns they did in 1919 (the British alone sent one hundred million pounds-worth of equipment to Kolchak and Denikin), only a few thousand British, French and American troops ever set foot in Russia, and few of them saw action. And after the armistice, most Allied efforts were directed towards finding an honourable way out of Russia, rather than a means of more forcefully intervening.

It was this victory that helped forge post-tsarist Russia's self-image

Nevertheless, the Red Army's victory over what became characterised under Stalin as 'The Three Campaigns of the Entente' (a loaded reference to the efforts of Kolchak, Denikin and Iudenich, who were portrayed as being 'puppets' of western capitalism), in a civil war that cost perhaps ten million lives, assumed a hallowed place in Soviet and Russian history.

It was this victory that helped forge post-tsarist Russia's self-image as a strong country that had stood up to the bullying of the west, and that lay at the root of the Cold War. Even Gorbachev, often seen as a friend of the west, was prone to mentioning it; and it cannot be far from President Putin's mind as events unfold in the Middle East.

Find out more

Books

Allied Intervention in Russia, 1917 - 1920 by JFN Bradley (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968; University Press of America, 1984)

Russian Democracy's Fatal Blunder: The Summer Offensive of 1917 by LE Heenan (Praeger, 1987)

'Imperial Russia's Forces at War' in *Military Effectiveness, Volume 1: The First World War* ed by AR Millett and W Murray (Allen & Unwin, 1988)

Passage Through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914 - 1918 by W Bruce Lincoln (Simon & Schuster, 1986; Oxford University Press, 1994)

The Russian Civil War by Evan Mawdsley (Allen & Unwin, 1987; Birlinn, 2000)

The Eastern Front, 1914 - 1917 by Norman Stone (Hodder & Stoughton, 1975; Penguin, 1998)

The End of the Russian Imperial Army, 2 volumes, by Alan Wildman (Princeton University Press, 1980 - 1987)

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