

Why did the Bolsheviks win the Civil War?

Factor One – The strategic position of the Bolsheviks was strong.

Historians of the Civil War have used the term 'objective factors' to refer to the resources available to the combatants and to their geographical position. There were three main 'objective factors' which advantaged the Bolsheviks:

- ◆ The Bolsheviks controlled the most heavily-populated parts of Russia. In 1918–19, Bolshevik-held territory contained some 70 million people, compared with approximately 20 million in the White-controlled areas. The Bolsheviks therefore had a bigger reservoir of manpower upon which to draw than the Whites. One consequence of this was that in major battles, the Red Army invariably had a huge numerical advantage over its opponents.
- ◆ As a result of its participation in the First World War, Russia was awash with munitions and other war material at the time of the October Revolution. In 1917–18 almost all of the arsenal of the old Tsarist army – one estimate suggests something like 2.5 million rifles, 12,000 artillery pieces and 28 million shells – fell into Bolshevik hands. The Bolsheviks did not, of course, rely solely on this windfall. Russia's main engineering and armaments factories were located within Sovdepiia and this gave them the capacity to manufacture new weapons.
- ◆ The Bolsheviks controlled the hub of the Russian railway network, which radiated outwards from Moscow. This enabled the Bolsheviks to rush reinforcements to battle fronts where they were threatened. The Whites, by contrast, had to operate around the circumference of Bolshevik-held territory. Communication between the different White armies was extremely limited, and as a result it was all but impossible for White commanders to co-ordinate their strategies.

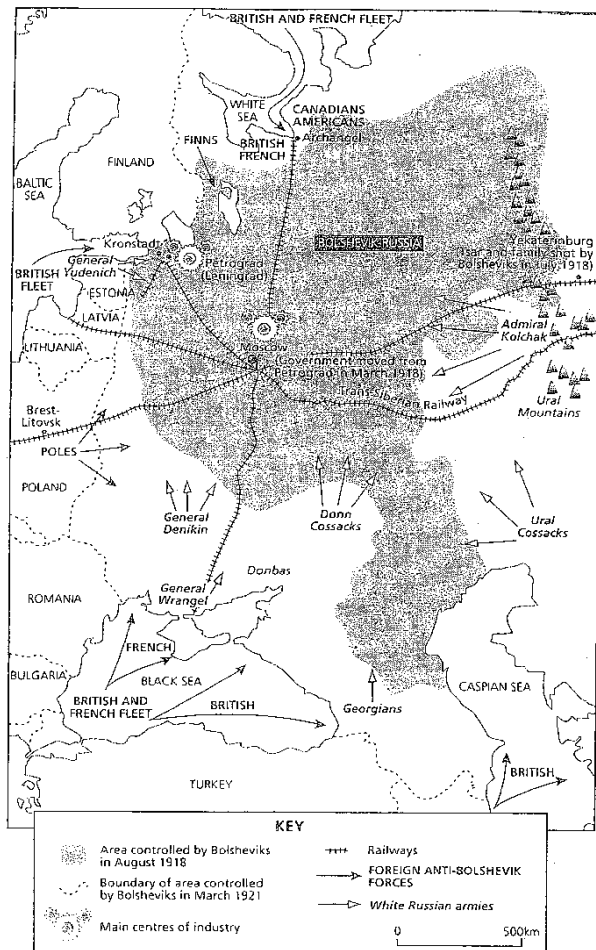
Richard Pipes believes the 'objective factors' were so heavily in the Bolsheviks' favour that the outcome of the Civil War was a 'foregone conclusion' (*Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 1994). Other historians, for example Orlando Figes (*A People's Tragedy*, 1996), though acknowledging the importance of 'objective factors', have doubted whether they were quite as decisive as Pipes alleges.

Unlike the First World War, the Civil War was a war of movement, largely dictated by the layout of Russia's railway system. It was because the Bolsheviks were largely successful in their desperate fight to maintain control of the railway lines that they were able to keep themselves supplied, while denying the Whites the same benefit.

The Reds remained in control of a central area of western Russia which they were able to defend by maintaining their inner communication and supply lines. The two major cities, Petrograd and Moscow, the administrative centres of Russia, remained in their hands throughout the war, as did the railway network. The Reds also possessed a key advantage in that the areas where they had their strongest hold were the industrial centres of Russia. This gave them access to munitions and war supplies denied to the Whites. The consequent dependence of the Whites on supplies from abroad appeared to prove the Red accusation that they were in league with the foreign interventionists.

How were the Bolsheviks able to win the civil war? Perhaps the main reason was their control over the central heartland of Russia. They had a better system of communications, and controlled a considerable part of the industrial territories of the former empire. Factories in Petrograd and Moscow that had been harnessed to the war effort against the Central Powers could easily be redirected to the needs of the civil war.

a map of the Civil War in Russia.



Factor Two – The leadership of the Bolsheviks was very strong. Lenin and Trotsky had great organising ability and were determined to defend their revolution.

The Bolsheviks were also effectively led. Lenin's role in the Civil War period was in some respects a muted one - he remained in Moscow throughout, never visiting any of the battle fronts – but he influenced thinking on strategy, offered unwavering support to those implementing the “Red Terror” and, above all, was a hard - headed decision – maker when the need arose.

Lenin's contribution to victory in the Civil War was equalled, perhaps surpassed, by Trotsky's. Trotsky may not have been a great battlefield commander, but he was a brilliant organiser. He was also an inspirational figure, moving from front to front in his famous armoured train, rallying Red forces with rousing oratory.

In the final assessment, the outstanding factor explaining the success of the Reds in the Civil War was their driving sense of purpose. Waging war is not just a matter of resources and fire - power. Morale and dedication play an equally vital role. Trotsky may have been extreme in his methods, but he created an army which proved capable of fighting with an unshakable belief in its own eventual victory. Set against this, the Whites were never more than an unco-ordinated collection of separate forces, whose morale was never high. They were an uncertain grouping of dispossessed socialists, liberals, and moderates, whose political differences often led them into bitter disputes among themselves. Throughout the Civil War, the White cause was deeply divided by the conflicting interests of those who were fighting for local separatism and those who wanted a return to strong central government. Since they were without a common cause, other than their hatred of Bolshevism, the Whites lacked effective leadership. This was a problem they were unable to resolve. No White leader emerged of the Stature of Trotsky or Lenin around whom an effective anti-Bolshevik army could unite.

Factor Three – Trotsky's reorganisation of the Red Army was vital to Bolshevik success.

In March 1918, Trotsky was given the job of creating a professional army. His task was enormous. He had the nucleus of an army in the form of the Red Guards who had provided military support from the Bolsheviks during and after the October Revolution. However, this was not the large, disciplined army which Russia clearly needed. Trotsky set to work to build up such an army.

In order to establish a working army with an effective command structure, Trotsky had to reverse most of the concessions won by Russian soldiers since the February Revolution. He expressed the view that soldiers' committees could not lead regiments in time of war; he insisted that a return to military discipline was required; and he demanded that the Red Army should have proper, central control.

Administration of the Red Army required Trotsky's energetic attention too: recruiting centres, barracks, and supplies were needed. Under the slogan, "Work, Discipline and order will save the Soviet Republic", Trotsky sought full soviet support for the construction of a Red Army. Recruitment began. There was no consistency in the quality of the early Red Army units: some were very well disciplined and effective, while others were little better than a rabble.

Quality officers were at a particular premium, and Trotsky had to accept former Tsarist officers who were prepared to serve in the Red Army. Precautions were subsequently used during the Civil War to ensure that these officers would think twice about switching allegiance. For example, a register of their families was kept and Trotsky made it known that their families would be used as hostages if they deserted from the Red Army. In addition, a Communist commissar was placed at each officer's side to ensure the politically correct nature of judgements made.

It is to Trotsky's credit that an effective fighting force did emerge during the years of the Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, the Communists could claim victory – and point to an army of five million men.

Factor Four – The economy was geared to the war effort through the imposition of policies known as War Communism.

While Trotsky's reforms of the Red Army may have indeed played a vital part in the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, so too did the economic policy that Lenin had adopted. This was known as 'War Communism'. The government took control of all industries with more than ten workers. All private trade was banned. It was illegal to go on strike and strikers could be executed. Peasants were only allowed to keep enough of their crops to feed themselves. The Bolshevik secret police, the **Cheka**, forced the peasants to hand over everything else. The whole point of War Communism was to ensure that the Red Army had enough food and supplies. If the Civil War was lost then it would be the end of Communism in Russia and so no sacrifice was too great to achieve victory.

When Lenin seized power in 1917, Russia's food-supply system had already broken down. Faced, as he was, with civil and foreign war, he brought in a programme of State control which became known as 'War Communism'.

In June 1918 all the big industries were nationalized - they became owned, that is, by the nation at large - and the State took control over every branch of life. All private trade was banned - and the Government ordered that all surplus grain must be sold to the state at fixed prices.

There was not enough food in the towns to feed the factory hands and the Red army, so teams of workers were sent out into the countryside to collect food from the peasants. These squads met with a chilly welcome. There was nothing for the peasants to buy with the money they were offered for their grain. They preferred to hoard it, or trade it secretly for real goods. They would not willingly hand it over.

The grain-collecting squads were then given an armed escort, with the right to seize grain by force. This led to a 'war for bread'. In some districts there were pitched battles between bands of armed peasants and Red Army units.

Factor Five – The Ruthlessness of the Bolsheviks.

(The use of terror by the Reds was effective in gaining the support of people in areas they controlled.)

The Bolsheviks displayed a messianic self-belief – a supreme confidence that they knew best, that history was on their side. They were motivated by a desire to transform the world, by a vision of world socialism. If people did not agree they would have to be educated. All this translated into a ruthless determination to hold on to power at all costs. The Bolsheviks had no compunction about shooting striking workers or obstructive peasants. Finally, the Bolsheviks had a clear and systematic ideology and used their control over all forms of communication to put across an effective propaganda campaign based on posters and the use of “agitprop” trains.

Terror was employed against their opponents. Felix Dzerzhinsky headed the Cheka-a Bolshevik secret police. Terror was imposed on all enemies of the Bolsheviks. Former officials, priests and landlords were executed and the Cheka a purged all who collaborated with the Whites. In July 1918, the Cheka murdered the former Tsar Nicholas at Ekaterinburg in the Urals. This removed any possibility of a restoration of the Romanovs.

In August 1918, Lenin ordered the implementation of a ruthless mass terror against the kulaks, priests and White Guards by specially chosen men loyal to the Bolshevik regime. All suspicious persons were detained in concentration camps. Any opposition to the Bolshevik authorities was dealt with by violence during what came to be known as the “Red Terror”.

Factor Six - The Weakness of the White Forces.

The various White armies fought as separate detachments. Apart from their obvious desire to overthrow the Bolsheviks, they were never bound together by a single aim. They were unwilling to sacrifice their individual interests in order to form a united anti-Bolshevik front. This allowed the Reds to pick off the White armies one by one. In the rare cases in which the Whites did consider co-operating, they were too widely scattered geographically to be able to bring sufficient pressure to bear on the enemy.

The Whites were weak; their armies not very large. For instance, Denikin's army consisted of only around 100,000 men at most and when Yudenich advanced into Perrograd in September 1919 he only had about 14,400 men at his disposal – hardly enough to hold such a large city. Although they controlled the grain areas, the Whites had great difficulty recruiting and enormous problems with desertion. The Red Army, on the other hand, numbered millions. Trotsky created the Red Army which quickly built up to 1.5 million in 1919 to 3.5 million by mid 1920. Despite a high desertion rate, the White army could never match these numbers.

The Whites were divided as to overall leadership and goals. The armies of Denikin (especially) and Kolchak alienated the mass of peasants in their regions by their support for the former landowners. To many observers they represented the forces of the past. The White leaders had few political goals other than personal power, which would have resulted in a military dictatorship in some form or other. Their armies were widely scattered over a vast territory. It was impossible for Kolchak, for example, to communicate effectively with Yudenich, separated from him by some 5,000 kilometres of territory.

The Whites were an amalgam of different groups united only by their desire to get rid of the Bolsheviks. On what was to replace the communist regime they were deeply divided. Some wanted a return to the Tsarist regime; others a democratic republic. There was little in common between the Tsarist groups and socialist groups like the Mensheviks. The aims of the national minorities were more limited and often at odds with the White leaders. The slogan "Russia One and Indivisible" did little to keep the minorities fighting for the Whites. These divisions were reflected in the military strategy of the Whites. Co-operation was limited, not helped by the long front on which the Whites fought. Kolchak established a government in Siberia but it had little contact with the forces under Deniken in the south. Thus the White armies fought largely independent of one another. Although the Whites were well supplied with old Tsarist officers they had problems recruiting conscripts. The peasants feared the loss of their newly gained land if the Whites won and saw the Reds as posing less of a threat to their position.

Factor Seven – The failure of the Allies to provide sufficient help to the Whites.

The Whites did receive help from Russia's former allies in the first World War but after the end of the war and the signing of the Versailles treaty in 1919 this assistance dried up. The Allied leaders may have had no taste for communism but neither did they desire to carry on fighting. The undemocratic nature of Kolchak's government also did nothing to inspire American help. At the end of 1918 there were only about 15,000 Allied troops in northern Russia. It is true that the Whites did receive money and military equipment from the Allies although not enough to have an impact on the course of the war. One impact Allied intervention did have was to make the Bolsheviks seem good Russian patriots against foreign interference.

Despite the preaching of an anti-Bolshevik crusade by influential voices in Western Europe, no concerted attempt was made to unseat the Bolshevik regime. This was shown by the relative ease with which the interventions were resisted. The truth was that the interventionist nations were war-weary after four long years of struggle against Germany. They had no stomach for a prolonged campaign. There were serious threats of mutiny in some British and French regiments ordered to embark for Russia. When the interventionist forces did arrive in Russia, there was seldom effective liaison between the various national contingents. Moreover, such efforts as they made to co-operate with the White armies already engaged in the Civil War were half-hearted and ineffectual After a token display of aggression the foreign troops began everywhere to withdraw. By the end of 1919, all French and American troops had been recalled, and by the end of 1920, all other Western contingents had left.....Lenin's government grasped the opportunity to present itself as the saviour of the nation from foreign conquest. It helped to put resolve into the party members who had wavered and it lent credibility to the Bolshevik depiction of the Whites as agents of the foreign powers, intent on restoring reactionary tsardom.