

**THE CIVIL WAR IN RUSSIA
(PROBLEMS OF UNDERSTANDING)***

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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 Mikhail Vasil'evich Bryantsev—Doctor of Science (History), Head of the History and Theory of State and Law Department at I. G. Petrovskii Bryansk State 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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ГРАЖДАНСКАЯ ВОЙНА В РОССИИ (ТРУДНОСТИ ПОНИМАНИЯ)

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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 Михаила Васильевича Брянцева – доктора исторических наук, заведующего кафедрой теории и истории государства и права юридического факультета Брянского государственного университета – о трансформации термина «гражданская война» в контексте травматичных событий 1917/1918–1922 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

For a long period in Soviet historiography, Lenin's essential definition of the Civil War, based on class understanding, was the predominant one. In his essay, “The Russian Revolution and the Civil War,” he defined civil war as “the sharpest form of the class struggle, it is that point in the class struggle when clashes and battles, economic and political, repeating themselves, growing, broadening, becoming acute, turn into an armed struggle of one class against another” (Lenin 1972). However, already in the 1980s such a definition ceased to satisfy researchers. The unfolding discussion brought forth calls to explore the Civil War as a complex,

multifaceted phenomenon. On these grounds, the most acceptable definition was proposed by Iu. A. Poliakov: "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 1992, 32–33). In the same vein, American researcher V. N. Brovkin has written about several "interwoven varieties of war" (1994, 26). It is this view that allows for a deeper and fuller understanding of the essential nature and timeline of the Russian Civil War.

Of course, the Civil War is not just an armed confrontation between the "Reds" and the "Whites." Moreover, the struggle between these two forces was intertwined with other political opponents on the domestic front. Further, both were forced to resist the nascent states that formed on the territory of the former Russian Empire. Foreign intervention likewise asserted an indisputable influence on the course and essence of the Civil War. Lastly, a special place is occupied by the insurgent, mainly peasant movement. Together, these factors demonstrate that the Civil War was not only an armed class struggle between the proletariat and the peasantry (or at least the poorest peasants) on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie and landlords on the other.

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

When did the Civil War in Russia begin? We still do not (and cannot) offer an unambiguous answer to this question. The Leninist idea of the beginning of the Civil War dominated Soviet historiography for a long time. After the February events of 1917, Lenin declared that "the first civil war in Russia was over," in that he regarded the February Revolution as the first civil war. Later he referred to the Kornilov revolt as the beginning of the Civil War, which he then blamed on junkers and other elements who opposed the revolution. Already in April 1918 he was certain that "the civil war is basically over" (Lenin 1974, 233–234). Later, Lenin labeled the entire first period of the Soviet power (i.e. until the end of 1920), a period of fierce civil war. Thus, it is obvious that Lenin included the revolutionary events of 1917 in the chronology of the Civil War.

The Stalin period is characterized by a different approach to the periodization of the Civil War, when historians sought to break the internal connection between the revolutionary events and the Civil War, laying the entire responsibility for the protracted and bloody conflict in the country on internal and external counterrevolution. The Civil War was adjusted to fit the primitive Stalinist scheme of the "three combined campaigns of the

Entente,” smashed by the Red Army “under the wise leadership of comrade Stalin.”

Thus, in order to determine the moment of Russia’s entry into the Civil War, it is important to make a methodological decision about the “division” within Russian society, which became actively discussed in the Russian social sciences in the early 1990s (*Is Russia a Divided Civilization?* 1994, 3–5). This debate allows us to speak of the country’s gradual “crawl” into an acute civil confrontation (Goldin 2000, 39). Undoubtedly, since the start of the twentieth century, the polarization of society has clearly manifested itself in Russia, sometimes spilling over into an obvious confrontation between various social groups. This split was most acute in the revolution of 1905–1907, while World War I aggravated this tension and the February revolution showed the possibility of an armed resolution on this basis.

At the same time, in the post-February period, the possibility of a peaceful resolution still remained. However, Bolshevik policy aimed at escalating the domestic situation and then seizing power led their opponents to make plans to use armed force to remove them from power. During this period, the Civil War was of a focal nature, and only since the late spring to early summer of 1918 did it begin to acquire a large-scale character. By that time, intertwined internal and external factors had played a critical role in establishing a base of support for anti-Bolshevik forces. Until the end of 1920 there was a struggle not only between the “Reds” and “Whites.” Foreign troops participated in the confrontation, guerrilla forces operated in the rear of regular armies, and the Bolshevik policy of “military communism” aggravated divisions between city and countryside, which in turn shaped a militarized economy.

From the end of 1920 until 1922 hostilities on all fronts gradually diminished. At that time, the main tension moved to the interior of the country. There were numerous uprisings, among them revolts in Kronstadt, Tambov province, Siberia, Ukraine, and the North Caucasus. The Soviet government was forced to use the regular Red Army to suppress them, conducting full-scale army operations with the use of aviation and artillery. Lenin called the events of 1921 the most acute crisis of Bolshevik power. He believed that the peasant rebel movement headed by Makhno, Antonov, and others posed a much greater danger to the Bolshevik dictatorship than the armies of Kolchak, Denikin, and Wrangel, since the latter were not supported by the peasantry. Realizing the impossibility of resolving the situation solely through military force, the Bolsheviks resorted to reforms in their domestic policy by introducing measures known as the “New Economic Policy.”

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”*

The outbreak of the Civil War made clear that some political forces in Russia sought a middle ground, avoiding the extremes of the main opponents while searching for a way out through the paths of democracy, evolution, and reform. This current was represented by the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries and the governments they created along the Volga River, and in the Urals, Siberia, and Arkhangelsk. The Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary programs seemed very reasonable and attractive, but historical precedent has shown that in conditions where political forces have reached the limits of polarization, moderating forms of governance simply do not have sufficient power. As it turned out, the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries did not suit either the Bolsheviks or their opponents, and, most importantly, they were, perhaps, not understood by the people. The Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries did not at all meet the aspirations of the bulk of the population (primarily the peasantry), in contrast to the Bolsheviks, who promised exactly what the masses wanted and who quickly managed to create an image of their opponents in the socialist camp as betrayers of the interests of the working people.

The possibility of a single bloc between Bolsheviks and their recent allies/opponents was lost. Throughout the Civil War, the Bolsheviks repeatedly used the weight and influence of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks to maintain their own power under slogans close and understandable to their allies in the socialist camp. In order to achieve their goals, they assailed the latter, eliminating them from power. Thus, this third way was never pursued.

Often in historiography, especially abroad, the peasant insurgency during the Civil War is referred to as the “Greens” and qualified as a “third force.” However, no matter how the “Green” movement is characterized, one thing is obvious: the peasants tried to express and defend, weapons in hand, their own special truth and interests. Their actions were a reaction to the policy of coercion and violence by both Soviet and anti-Soviet government agencies and their special services and armed forces. As V. N. Brovkin has shown quite convincingly, the “front” war was not the only or even main form of the Civil War: the peasant war against all authorities, both “White” and “Red,” dominated the conflict (1994, 25–26). These movements were not united; they were torn apart by divisions that reflected the heterogeneous social structure of the peasantry. Communist equalizing notions of justice, hatred of the ruling classes, and mistrust of the city and state power and of its ability to understand and express peasant interests in its policy, all coexisted. Even so, it was the Bolsheviks that proved to be the most acceptable political power for the bulk of the population, and therefore any

variability in the development of events proved impossible given such conditions.

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

Immediately after the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd, the elder spokesman of Russian Social Democracy, G. V. Plekhanov, warned in his “Open Letter to the Petrograd Workers” about possible adverse consequences: “In conditions of an untimely seizure of political power, the Russian proletariat will not wage a social revolution, but will only cause a civil war...” (Plekhanov 1917). However, this warning was not heeded by the Bolsheviks. It seems that in the conditions of a “divided” society, the Bolsheviks’ position became one of the main reasons for the start of a large-scale civil war. It should be noted that the Bolsheviks were mentally and morally ready to unleash such a war and did everything to make it happen. As early as 1914, Lenin put forward the slogan of turning the imperialist war into a civil war, defending it throughout the course of the First World War. N. I. Bukharin in his “Theory of the Proletarian Dictatorship,” wrote: “The proletarian revolution, however, is a rupture of the civil world: this is a civil war” (2014, 29). Leon Trotsky, in a speech at a joint meeting of the members of the Fourth All-Russia Central Executive Committee, the MCP and SD, the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions, and the Moscow City Council, representatives of all Moscow trade unions, factory committees and other workers’ organizations, called Soviet power “organized civil war against the landlords, the bourgeoisie, and the kulaks.” He openly admitted, “And our party is for a civil war! Civil war hit a wall with the issue of bread. We, the Soviets, are on the march!.. (From the audience, ironically: “Long live the civil war”) Yes, long live the Civil War! A civil war in the name of bread for children, the elderly, workers, and the Red Army in the name of a direct and ruthless struggle against counterrevolution” (Trotsky 1926). The fact that the Bolsheviks pursued a deliberate policy to unleash a civil war in May 1918 was also mentioned by the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, Ia. M. Sverdlov: “Only if we can split the village into two irreconcilable hostile camps, if we can ignite a civil war there... if we manage to set the rural poor against the rural bourgeoisie, only in that case we can say that we will do for the village what we could do for the city” (*Proceedings* 1920, 293–296). It should also be noted that it was at this time that the Bolsheviks intensified their policy aimed at forcing the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries out of the government, including the Left SRs. It was from the summer of 1918 that the Civil War turned into a real war, a war in the fullest, terrible meaning of the word.

However, when speaking about the causes and culprits of the Civil War, one should take into account the aforementioned “division” of Russian society, which under certain conditions did not presuppose a desire for

consensus. The absence of rooted traditions of democracy, the accumulated centuries-old lower class hatred of the upper classes, the traditions of rebellion and peasant wars, all anticipated an impending cataclysm. At the same time, the long world war in many respects shaped the atmosphere, psychology, and behavior of the population, and convinced them of the opportunity to solve the major issues of politics and everyday life primarily through violence, with weapons, thus bringing forth “the man with a gun.”

Having come to power, the Bolsheviks attempted to build new international relations (including those based on the idea of a world revolution), which naturally caused concern among other countries and largely predetermined interference in Russia’s domestic affairs. Foreign intervention further delayed the Civil War. No less important was foreign military aid to White Guard troops. Without the delivery of weapons, ammunition, and gear, the White Guard armies would simply have been unable to fight in 1919 and 1920.

Undoubtedly, a certain part of the blame for unleashing the Civil War in Russia is borne by the Bolsheviks’ opponents, who, not having reconciled themselves to the seizure of power, formed armed forces to fight them. It was after October 25 that all parties—the Bolsheviks, anarchists, moderate socialists, local national leaders, Kadets, generals, and officers who rushed to the Don, felt themselves in a state of civil war. Still, when talking about the “culprits” of the Civil War in Russia, one should remember that the most direct participant in these bloody events was “his majesty” the people.

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