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Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916-1926

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In the years following the Russian revolution, the infant Bolshevik regime fought many enemies on many fronts. It defeated them all. Its victory in the civil war was a miracle of survival and the history of those years, although complicated, is a heroic one. It was also horrible. But the terminal dates which Dr Smele uses for his book on the subject might surprise some readers. Russia's civil war is usually located between the years 1918 and 1921. In fact, those dates are largely correct, and the extra years in Smele's book have been added for thoroughness sake: he seems determined to cover every last skirmish, occupation force and military mission wherever it occurred – and in 1,500 pages of close detail he might have achieved it.

Smele begins his coverage early. In 1916 the tsar was still in place but tsarism was barely hanging on. The rotten props of this 300-year-old monarchy were steadily being kicked away by the appalling losses of the First World War and by hardship and hunger at home. Tsar Nicholas and his ministers found it impossible to stop the slide. Within a year and a half, the entire system had gone and a fledgling Bolshevik government was in charge – desperately insecure but ruthless and with a hard-core dedication that no other group in Russia could match.

During the civil war, three significant groups attempted to challenge Bolshevik power. First, the Romanov loyalists – remnants of the old regime who could not bear to see three centuries of tsardom and orthodoxy extinguished. These so-called “white” forces, pushing westwards from Siberia, were fractious but far from negligible. Second, as Russia was deeply embroiled in the European war, its western allies came to play an important part in the country's internal politics. The Allied Powers were depending upon tsarist forces to soak up German firepower on the eastern front – at a

horrific cost to the rank and file of the army. But keeping Russia in the war meant direct intervention with troops. Third, as the tsarist regime felt its grip on power failing, there were separatist groups waiting in the wings and ready to seize any chance to break away: in Finland, Ukraine and the Baltic republics. The picture is further complicated because, for a large part of 1918, the Germans occupied huge tracts of European Russia and sponsored a nationalist regime in the Ukraine headed by “Hetman” General Skoropadsky.

In his desire for inclusiveness, Dr Smele has extended his coverage into the middle 1920s. In fact, most of the fighting had died down by 1921 and by that year the brief war with Poland was over. By 1922 at the latest, Bolshevik power was an accomplished fact – from the Polish border to the border with Korea and from the White Sea to the Black Sea. The last gasp of foreign intervention was in April 1925 when Japanese forces finally withdrew from Northern Sakhalin Island.

This is an extremely substantial book. Dr Smele includes an extensive chronology, which I found most valuable, then a good historical introduction – in reality a mini-history of the war complete with reference notes; then 1,270 pages of entries. At the end, we have lists of ministers and officials (red and white), then a glossary and a bibliography with some of the entries in Russian.

Most of the articles revolve around proper names, not subject entries. The ones we get (Famine, Cossacks, Casualties, Pogroms, Orphans, etc.) are precious. An entry on Labour Armies reminds us that some workers had to endure almost military discipline. Later on, Trotsky made plans for the wholesale militarisation of labour. There is a substantial article on the Cheka – Lenin's brutal Extraordinary Commission for rooting out and “liquidating” political enemies. In fact, there was terror on both sides. After the failure of Boris Savinkov's Yaroslavl revolt in 1918 (noticed), the Bolsheviks executed 400 prisoners in cold blood. Another 500 were killed when Lenin was wounded two months later. In Siberia, the “white” Admiral Kolchak was equally ruthless with local opposition (the Omsk massacre of November 1918 – also noticed). Civil wars seem to be particularly nasty. It is worth noting that this was an Asiatic war as much as it was a European one. Omsk is in the heart of Siberia, 1,500 miles east of Moscow.

The article Military Commissars reveals the atmosphere of paranoid suspicion which suffused the war: the Bolsheviks forcibly recruited thousands of ex-tsarist officers for the Red Army, and party commissars were appointed to keep an eye on them. Trotsky held their families

hostage whilst the fighting was going on. The system of military commissars was formally established as the PUR – Politicheskoye Upravleniya Respublika and it became the party's eyes and ears in the armed forces. This is just one of the many official bodies noticed here: Sovnarkom, Prolet'kult and Rabkrin were Russia's first taste of Communist bureaucracy.

The worst of the deprivation is described in the article on War Communism, the economic counterpart of the civil war. Food was requisitioned from the peasantry by detachments of the Red army (the "Prodotriady"). The food went to the hungry towns with the result that the villages starved. There was some cannibalism. But the towns starved as well, so workers deserted them to seek out food in the countryside. This meant industrial production collapsed and there were no goods to exchange for food. Farm output slumped even further.

Another of Lenin's anxieties was money. There is a nice story, noticed here, about the Imperial Gold Reserve, valued at 650 million gold roubles. Seized during the revolution, the Bolsheviks held it in Samara. However, lodged there, it was in danger of being captured by the White armies, so to keep it safe it was floated in barges up the Volga to Kazan. When the Whites overran Kazan, they shipped it off to Siberia. I wonder what happened to all that money?

If we use it as a biographical dictionary (almost half the entries are biographies), Dr Smele's book is a fascinating read: General Vladimir Tolstoy – a "white" Cossack commander who escaped Russia to Australia and ended up with a job on the Sydney harbour docks; General Miller, another white commander who later became active in Romanov circles in Paris, the informal capital of monarchist exiles in Europe. In 1937, he was kidnapped by the NKVD, taken to Moscow and shot.

But not all the stories are sad ones. Sergei Chakhotin came through it all: the son of a tsarist diplomat, he was successively a white propagandist, a Soviet trade official and a research biologist in Berlin; he survived a Nazi prison and died at the age of 90, an honoured scientist of the Soviet Union. Chakhotin was a lucky man. By contrast, Vasili Chapaev died at 32. Chapaev was a soldier for the Bolsheviks who died in the battle of Ufa in 1919. Later, Soviet propaganda needed heroes and found one in this peasant soldier, glorifying his memory in later years with a novel, a biopic and even a popular board-game: Igra v. Chapaev!

The fate of many loyal Bolsheviks was a pitiless one. Alexander Beloborodov, leader of the Urals Cheka and the man who signed the death warrant for Nicholas and the royal family was himself executed on Stalin's orders in 1938;

Stepan Petrichenko, leader of the Kronstadt sailors and later a spy, died in a Soviet prison camp in 1947. They were just two of the thousands of dedicated party workers who suffered at Stalin's hands.

I cannot fault *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars* on grounds of comprehensiveness but the work is pre-eminently a book of factual detail. I would have preferred to see more subject entries on topics like rail transport, munitions, desertions, atrocities, trade, food supplies, war finance, cavalry and the procurement of horses. (This was not a sophisticated war: it was fought on horseback and on foot.) Everyday social realities do not figure much in the book. The combination of atrocious cruelty, hunger and a bitter climate made Russia a truly hellish place to live in but this reality gets lost in the welter of historical detail. Of course, the work is not meant to include impressions of ordinary life – Smele leaves that to other writers. His book is a quarry of information for them to draw on – and more entries would have made a big book even bigger! The other omission is maps. To make sense of the civil war, and in huge Russia of all countries, maps are an acute necessity.

Rowman & Littlefield have stuck to the series format: two tightly bound standard octavos. But at 700 pages each, they are fat, awkward little volumes which are not easy to handle. Small quartos would have been better for such a mammoth book. All in all, Dr Smele has made a valiant attempt to cover every scrap of information about this grim decade, its politics and warfare. There is no mention of collaborators: the book appears to be a single-handed effort.

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NationMaster is based on such a great idea. The premise of having gratis one source that would allow quick comparison of countries has merit. Many assignments ask students to do just that. Headlines from both the popular and scholarly press lament young people's lack of geographic literacy with good reason. Too few students could begin to take a world outline map and fill