

Russian Civil War of 1917: a summary

In the early 20th century, the Russian Empire engaged in its fourth bloodiest war in its entire history, amounting to over 9,000,000 deaths. The Russian Civil War began in the aftermath of the Bolshevik-led Great October Revolution, which was itself nearly bloodless, setting the stage for the most tragic period in Russian history. The conflict consisted of two main enemies - the Red and the White armies. Both parties were at each other's throats not only for victory but also for who would decide the fate of the Russian Empire in the following decades.

The Red Army, as they were called, was led by the Bolsheviks, or the Bolshevik socialist party, who had first seized power in the October Revolution, led primarily by Vladimir Lenin, fought to implement the socialist doctrine into the Russian Empire. The White Army, on the other hand, was a group of loosely allied groups with diverse political interests, including monarchism, capitalism, and social democracy. The third party present in the Russian Civil War were outside entities - Ukrainian anarchist factions, non-ideological green parties, etc. - as well as the intervening forces, though all of the internal combatants were against outside intrusion.

The turning point in Russian history within which lies the start of the Russian Civil War can be tied directly to the crowning of Nicholas II as the tsar of Russia in 1894. At the time of his ascension, his subjects wanted direct change in the government, which the tsar was not equipped to handle. As the demands grew louder, the tsar flitted between the two outcomes, and his indecisiveness would be a major underlying clause in the Russian Civil War. Another cause was the strain World War I put on the Russian people, especially considering the staggering amount of military defeats they suffered in their participation from 1914-16. The Russian people began to believe that the only alternative to the World War was a revolution to pull their country out of it.

In 1917, Russia experienced two revolutions. The first, held in February of that year, was born of frustration with the World Wars and showcased the lack of confidence that Russian workers had in their government. In March of that year, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne and removed his son from the line of succession, and

he and his family were arrested soon after this decision. Urban workers in Petrograd formed together to make a pseudo-government, which they labeled the Petrograd Soviet. The Duma, however, still nominated ministers to the cabinet of the new government, including Prince Lavrov as the cabinet head and Pavel Milyukov as the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Though radical revolutionary parties did not actively partake in the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks seized their opportunity and started to amass a following large enough to go after the new Petrograd Soviet. Following the February Revolution, the German government granted Russian exile Vladimir Ulyanov the right to return to the Russian Empire through their territory, thus drawing one of the most influential revolutionaries of the Russian Civil War back into the fold. Though Vladimir Ulyanov had many names, he was commonly referred to as Vladimir Lenin.

In the months following the February Revolution, the provisional government lost most of its control as Bolshevik propaganda helped convince the Russian population that the government was weak, to dissolve the police, and to eradicate the world order. The Russian troops that started to defect from World War I were the largest combat-ready group that Russia ever absorbed from war, providing the manpower needed to help the Bolsheviks as they promoted their anti-war rhetoric. In July, an order by the Allied Forces to start a full-frontal attack started a series of demonstrations throughout the Russian Empire, and as the demonstrations began to become more and more threatening, the provisional government moved loyal Russian troops into the cities, who put down the demonstrations with brutal force.

In the later months of 1917, the Bolsheviks produced more and more calls for support from the Russian people, campaigning in Petrograd and other cities, and the Russian population was drawn to the charismatic leader they found in Lenin. During this period, the Bolsheviks set up a Military Revolutionary Committee, which would plan and execute their seizure of power, forming groups of “militiamen” that they called the Red Guard. On October 25 of 1917, the Bolshevik forces attacked the Winter Palace with considerable ease, utilizing their determination as well as their manpower to sweep through the complex. On October 30th, the first physical battle of the Russian Civil War commenced outside Petrograd, with the Red Guard facing off against the Cossacks, which were still loyal to the recently overthrown provisional government. Within the week, the Bolsheviks established power throughout most of the Russian Empire without much bloodshed.

Though the Bolsheviks had established power almost everywhere, Moscow remained under the provisional government's control, with Cossacks soldiers taking the Kremlin, the State Duma, and other city-center buildings. Although the Red Guard defeated the Cossacks, they lost nearly 1,000 troops in the battle and severely damaged Moscow's central buildings. In other opposition, the Cossack Ottoman Aleksey Kaledin had claimed control over the Don territory and refused to recognize the Bolshevik's sovereignty, creating the "White Army" of over 4,000 men loyal to the provisional government, united over their animosity for the Bolsheviks. Though the White Army called upon the Russian Empire's former allies (France, Britain, and the United States) to provide aid against the Bolsheviks, they could not decide which army to support and what supplies to send.

In December of 1917, the Red Army started the trek to the Don region, collecting scattered Red Guard units along the way, which sparked the Echelon period, when fighting along the railroads was common in conjunction with uprisings in urban areas and lasted until late 1918. In addition, the Don region had fallen into dispute - the Cossacks, normally loyal to the previous government of Tsar Nicholas II, had become disillusioned with the invention of World War I, and the non-Cossacks in the Don region had begun to lean towards the Bolshevik cause. The new arrival of politicians that wanted to keep Russia as one state was resented by the people of the Don region, who wanted Don to become an independent state.

In January 1918, the Russian State Duma met and was subsequently dissolved by the new Bolshevik government, sparking a new wave of anger throughout the Russian people. Throughout this period of turmoil mentioned above, many countries in the Russian Empire were seeking independence from the Russian Empire, and their ideology was focused on the role the state should play in an individual's life and how much impact the government should have on society.

This is when this very Historical Committee starts its work.