The Russian Civil War

After seizing control of Russia from the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks had to safeguard their fragile grip on the reins of power.

Lenin negotiated peace with Germany and therefore an end to Russia's role in World War One. However he could not avoid a civil war.

The Russian Civil War raged from 1918 until the start of 1921. During this time, the Bolsheviks faced massive opposition to their rule in the form of the White Armies, led by former officers of the Tsarist state, and also from intervention by the forces of foreign countries. Yet, by the start of 1921, the Bolsheviks had defeated their enemies and gained a complete victory.

Leadership of the Reds
The Bolsheviks were extremely fortunate in the quality of their leadership, particularly in Lenin and Trotsky. Throughout the Civil War, Lenin provided the energy and drive needed to inspire success, while Trotsky provided the organisation and charisma.
Role of Leon Trotsky

Trotsky became Commissar for War in the Bolshevik government in March 1918. A brilliant organiser and improviser, Trotsky created the Red Army out of the Red Guards and from the remnants of the old Tsarist army.

Although the appointment of ex-Tsarist officers was questioned, Trotsky insisted they would bring expertise essential to winning the Civil War.

Political commissars were drafted into army units to spread socialist ideas and maintain loyalty to the Bolsheviks.

Conscription was established, hundreds of thousands of peasants were drafted into the Red Army.

Trotsky imposed a very tough system of discipline and control over the Red Army. Officers found guilty of cowardice or treachery were executed. However, men who showed initiative and courage were promoted rapidly.

Trotsky travelled in an armoured train to the front lines to encourage troops. At times of crisis, he readily assumed personal command of areas under threat. He successfully inspired and encouraged troops to greater efforts, and to eventual victory.

Ruthlessness

Under Lenin’s leadership, the Bolsheviks displayed total ruthlessness in making sure that they did not face rebellion and revolt in the areas they controlled.

The Constituent Assembly had been organised by the Provisional Government, to draw up a constitution for Russia. When it was elected, the majority of delegates happened to be Social Revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks feared opposition to their plans and closed the Assembly.

Once the Civil War began, the Bolsheviks banned all political parties and arrested their leaders. They also closed down newspapers that opposed them.
The Cheka, the Bolshevik Secret Police, hunted down and arrested anyone who was suspected of hostility towards the Bolsheviks. By the end of the Civil War, they had executed over 100,000 political opponents.

"War communism" was introduced to help supply the war effort. In May 1918 a Food Dictatorship was established where the Bolsheviks requisitioned grain from the peasants.

Meanwhile, much of Russia’s industry was nationalised, giving the Bolsheviks total control of goods production.

Propaganda

The Bolsheviks organised a highly effective propaganda campaign in the areas they controlled:

Agitprop (agitation propaganda) was used to encourage soldiers.
Trotsky’s train was fitted with equipment to produce posters and leaflets
This and other trains contained cinemas where propaganda films were shown
Speeches, newspapers, and leaflets continually told the people that, through the Soviets, they were in charge of Russia.

Propaganda told the people that living conditions would improve and wealth would be distributed more fairly. In contrast they warned that the White Armies and their leaders would destroy all the achievements of the Revolution, break up the Soviets and bring back the old system:
The Bolsheviks portrayed themselves as a patriotic party who would defend Russia from imperialists. This was particularly effective since the Whites had support from Britain, France and the USA.

The Bolsheviks spread the fear that Russia would be taken over by foreign countries and absorbed into their empires.

**Leadership of the Whites**

The White Armies appeared to have a number of advantages in the Civil War:

- Their leaders were experienced military commanders
- They controlled huge areas of Russia
- They had the Bolsheviks surrounded
- They had the active support of foreign countries, which intervened in the Civil War on their behalf.

However, as the Civil War developed, the White Armies began to face major problems and difficulties in organising their campaigns. Against the drive and ruthless energy of the Bolsheviks, their campaigns faltered. By the end of 1920, the Bolsheviks were close to achieving total victory.

**White Army weaknesses**

The Whites had a number of weaknesses that led to their defeat.

**Divided leadership**

While the Bolsheviks had Lenin as their leader, no one person was in charge of the White forces.
The Whites had several leaders - Yudenich, Kolchak, Deniken and Wrangel. All wanted glory for themselves. While trying to defeat the Reds, they were also often in competition with each other. They were all ambitious men and each was determined to take control of Russia for himself.

Deniken and then Wrangel were concentrated in the south, while Admiral Kolchak was in the north-east and Yudenich in the west. They were so far apart that they were unable to coordinate attacks.

As a result, there was virtually no co-operation between the various White Armies. They fought independently and this made it easier for the Red Army to defeat them individually.

**Brutality and corruption**
White Army forces often behaved with great brutality and cruelty in the areas they controlled. Towns were burned, property destroyed or stolen, and crops and livestock were taken by force. If civilians objected, they faced torture and execution. Inevitably, the Whites became hated and feared.

Corruption was widespread in White-controlled areas. White soldiers looted shops and houses, and were often drunk. A black market was created for goods originally intended to help fight the war.

**Morale**
The Bolsheviks were fighting for a very definite cause - the establishment and survival of a communist Russia.

The Whites, however, had problems motivating their troops and building up support. Why should soldiers face death simply to make Kolchak or Yudenich master of Russia?

Moreover, some Russians feared that foreign intervention would bring an end to Russian independence in the event of White victory. As time passed, more and more soldiers deserted from the White Armies.

Given the choice between the Bolsheviks and the Whites, it was hardly surprising that Bolshevik support increased dramatically.

**Impact of foreign intervention**
The impact of foreign countries on the Civil War was minimal for a number of reasons:

World War One had ended in 1918, resulting in a lack of commitment to Russia With the threat of Germany gone, Britain, France and the USA did not feel the need to supply Russia. After World War One, foreign powers lacked resources or troops to spare Neither the fear of communism, nor the desire to protect Russian autocracy was strong enough to keep Western powers committed to involvement in Russia
By the end of 1919 most foreign troops had left Russia. But the Reds used the idea of foreign support for the White armies as propaganda. They claimed that the White generals were attempting to defeat the Bolsheviks in order to hand Russia over to foreign imperialists.

The fear of losing their independence convinced a great deal of Russians to support the Reds. As a result, the Reds established themselves as the saviours of Russia.

Geographical implications
At the start of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks controlled the key central area of Russia between Petrograd and Moscow. This gave them a number of advantages.

Most of Russia’s railways were in this area. This made communication between the various battlefronts much easier. Trotsky was able to move troops and supplies quickly to positions under attack. As Commissar for War, he was able to visit the battlefronts in an armoured train, and to take personal command.

The large population of the major cities was a key resource for the Bolsheviks. The cities provided fresh recruitment for the Red Army.

Much of Russia’s industry and raw materials was located in this area. This made it possible for the Bolsheviks to keep their troops supplied and equipped with weapons, ammunition and supplies.

The sheer size of Russia worked against the White Armies. They had to move their forces and supplies over huge distances. This made it difficult to maintain effective control.

The lack of effective railways was an added complication to the existing communication.
difficulties between the different White Armies and their leaders.

**Victory for the Reds**
By the end of the Civil War in 1921 the Bolsheviks had succeeded in securing their grip on power in Russia.

The White Armies and the foreign powers fighting on Russian soil had been defeated. Just as importantly, rival political parties had been outlawed. Thanks to the Cheka secret police, dissenting voices had been silenced.

Lenin had achieved his ultimate goal of steering his small Bolshevik party to total control of Russia.