CHAPTER 2

THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR, 1917–1921

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The Russian Civil War was a vicious and epic struggle between the Reds—Bolsheviks and their sympathizers—and all those who attempted to stop them from cementing their control over Russia. These included separatists from the non-Russian territories around the fringes of the old Russian empire, peasant anarchists who wanted little but to be left alone, and (most prominently) the Whites. The Whites were the last remnants of Russia's old regime, especially military officers, government officials, and the leaders of pre-revolutionary Russia's political parties.

The war between the Reds and Whites and all the other warring factions was fiendishly complex, and defies any attempts to force it into a neatly coherent narrative. In the Bolsheviks' campaign to retain and expand their newly won power after October 1917, they confronted internal and external opposition from their non-Bolshevik fellow socialists, two exceedingly dangerous right-wing competitors from Siberia and southern Russia, along with other White armies, a host of nationalist movements aimed at splitting parts of the tsarist patrimony away from Soviet Russia, intervention by a host of foreign states, and not least massive and violent opposition from the peasantry under Soviet rule. Fronts moved with dizzying rapidity back and forth across Russia, accompanied by near-total social breakdown, epidemic disease, and mass hunger. The Civil War is thus far more complex than can be portrayed in a short summary; the best this chapter can hope to do is indicate the most important developments.

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Despite this complexity, we can simplify matters somewhat by concentrating on the two groups that had a serious potential for overthrowing Bolshevik rule, rather than simply denying the Bolsheviks control of imperial Russia’s peripheries or hindering Bolshevik attempts to consolidate power. Looked at in that sense, the two theaters worthy of sustained attention are the south and the east, both of which were marked by large and relatively effective White movements.

The First Shots of Civil War

When did the Civil War begin? Some historians have pointed to the clash of major armies in the summer of 1918. Should we move further back to the Bolsheviks’ forcible dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, which marked Lenin’s refusal to cooperate with other socialists in governing the new Russia? Did the Civil War begin from the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in October 1917? Should we go back even further to the Kornilov Affair of August 1917, in which General Lavr Kornilov attempted to seize power from Aleksandr Kerenskii’s Provisional Government?

Simply raising the question shows that there is no clear answer. This essay, however, picks up the story with the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. It is from that point that the essential thread of the Civil War began: the Bolshevik party attempted to hold the state power it had seized against desperate effort to deny it this authority. In the immediate aftermath of the October coup, the Bolsheviks faced in microcosm the foes they would eventually confront in much larger numbers. In contrast to the ease with which the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd, the capital, they were forced into several days of bloody street fighting in Moscow against military cadets. Within days after the coup, an improvised group of Red Guards (revolutionary workers and sailors formed into a militia), fought a battle on the Pulkovo Heights just west of Petrograd to repel a half-hearted attempt by Kerensky and the Cossack General Petr Krasnov to crush the Revolution.

Soon thereafter, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin acted against the sentiments of the Russian proletariat; the Mensheviks, his fellow Marxists but political rivals; the Socialist Revolutionaries or SRs, a pro-peasant socialist party; and even a substantial portion of his own party by decisively rejecting any Bolshevik cooperation in government with a broad coalition of socialists. He chose to rely instead solely on his own Bolsheviks and his temporary allies, the Left SRs, a breakaway faction. This became quite clear with the first and only session, on 5 January 1918, of the Constituent Assembly, a