

THE CIVIL WAR IN RUSSIA—DEFINITION, CAUSES, AND PERIODIZATION*

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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 Vasilii Zhanovich Tsvetkov—Doctor of Science (History), Professor at the Contemporary Russian History Department at Moscow Pedagogical 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 – ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ, ПРИЧИНЫ, ПЕРИОДИЗАЦИЯ

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Аннотация. Минувшее 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 Василия Жановича Цветкова – доктора исторических наук, профессора кафедры новейшей отечественной истории МПГУ – о трансформации термина «гражданская война» в контексте травматичных событий 1917–1922 гг. в России, причинах несостоятельности «третьей силы» в ходе острого гражданского противостояния, периодизации и 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

The conceptual apparatus of the history of the revolution and the Civil War in Russia needs further elaboration and refinement. Sociocultural definitions of the Civil War (as, for example, the “tragedy of fratricide”), of course, are justified, but in the socio-political, military-political, and political-legal contexts, they are insufficient. Lenin's definitions arose from the class characterization of social development, the change in socio-economic formations occurring in the process of class struggle. Its supreme form was recognized as civil war. Moreover, it was Lenin who wrote about “a long civil war, engulfing the whole country, the armed struggle between two parts of the people” (Lenin 1972, 11). This is a broader definition.

The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (the second, the so-called “Stalinist” edition) defined the Civil War in its direct relation to the intervention of foreign states. The entry itself begins with an “F” rather than “C”: Foreign

military intervention and Civil War in the USSR 1918-1920.” Here is the definition, according to the Short Course of the History of the CPSU(B): “The interference of international imperialism in the internal affairs of the Soviet state, the organization by foreign imperialists of the forces of internal counterrevolution in Russia, their joint attack on the Soviet country with the aim of strangling the Soviet socialist republic; on the part of the working people of Russia, the civil war was a war of ‘workers and peasants of the peoples of Russia against the external and internal enemies of Soviet power.’”¹ Thus, if there was no interference of foreign states, there would have been no Civil War. At the same time, the Civil War was not dated from the “mutiny” of the Czechoslovak Corps and not from the landing of Allied forces in Murmansk in the spring of 1918, but from October 25, 1917.

In my view, among the modern assessments, a precise definition is given in the recently published textbook on the history of Russia for the tenth grade: “... Civil war is an armed conflict between citizens of one state, which is accompanied by division of the country into two or more internally organized parts, openly fighting with each other in order to implement their program for the future organization of the country ...” (Gorinov, Danilov, Morukov et al. 2016, 8). It indicates the central factor in its political and legal context: the division of the country, the division of power, and the division of the political and ideological programs. In other words: the two sides (Red and White)—the two truths.

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

Civil war, unlike a war with an “external enemy,” does not have a clear date for “declaration,” “truce,” or “conclusion.” However, based on the above thesis that the Civil War is a confrontation between two state systems, we can talk about its beginning after October 1917. In fact, Lenin himself spoke at the IV Extraordinary All-Russian Congress of Soviets in March 1918 about the state of civil war as from the moment of the “deposition” of the Provisional Government and the decision of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets to transfer the power to the Soviet “vertical” (Lenin 1974, 94–95). Further, we can already talk about the escalation, the development of the Civil War.

As for the end of the Civil War, Lenin declared this in December 1920 at the Eighth All-Russian Congress of Soviets (Lenin 1970, 137). This was due to the fact that at that time there were no military fronts and the “economic front” was recognized as the main one. The White Crimea of General Wrangel and the White Transbaikalia of Ataman Semionov were already history. However, in the spring of 1921 a powerful anti-Bolshevik

¹ “Inostrannaia voennaia interventsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v SSSR 1918–1920 gg. [The Foreign Military Intervention and the Civil War in the USSR of 1918–1920].” In *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia [Great Soviet Encyclopedia]*. 2nd edition. Vol. 18. p. 175. Moscow: Bol'shaia sovetskaiia entsiklopediia, 1953.

insurrection unfolded. In the Far East, as a result of the coup, in May 1921 the power of the anti-Bolshevik government of the Merkulov brothers was established. Thus, the end of the Civil War is appropriate to move either to November 1922, the fall of General Diterikhs's Provisional Priamur Government, or even to the summer of 1923, the date of the defeat of the Yakut campaign by General Pepeliaev, and the subsequent occupation of Okhotsk and Aian by the Red Army.

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"

Since the early 1990s, the thesis that there was a "third force" alternative to the Soviet power and the White movement has been quite widespread. In particular, slogans such as "Down with the food surplus appropriations," "Down with the commissars' power," and the famous "Soviets without Communists" can be considered distinctive indicators of the "third way." We can note numerous examples of independent insurgent governmental structures, or rural "republics." Rebel commanders are well known. Even so, it is necessary to take into account the political passivity of a large part of the population and its hostile attitude towards any authority.

At the same time, there are objections to the definition of the anti-Bolshevik insurrection as a "third force." They primarily concern debates over the origin, course, and consequences of various uprisings. It is possible to single out pre-prepared revolts with the participation of large underground organizations (Iaroslavl, Izhevsk-Votkinsk Uprisings). One can likewise note the insurgency that actively interacted with other forces opposing Soviet power (the actions of the so-called Russian People's Volunteer Army during the Soviet-Polish war of 1920). One can also single out spontaneous protest actions, which became the basis for mass movements (the Veshenskaia, Tambov, and West Siberian Uprisings). Isolated resistance actions typical for the end of the Civil War (rebel detachments in the North Caucasus, the Baikal region, the Urals, and the Volga region) were also numerous. However, it is difficult to find a unifying political and economic program among them. It is impossible to equate the actions of deserters, spontaneous actions by peasants brought to despair by food surplus appropriation, and the organized operations of Tambov and Izhevsk insurgents. The demands of the insurgents were also varied. Often it was a protest against all authorities. It is not by chance that many insurgents who fought against the Reds began to resist the Whites as well. At the same time, one way or another, the rebel forces gravitated toward either Red or White.

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

In my view, it is better to avoid placing blame for the start of the Civil War on “Reds” or “Whites.” Undoubtedly, the Bolsheviks were not afraid of the Civil War; they accepted it as an inevitable and necessary stage on the way to changing socio-economic formations. It is known that Lenin declared “the transformation of the modern imperialist war into a civil war” back in September 1914 in his declaration “War and Russian Social Democracy.” The policy pursued by the Bolsheviks after coming to power aggravated the confrontation in society and divided society according to the social and class characteristics.

However, other questions need to be asked as well. Did opponents of the Bolsheviks, that is, the liberal, right-wing political forces, do everything possible to prevent civil confrontation? Did they equally take into account the socio-political and economic changes that had matured? Was it really impossible for politicians and military leaders to agree on an anti-Bolshevik platform in the summer and autumn of 1917? In short, is it possible to say that he who did not prevent the war is also to blame?

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