



The Causes and Costs of the Civil War

By Marja Erwin

The Ukrainian Revolution was shaped by the conditions in Ukraine and in the whole Russian Empire; Ukraine was one theater of the Russian Revolution and one front of the Russian Civil War. The Ukrainian Revolution was shaped, in part, by cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between several regions of the former Russian Empire:

Firstly, central Ukraine, including Volyn, Podolia, Kiev, Chernigov and Poltava provinces. The population was mostly Ukrainian. This area was the stronghold of Ukrainian nationalism. The economy was almost entirely agricultural.

Secondly, the border regions, including Kharkov province in Ukraine, and Orel, Kursk and Voronezh Provinces, and the Don Host, in Russia. The population was divided; mostly Ukrainian in Kharkov and mostly Russian in the other provinces. The economy was almost entirely agricultural.

Thirdly, the Black Sea coast, including Kherson, Tavrida, and Yekaterinoslav Provinces, part of the Don Host, the Kuban Host, and the Black Sea Province. The Russian Empire conquered the area in the 18th century, and encouraged Russian, Ukrainian, and German settlement through the 18th and 19th centuries. The area also included large Greek, Tatar, and Jewish minorities. This area was relatively inhospitable terrain for either Russian or Ukrainian nationalism. The economy was primarily agricultural, but included the Empire's largest iron mines around Kryvyy Rih and its largest coal mines around Luhansk, as well as iron foundries in the Donets Basin and Dnipro Bend, and the ports of Odesa and Novorossiysk.

Lastly, the Don, Kuban and Terek Hosts, including parts of Central Russia and much of the Black Sea Coast. These areas were sharply divided between the original inhabitants, the Cossacks, and the new settlers who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Cossacks sought to keep land and power in their own hands. The Cossacks were inclined to regional autonomy, but the Kuban Cossacks were themselves divided between the pro-Ukrainian Black Sea faction and the pro-Russian Line faction.

The Causes of the Civil War

Economic Conditions

Agriculture accounted for about 75% of Ukrainian labor, and was important throughout Ukraine. Mining accounted for another 10% of Ukrainian labor, and was centered around Yekaterinoslav, with the Empire's largest coal mines in the Donets Basin, its largest iron mines around Krivyy Rih, and its largest iron foundries in the Donets Basin or the Dnipro Bend. Ukrainian industry was an important objective for all sides, but the arms industry was less developed than the mining and iron industries, and was unable to supply the armies of the Civil War.

After the abolition of serfdom in the 19th Century, the typical Ukrainian peasant was allotted three hectares of land, and the former serfs were required to pay their former owners for their freedom. The free settlers were substantially better off. The Tsar, the nobility and the clergy continued to claim the best lands. After the February Revolution, the peasantry first withheld rents, and then seized the lands of the Tsar, the nobility, the clergy, and other absentee landlords, and distributed these lands among themselves. Successive regimes either attempted to restore the prerevolutionary landholdings, or to seize them for their own interests.

Political Movements

The Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine was divided between the Kyiv and Katerynoslav factions. The Kyiv faction was strongest in central Ukraine. It favored peasant revolution, and the cultural and political independence of Ukraine. The Katerynoslav faction was strongest in the industrial regions near the Black Sea coast. It favored working-class organization, and close union with Russia. The Borotbists also joined the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine at the beginning of 1920. The Bolsheviks opposed the distribution of the land to the peasants. They saw state control as the basis of socialism. They saw smallholders, small-scale artisans and small-scale traders as the petit bourgeoisie and as potential counterrevolutionaries.

The Makhnovist movement emerged, during the war, in the industrial regions near the Black Sea coast. Makhno was an anarchist, but the movement included many non-anarchists. The movement was internationalist. The Makhnovists sought a federation of sovyets, and they opposed dictatorship and landlordism. The Makhnovists supported the seizure and distribution of the land by the peasants. They saw workers' control, including peasants' control, as the basis of socialism. They valued the peasants' self-determination and declined to dictate the mode of distribution. Makhno himself favored libertarian communism but anarchist ideas embraced individual, community, and various forms of cooperative workers' control as well as libertarian communism.

Several other partisan movements, including those of Zelenyi and Grigoriev, emerged in central Ukraine. Most of these movements were nationalist; Zelenyi combined Ukrainian nationalism with peasant populism, while Grigoriev was an opportunist. Many of these movements were xenophobic. Grigoriev encouraged pogroms against the Jewish population, and hostility toward non-Slavs.

The Directory was divided between socialists and non-socialists. Vinnichenko, the first chairman of the Directory, favored the distribution of land to the peasants and workplaces to the workers. Many of the military officers opposed Vinnichenko; some sided with the Whites while others supported Petliura and non-socialist members of the Directory; furthermore, the Entente was not willing to negotiate with a socialist-led Directory. After the fall of Kyiv, Vinnichenko resigned from the Directory. Petliura, the second chairman of the Directory, believed its fate depended as much on the Entente and the army as on the peasantry, and put national independence before the social revolution.

The Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party had initially supported both the Directory and the social revolution. In January 1919, at the 6th Conference of the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party, the conservatives seized control and condemned the revolutionaries. This split the party. The new Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party now explicitly opposed the social revolution, while the Independents continued to support the social revolution.

Most of the important leaders of the white movements, including Lavr Kornilov, Anton Denikin, Pyotr Wrangel, Pavlo Skoropadskiy, and Pyotr Krasnov, among others, were army officers, and the ideology of the white movement drew from the attitudes of the officers' corps. They put military victory before political reform. Moreover, many of the important leaders, especially Skoropadskiy, were important landowners. They delayed land reform until after the white defeat. Some, particularly Skoropadskiy, sent troops to restore the prerevolutionary landholdings and punish the peasants who had seized them.

The white movements were divided between Cossack separatists and Russian centralists. Denikin staunchly opposed autonomy, led alone independence, but many Cossacks, if not most, favored independence. This resulted in continual tensions between the Cossacks and the Armed Forces of South Russia. This was particularly explosive among the Kuban Cossacks. The Kuban Cossack Host had been formed from the majority-Russian Caucasus Line Cossacks and the majority-Ukrainian Black Sea Cossacks. Most of the Black Sea Cossacks favored Cossack separatism and close ties with Ukraine. Many of the Caucasus Line Cossacks favored Russian Centralism. On June 27th 1919, Riabovol, the president of the Kuban Rada, and an advocate of Kuban independence, was assassinated. On November 7th, Denikin ordered the suppression of the Kuban Rada. Between November 1919 and January 1920, about half of the Kuban troops deserted from the Armed Forces of South Russia.

The white movements were again divided between pro-German and pro-Entente factions. Skoropadskiy and Krasnov allied with the Germans, while Kornilov and Denikin allied with the Entente. However, this division never prevented cooperation between the two factions. During the First World War, the White forces continued to cooperate against the Bolsheviks, and the pro-Entente Volunteer Army even received German aid via the Don Army. After the German surrender, the Hetmanate collapsed, but the Don Host survived; Krasnov resigned and the Krug elected Bogaevskiy to take his place.

The Costs of the Civil War

An estimated 7 to 10 million people, mostly civilians, died in the Civil War. The military operations themselves killed hundreds of thousands of people, but the resulting dislocations, starvation, and disease killed millions more.

249,000 Red Army troops killed in action, 1918-1920. similar All other troops killed in action in the Civil War, 1918-1920. similar All people killed by banditry, pogroms, and state terror, 1918-1920.

2,000,000 All people killed by epidemic disease, exposure, and starvation, 1918-1920. similar Other war-related causes, 1918-1920.

Land Conflicts

Land conflict was one of the direct causes of the Civil War; its escalation was among its worst results.

In most of Russia and Ukraine, the peasantry seized the landlords' estates and divided them among themselves. Land war only came when outside forces attempted to restore the landlords' estates or to bring them under state control. The Bolsheviks escalated land conflicts by bringing half the former estates under state control, and by pitting the lower peasantry against the middle and upper peasantry.

In the Cossack hosts, the Cossacks refused to divide the land with the "*inogorodnie*," or "strangers," the new settlers, or to grant any power to them. Land war came the moment the Cossack forces decided to fight for their privileges, and continued until the Red Army finally defeated the Cossack armies; this involved some of the fiercest fighting of the Civil War, atrocities on both sides, and systematic de-Cossackization.

In the German colonies, similar conflicts could flare up, although the German colonists did not have the same political and military traditions as the Cossacks did.

Banditry

Banditry was widespread throughout the Russian Civil War. The armies, regular and irregular, depended on self-supply for food, water, and clothing; in practice self-supply meant extortion. The costs of corruption, waste, and plunder could far exceed the needs of the troops themselves.

Pogroms

Pogroms spread through Ukraine during the Russian Civil War. It remains in dispute how much the armies differed in practice. Nationalist and White propaganda encouraged anti-semitism and pogroms. However, Makhnovist propaganda denounced anti-semitism and pogroms, and denounced Grigoriev for his involvement in pogroms.

Disease, Exposure, and Starvation After the start of the Civil War, the decline of agriculture, the collapse of transportation, and the need to escape from combat zones or from hostile territory all led to exposure and starvation. All of these added to the effect of epidemic disease.

Economic Destruction

The Civil War also devastated the economy. The grain harvest of 1913 was 80 million tons; that of 1921 was 38 million. The coal output of 1913 was 29 million tons; that of 1921 was 9 million. The Ukrainian economy was even harder-hit than the Russian.

Major Sources

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