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Donald J. Raleigh: Experiencing Russia's Civil War

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Introduction

Experiencing Russia's Civil War

AS SELF-PROCLAIMED heir to the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution also had universal aspirations. One of the great defining events of the twentieth century, it aroused desires to overthrow exploitation, injustice, and colonial domination. Although it failed to live up to its expectations, the Revolution forced a reconfiguration of politics in Europe and the United States by presenting itself as an inevitable alternative to Western socioeconomic and political practices. The Revolution likewise fired the imaginations of intellectuals and nationalists in the developing world, who sought to liberate themselves from the confident global empires. Supplanting the “Marseillaise” as the anthem of the downtrodden, the “International” echoed throughout the century and reverberates *sotto voce* even today.

Given its singular significance, it is not surprising that no other topic in Soviet history has been as politically charged and so often retold as the story of the Revolution of 1917. This is not true, however, of its most decisive chapter, the Civil War, the historiography of which remains remarkably underdeveloped,¹ considering the conflict's relation-

¹ John Keep, “Social Aspects of the Russian Revolutionary Era (1917–1923) in Recent English-Language Historiography,” *East European Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1990): 159–60. Other thoughtful essays that survey the general contours of the debates in the recent past are Ronald G. Suny, “Toward a Social History of the October Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (1983): 31–52; idem., “Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics,” *Russian Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 165–82; and Steve Smith, “Writing the History of the Russian Revolution after the Fall of Communism,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 4 (1994): 563–78.

ship to the subsequent course of Soviet history. Before researching this book I subscribed to the view that Stalinism marked a departure from Leninism and that the fledgling Soviet system entering the 1920s sustained less authoritarian alternatives to the path that Russian history ultimately took with the launching of Joseph Stalin's grandiose industrialization drive at the end of the 1920s. I no longer am so sure. For one thing, as the "matrix of the contemporary world," World War I inaugurated a century "of revolution and ideological politics" and "international and social violence par excellence,"² marking a watershed in the methods the European states used to govern their populations. As Peter Holquist persuasively shows, many of the features we tend to associate with the Civil War period, such as militarization, centralization, and the concept of the internal enemy, first emerged during the Great War, while practices we associate with the Bolsheviks—surveillance, state control of food supply, and the application of violence for political ends—were also widely employed by other belligerent powers.³ Then there is the unanticipated and contingent. In his comparative study of the French and Russian Revolutions, Arno J. Mayer insists that "the Furies of revolution are fueled above all else by the resistance of the forces and ideas opposed to it." In emphasizing that the by-no-means innocent opposition to revolution helped nurture a spiral of terror, Mayer poignantly demonstrates how violence overwhelmed the revolutionaries who had come to power.⁴ Although I see great merit in Mayer's bold argument, I believe he undervalues the extent to which the Bolsheviks and other elements of the country's radical Left actually promoted a climate of violence, owing to Russian political culture, ideology, and the broader wartime practices referred to earlier. Their determination to rule as a minority party in order to reorder society resulted in the militarization of public life, which bequeathed a traumatic legacy by ordaining how the Bolsheviks would, in subsequent years, realize their plans for social engineering: many of the practices we associate with the Stalinist era were experimented with and even became an integral part of the new order already during the Civil War, as did the population's strategies of accommodation and resistance.

² Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 235, 293.

³ Peter I. Holquist, "Information Is the *Alpha* and *Omega* of Our Work': Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (September 1997): 443–46. See also his forthcoming book, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Don Territory during Total War and Revolution, 1914–21*, to be published by Harvard University Press.

⁴ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2000), 23, also 4, 7, 17.

Despite the crucial long-term consequences of the experiential and social aspects of the Russian Civil War, Western scholarship on the topic has focused on military operations, diplomacy, and politics at the top, due to the nature of the available sources as well as to dominant paradigms in the historical profession.⁵ Since the 1980s, however, heightened awareness on the part of Western historians of the importance of the years 1918–21 as a formative experience for the Soviet state has resulted in a shift to heretofore neglected questions of social history and Bolshevik cultural experimentation,⁶ stimulating publication of new academic and popular overviews of the Civil War.⁷ Nevertheless, the traditional emphasis on military and political aspects of the conflict has not abated.⁸ While some 1920s Soviet publications on the subject that appeared before the imposition of Stalinist orthodoxy on intellectual life still appeal to contemporary readers, nearly all later historiography in the USSR on the 1918–21 period suffers from the general shortcomings common to Soviet historical writing. True, Soviet historians who studied 1917 often produced results that were not entirely invalidated by ideological content, but this is much less the case in regard to the Civil War years. In fact, my research indicates the enormous extent to which Soviet historians patently falsified the history of the Civil War in their

⁵ This is not because those of us who wrote on 1917 did not want to expose the dark side of the Bolsheviks' social experiment by extending our narratives beyond the confines of that year. Indeed, the social history of the Russian Revolution, and of the Soviet Union for that matter, was still in its infancy a mere twenty-five years ago, and it was only natural that historians first applied the research strategies of the then new social history to 1917 itself. More importantly, the sources available for many topics on the post-1917 period were simply inadequate. Despite the lack of access to Russian archives before the mid-1980s, historians exploring the social dimensions of the Revolution could at least rely on the rich Russian press. Yet once the Bolsheviks imposed censorship—almost immediately after October 1917—they silenced opposition voices or drove them into the underground.

⁶ See Peter Kenez, "Western Historiography of the Russian Civil War," in *Essays in Russian and East European History: Festschrift in Honor of Edward C. Thaden*, ed. by Leo Schelbert and Nick Ceh (Boulder, 1995), 199–205.

⁷ I have in mind works such as Evan Mawdsley's *The Russian Civil War* (Boston, 1987); Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918–1922* (Princeton, 1994); and W. Bruce Lincoln's *Red Victory* (New York, 1989).

⁸ See, for instance, Jonathan Smele, *Civil War in Siberia: The Anti-Bolshevik Government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918–1920* (New York, 1996); Norman G. O. Pereira, *White Siberia: The Politics of Civil War* (Montreal, 1996); and the publications of Susan Z. Rupp: "Conflict and Crippled Compromise: Civil-War Politics in the East and the Ufa State Conference," *Russian Review* 56, no. 2 (1997): 249–64; idem., "The Struggle in the East: Opposition Politics in Siberia, 1918," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1304 (Pittsburgh, 1998).

attempts to employ the “science” of Marxist history as an instrument to fight émigré and Western accounts of the Revolution.

My book, the aim of which is to bring to life the diverse experiences of the Russian Civil War in the city and province of Saratov, thus marks a major departure in the historiography for which a local or case study of a Russian province during the hostilities is virtual *terra incognita*.⁹ Because Russia is a vast country with a diverse and dispersed population, a local study can tell us a tremendous amount about momentous events and arguably is the only way to learn about them, for the approach allows the researcher to probe complex interrelationships that are difficult to ascertain on a national level and to attack questions that previously were either considered in isolation or ignored. Instead of stressing the “typicality” of Saratov, I wish to show that while the particular events presented in this study are unique—as they would be in any setting—they have condensed within them more general experiences that are larger than the local. As Allan R. Pred argues, “it is through their intersection with the locally peculiar, the locally sedimented and contingent, the locally configured context, that more global structuring processes are given their forms and become perpetuated or transformed.”¹⁰

Saratov proved to be an ideal choice for my study as well as for my earlier book on the Revolution of 1917, when I specifically sought out an administrative, trade, and cultural center that had some, but limited, industrial development, making it more representative of provincial Russian towns than a major industrial city with a sizable working class. For a variety of objective and fortuitous reasons, sources on Saratov were more plentiful and diverse than those available for other urban areas. Furthermore, the peasant problem loomed so large in Saratov Province that its capital city became a center of Russian populism and of Russia’s most popular party, the Socialist Revolutionaries. Saratov similarly affords a suitable setting in which to explore Bolshevik efforts during the Civil War to construct Soviet power both politically and lin-

⁹ An exception to this generalization is Igor’ Narskii’s *Zhizn’ v katastrofe: Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 2001), which appeared while my book was in production. I was pleased to see that many of Narskii’s conclusions about the consequences of the Civil War agree with my own. My work also complements studies on Russia’s capitals, but differs in its methodology and in that I had access to archival materials. See Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd, 1917–1922* (Oxford, 1991), and Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power: A Study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918–21* (London, 1988).

¹⁰ *Making Histories and Constructing Human Geographies: The Local Transformation of Practice, Power Relations, and Consciousness* (Boulder, 1990), 15.

guistically, because it remained in Bolshevik hands throughout the tortuous ordeal that lasted locally from 1917 until 1922.

Interested in how different groups lived their lives in particular surroundings and circumstances, I situate my research around the experiences of revolutionaries and of key social groups affected by Bolshevik policies, and use each as an illuminating foil to reflect broader tendencies. I complicate our understanding of the period by considering the languages that represented the divergent experiences and interests of distinct social and political elements, reading certain actions as symbols of political attitudes embedded in social and cultural matrixes that defy easy categorization. While the conceptual ground admittedly is treacherous here, I seek to show how Russian political culture (which I define as the subjective aspects of social life that distinguish one society from another), Bolshevik practices, and the circumstances of civil war molded diverse elements of society into an organic experiential whole. Because those living through the Civil War saw no logic or structure to it, no “center” or generally accepted integrating myth or narrative (despite Bolshevik efforts to craft one), a strict chronological approach would impose a false order on a chaotic chapter in the country’s history. Although I observe chronological boundaries, I therefore proceed synchronically, linking a disparate cast of social actors who, at various times, adopted, contested, and/or manipulated to their own advantage the Bolsheviks’ attempts at cultural creation.

The major problems my project investigates include the social and political relations and divisions created by revolutionaries; the discursive battle the Bolsheviks and their opponents fought in presenting rival versions of the revolutionary tale; manifestations of “localism,” and Saratov leaders’ troubled relationship with Moscow and with Bolsheviks in the province’s backwaters; the largely unknown role of the left populist movement in helping to keep Soviet power afloat; the development of new rituals of power and attempts to create a “proletarian” culture and to establish cultural hegemony; local economic policies and their effects on daily life; how Saratov peasants, workers, and members of the much despised—but needed—bourgeoisie, responded to Bolshevik rule; and the far-reaching crisis erupting in 1921 that heretofore has been neglected in the scholarly literature. By focusing on the vital, even explosive, interaction between social context and ideologically inspired politics, I seek to comprehend how the experiences of revolution and civil war transformed people and structures.¹¹

¹¹ Although my work is informed by recent historical writing on the French Revolution and the cultural turn, I part ways with François Furet and others, who argue in favor of

The great advantage of the approach I am taking is that it brings a new dimension to our understanding of the period by providing insight into how millions of people who lived in the provinces experienced the essential events and issues that confronted the new Soviet regime. Until now, we knew relatively little about the dynamics of civil war at the local level, about daily life in Soviet Russia at this time, about mass attitudes toward social and political experimentation, about center-periphery relations, and about the long-term impact of this extended period of disruption and brutalization on the continuities of social life. By showing how the Bolsheviks were able to stay in power in Saratov Province, I deepen our knowledge of why they survived the Civil War, of the price they paid to do so, and of what this meant for the new type of state they created. My detailed account of what I call the total experience of civil war between 1917 and 1922 permits me to demonstrate how the powerful legacy of the struggle portended social and political clashes to come. In many respects, the ideologically justified devaluation of human life at the time represents the first inkling that the consequences of World War I would reverberate throughout the century.

During the conflict the Bolsheviks or Reds, renamed Communists in 1918,¹² found themselves pitted against the Whites, many of whom represented the country's business and landowning elite. Opposing social (and socialist) revolution, the Whites were a more diverse group than the Bolshevik label of "counterrevolution" would suggest: some sought to set up a conservative government and to restore the old order, but others harbored reformist ideas. Much more complicated were the Bolsheviks' relations with Russia's moderate socialists, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), who wished to establish a government that would, at the least, include all socialist parties. Often subsumed within the wider conflict of Reds and Whites, the internecine struggle within the socialist camp in fact prevailed during much of 1918, persisted throughout the Civil War, and flared up once again after the Bolsheviks routed the Whites in 1920. Moreover, left-wing SRs and Mensheviks sided with the Bolsheviks against the Whites during the initial phase of the Civil War. Despite their increasingly difficult relationship with the Bolsheviks as the Civil War progressed, these groups tended to accept a semi-legal status during the struggle, backing the Communists at critical junctures or remaining neutral.

Because opposition to revolution was every bit as deeply anchored in

an exclusive focus on revolutionary discourse. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (New York and London, 1981).

¹² I use both terms interchangeably throughout this study.

Russian political life as the fashion for revolution, armed opposition to the Bolsheviks arose immediately after the events of October 1917, when officers of the Imperial Army, Lavr Kornilov, Anton Denikin, Aleksei Kaledin, and others, formed the first White force known as the Volunteer Army, based in southern Russia. Political opposition to the Bolsheviks became more resolved after they closed down the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, elected in November to decide the country's political future. The period between November 1917 and mid-1918 remained one of great uncertainty that ended with a spate of armed conflicts in Russian towns along the Volga between Bolshevik-run soviets and Czechoslovak legionnaires (former prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian armies who were to be transported back to the Western front, where they were to join the Allies in the fight to defeat the Central Powers). These skirmishes emboldened the SR opposition to set up an anti-Bolshevik government in the Volga city of Samara. Many delegates elected to the Constituent Assembly congregated there before the city fell to the Bolsheviks that fall.

Determined to sweep the Bolsheviks from power, the Whites posed a more serious threat to the Red republic after the Allies defeated Germany and decided to back the Whites' cause. The Allies had dispatched troops to Russia in order to secure war materiel for World War I, which they feared would fall into the wrong hands. But their hostility to Bolshevism's call for world revolution and to Russia's withdrawal from the war in March 1918 turned them into supporters of the Whites, who soon fought the Reds along four fronts: southern Russia, western Siberia, northern Russia, and the Baltic region. Until their defeat in 1920, White forces controlled much of Siberia and southern Russia, while the Reds, who moved their capital to Moscow, clung desperately to the Russian heartland, including agriculturally rich Saratov. Emerging in the fall of 1918 as official leader of the White movement, Admiral Kolchak maintained his headquarters in Siberia until major defeats forced him to resign in early 1920.

The Whites' launching of a three-pronged attack against Moscow in March 1919 greatly imperiled the Soviet state. Despite their initial success, the Whites eventually went down in defeat in November, after which their routed forces replaced General Denikin with General Petr Wrangel, usually regarded as the most competent of all of the White commanders. The Whites opened one final offensive in the spring of 1920, which coincided with an invasion of Russia by forces of the newly resurrected Polish state. Red forces overcame Wrangel's army in November, after which he and his troops evacuated Russia by sea from the Crimea. In the meantime, the Bolsheviks' conflict with the Poles

ended in stalemate when the belligerent parties signed an armistice in October 1920.

Apart from their military encounters with the Whites, the Bolsheviks also had to contend with a front behind their own lines because party economic policies alienated much of the working class and drove the peasantry to rise up against the requisitioning of grain and related measures. Known as Greens, peasant bands comprised of deserters and others first surfaced in 1919 during the White offensive. They presented an even more pressing danger in mid-1920, triggering uprisings in many Volga provinces, especially Tambov and Saratov. By early 1921, mass unrest, including worker discontent, had convinced the Bolshevik Party to replace their unpopular economic policies known as War Communism, characterized by economic centralization, nationalization of industry and land, and compulsory requisitioning of grain, with the New Economic Policy (NEP), which promised to replace the hated grain requisitioning with a tax in kind and to restore some legal private economic activity. The soundness of this shift in policy from stick to carrot was made clear when, in early March, sailors of the Kronstadt naval fortress, the “pride and glory” of the Revolution, rose up against the Bolsheviks whom they had helped bring to power. Historians traditionally view this episode and the introduction of the NEP as the last acts of the Civil War, after which the party mopped up remaining pockets of opposition, mainly in the borderlands that had gone their separate ways during the ordeal. They depict the ruinous famine that first made itself felt in the winter of 1920–21 and hit hard the next year as one of the Civil War’s consequences.

Although Saratov remained Red throughout the period, it came dangerously close to falling to the Whites. Opposition to the Bolshevik takeover in Saratov first found expression in boycotts by the majority of the city’s officials and professionals, who hoped to undermine Soviet power by refusing to cooperate with it. Financial collapse, turmoil among the once pro-Bolshevik soldiers, and sporadic peasant disturbances also threatened Saratov’s new leaders. Moreover, a full-scale revolt in the local garrison in May 1918 forced the party to introduce martial law in Saratov and revealed that the Bolsheviks lacked a popular mandate. The revolt of Czechoslovakian troops and formation of an anti-Bolshevik government in Samara also drove the Bolsheviks to harden their policies. In addition, by summer the eastern and southern fronts had converged on Saratov as the armies of the White generals seized nearby towns. In August, strategically important Tsaritsyn fell under siege; in September, Moscow placed Saratov under martial law once again. Local authorities now directed all of their energies at warding off the military threat, made more difficult when food brigades

sought to wrest grain from the countryside, thereby turning many elements within the local peasantry against Soviet power.

Galvanized into action by their belief in world revolution—and by Moscow's neglect—Saratov Bolshevik leaders in 1918 took steps to create new institutions of Soviet power as the country descended into anarchy and chaos. Following an independent course with their Left SR allies, they declared Saratov a “republic,” an action that gave rise to Moscow's charges of “localism.” This first heady phase in the local civil war ended with the Center's recall of Saratov's most prominent local Bolshevik leaders at the close of 1918. Their departure amounted to a turning point in the local civil war, for it ushered in a new period for Saratov as it became run like an armed camp by outsiders who had few ties if any locally. Moscow's interference likewise signified the beginning of state centralization. Meanwhile, lack of raw materials and fuel and the disruption of transportation wreaked further havoc on the local economy, which was already in shambles owing to a severe lack of revenue. Scarcities of all sorts forced people to reorient their priorities, restrained the Bolsheviks' efforts at cultural creation, and made it easier for them to justify their use of coercion.

The White offensive of 1919 represented another crucial turning point for Saratov, which had not only strategic significance, but economic and logistical importance as well, for it had become a main source of bread for the hungry cities of central Russia. Placed for the third time under martial law, Soviet power in Saratov teetered between collapse and surrender. Desertions from the Red Army reached alarming levels as Saratov was transformed into an armed camp, its party rulers became isolated from the population, and civilian life and administration became militarized. Relations with the peasantry deteriorated because the party used force to requisition grain.

From a military perspective the tide of events had shifted in favor of the Bolsheviks by 1920, yet keeping oneself fed, and poorly at that, remained a Sisyphean labor. Deeming the economic front every bit as important as the military one, the regime took desperate and unpopular measures to avert total economic collapse, which gave credence to the claims of anarchists and Mensheviks that the Bolshevik usurpers had brought Russia nothing but ruin. That summer Greens burst into Saratov, igniting uprisings in several districts, and resulting in the imposition of martial law yet again. The uprisings quickly spread throughout much of the province, serving as an ominous backdrop to burgeoning worker unrest. In early March 1921, angry worker rallies developed into a general strike, which the Bolsheviks put down by force and intimidation. Repression and the introduction of the NEP kept the Bolsheviks afloat as famine, the consequence of Bolshevik policies and climate,

claimed its first victims. This horrific concluding chapter of the local civil war lasted well into 1924, largely negating any of the positive developments normally associated with the NEP.

I have divided my study of Saratov into two parts. Part One makes a case for the centrality of politics to the period. Chapter 1 sketches Saratov's historical development, throwing light on the peculiar features of the local revolution and civil war. Chapter 2 examines how the languages of Bolshevism attempted to understand, represent, and manipulate the flood of resistance to the party's assumption of power during this liminal period in the definition of socialism. Chapter 3 offers a case study of the fate of the Saratov Soviet and of soviets at the district (*uezd*) and county (*volost*) level, emphasizing the defining nature of war and geopolitics in the process of state formation. Through the prism of the dialectical relationship between ideologically inspired attempts to restructure society and general cultural patterns, chapter 4 analyzes the local Communist Party organization. Chapter 5 retrieves from the dustbin of history the so-called Revolutionary Communist Party, without whose support the Bolsheviks would have lost Saratov, and assesses the Leninists' strategy of co-option amid repression in dealing with their radical populist allies as well as with other socialist parties.

My goal in Part Two is to scrutinize the processes that invest social life with meaning, including the consequences of the Bolsheviks' understanding of class. Chapter 6 documents the physical impact of civil war on Saratov as a community or set of social relations, underscoring the extent to which Saratov during the Civil War was not only a community in disarray, but also a community in the making. Chapter 7 canvasses the cultural practices of provincial Communists, demonstrating that their need to employ the coercive power of the state made cultural hegemony an elusive goal. Although it has been suggested that Marxist class analysis became useless for analytical purposes because the Russian class structure disintegrated during the Civil War, class is not just the consequence of social and economic change, but also of reconfigurations of discourse in which class can serve as an organizing principle for constructing social reality.¹³ Indeed, given Bolshevik efforts to reify the proletariat and to strike the bourgeoisie as close to home as possible—in their identity, class, as the Bolsheviks politically defined it, remains a useful, even essential concept in my effort to weigh the impact of the Civil War on specific social groups. Thus, chapter 8 draws on provincial diaries and memoirs to furnish elements of concreteness and individu-

¹³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Bolsheviks' Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in Early Soviet Years," *Slavic Review* 47, no. 4 (1988): 599–613. See also Smith, "Writing," 571.

ality to the experiences of Saratov's ascribed class "other," the bourgeoisie, the target of Bolshevik discriminatory policies. Investigating the Red Guard assault on capital, chapter 9 is as much about the new economic order the Bolsheviks instituted, as it is about the significance of how they attempted to create it. The chapter supplies the background necessary to understand the foci of chapters 10 and 11, which depict the experiences of Saratov peasants and workers, respectively. These chapters chronicle how a consciousness of interpreted experience gave workers and peasants collective identities outside those the Bolsheviks fabricated for them in their narratives of revolution. Chapter 12 probes mass discontent with Bolshevik rule in the spring of 1921 and explains the role of the famine, the last chapter of the local civil war, in keeping the Bolsheviks in power. The conclusion pulls together my findings but also lets the evidence that I have assembled speak for itself.

Dates used in this book before January 1918 are given according to the Julian calendar, which was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar of the West; all later dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar. Transliteration from Russian is based on the Library of Congress system. For stylistic considerations, however, I have dropped the soft sign from place names (Volsk, not Vol'sk), proper nouns (Zhest metalworks, not Zhest'), and surnames (Vasiliev, not Vasil'ev). Moreover, in some surnames "ii" is rendered "y" to conform to common usage: Kerensky, Chernyshevsky, and Trotsky.