

*Revolution, Civil War, and the 'Long' First World War in  
Russia*

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**Introduction**

This essay has two related themes. The first is the causal link between the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The second is the periodization of Russia's crisis; in particular the essay examines the 'continuum' between the First World War, the 1917 Revolution, and the Civil War of 1917-20 which formed, for Russia at least, a 'long' First World War.

The link between war and revolution is important, especially as Imperial Russia was the only major participant in the Great War to fall victim to radical political overturn *during* the conflict, and the only one which continued to fight in 1917 after a drastic change of government.

One of the most famous documents relating to the war-revolution link was a memorandum written by P. I. Durnovo to Emperor Nicholas II in February 1914, six months before the outbreak of the Great War. Durnovo had been Minister of the Interior during the 1905 Revolution; following his ministerial appointment he was one of the leaders of the State Council. The 1914 memorandum warned about the extreme danger of becoming involved in a war with Germany.

[I]n the event of defeat, the possibility of which in a struggle with a foe like Germany cannot be overlooked, social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable ....

[I]t will start with the blaming of the government for all disasters. In the legislative institutions a bitter campaign against [the government] will begin, followed by revolutionary manifestations throughout the country, with socialist slogans, capable of arousing and rallying the masses, beginning with the complete division of the land and succeeded by a division of all valuables and property. The defeated army, having lost its most dependable men, and carried away by the tide of primitive peasant desire for land, will find itself too demoralized to serve as a bulwark of law and order. The legislative institutions and the opposition parties of the intelligentsia, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stem the popular tide, aroused in fact by themselves, and Russia will be flung into hopeless anarchy, the end-result of which cannot be foreseen.<sup>1</sup>

Durnovo died in 1915 and did not live to see how closely his fears would correspond to reality. However, since his Memorandum was published by the Soviet historians in 1922 it has been noted for its predictive quality; a recent Russian biography was published with the title 'Russian Nostradamus'.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the notion of continuum has recently become an important theme in the study of early twentieth-century Russia, as the centenary of those events is reached. A major international research project, 'Russia's Great War & Revolution', is currently under development; it aims to 'fundamentally transform understanding of Russia's "continuum of crisis" during the years 1914-1922'. The key phrase comes from the sub-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://on-island.net/History/Durnovo.htm> (accessed 16 March 2015) provides an on-line version of the Russian language version originally published in the Moscow-based literary journal *Krasnaia nov'* in 1922 (no. 6). See English translation in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, eds, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), pp. 8-9. Durnovo's prediction owed much to the experience of the 1905 Revolution, where an unsuccessful war with Japan had coincided with liberal and socialist demands for representative government and peasant demands for land.

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Borodin, *Russkii Nostradamus* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2013).

title (*Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*) of a 2002 book by Peter Holquist's on the Don region.<sup>3</sup>

To make more sense of both the link between war and revolution and the continuum, the period 1914-1920 can be divided into four periods - 1914-1917, 1917, 1917-18, and 1918-20.

### **Period 1: Imperial Russia and the World War; July 1914 to February 1917**

This first section takes in the period from the start of the war in August 1914 until the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II in February 1917 (o.s.).<sup>4</sup> This was the only 'normal' period, when the conduct of the war by the pre-war established government (the 'old regime') took precedence over politics.

The pre-history of the World War is, of course, also important, and it might be seen as part of an 'even longer' First World War. A stimulating recent volume edited by Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela reinterprets the Great War as a whole as essentially one of multi-ethnic global empires. It also sets out a new time frame going back to the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, and including the two Balkan Wars of (October 1912 to May 1913, and June-August 1913).<sup>5</sup> Although Imperial Russia was not directly involved in these battles, the fate of the Ottoman Empire featured heavily in its foreign policy. Joshua Sanborn puts forward the view - not altogether convincingly - that Russia was eventually dragged into the World War by the 'decolonisation' crisis in the Balkans.<sup>6</sup> This relates also to the plausible argument put forward by Sean McMeekin in 2011 to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://russiasgreatwar.org/index.php>. The first two volumes, edited by Murray Frame, Boris Kolonitskii, Steven G. Marks and Melissa K. Stockdale, have the sub-series title 'Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914-22' (Bloomington: Slavica, 2014). The Holquist book is *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Old-style, i.e. the Julian calendar used in the Russian Empire; this was 13 days ahead of the 'new style' Western Gregorian calendar. The Soviet government abandoned the Julian calendar in February 1918.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds. *Empires at War, 1911-1923*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. Of special interest is the chapter, "The Russian Empire", by Joshua Sanborn (pp. 93-108).

<sup>6</sup> Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 14-20. Sanborn follows the "clash of empires/long war" interpretation; the title of the series in which his book appears is 'The Greater War', and the General Editor is Robert Gerwarth

the effect that aggressive Russian plans directed against the Ottoman Empire were a primary cause of a readiness to go to war in August 1914. 'There were,' McMeekin suggests, 'at least as many men in St Petersburg who wanted war in 1914 as there were in Berlin - and the men in St Petersburg mobilized first.' McMeekin, like Gerwarth and Manela, took a 'long' view of the First World War, dating it from 1911 to 1921 and giving it the title of the 'War of the Ottoman Succession'.<sup>7</sup> Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, also depicts this as a decade-long geopolitical competition between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, rather than a clash of emergent nationalisms.<sup>8</sup> (It does seem worth pointing out that this 'imperial' view of the First World War is not just a product of the historical thought of the past decade; it is much the same as Lenin's view in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in the first half of 1916 and published in mid 1917, a view which informed Russian historiography throughout the period of Communist rule.)

Whatever the starting point of the war, and whatever the level of responsibility of St Petersburg in 1914, one thing many historians agree upon is that the participation of Imperial Russia in the Great War has been a singularly neglected subject. There are two major but quite different reasons for this. One is the parochial approach even today of many Western historians, a characteristic what has not been altogether eliminated in an era of supposedly 'trans-national' historiography. The second was the core belief in Russia during seventy years of Soviet rule that the World War was an imperialist struggle important only as a cause of the Bolshevik Revolution; as an historical subject the events of 1914-1917 were completely overshadowed by the Revolution and Civil War. That has also had its effect on western historiography. At the time of writing the fullest English-language history bringing in the Imperial Russian contribution to the Great War is still a book written nearly forty years ago, Norman Stone's *Eastern Front*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 4, 239.

<sup>8</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 6-13. Note that Reynolds covers a slightly different decade from Gerwarth and Manela.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975). The other side of the front is covered by Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918*, 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2014 (first edition 1997)).

Joshua Sanborn's 2014 book *Imperial Apocalypse* contains interesting arguments, but it is a relatively short work and its coverage is not comprehensive.

This is not the place to detail the operational history of Russia's 1914-1917 war. Most observers sketch this out as the defeat at Tannenberg, the more damaging 'Great Retreat' in Poland in 1915 following the German Gorlice-Tarnów breakthrough, and finally the limited success of the wide-front counter-offensive in western Ukraine carried out under General A. A. Brusilov in the summer of 1916. In reality the course of the military operations conducted by the Russian Empire did not actually go that badly, at least in comparison with the Second World War. Within ten days of the start of Operation Barbarossa in 1941 the Germans would be deeper into Russian territory than they would ever reach by February 1917 (o.s.).<sup>10</sup> The armies of the Central Powers never actually extended their occupation to territory inhabited mainly by ethnic Russians; the fighting in 1914-1917 took place in Poland, and what are now western Belarus and western Ukraine. The Russian Army meanwhile had considerable success against the Turks, with the campaign in the Transcaucasus and eastern Anatolia which culminated in the capture of the fortress of Erzurum in February 1916 by General N. N. Iudenich.<sup>11</sup>

All the same the lack of any direct threat to 'Russia' in 1914-1917 made it more difficult fully to galvanise the mass of Russian public opinion - in contrast to what happened in 1941-1942. The opportunity of making gains at Turkey's expense was not a convincing compensation for most of the Tsar's subjects. Although ethnic Russian territory was not lost in the Great War, many ethnic Russians were among the fallen in that unprecedentedly lethal conflict. The overall total loss has been estimated as 1,890,000 inhabitants of the Russian Empire killed, missing, mortally wounded; it did not matter that in per capita terms this toll was lower than in the armies of the other

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<sup>10</sup> The German offensive in 1941 did, of course, begin further east, at least in the central part of the front (i.e. in central Poland rather than western Poland). Nevertheless the situation rapidly became much worse in July-November 1941, with the Wehrmacht penetrating far into ethnic Russian territory.

<sup>11</sup> The Russian-Turkish Caucasus front is left out of one of the most recent general histories of the war. See volume I of the new *Cambridge History of the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014 (hereafter *CHFWW*), where the theatre is ignored in Holger Afflerbach, 'Eastern Front' (pp. 234-65), and Robin Prior, 'Ottoman Front' (pp. 297-320). It is only briefly mentioned - in connection with the Armenian killings - in Hans Lukas Kieser and Donald Bloxham, 'Genocide' (pp. 585-614). More helpful is the account in Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

major powers, nor that this was much lower than Red Army losses even in six months of 1941.<sup>12</sup>

The other side of Russian developments in 1914-1917 was political. As already mentioned, both in Russia and the West the background to the February 1917 revolution has been investigated much more thoroughly than the operational side of the war. A major debate has involved whether there would have been a revolution at all had the war not occurred. Liberals and conservatives in emigration tended to take the 'optimist' view that Imperial Russia had been on the path to managed modernisation before 1914, with the beginnings of political and economic reforms. On the other hand, a 'pessimist' school took the view that revolution in Tsarist Russia was inevitable, even without the First World War, given underlying social and economic problems and the political rigidity of Nicholas II.<sup>13</sup> The followers of Marx and Lenin, meanwhile, emphasised that both war and revolution were logical and inevitable consequences of capitalism and imperialism.

Recent research on Russia in the First World War has made much of the crisis of the refugees from Poland and other parts of the western borderlands and the inept handling of the situation by the military administration, what Jonathn Sanborn called 'Stavkaism'.<sup>14</sup> This is a neglected topic, and these are valuable contributions, but refugees were not the cause of the February 1917 Revolution.

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<sup>12</sup> G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: Poteri vooruzhennykh sil: Statisticheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: OLMA-Press, 2001), pp. 98-101. 1,200,000 Russian soldiers were killed in battle or died of wounds shortly afterwards; 440,000 were missing, presumed killed; 240,000 died in hospital; and 11,000 died as a result of poison gas. A further 155,000 died from illnesses. See also Antoine Prost, 'The Dead', *CHFWW*, vol. 3, 2014, pp. 587-8. The population of Russia in 1914 was 181,000,000, compared to 40,000,000 for France and 67,000,000 for Germany (Krivosheev, p. 65); the per capita losses of France and Germany were nearly three times those of Russia.

<sup>13</sup> The classic statement of the pessimist viewpoint was Leopold Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917" *Slavic Review* 23, 4 (1964): pp 619-642; 24, 1 (1965): pp. 1-22. See also Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution of Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981); and Edward Action, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse*, pp. 254-5. Peter Gattrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999); and Eric Lohr, *Nationalising the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

It was during his exile in Switzerland that Lenin developed the politically powerful concept of the war as an essentially imperialist one. This was a key development of the theoretical development of Marxism-Leninism, and it was important for three reasons. The first reason is, perhaps, that this argument contained elements of truth. Secondly, the international dimension justified for one wing of Russian Marxist intellectuals the 'un-Marxist' seizure of power in an economically and socially backward country that lacked the *domestic* pre-conditions for a *socialist* revolution. And, thirdly, this interpretation of events also seemed to justify intellectually a policy of 'defeatism'; what was going on was a predatory imperialist war, therefore opposition to it was acceptable. This last perspective eventually gave the Leninists common ground with a growing part of the popular masses who opposed the Great War because of the extreme sacrifices and hardships it imposed. As part of its war effort in 1914-1917 Imperial Germany implemented a policy of subversion in Russia and elsewhere, the so-called *Revolutionierungspolitik*. This included support for anti-war revolutionaries and minority nationalists. The most remarkable development would come after the overthrow of the Romanovs, with the return of Lenin to Russia from Switzerland. However, in any analysis of what happened in Russia in February 1917 an emphasis on the role of Lenin's tiny party and on 'German gold' is, in reality, misplaced.

'Conscious' opposition to the war effort in Russia in 1914-1917 was actually quite limited. February 1917 was politically a pro-war revolution, not an anti-war one. The crucial decision of the Tsarist army high command, not to oppose the popular demonstrations taking place in Petrograd, was based on the generals' dissatisfaction with the unsuccessful conduct of the war by Emperor Nicholas II and his government. The educated Russians who formed the immediate higher-level post-Tsarist political authorities, both the new 'Provisional Government' (provisional until a constituent assembly could be held) and the original Petrograd Soviet (Council) of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, followed a policy not of defeatism but of continuation of the war.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Holger Afflerbach argues that the remarkable feature of the government of Nicholas II was the refusal to accept 'reasonable' peace terms put by the Germans, and the 'blind determination to continue the this war while ignoring all signs of the coming catastrophe' ('The Eastern Front', in *CHFWW*, vol. 1, p. 264). This is not incompatible with the inept handling of the war by the Tsar, his ministers, and his generals.

The war had however had a deep influence which would resonate through the month and years that followed. Here Durnovo was proven correct. A deep political crisis discredited and split the ancien regime ('blaming of the government for all disasters'); there was no underlying political layer able to replace the old order. And secondly, 'the defeated army, having lost its most dependable men' would indeed turn out to be 'too demoralized to serve as a bulwark of law and order'. What was important was the destruction of the pre-war army in the battles of 1914-1915. As Allan Wildman put it, 'By the winter of 1915-1916 one could say that the wartime army had assumed its peculiar physiognomy, and former peacetime army was left far behind'.<sup>16</sup> What Durnovo did not anticipate was that the process of mobilisation for total war would also include mass armament of the peasantry and militarization of the intelligentsia; both of these developments would have a huge impact in the revolution and the civil war.

## **Period 2: Eight Months of Revolution; February to October 1917**

In the period of the Provisional Government, between the overthrow of the Tsar in February and the Bolshevik Revolution in October, the First World War continued for Russia. Indeed the conflict was for those eight months a central political issue. Revolution *in wartime* was actually an unusual event; the revolutions in both Germany and Austria-Hungary in October-November 1918 were the result of perceived military *defeat*, and they were immediately followed by the complete end of the fighting with the Allies.

In the spring of 1917 the Great War had become for many Russians, at least on the centre and left of the political spectrum, a more political confrontation. On one side was a democratic Russia (allied with democratic governments in France, Britain, and the United States). On the other side were the autocratic governments of Hohenzollern Germany, Habsburg Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Turkey. The Turkish dimension was also important, because it exposed in Russia a rift between those for whom

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<sup>16</sup> On this see especially Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt (March-April 1917)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 75-120.



(imperialist) gains against the Ottomans - Constantinople and the Straits - were still a war objective, and those on the left who advocated a continuation of the war, but on lines of national defence rather than expansionism; this latter policy was known as 'revolutionary defencism'.

Lenin's critical intervention came in his 'April [1917] Theses', which he put forward on his return to Russia. The Bolshevik leader rejected both the Provisional Government and the war effort: 'In our attitude towards the war, which under the new government ... unquestionably remains on Russia's part a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of that government, not the slightest concession to "revolutionary defencism" is permissible.'<sup>17</sup> Although this view was regarded as politically extreme in the early honeymoon months of the post-imperial government, it soon intermeshed with increasing popular war weariness.

The demands of the continuing Great War fatally slowed political initiatives on the part of the new government, for example over land reform and the calling of the Constituent Assembly. The government attempted to deal with its political problems - and also to retain credibility with its external allies - by undertaking a military offensive in June 1917, under the leadership of A. F. Kerenskii, the new Minister of War, and General A. A. Brusilov, now the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. The failure of the offensive left the government without a clear policy, despite an attempt to clamp down on the anti-war parties. The Provisional Government attempted to buttress its position by the appointment of Kerenskii as Prime Ministers and of the war hero General L. G. Kornilov as a replacement to the unsuccessful Brusilov. This foundered on a political split between the two men, and on Kerenskii's not unjustified fear that the general planned a coup d'état. The net result of the 'Kornilov affair' in late August was to discredit the army high command in the eyes of the soldiers and the population, and to divide the forces of the Provisional Government. When Kerenskii's Provisional Government was overthrown in October 1917 by a Bolshevik coup, in which insurgent soldiers and sailors played an important part, there was no effective military force on the side of the rump government.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>.

The arguments about whether the First World War led to the overthrow of the Tsar in February relate also to the radicalisation of the Russian political scene in the eight months that followed. Without doubt the specific international wartime conditions of 1917 were crucial to the uniquely radical outcome in Russia. Again Durnovo had anticipated the failure of '*demokratiia*': 'The legislative institutions and the opposition parties of the intelligentsia, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless of stem the popular tide, aroused in fact by themselves.' The war shattered the forces of order. The Russian government was in an isolated position, where the other friendly governments could play no role of influence or force. Three years of war had armed a large part of the peasant population, and deployed them to the front and to urban centres across the length and breadth of Russia.

### **Period 3: World War and Civil War; October 1917 to November 1918**

The period of twelve months after the Bolshevik October Revolution was when the First World War and the Russian Civil War directly coincided.

A recent theme in the historiography of the Great War - especially the 'long' war - has been 'paramilitary violence'. It has been defined as 'military or quasi-military organizations and practices that either expanded or replaced the activities of conventional military formations'; this 'shared the stage with other violence, such as social protest, insurrection, terrorism, police repression, criminality and conventional armed combat'.<sup>18</sup> The concept of the 'paramilitary' - a term which dates from the 1930s - is a rather vague one, and its usage runs the risk of confusing the nature of the struggle with the nature of the forces involved.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See the introduction to Robert Gerwarth, and John Horne, eds, *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 1-18.

<sup>19</sup> Gerwarth and Horne's further comments show how general the term can be: 'Sometimes [paramilitary violence] occurred in the vacuum left by collapsing states; on other occasions it served as an adjunct to state power; in yet others it was deployed against the state. It included revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence committed in the name of secular ideologies as well as ethnic violence linked to the founding of new nation-states or to minority groups which resisted this process' (p. 1).

Some classic paramilitary forces were made up of young men who had been 'militarised' (or 'brutalised') by earlier wartime service in conventional forces. They then had difficulty integrating back into civilian life at the end of hostilities - either because of their own changed consciousness or because of physical obstacles in making their way home (which in an early twentieth-century setting meant a return to the village or the farmstead). The classic case from the early 20th century is perhaps the German Freikorps of 1919-1920. The first phase of the Russian civil war was not that dissimilar from the events in post-war Germany.<sup>20</sup> In what was called the 'railway war' (*eshelonnaia voina*) 'paramilitary' detachments of armed workers ('Red Guards') and pro-Soviet soldiers fanned out across the country to take control of regional centres. Their opponents were remnants of the army of the Tsar and the Provisional Government - ranging from generals to young war-time officers - whose motivation was broadly Russian nationalist (patriotic) - and also both anti-socialist and anti-liberal. One fundamental difference with Germany was that there the 'forces of order', the Majority Social Democrats (SPD) allied with the army < >, used such paramilitary violence to *suppress* the radical revolutionaries.

Another difference from Germany in 1918-1919, however, was that in the winter of 1917-1918 the World War was still in progress. Lenin and the Bolsheviks had won much support in 1917 by promising a quick end to the 'imperialist' war, but despite the demobilisation (or self-demobilisation) of most of the Russian army, the struggle with the Central Powers remained high among the tasks of the Soviet government for over six months after October 1917. Even the signing of the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918 did not bring an end to the conflict.

In October 1917 the Bolshevik leaders had genuinely expected that their success in Russia could transform the World War into a Europe-wide revolution. Although an armistice was signed in December, the German government effectively utilised the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination in Poland, Finland, the Baltic,

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<sup>20</sup> Aspects of 'paramilitary violence' in the former Russian Empire are discussed in Gerwarth and Horne: William G. Rosenberg, "Paramilitary Violence in Russia's Civil Wars, 1918-1921" (pp. 22-38); Pertti Haapala and Marko Tikka, "Revolution, Civil War, and Terror in Finland in 1918" (pp. 73-84); Serhy Yekelchuk, "Bands of Nation Builders? Insurgency and Ideology in the Ukrainian Civil War" (pp. 107-25); and Tomas Balkelis, "Turning Citizens into Soldiers: Baltic Paramilitary Movements after the Great War" (pp. 127-44).

Belarus, and Ukraine, demanding the independence (under German military control) of states to be organised in those regions.< > Initial Soviet refusal at the Brest-Litovsk negotiations to agree to these conditions led to a renewed advance by the German Army on 18 February (n.s.). The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army (RKKA) was formally created to oppose this advance by a foreign power; 'Red Army Day' (now *Den' zashchitnika Otechestva*) would later be celebrated annually on 23 February to commemorate these first skirmishes. Within days the Soviet government capitulated. The enemy advance halted on the western edge of Soviet Russia (the RSFSR), but further south the Germans and Austro-Hungarians continued to march across the 'independent' Ukraine as far as Sevastopol', Khar'kov and Rostov.

Although a large part of the Bolshevik Central Committee had advocated refusal with accept any German terms and instead to pursue of revolutionary war, Lenin came down in favour of a 'breathing space' to allow 'state building'; it was one of his most astute decisions and historically a highly significant departure from the Durnovo scenario. Nevertheless the eight months after Brest-Litovsk were a continuation of the war in the territorial space of the former Russian Empire, with the Russian territory and population the object of 'imperialist' actions rather than the source of them.

The leaders of Wilhelmine Germany found the Soviet government abhorrent. They favoured it, however, over any alternative, as it appeared to be the weakest possible authority. For them, as for Durnovo, it was evidently presiding over the 'hopeless anarchy', and its impotence would enable Germany to maintain control over peripheral territories and in the course of 1918 to transfer the maximum troop strength to the Western Front. The Soviet government was wary of the Germans as the gravest potential threat.<sup>21</sup> The capital was moved from Petrograd to Moscow to put the government in a safer position with respect to German troops which had advanced into the Baltic provinces, Belarus and Ukraine. The Red Army, with some help from individual leaders of the old army, was further developed in the west in March, April and May 1918 in the form of 'screen' (*zavesy*) to prevent any incursion by the Central Powers into rump RSFSR territory.

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<sup>21</sup> Brian Pearce, *How Haig Saved Lenin* (London: Macmillan, 1987), provides an interesting interpretation of this question, refuting Soviet claims that the tying up of German troops in Russian in 1918 made possible the eventual victory of the Allies in France.

The Allies were also actively involved in Russia in the winter of 1917-18 and the summer of 1918. Best known is the despatch of British and other Allied troops to North Russia (Murmansk and Arkhangelsk) and of Japanese troops to the Russian Far East, initially around Vladivostok. Some of these measures were concerned with preventing the capture by the Central Powers of the military supplies shipped to Russia by the British and French, and stored in those ports.

German and Allied actions meant that the Great War was inextricably linked to Russian revolution and civil war in 1918. It was the year of the “Democratic Counter-revolution”. At this time effectively the two sides were the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and other socialists, especially the peasant-oriented Socialist-Revolutionaries (PSR), on the other. Their intense struggle was over who had a right to rule Russia and whether the war against the Central Powers would continue. The issues came together with the ‘mutiny’ of the Czechoslovak Legion in the Volga region and Siberia, beginning in May 1918. This neutralised weak ‘Soviet’ political and military power and allowed the creation at Samara on the middle Volga of a “Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly” (*Komitet chlenov uchreditel'nogo sobranii* or *Komuch*). This claimed, on the basis of the 1917 elections, to be the legitimate government of Russia.<sup>22</sup> Komuch, with the military support of the Czechoslovak Legion and some anti-Bolshevik Russia forces, was take control of much of the middle Volga region and to over-run the long railway corridor stretching across the Urals and Siberia to the Pacific. All that vast region was now no longer under Soviet control.

Developments in south Russia in 1918, although not yet of such immediate national importance, were also strongly linked to the war and to the mainstream Russian military. In the winter of 1917-1918 leaders of the Russian Army, especially the group interned after the with Kornilov affair in 1917, had moved to the Cossack areas of the southeast as a potential counter-revolutionary base. In addition to the charismatic Kornilov, also involved were wartime officers of the stature of Alekseev (chief of staff to

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<sup>22</sup> The Czechoslovak Legion was raised by the Tsarist government and the Provisional Government from Czechs and Slovaks resident in Russia or captured while serving in the Austro-Hungarian army. The corps was in 1918 in the process of being moved from the Ukraine to Vladivostok for shipment to the Western front, and was strung out along strategic railways. The men of the Legion were worried that the Soviet government might hand them over to the Central Powers. It is unclear how much influence British or French agents had on instigating the ‘mutiny’; the Allies were certainly planning to land troops in Arkhangelsk, and did so in early August.

Nicholas II and first head of the army under the Provisional Government), General A. S. Lukomskii, (Quartermaster-General under the Tsar), Generals A.I. Denikin and V. Z. Mai-Maevskii (both corps commanders), as well a number of junior officers who rallied to the cause; this force became known as the Volunteer Army (*Dobrovol'cheskaia armiiia*). Cut off from the Allies in 1918, it was not sufficiently strong to do more than establish a base in the North Caucasus.

The two events of November 1918 were the Compiègne Armistice on the 11th and the Kolchak coup on the 18th - which took place 2,900 miles to the east, at Omsk in central Siberia. These brought together the two strands of war and politics and began a new phase of the continuum. While in Western Europe November marked the end of the war, in Russia it was a turning point. The Compiègne Armistice meant the Germans, Austro-Hungarians, and Turks would now have to pull out of the peripheral territories of the Russian Empire which they had occupied.<sup>23</sup> The navies of the Central Powers would no longer blockade the entrances to the Baltic and Black Seas; the Allies for the first time had access to the 'inner periphery' of European Russia. The Kolchak coup, meanwhile, changed the character of the anti-Bolshevik movement. The successor government to *Komuch*, with its agrarian socialist leadership, was overthrown (the coup had at least the morale support of local Allied military representatives). In its place was installed Admiral A. V. Kolchak, wartime C-in-C of the Black Sea Fleet, as military dictator with the title of 'Supreme Ruler'. In the south Russia, the Volunteer Army, seen in London and Paris as diehard loyalists to the Allied cause, were about to receive substantial material help.

#### **Period 4. Full-blown Civil War; November 1918 to November 1920**

The fighting between the Reds and the Whites flowed back and forth across the Russian periphery from the winter of 1918/19 to the autumn of 1920. The general dynamic of these events can be seen in two contrasting ways. Soviet propaganda at the time, and Soviet historians in the half-century that followed, emphasised the

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<sup>23</sup> Compiègne, of course, was only the most important armistice agreement. Bulgaria, Turkey, Austria-Hungary and had agreed to ceasefires days or weeks before 11 November.

involvement (*interventsiia*) of troops of the wartime Allies (the 'Entente') on 'Russian' soil. Borrowing Lenin's perspective, the emphasis was on 'capitalist encirclement'. In contrast, others, including some of the new non-Russian states on the periphery, thought in terms of 'Muscovite' expansion, a new version of ethnic-Russian imperialism.

Soviet propaganda, then and later, attempted to exploit patriotic and anti-imperialist sentiment. It divided the civil war fighting into three 'Entente campaigns' (*pokhody antanta*), in which the Anglo-French imperialists attempted to put together coalitions against Soviet power. The first 'campaign' was Admiral Kolchak's offensive west across the Urals toward the Volga in the spring of 1919. The second was mounted by the White armies of General Denikin (in southern Russia) and General Iudenich (on the outskirts of Petrograd) in the summer and autumn of 1919. The third comprised the operations of the Poles and The White General P. N. Vranghel' (in the Crimea) in the summer and autumn of 1920.

The actual impact of Allied intervention is debatable. The Royal Navy did open the Baltic and Black Seas in November 1918 and provide contact with coastal regions relatively near the Russian core (relative to the distant periphery of North Russia and Far Eastern Siberia). But although the Allies faced no conventional enemies in western Europe after November 1918 their ground forces did not play a very significant role in Russia; the level of involvement of the British and French, as well as the Americans and other minor allies in 1919, was much less than that of the Germans, the Austro-Hungarians or the Turks in the spring, summer and early autumn of 1918. For the Allied governments Russia was of significant interest only as long as the 'real' enemy, Germany, was still an elemental danger.

The World War had been an immense burden for Britain and France and the most important priorities for them after November 1918 were demobilisation and a return of normalcy. Their rapidly reduced forces were required for more conventional police operations in the empires (including the former Ottoman Empire). They did have an abundance of surplus supplies in military dumps in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, and some of this was provided to the White Russians. The Americans had even less interest in foreign adventures. The Japanese, for their part, were prepared to fill a vacuum, partly to protect their own nationals in the Far East, but their own

partners/rivals were reluctant to see Japan play a greater role. None of the Allies devoted many resources to an ideological crusade against 'Bolshevism', partly because there seemed such little likelihood that Lenin and Trotskii could create a viable state.

The other general interpretation of events is Muscovite expansionism (or the 'Red peril') - one that resonates in 2014-2015. It is certainly true that one of the main factors in the winter of 1918/19 was the creation of a 'power vacuum'. The Germans, Austro-Hungarians, and Turks withdrew from the territories they had briefly occupied in Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the Transcaucasus (Georgia, Azerbaidzhan and Armenia). This vacuum was filled by ethnic Russian forces (either Red or White) returning to parts of the imperial space from which 'Russian' forces had been expelled by the Central Powers or the Czechoslovak Legion in the spring and summer of 1918. Kolchak's half-baked Russian armies of 1919 essentially replaced the Czechoslovak Legion in western Siberia, while Denikin's 'Armed Forces of South Russia' superceded the Don Cossacks who had held the fort in 1918. A fundamental problem of the White cause was that the advocates of 'Russia One and Indivisible' were based on the periphery, either in Siberia or southern European Russia; there they were reliant on the Allies for military resources, and in south Russia they had to compete with national minorities (especially in Ukraine) or with independently-minded cossacks. The ultimate victors however, were the Communists and the Red Army, with a far more powerful - and homogeneous - base in central Russia.

The Polish War of 1920 was something different. By that year Poland had more powerful conventional forces, and under Józef Piłsudski it competed with Soviet Russia for influence in the western borderlands. The origins of the conflict are a matter of historical debate. It certainly began with a Polish offensive against Kiev in April 1920, but that attack was seen by many Poles as preemptive. In any event, as the rapid Soviet counter-stroke developed in July 1920, heading back west towards Warsaw and the Vistula, Lenin certainly anticipated a larger revolutionary role for the campaign; the Red Army, now largely victorious in the Civil War, would spread revolution into Central Europe.

The legacy of the total war of 1914-1918 (or in the Russian case 1914-1917) was tangible. The Civil War was even more lethal to Russia than the First World War.



Overall deaths, including those caused by disease, came to 7-10 million, about four times Russia in the First World War.<sup>24</sup> The fighting in all these campaigns of the Russian Civil, in 1918, 1919, and 1920 was very dissimilar to that of the World War, despite use of modern small arms. Front-line armies were small. The campaigns were extremely fluid, with only a few examples of trench war (at Tsaritsyn in 1918-19 and Perekop in 1920). The World War famously marked the death of the cavalry, but the Red Cavalry were the shock troops of the Communist army. There would be debates in the Red Army leadership about the nature of future war, with one school of thought referring to World War practice (mainly on the Western Front) and other referring to the Civil War.

However, the Red and White Armies were not paramilitary forces, but large semi-conventional formations organised on traditional lines and commanded by officers who had all taken part in the First World War. A great many of the rank-and-file participants had military training from the Great War or before. The White Army was led by some of the outstanding leaders of the Imperial Army and Navy. As for the Red Army, the debates in Moscow in 1918 and early 1919 about the structure of the Red Army were very important ones. Lenin and Trotskii came down in favour of a regular army with a centralised structure, commanded by trained officers (albeit monitored by commissars), leading a mass of disciplined conscripts. The debate with the Military Opposition at the 8th Party Congress in March was whether the main army of Russia would continued to be organised on 'military' lines or become a revolutionary (paramilitary ) one. Here, Russia's development differed more than anywhere else from the 'hopeless anarchy' Durnovo had predicted. Lenin and Trotskii, as much as Durnovo, dreaded such an outcome.

The ultimate irony was the continuity of Russia's southern orientation. The Turkish Straits were an important factor in the Russian strategic view in 1911-1914, even if Sean McMeekin's argument that it was the decisive one is not fully accepted. The Caucasus was Imperial Russia's most successful fighting front in 1914-1916. The region were again a factor during the period of the Provisional Government, when Foreign Minister Miliukov's advocacy of the Turkish Straits as a war aim led to a split with 'revolutionary defencists'. The opening of the Straits in the late autumn of 1918 permitted the provision of military support to Denikin's White armies, which eventually

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<sup>24</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), p. 399.

constituted the most serious threat to Soviet Russia. And finally it was to Tsargrad (Constantinople) that the last European survivors of the White cause, now commnded by General Vrangel', fled as refugees in November 1920.

## Conclusion

So, *was* there a connection between the First World War and the Russian Revolution and Civil War? Of course. Durnovo was right: the war with Germany put the Tsarist political system at extreme risk, especially as an intact and loyal army had ultimately been required to maintain that brittle political and social order.

But on the other hand it can be argued that Russia, with its vast expanses and huge manpower, was vulnerable to military defeat *only* if the political system was shaken. As Clausewitz himself put it, while discussing Napoleon's campaign, 'Russia is not a country that can be formally conquered .... Such a country can only be subdued by its own weakness, and by the effects of internal dissension....'<sup>25</sup>

Also, while the war with the Central Powers inflicted fatal strains on the imperial system we can agree with Peter Holquist and Joshua Sanborn that the enormous changes that took place in Russia during the war - including the years 1914, 1915, and 1916 - had their own effect, hence the continuum. Perhaps the most important element of continuity was the raising and equipping of a mass regular armies in which many individuals took part as rank-and-file soldiers and commanders, ultimately in later forces that were similarly-structured and equipped.

As a result war led to revolution but *not* to Petr Durnovo's 'hopeless anarchy'. The medium-term result was the opposite, a form of state-building. Following the argument of Mark von Hagen's 1995 book, *Soldiers of the Proletarian Dictatorship*, we can agree that the World War and the Civil War nurtured a generation of Soviet leaders who with an 'interpenetration of military and socialist values' had great influence in the

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<sup>25</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (London: David Campbell, 1993), pp. 758-9.

1920s and 1930s, and whose role and attitudes were among the preconditions of Stalinism.<sup>26</sup>

The First World War was not in essence a war of ideology (at least not for the Russian Imperial government), and the Russian Civil War certainly was. Nevertheless, it is also possible to see both conflicts ultimately as wars of imperial competition and state defence, even though the external element was different. In 1914-1917 Imperial Russia hoped to protect its western borders and gain control of parts of the Ottoman Empire. By 1917-1918 the peripheral territories of the multi-national Russian Empire had themselves become the targets of expansionist ambition from outside, and ethnic conflict from within. Outsiders - Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Turks, British, French, and Japanese - staked their claims for influence, if not for territory. Internal actors joined the struggle in 1919-1920, as the Soviet government in Moscow and the anti-Bolshevik forces on the periphery competed with one another to re-absorb regions like Ukraine, Belarus, the North Caucasus, Siberia, and Crimea.

Thanks to the superior strength of Trotskii's 'Workers and Peasants Red Army' and the effective political calculations of Lenin's Communist government, the end result of all this was the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, covering most of the territory of the old Empire. This meant not 'hopeless anarchy' nor even the triumph of (minority) nationalism. A multi-ethnic 'Russian' state emerged from smoke of revolution and civil war, but in a form different from what Durnovo, the 'Russian Nostradamus', could ever have predicted.

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<sup>26</sup> Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers of the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 331.