

Volume 22, Number 3, February 2020

## Revision

# Understanding the significance of the Russian civil war

*Nicholas Fellows*

Consider the following question on the Russian civil war, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

Assess the reasons the Reds won the Russian civil war.

### Student answer with commentary

When the civil war broke out the Bolsheviks controlled very little of Russia, with their power limited to the major cities and industrial centres of Petrograd and Moscow. It might therefore be expected that the Whites would emerge triumphant in the struggle that followed, yet by November 1921 they had been driven from their last stronghold in southern Russia. Their defeat was due to a number of reasons, some of which were their own weaknesses, particularly their divisions and strategy, but more important were the result of Bolshevik strengths, most notably the clear objectives and strong leadership.

The opening paragraph sets the events in context but avoids a common pitfall of telling the story of what happened. It identifies a range of reasons why the Reds were victorious and also offers a view on which was the most important factor. This line of argument should then be built on in the rest of the response.

Objectives played a crucial role in the outcome of the civil war. The Whites had a variety of objectives and aims. This was because they were a disparate group who were fighting for a range of causes and ideologies, reflected in the fact that they fought as separate detachments. Some Whites were socialists while others were conservatives looking to restore some form of aristocratic rule. There were also regional variations with some White and Green leaders seeing the civil war as an opportunity to seek autonomy or even independence for their region. As a result, the Whites did not form a united front or have a coordinated plan, which made the task of the Bolsheviks that much easier. Not only was the Red Army of the Bolsheviks fighting for one cause — to install communism — but the divisions within the White armies meant that the Bolsheviks could be attacked separately, making it much easier for the Red armies to pick them off. Most importantly, Trotsky's strategy of keeping open lines of communication with the Red Army, while destroying the supply lines to the White army groups and preventing them from any coordinated activity, helped the Red cause. This was clearly evident in the priority given to the tactic of controlling and maintaining the railways, particularly in the areas around Moscow and Petrograd. This allowed the Reds to move troops easily, but control over the industrial areas also meant that they had supplies and munitions, while the Whites were reliant upon materials from overseas.

The opening sentence of the paragraph identifies a reason for the success of the Reds and its importance is stressed. This issue is then explained in depth, with a range of issues considered. The White weakness is also linked to Red success and a direct contrast between the two sides is made. Within the discussion of White strengths the answer also discriminated between the importance of issues, arguing that Trotsky's strategy was key and going on to explain why this was so important. As a result of the structure and comparisons an evaluative approach is followed, making the analysis much stronger.

Objectives were also closely linked to the quality of leadership. The Whites lacked leadership with no one person in charge of White forces, instead there were many rival figures, such as Yudenich, Wrangel, Kolchak and Denikin, all of whom were more concerned with securing the control of different geographical areas and furthering their own ambitions to eventually gain the leadership of Russia. This only added to the lack of cooperation between the White armies. This was in complete contrast to the Red army under Trotsky, the war commissar. There was no White leader able to match his strategy, tactics or ability to maintain the morale of the troops. He imposed a tough system of discipline and control, executing officers found guilty of cowardice. Using a special train Trotsky travelled vast distances — some suggesting 65,000 miles — inspiring his army, particularly when they were under threat. The Red cause was further helped by Lenin, who ensured the army remained united in their belief in the socialist cause and through an effective propaganda campaign encouraged his supporters that life would be better and wealth distributed more fairly once they were victorious. He was also able to portray the Reds as patriots fighting for their homeland, while the Whites were in pay of foreign forces who would destroy all the achievements of the revolution, break up the system of Soviets and bring back the old order.

The response continues by making links between factors and also continues the comparative approach, contrasting White weaknesses with Red strengths. The issue of leadership is developed and there is supporting detail on White leadership, which is contrasted with Trotsky's leadership of the Reds. The leadership of Trotsky is also linked to the role of Lenin, allowing the point to be further expanded and then contrasted with the image of the Whites.

Although Bolshevik forces initially controlled only a small area of Russia, around the two main industrial centres, they used this to their advantage. First, they consolidated their control and then used it as a base from which to launch a series of coordinated offensives against White forces. In contrast, the Whites were geographically scattered with their armies in the northwest, south and southeast. This made it much harder for them to raise a large enough army — which at best numbered 500,000 men — to challenge the Bolsheviks, who were able to raise some three million men. Trotsky was better than the White commanders at organising his forces, turning workers and peasants into a disciplined fighting force. This was reinforced by the use of terror and intimidation, using the brutal methods of the Cheka, such as the Red Terror. Moreover, the Red army used former tsarist military officers to counter the experience of the military leaders in the ranks of the White armies. The Reds also formed cavalry units to oppose the Whites' use of Cossacks in the south.

The response continues to be focused on the question and follows an analytical approach. Once again the position of the two sides is contrasted throughout the paragraph, making the analysis stronger, although a judgement at the end of the paragraph could have been developed.

Brutality was used by both sides as a tactic to maintain discipline, gain support and boost resources. The Whites angered many peasants and workers in areas they controlled, towns and villages were ransacked and fired, property was requisitioned and crops and livestock were seized. Although the

Bolsheviks used force to impose their rule, with the Cheka imposing war communism and the militarisation of labour, everything was geared towards winning the war and those who opposed Bolshevik methods were either killed or subjected to brutal treatment, discouraging any opposition.

A further factor, that of brutality, is considered, but this is probably the weakest of the paragraphs and is not fully developed, while the contrast between the two sides is also less well-explained. As there are so many issues that could be considered an examiner would not expect all issues to be fully developed, but the weakness in this instance is that the argument that Bolshevik brutality was more acceptable than White is less convincing.

The Whites were never able to match the strengths of the Bolsheviks and, despite some victories, were often on the defensive, particularly after in the period after October 1919 when General Denikin was defeated at Orel and Yudenich was defeated near Petrograd. Bolshevik strategy was central to their victory as Trotsky and Lenin sacrificed everything to winning the war and despite some opposition it did appear to work and allowed the Red Army to emerge triumphant, able to exploit weaknesses in the White forces.

The conclusion again places events in context and builds on the line of argument taken in the opening paragraph that strategy was the most important factor. A judgement that is therefore consistent with the opening is reached and has been explained during the essay and some justification for the claim is also made in the conclusion. Throughout the answer links and comparisons are made between the issues and between the Whites and Reds, helping to take the response to the higher levels..

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: <http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreview>