

Russian Civil War | A1 Sample Answer

Why did Lenin and Trotsky win the Russian Civil War?

The Russian Civil War 1918-1920 had various causes but was largely a result of Russia pulling out of World War One when Lenin got into power in Russia. He promised the people a way out of the war but then was faced with a harsh treaty imposed upon Russia by the victorious Germany. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk saw Russia losing a large portion of its land and with it one third of its population, 80% of its iron and 90% of its coal to the central powers. The treaty was obviously very unpopular, even with many of the Bolsheviks, and soon sparked a civil war between supporters of the government, reds, and the opposition, whites. The reds won this war for several reasons.

Lenin appointed Leon Trotsky as Commissar of War, who was a brilliant military tactician and organiser. He introduced conscription for all men between the ages of 18 and 40 which left the Red Army at five million strong by 1920. The reds also controlled the most strategic parts of Russia such as Moscow, Petrograd, agricultural land, industrial regions and railways. He made Tsarist officers join the army by force, often by resorting to taking their families hostage. 50-70 thousand were made to join the army at this time. He established places for political commissars that were Communist Party members who would increase the morale of the troops. Trotsky was a harsh leader but he won the respect of his soldiers by moving them constantly from front to front and keeping their morale high. He used an armoured train for a printing press, radio station and telegraph office and used this to take advantage of the internal rail network that centered around Moscow and Petrograd for supplies. This allowed his armies to escape the whites quickly and efficiently and also make effective propaganda on the move.

The communists used propaganda better than the whites. They used posters and leaflets with information solely made to frighten the poorer population and workers. They threatened them with the thoughts of more imperialism if the communists were to lose and made themselves out to be the lesser of two evils. Lenin used the Russo-Polish war in 1920-21 to create even more communist propaganda and anti-Polish sentiment among the Russian people to support his own cause, regardless of the fact that the communists had started the war. They also used strong Russian nationalism sentiments and made them appeal to the peasant class, making Russia out to be a great nation they should be proud of. This was also used against allied

interference in Russia as it was strongly against foreign invaders and foreign countries dictating to Russia about its own internal affairs. This was popular among the people who didn't even necessarily like the communists. They simply feared them. But they feared the whites more as they dreaded to think what would happen if the whites brought back the terrors of Tsarism for them because they would have to go back to working under oppressive landlords. In the short term and thanks to the mass usage of pro-communist propaganda, the reds gained the support of the people simply through being the lesser of two evils.

Another reason the whites failed to win the civil war is because they were disunited and poorly led, especially when compared to Trotsky's army. They were made up of vastly different groups such as tsarists, social revolutionaries, ethnic minorities, foreign mercenaries and Russia's allies. All they had in common was a hatred of communism and, in the long term, they all had vastly different objectives for the future of Russia. They had varying political views and this made it quite difficult for them to agree on anything but this mutual hatred for the reds. They communicated poorly because of this. Not only were they divided socially and mentally but they were also divided physically with the lands they had conquered being spread out all over Russia. This meant it was hard for them to attack the strategically positioned Red Army. The soldiers were also poorly equipped and poorly led and were prone to drunkenness and looting. They also committed atrocities against the people on all the lands they conquered, which drove animosity for the whites among the public up.

However 'the reds' were responsible for their own atrocities too, such as during the Red Terror. Lenin felt that in order to get the Russian people to concentrate on the war effort he had to eliminate anyone who opposed him or had dissenting ideals. For this, the communists took increasingly cruel measures against anyone they saw as a threat. They set up the secret police, the Cheka, to terrorise people into total submission for fear of what would happen to them and their families were they to voice any alternative opinion to communism. 12-50 thousand people were shot by the Cheka for 'anti-communist sentiments' which could mean anything from not handing over their crops or for providing whites with information. Mass executions were held which killed people for their status and wealth more so than any actual wrongs they had done against communism. Rich peasants, white officers, nobles, priests, cadets, moderate socialists and many more were all murdered. Peasants were encouraged to kill their landlords in the name of Lenin. Up to 850 thousand were imprisoned on top of this.

Lenin's policy of War Communism also aided him and Trotsky in winning the civil war. He was responsible for supplying the army with weapons and food. He took ownership of all the land and factories to make sure

that what the army needed to survive was produced. He claimed this was superior to any free market. It meant he also complete control over most other war material produced for use in World War One. He had distributed land to the peasants and distributed factories to the workers but these were later confiscated again by the reds and used for the war effort. He and Trotsky provided a united leadership over War Communism, rationing and confiscating any surplus food for the soldiers. This ensured that the soldiers could survive the harsh winter conditions of Russia but it left an estimated 3-10 million peasants starving to death.

The allied withdrawal from Russia also strengthened the position of the communists. The allied forces lost interest in Russia after World War One because it was no longer a strategic advantage. The many atrocities the whites committed also led to animosity in the allied forces that no longer sympathised with their cause. Their anti-Semitism and Tsarism was also frowned upon by the allies. The whites had been heavily funded by the allies until this point and were at a complete loss when the support was pulled from them. The supply of money and weapons ceased and this helped the reds gain the upper hand over them.

It concluded with a victory for the Red Army but it was not without consequences. There was a great loss of life, and financial and economic produce was affected. An estimated 10 million people died during the war itself and due to terror, disease and famine. 2 million people were killed by typhus alone and 5-7 million died of famine in 1921. Factory produce was a third of what it was in 1913 and food production had been halved. A lot of educated Russians who had supported the whites immigrated to western countries which left Russia devoid of much of its talent and genius. However, Lenin had succeeded in establishing the communist dictatorship that was set to rule Russia for the majority of the 20th century. Communism had proved itself to be the lesser of two evils during the war but the suffering of the Russian people hardly changed at all.