

“GENERALS DON’T CRY...”: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REASONS FOR THE DEFEAT OF THE WHITE MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Purpose of study: The purpose of this research is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the military-strategic, ideological and theoretical, foreign policy and socioeconomic reasons for the defeat of the White movement.

Methodology: The methodology is based on the principles of historicism and objectivity with the involvement of archival material, documentary sources, memoirs and biographical literature.

Result: The main message of the article is to show the lack of unanimity and coordination in the actions of the internal and external forces of counter-revolution during the Russian Civil War. Significant attention is paid to the characterization and estimation of the military and ideological leaders of the counter-revolution, such as A.I. Denikin, P.N. Wrangel, I.P. Romanovsky and G.V. Florovsky, V.V. Shulgin.

Originality/Novelty: The authors conclude by defining the main peculiarities of the historical development of Russia which contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War and led to the complete failure of the White Guard.

Keywords: *White Movement, Defeat, Generals, Philosophy of G.V. Florovsky, Contradictions and Weaknesses, Socioeconomic Policy, Agrarian Issue.*

INTRODUCTION

What reasons led to the defeat of the White movement? What caused the collapse of the White Army? How did political and military-strategic miscalculations of the White leaders and ideologists affect the outcome of the Civil War? To the credit of many White Guardsmen who suffered defeat and therefore unlike the Reds avoided the exhilaration of victory, they found the strength to speak about their fight and failure extremely frankly, seeking to reveal its deep sources, castigating delusions and vices inherent in the movement.

Even those participants of the White fight who directly declared about their partiality considered that for this exact reason they were most interested in the impartial judgment of the question of why the Whites did not win. Without having realized it, the continuing struggle against Bolshevism in emigration was doomed to failure and as a result, they could never return to Russia ([Denikin & von Lampe, 1991](#)). That is why a lot of objective evidence of the White movement participants remained, which did not only seek to put a positive spin on the Whites but on the contrary, seemed to aim at discrediting them. These testimonies belong to the far-right (the Black Hundreds and the monarchists), the center (the Kadets), the left (the Social Democrats, the Socialists-Revolutionaries and the Popular Socialists), who took part in the anti-Bolshevik movement to a greater or lesser extent and at different stages.

The military leaders of the counter-revolution couldn't help speaking out on the reasons for the victory of the Reds in the Civil War. Contrary to widespread opinion, that the generals attributed their defeat to purely military factors, in the works by A.I. Denikin and many others the attention is paid to the ideological and theoretical, socioeconomic and foreign policy reasons of what had happened.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A.I. Denikin identified three groups of causes, which together led to the defeat of the White armies: a) purely military; b) sociopolitical and c) foreign policy ([Denikin & von Lampe, 1991](#)). In the article “Who saved the Soviet regime from ruin?” he directly accused Pilsudski of reaching a secret agreement with the Bolsheviks owing to which military operations on the Soviet-Polish front were stopped in the autumn of 1919. Meanwhile, the battle co-operation of the Polish and Volunteer armies would lead, according to him, to the fast defeat and fall of the Soviets. However, Poland, which had sufficient forces on the Polesie Front to launch the offensive and give crucial support to Denikin, didn't do it, because Pilsudski wanted to separate Poland from Russia with a buffer in the form of hostile to Russia and leaning towards Poland (vassal) state – Ukraine. He believed that only by the restitution of Ukraine the Poles could defend themselves from the East. Since there were no accomplices in the partition of Russia among the leaders of the White movement and it was possible to implement the above-mentioned plan only after the defeat of the Volunteer Army, general Listowski, the Commander of the Volhynian front, didn't give support to A.I. Denikin ([Denikin & von Lampe, 1991](#)). As for the Entente “allies”, they only wanted to tighten the agony of the White armies, pursuing their own selfish interests and did not think about the real help to White Russia ([Denikin & von Lampe, 1991: 19](#)).

Among the sociopolitical reasons for the defeat, A.I. Denikin emphasized the “self-supply” of the White armies, which often developed into the looting of peasants and pogroms of the Jewish population ([Dumova, 1982](#)).

The erroneous attitude towards the vacillating officers and defectors from the Red Army, who were shot during the first period of the White struggle, became another self-destructive blunder. A.I. Denikin considered that L.D. Trotsky solved the problem with the captive officers and defectors more rationally in regard to organization and propaganda. As a result, in spite of the fact that the officers’ environment was not much affected by the Soviet influence, the Whites lost their struggle for the hesitating part of the officer corps ([Vlasov, 1993: 211-213](#)).

The arbitrariness of counterintelligence, which covered with a dense network the territory of the South of Russia and created centers of provocation, organized robbery and terror, set the population sharply against the Whites ([Volkov, 1999](#)).

A.I. Denikin put the blame for what had happened to the White governments. He considered that they didn’t manage to supply the army and suppress abuses at the local level. The military commanders were to blame as they didn’t cope with some of their leaders. The military leaders were to blame as they weren’t able or didn’t want to take control of the troops that couldn’t resist the temptation. A.I. Denikin put the blame on the society that didn’t want to sacrifice their work and wealth, on the hypocrites cynically savoring the wit of the army phrase “from the grateful population” and later throwing stones at the army ([Denikin, 1992: 385-390](#)).

A.I. Denikin wrote: “We knew well our sins. But in different periods of the hostilities in the South, the morale of the troops varied. The degree of the sinfulness of particular military units was different. Tens of thousands of officers and soldiers – fallen and survived – kept their conscience unblemished. Many thousands, even among sinners, not being able to resist the temptation of virtueless time, we’re able to make a sacrifice – they laid down their lives. They fought and died. Perhaps, in this case, the judgment of God and the verdict of history will be less severe: “They are guilty but deserve indulgence!” ([Denikin, 1992: 392](#)).

As we can see, the military and political leaders of the counter-revolution clearly realized in the course of time and accurately formulated many of the contradictions and weaknesses characteristic of the White movement, its “sins and vices” that contributed to the defeat of the White armies. Despite it, until the end, most of them continued to believe in its high state-patriotic and spiritual-moral ideals, continued to defend the predicted pattern of emergence and the ultimate historical rightfulness of the White movement ([Joffe, 1989](#)).

G.V. Florovsky truly called the voluntary White movement the protest of conscience which turned out to be powerless to solve the socioeconomic contradictions of Russia. He wrote that the White movement, on the whole, is “similar to a holy, but hopeless impulse. It sprang up on the same psychological ground on which the unsuccessful work of the Provisional Government was built, it sprang up from the same desire to bring peace and harmony into the enraged historical powers only with formal energy of will, obedience, the temperament of authority. It had the same insensitivity, the lack of vigilance to the depth and complexity of the vital contradictions that led to the revolutionary explosion and fed it then” ([Florovsky, 1991: 152-153](#)).

According to G.V. Florovsky, the main problem was connected with the inattention to the necessity to overcome these contradictions in a creative way. His conception was to organize ideological work, not through the suppression and disciplinary restraint but to improve it in the socio-cultural and spiritual sphere by revival and creativity ([Florovsky, 1991](#)).

The below-mentioned factors are among the most significant inner sources of weakness in the White movement.

The forces of external and internal counter-revolution were not united into one common coalition. The representatives of the Entente under the governments of A.I. Denikin and P.N. Wrangel actively interfered in the decision-making process. They insisted on the recognition of separatists, put forward demands in the economic, ideological and political areas, actively promoted their protégés to the most important government posts. All this, in aggregate, led to the fact that the White movement lost its national halo, associating itself with foreign elements, discredited itself in practice due to chronic alliances and compromises with “allies”.

There was no unanimity in the actions of the internal forces of counter-revolution. From the beginning to the end, of the armed struggle the White movement was uncoordinated, united only by a common adversary – Bolshevism. The unity of the military operations faced a lot of difficulties even among those forces of the White movement that marched under one political flag, both because of the geographical conditions of the war theatres and because of the hidden rivalry of many military and political leaders of the counter-revolution.

In a civil war, as in any other, he who has the decisive advantage in the decisive place wins. But any military victory turns out to be fragile if it is not supported by a reasonable socio-economic policy on the territory occupied by the troops. None of the White governments was able to create an effective power structure in the areas under their control. None of them solved effectively any urgent socio-economic problems. The reactionary agrarian policy had the most serious consequences. According to P.N. Milyukov, it “was equivalent to the most effective propaganda” ([Milyukov, 1927: 203](#)). A.S. Lukomsky recalled that the peasants met the Volunteer Army very well. But gradually the attitude

towards the Whites changed as the “administration and troops” turned the people against themselves in eager rivalry ([Lukomsky, 1922: 132-133](#)).

N.I. Astrov wrote to A.I. Denikin: “Violence, floggings, robbery, drunkenness, the disgraceful behavior of authorities at the local level, the impunity of obvious criminals and traitors, mediocre people, cowards, libertines, people who brought with them their old vices, old inability, laziness, self-confidence, discredit the Whites” ([N.I. Astrov to A.I. Denikin, 1918](#)).

The White governments did not dare to validate a spontaneous land repartition ([GARE](#)). They understood the need to separate the landowners and peasants, putting a state between them, to set aside for the peasants the lands obtained in the course of the revolution, but they did not do that ([Gurevich, 1923](#)). A.I. Denikin and I.P. Romanovsky, for example, in response to the strong advice of N.K. Sokolov, standing for the radical solution of the agrarian issue, invariably answered that “they do not see in Russia those conservatives who would be ready to honestly reconcile themselves to the accomplished land repartition” ([Milyukov, 1927: 205-206](#)). The whole situation with the White movement entrusted the peasantry to the landlords and reanimated their long-standing hatred for them. Where there were no landlords, there was “self-supply” of White divisions and the arbitrariness of the local administration ([Il' in, 1926: 8-9](#)).

The peasant revolts in the rear of the Whites, the interruption of the supply of combat units, the lack of reinforcements at the front were the consequence. The discontent of the peasantry with the agrarian policy of the Whites increased after the punitive actions against insurgents and guerrilla fighters. As a result, the command of the White armies had to divert more and more forces to the fight against the “Russian Jacquerie” which was demoralizing the rear ([Arshinov, 1923](#)). The inability of the White leaders to rely on their own people, drastically solving their age-old socioeconomic problems, became the main reason for the defeat of the Whites in the fight against the Bolsheviks.

The generals waged war but they didn't have essential political expertise to work out and develop policy and ideology crucial for the Whites. Their military thinking turned out to be a drawback in the struggle which was ideological and political in its essence. The disagreements between the parties and groups that were part of the White camp did not allow civilian leaders of the movement to take precedence over the military ones. The lack of ideological and political support for the White movement, which became particularly noticeable after the elimination of the Socialists-Revolutionaries, played a significant role in the defeat of the White armies ([Tsvetkov, 2000](#)).

The peculiarities of the historical development of Russia, which determined the conditions for the White and Red confrontation, are such as:

- The incomplete formation of the social-class structure of bourgeois society;
- The retention of powerful remnants of feudalism in the socio-economic sphere and in the mass consciousness;
- Acute national problems;
- The lack of traditions of political life in a rule-of-law state;
- The extremism and groundlessness of the educated class (“the intelligentsia”); the weakness of bourgeoisie;
- The lack of respect for the right to private property;
- The unpopularity of the ideas of long-term social transformation.

The exasperation of the population, tolerance for violence and death as a result of the participation of millions of people in the World and Civil wars were favorable for the victory of political extremists and made the implementation of the values of pro-Western liberalism extremely problematic.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the White movement had many internal contradictions and weaknesses. Foreign policy, military-strategic, socioeconomic, ideological and political miscalculations and mistakes of the White leaders contributed to their defeat. The Bolsheviks made fewer mistakes. They caught the spirit better, understood the aspirations and social psychology of the Russian people, and as a result won. We cannot say that the Whites were defeated. The White camp began to notice soon that some of the White-Guard slogans were strangely adopted by the Reds ([The Bulletin of the Volunteer Army, 1918](#)).

Vasily Shulgin, a Russian conservative monarchist, and a politician thought that someone would appear – “the Bolshevik by energy and the nationalist by convictions” – who could eliminate “red madness”, and the White idea would win ([GARE](#)). When V.V. Shulgin arrived in Constantinople with P.N. Wrangel, he summed up, trying to be optimistic: “The Bolsheviks created the Red Army, organized the same way as the armies of the whole world, like ours ... – so they brought to life “White” ideas”. According to him, “V.I. Lenin restores “united and indivisible” (State)” ([Shulgin, 2002: 48, 527-529](#)). The same idea was later rendered by N.A. Berdyaev: “In Russian communism, the will to power was stronger than the will to freedom” ([Berdyaev, 1955: 116](#)).

Having analyzed the main reasons for the defeat of the White movement from the point of view of its politicians and ideologists, we can elicit the weakness of the white dictatorship, which failed to create flexible and powerful governmental structure, and the negative attitude of the population towards the half-measure and inconsistent socioeconomic policy of the Whites. As for their socialist opponents, they clearly identified and formulated one of the main problems of the White movement: the transformation of the struggle against the Bolsheviks into the struggle against the revolution.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Writing a major portion of the paper: Gayane Nikolayevna Edigarova;
2. Interpreting the results: Marina Vadimovna Krat;
3. Formulating the problem: Natalia Victorovna Doronina;
4. Literature review: Nadezhda Sergeevna Sibirko;
5. Collecting the data: Yuliana Anatoliyevna Chernousova.

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