

HIGHER HISTORY ESSAY

How important was Trotsky's contribution to victory in the Civil War?

For three years between 1918 and 1921, a bitter civil war was fought between the Bolshevik party and their opponents, who were collectively known as the Whites. After a long struggle the Reds were victorious and a Communist Government prevailed in Russia. A combination of factors can be attributed to the Reds seizure of power such as; their geographical strength, their control of industry, the introduction of War Communism, the weaknesses of their opponents, the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky's strong and ruthless control of the Red Army. However, was Trotsky actually an important ingredient in the success of the Reds victory or has history over emphasised his role during the civil war?

Historical debate has flourished over Trotsky contribution to the civil war. On one side of the debate there are those historians such as R. Service, who believes that the Reds won due to Trotsky's ruthlessness, as he rebuilt and transformed the Red Army into an effective fighting force. O. Figes also shares this view, having the opinion that Trotsky was the champion of militarization and that he more than anyone won the civil war. However, on the other side of the debate the historian R. Pipes has the opinion that Trotsky was not that important to the Reds victory, as they only won due to the inadequacies of their opposition. The historian E. Mawdsley is also negative of Trotsky's role in the Civil War as he has the view that Trotsky's importance has been over emphasised in certain historical quarters. The following work will unearth how important, if at all, Trotsky was to the Reds victory in the Civil War.

Trotsky was appointed Commissar of War by Lenin, and was given the task of organising an army to destroy the opposition. Although, untrained as a military commander, Trotsky excelled in his job. He rebuilt, trained and transformed the Red Army into a formidable, fighting force. Trotsky's strengths were his passion, energy and organisational abilities, as well as his outstanding driving sense of purpose. Trotsky was appointed, at a time when the army was on the point of disintegration. However, Trotsky restored discipline and professionalism to what was known as the "Workers and Peasants" Red Army and successfully turned it into an effective fighting force. He changed and reorganised the Army along strict hierarchical lines and enlisted thousands of former tsarist officers to train the rank and file into efficient soldiers. At the time many of these officers were unemployed, poor or hungry and seized the opportunity to get back into the world they knew best. This created as O. Figes says, "a model of the old imperial army with proper discipline in the ranks, professional officers and centralized hierarchy of command." Yet, organisation was not only needed, but also manpower.

During the Civil War there was also an increasing demand for soldiers. Trotsky responded to the need for manpower by enforcing conscription in those areas under Bolshevik control. In order to establish a working army with an effective command structure he ended soldiers committees, reintroduced ranks, saluting and pay differentials which did not go down well with soldiers.

However, Trotsky believed that a return to military discipline was essential to make men fight and went even further by bringing back the death penalty, which meant that unwilling peasant conscripts knew that they would be machine gunned if they retreated at battle. The Bolsheviks applied the harshest of tactics to ensure the loyalty of the troops and officers and Trotsky made it known that their families would be used as hostages if any dared to desert the Red Army. If Trotsky had not taken such a harsh line with peasant soldiers then anarchy could have broke out and prevented the Reds victory in the Civil War.

Trotsky was extreme in his methods, but he created an army as the historian as M. Lynch says, which "proved capable of fighting with an unshakable belief in its own victory." Not known as a military strategist, Trotsky proved himself as a brilliant organiser and inspirational leader. This is clear by the fact that during the Civil War his famous headquarters train covered 65,000 miles rallying his troops towards victory. As E Mawdsley says, "the fighting men needed a figure head to rally around, and Trotsky played his part effectively." Travelling in a specially equipped train he rushed to the front lines to provide support and inspired and rallied the forces towards victory. However, there were many advantages the Reds enjoyed out with the control of Trotsky, which contributed to their victory in the Civil War.

One major factor in the Reds victory was the fact that Whites were constantly divided and had no strong leader, like Lenin or Trotsky. This had a detrimental effect on their strategy for war. As O. Figes points out, "the Whites were fragmented units separated by large distances which meant they had difficulty co-ordinating their operations." Consequently, as a result of their poor communication attacks were uncoordinated and ineffective. Furthermore, as M. Lynch highlights no concerted effort was made by the influential voices in Western Europe to unseat the Bolshevik regime. The Whites did receive help from Russia's former allies in the First World War but after the end of the war this assistance withdrew. Historian S. Phillips argues that the allied leaders may have had no taste for communism, but neither did they have the desire to carry on fighting. This was mainly due to the fact that the Allies were war weary after a lengthy struggle with Germany. Therefore, it could be argued that Trotsky was not that important to the Reds victory in the Civil War, as they won due to the inadequacies of their opponents rather than the skills of Trotsky as the historian R. Pipes believes.

Yet, counter to R. Pipes argument, Trotsky made it difficult for the Whites to be a strong force as he took control of the railtracks. Trotsky taking control of the railway network, ensured that the Whites could not maintain regular supplies of food and munitions, forcing them to be dependent on the untrustworthy allies for much of their supplies. They were also denied the opportunity to concentrate large forces in any one location. It also allowed the Reds to transport troops and supplies to the battlefield quickly and efficiently. As the historian White says, the transport, in particular, the railways were essential to Bolshevik success, as Trotsky organised the fast and efficient movement of troops and supplies to battlefronts. Indeed without Trotsky taking full advantage of the railways to transport troops and repress the White forces supplies, then success would not have been guaranteed

Another key element for the Reds victory over the Whites, out with Trotsky control, was the fact that they held the central heartland of Russia, which included Petrograd and Moscow. This gave the Reds not only a strategic advantage, but it also gave them human resources, control of the industrial heartland, control of a vast amount of inherited war materials and control of the railways. As E. Mawdsley says, "The Bolsheviks held the Aladdin's cave throughout the Civil War." This "cave" was kept under Red control by Lenin's policy of War Communism. This policy made sure that industry and agriculture produced the necessary goods to keep the war going. All major industrial enterprises were brought under state control to maintain the supply of weapons. State control was also granted over labour of every citizen. War Communism also tightened state control over agriculture and forced peasants to provide more food, while the state controlled the distribution. "Food Brigades" were sent out to extract grain from peasants to feed the Red army and keep up the fight for power. However, such policy did not go down well with the peasants.

Trotsky realised he had to be ruthless to make sure that the Bolsheviks did not have to face a rebellion and revolt from discontented peasants in the areas they controlled. To achieve this Trotsky under the guise of the slogan 'dictatorship of the proletariat' created 'totalitarian' controls. Newspapers were closed down if they opposed the Bolsheviks in any way. The feared communist Police: the Cheka, were used to control any problems. Any opposition to the Bolshevik authorities was dealt with by the Cheka using violence, which came to be known as the "Red Terror". The Bolsheviks had no compunction about shooting striking workers or obstructive peasants. Finally, the Bolsheviks had a clear and systematic ideology and used their control over all forms of communication to put across an effective propaganda campaign based on posters and the use of the 'agitprop' trains. If it had not been for such strong control and leadership from Trotsky then infighting could have quite easily have broken out between the peasant masses leading to anarchy.

In conclusion, it is to Trotsky's credit that an effective fighting force emerged during the years of the Civil War. When Trotsky was put in charge of the Red Army he brought a disciplinarian approach and supervised a strict, training regime and increased recruitment and retention. His organisational capacity was immense and despite his ruthless tactics he transformed the Red Army into an effective fighting force. Under the brilliant and dedicated leadership of Trotsky, the Red Army played a vital part in the seizure and maintenance of Bolshevik power. In addition Trotsky's tactical approach ensured that the Bolsheviks were able to supply their forces efficiently from their city strongholds ensuring that the Red Army could operate efficiently. Without doubt, Trotsky's contribution was vital to the success of the Bolsheviks in securing victory in the Civil War.