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THE RED ARMY AND MASS MOBILIZATION DURING THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR 1918-1920

The Red Army began life in 1918 as a small volunteer force of proletarians from the major urban citadels of Bolshevik power in northern and central Russia. By the end of the civil war against the Whites and the various armies of foreign intervention, in the autumn of 1920, it had grown into a mass conscript army of five million soldiers, 75 per cent of them peasants¹ by birth — a figure roughly proportionate to the size of the peasant population in Russia.²

For the Bolsheviks, this represented a tremendous social change. In October 1917 their support had been confined to the working-class districts of the big industrial cities, the Baltic Fleet, and the (soon to be demobilized) garrisons and armies of northern and western Russia. Without support in the countryside, where the vast majority of the population lived, no one had expected the Bolsheviks to hold on to power for more than a few weeks. The peasants, it was widely assumed, would rise up against them, joining the various armies of counter-revolution. Yet, contrary to expectations, the Red Army won the civil war, and it did so precisely because of its superior success, compared with the Whites, in mobilizing millions of peasants for military service. “In this social fact”, concluded Trotsky, was “rooted the final cause of our victories”.³

The mass conscription of the peasantry gave rise to a number of major debates within the Bolshevik party. Most Bolsheviks viewed the peasantry as an alien force, hostile to the socialist revolution

¹ “Peasants” are defined here (and throughout) as household members of small-scale family farms.

² N. Gorlov, “O sotsial’noi strukture krasnoi armii” [On the Social Structure of the Red Army], *Politrabotnika* (1922), no. 2, p. 55. The 1920 census of the Red Army and Navy gave the slightly higher figure of 77 per cent: see V. Efremov, “Professional’nyi sostav krasnoi armii i flota po perepisi 1920 g.” [The Professional Composition of the Red Army and Fleet According to the Census of 1920], *Biulleten’ TsSU* (1922), no. 66, p. 2. According to the Red Army census, only 66 per cent of soldiers registered farming as their main occupation: *Biulleten’ TsSU* (1922), no. 59, p. 41. Peasants counting domestic industry as their main occupation represented a significant component of the Red Army. Military service was also a popular means of social mobility from the peasantry to other social groups, especially the bureaucracy.

³ L. Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, trans. B. Pearce, in *The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, 5 vols. (London, 1979), i, p. 15.

because of its “petty-bourgeois” nature (its social inclination towards small-scale property rights and market relations). The Bolshevik party had always supported the ideal of a “class” army — one dominated by the proletariat, as opposed to an army based upon universal military service.⁴ Although the rapid escalation of the civil war in the summer of 1918 had forced the Bolsheviks to adopt the latter principle, many in the party continued to express their belief that a small but “pure” proletarian army, like the Red Guards or factory militia of 1917, would prove more reliable and effective than a mass conscript army infiltrated and weakened by non-proletarian elements. This was one of the central arguments of the Military Opposition in the Bolshevik party to Trotsky’s policy of constructing a regular conscript army commanded by “bourgeois” military specialists under the political supervision of Bolshevik commissars.⁵ The need to preserve the hegemony of the industrial worker over the peasant was also an important consideration for those (including Trotsky himself) who stressed the desirability of moving — as soon as the military situation permitted — away from the mass conscript army towards a militia system.⁶

These issues went far beyond the question of military organization. The principles upon which the Red Army was built served as a model for the rest of the Soviet system. The centralization of the Bolshevik state apparatus ran parallel to similar changes in the Red Army’s political and command structure. Trotsky compared the transition from workers’ control to one-man management in industry with the transfer of military authority in the Red Army from elected officers to military specialists, appointed by the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RVSR).⁷ The experience of mass mobilization gained by the Bolsheviks through the Red Army fundamentally shaped their governmental attitudes not only during the period of War Communism (1918-21), when the whole of Soviet society was militarized, but also during the Stalinist period. Even the language of the Bolsheviks — with its continual references to “campaigns”, “combats”, “fronts” and “brigades” — had military overtones.

The problems of military organization associated with the mass

⁴ *Ibid.*, i, pp. 134, 420-1, iii, pp. 4, 8, *passim*.

⁵ F. Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 66.

⁶ J. Erickson, “Some Military and Political Aspects of the ‘Militia Army’ Controversy, 1919-1920”, in C. Abramsky and B. Williams (eds.), *Essays in Honour of E. H. Carr* (London, 1974), p. 217.

⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, p. 105.

conscription of the peasantry had particular relevance to these broader issues of government. The difficulties of registering the rural population eligible for military service and of enforcing the Red Army conscriptions in the countryside pointed towards the general problems of administration which the Bolsheviks were bound to confront outside their strongholds in the major industrial cities. The tasks of training and disciplining the unruly peasant recruits served as an important lesson in the methods of rule for those (mostly Bolshevik and working-class) officers who were to enter the provincial organs of Soviet government in their thousands after the end of the civil war. The contempt and hatred felt by many of the proletarian officers for the peasantry was expressed in such brutal punishments (sanctioned by the disciplinary code of the Red Army) as hitting soldiers in the teeth with the butt of a rifle. Beneath this naked violence lay a deeper political struggle, as D. D. F. White put it, “between the anarchistic, anti-centralist tendencies of the village and the centralist, dictatorial trends of the Communist party. It was not merely a conflict between groups with different economic and political interests. It was a deep-rooted antagonism between two ways of living, two different cultural practices and concepts”.⁸

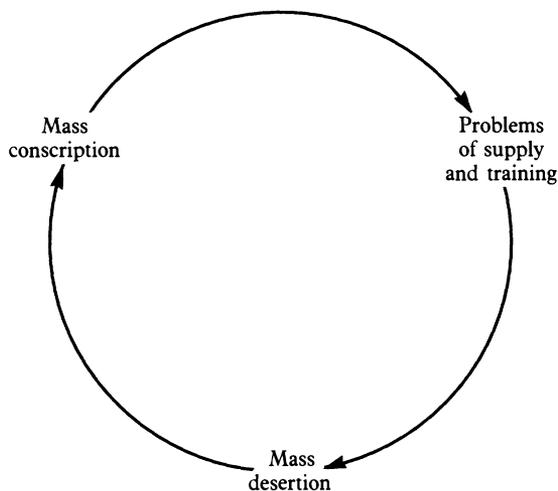
Isaac Babel symbolized this conflict in his brilliant story, *Konnaia armiia* (Red Cavalry), in the episode when one of Budenny’s élite cavalry brigades charges on a group of their own peasant infantrymen, thrashing them with whips to assert their superiority over them.

Of all the problems of military organization associated with the mass conscription of the peasantry, none was as serious, or had as many consequences for the civilian sector, as the difficulties of military supply. The decision to maintain a Red Army of five million soldiers, rather than one or two million, necessitated the militarization of the Soviet economy (War Communism) to supply it with food, uniforms, boots, weapons, transport and medical services. But the Red Army grew much faster than the productive capacity of the economy. Material shortages in the army increased. Living conditions deteriorated. Diseases spread. Discipline broke down. And desertion accelerated out of control, so that hastily mobilized — and often untrained — reinforcements had increasingly to be sent to the front-line units, although these were precisely those most likely to desert. The problem was made more acute by the fact that the army became dependent on peasant recruits, whose technical incompetence and

⁸ D. D. F. White, *The Growth of the Red Army* (Princeton, 1944), p. 121.

natural homing instincts during the agricultural season made them harder to train and discipline than skilled industrial workers.⁹ It was this consideration that had largely determined the decision of the Bolsheviks to go for a pattern of “extensive recruitment” — to mobilize all the possible age groups of the rural population in the hope of finding among them a sufficient number of reliable recruits. Yet opting for quantity rather than quality only exacerbated the problems of supply and desertion. In short, the Red Army became inextricably locked into a vicious circle, in which its fighting capacity was largely dependent upon the efficiency of its own social and economic organization. (See Diagram.)

DIAGRAM
THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF MASS CONSCRIPTION



The White armies suffered similar problems of organization as they attempted to expand from their social base of 1918 (small but well-disciplined volunteer forces, mainly consisting of Cossacks and officers) into the mass peasant-conscript armies which were ultimately

⁹ Many sources noted that the best-disciplined Red Army units tended to have a higher proportion of workers in them: see *ibid.*, p. 105. The Bolsheviks pursued a conscious policy of reinforcing as many military units as possible — especially those on the important fronts — with workers and party members. See Efremov, “Professional’nyi sostav”, p. 4; M. A. Molodtsygin, *Raboche-krest’ianskii soiuz, 1918-1920* [The Workers’ and Peasants’ Union, 1918-1920] (Moscow, 1987), pp. 149-54.

to decide the military struggles of 1919-20. The more peasants the White armies recruited, the weaker they became, as the familiar problems of military supply, training and indiscipline increased.¹⁰ In the summer of 1919, Lenin predicted that mass conscription would destabilize Denikin's army, as it had already weakened Kolchak's army during the previous spring:

universal mobilization will be the ruin of Denikin as it was of Kolchak; as long as he had a class army of volunteers who hated socialism it was strong and sound, but when he began universal recruitment he did, of course, get an army together more quickly, but the army became the weaker, and its class character less pronounced. Peasants recruited into Denikin's army will do the same in that army as the Siberian peasants did in Kolchak's army — they brought complete disintegration into the army.¹¹

The importance of the civil war armies' social and economic organization can only be understood if we bear in mind two specific features of the Russian civil war. First, there was the sheer speed with which the two armies were forced to mobilize the peasants, an alien social element to both. Neither had the time or the infrastructure to establish a solid territorial-military base among the peasantry, as the Red Army was able to do in China between 1927 and 1940. Secondly, the rapidly shifting fronts of the Russian civil war disrupted regular supply lines and local state structures, so that the two armies were frequently forced to mobilize reinforcements and military supplies from areas close to the fighting.

The effect of these two factors was to militarize vast civilian areas, so that terror and coercion by the military against the population — as well as popular rebellions against the military authorities — became an integral element of the civil war. Civilian dead and wounded accounted for 91 per cent of all losses in the Russian civil war, compared with 63 per cent during the First World War.¹² The ability of the armies to mobilize the peasantry and their economic resources depended almost entirely upon their relations with the rural population at large. Indiscriminate looting and confiscation of peasant property by military units was invariably followed by peasant upris-

¹⁰ See, for example, *Poslednie dni kolchakovshchiny* [The Last Days of the Kolchak Regime], ed. M. M. Konstantinov (Moscow and Leningrad, 1926), pp. 9-10; facsimile repr. in *Kolchak i Sibir': Dokumenty i issledovaniia, 1919-1926* [Kolchak and Siberia: Documents and Research, 1919-1926], ed. D. Collins and J. Smerle, 2 vols. (Pubns. of the Study Group on the Russian Revolution, xi, New York, 1988); E. Wollenberg, *The Red Army*, trans. C. Sykes (London, 1978), pp. 97-8; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, iii, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th edn., 47 vols. (London, 1960-80), xxix, p. 460.

¹² A. Bubnov, *Grazhdanskaia voina, partiia i voennoe delo* [The Civil War, the Party and Military Science] (Moscow, 1928), p. 29.

ings against conscription and the requisitionings of food and other supplies, as well as an increase in peasant desertion from the army itself.

It is rather surprising, in view of all this, that Western historians have chosen to write about the Russian civil war almost exclusively from the perspective of traditional military history.¹³ True, its outcome, like any war, was decided by force of arms. Military organization, strategy and performance on the battlefield were, in the end, decisive. But the civil war was also an exercise in mass mobilization and state-building. It was a test of how far the two military regimes, the Reds and the Whites, were able to enlist the support of the population which they aspired to rule. Teodor Shanin explains:

Much has been argued about the reasons why the "White Cause" (*Beloe delo*) was defeated by the Reds, who lacked, at least initially, the state-administrative know-how, the organized military forces, foreign support, basic equipment and international legitimation . . . The reasons since offered for the Bolsheviks' victory ranged from the stupidity of their foes and the marvels of Lenin's party organization, to geography (the centrality of Moscow and the country's size) and the mistaken military tactics adopted by the White Generals. All this, relevant as it may have been, disregards the fact that the civil war was fought not between Bolshevik party members and monarchist officers, but between armies in which both these groups were in a minority. In the conditions of civil war those armies' loyalties could not be taken for granted, and they thereby became a decisive element in defining the outcome of the battles. The ability to mobilise resources necessary for army operations was equally important . . . the recruits and the resources were not volunteered, but the question continually was how much would be volunteered, how much effort would be spent taking the rest, and how much was eventually at the disposal of the armies' command.¹⁴

This shortcoming in the Western literature is particularly surprising in the case of the Whites, given the abundant archival materials available on this subject in the West. We still lack a detailed social history of the counter-revolution and its armies. But the shortcoming is especially apparent in the case of the Reds, where access to archival materials has hitherto been very limited for Western historians. Consequently, there has been a marked reliance in the West on the

¹³ Typical of this approach are D. Footman, *Civil War in Russia* (London, 1961); R. Lockett, *The White Generals* (London, 1971); J. Bradley, *Civil War in Russia, 1917-1920* (London, 1975); P. Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1918: The First Year of the Volunteer Army* (Berkeley, 1971); P. Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919-1920: The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley, 1977); E. Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (London, 1987).

¹⁴ T. Shanin, *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of Century*, ii, *Russia, 1905-07: Revolution as a Moment of Truth* (London, 1986), pp. 200-1 (grammatical corrections made to published source).

works of Soviet historians for information about the organization of the Red Army. Yet the latter have tended to underestimate and simplify the particular problems faced by the Bolsheviks in the mass mobilization of the peasants. It is to this subject, in the hope of redressing some of the imbalance in the literature, that the following pages are devoted.

I

THE RED ARMY IN 1918

The disintegration of the imperial army during the autumn and winter of 1917, and the absence of an adequate administrative apparatus in the countryside to enforce the conscription of the war-weary peasants, necessitated the foundation of the Red Army on volunteer principles during the early months of 1918. For those Bolsheviks who put a premium on the Red Guards, formed by the factory workers in 1917, as the proletarian nucleus of the revolutionary army, the volunteer principle had virtues in itself.¹⁵ But, by and large, the first volunteer brigades of the Red Army came into being as a pragmatic and hasty response by local revolutionaries to the threat of Cossack or other counter-revolutionary forces. Most were formed by their local town soviet or trade unions to defend the railways and roads, although rural brigades were also common. They were small, irregular infantry brigades, numbering anything between 25 and 1,200 partisans, under the loose command of elected "officers". The majority functioned in a disorganized and eccentric manner. It was not uncommon for operative plans — which usually consisted of driving the enemy out of the immediate locality and then abandoning the military struggle — to be decided collectively by a show of soldiers' hands. Attacks were launched without adequate scouting of the enemy terrain, sometimes using no more than a school geography map. The soldiers fought in a fierce but undisciplined manner, too frequently succumbing to panic firing and breaking up ranks on first sight of the enemy. The military defeats of May and June at the hands of well-disciplined Cossack and Czech units made it clear to the majority of the Bolshevik leaders that there was an urgent need to reorganize the Red Army into an equally disciplined force, with regular regiments and divisions, and a centralized chain of command.¹⁶

¹⁵ See J. Erickson, "The Origins of the Red Army", in R. Pipes (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia* (Harvard, 1968), pp. 233, 242; Benvenuti, *Bolsheviks*, p. 20.

¹⁶ O. Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution (1917-1921)* (Oxford, 1989), p. 308; Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii, Moscow (hereafter TsGAOR), f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, l. 27.

The majority of the earliest volunteers for the Red Army were either urban workers, or “vagabond, unstable elements that” — in Trotsky’s words — “were so numerous at that time”.¹⁷ The former were probably in the minority. Of the 306,000 Red Army volunteers registered on 10 May 1918, only 34,000 were from the Red Guards, while 24,000 were from various other brigades (for example, party formations and food-requisitioning detachments).¹⁸ Whereas N. I. Podvoiskii, the first People’s Commissar of Military Affairs, had expected 300,000 urban workers from Moscow to join the Red Army during February 1918, the actual number amounted to no more than 20,000 (in Petrograd the figure was 6,000), and even these few had to be recruited “with the party’s military organization working flat out”.¹⁹ Many of the volunteers — 70 per cent according to a survey by the Supreme Military Inspectorate in the autumn of 1918 — had previously been soldiers in the imperial army.²⁰ They had grown used to military life, or simply found it preferable to the harsh conditions and difficult adjustments of post-war civilian life (armed robbery was the easiest way for many of them to feed themselves in the semi-anarchic and hungry conditions of early 1918).²¹ The urban unemployed, migrants, “hooligans” and criminal elements also made up a large contingent of the first Red Army volunteer units — as, indeed, they are almost bound to in any *armée révolutionnaire*.²²

Partly because of their social origins, the volunteer brigades proved a highly unstable form of military organization. Too many signed up just to get a gun and some uniform before running off home, or deserting to sell their booty and start the process over again. Consequently the turnover of volunteers was very high. Many recruiting stations were even left without supplies for the new volunteers.²³ Too

¹⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 5.

¹⁸ N. Movchin, *Komplektovanie krasnoi armii* [The Recruitment of the Red Army] (Moscow, 1926), p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰ *Izvestiia Narodnogo Komissariata po Voennym Delam* [News of the People’s Commissariat for Military Affairs], no. 10, 16 Jan. 1919, p. 3. See also V. D. Polikarpov, “Dobrovol’tsy 1918 goda” [The Volunteers of 1918], *Voprosy istorii* (1983), no. 2.

²¹ The first Red Army detachments were known to rob and loot villages in many localities, especially where they were responsible for food requisitioning. See, for example, TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 443, ll. 38, 112; f. 393, op. 3, d. 327, ll. 278-9, 282; d. 334, l. 105; d. 337, l. 64; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 101; I. N. Shteinberg, *In the Workshop of the Revolution* (London, 1953), pp. 153-5.

²² Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 85; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 165. On the Jacobin armies, which suffered from similar problems, see R. Cobb, *The People’s Armies*, trans. M. Elliot (New Haven and London, 1987), pp. 150-5.

²³ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 26; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, pp. 138-9; White, *Growth of the Red Army*, p. 31.

many brigades were formed in response to the immediate military threat, only to be disbanded once that threat had died away. The Supreme Military Inspectorate found that during the summer of 1918 the proportion of adult men volunteering for the Red Army from regions close to the civil war front was four times as high as in regions further away from the fighting. Above all, too few volunteers came from the stable farming peasantry, the majority of the toiling population. Even in the predominantly agricultural provinces of Voronezh and Kursk, only 49 per cent of the Red Army volunteers were registered as peasants, whereas industrial and unskilled workers comprised 43 per cent. In the semi-industrial provinces of Tver and Moscow, the latter provided as many as 62 per cent of the recruits. A similar proportion were bachelors (68 per cent were younger than thirty-one) — in other words, young men without a peasant family farm.²⁴ Most of those who had their own farm were more concerned to work on it and restore it to order after four years of war than to volunteer for military service in the Red Army.²⁵

Given the inadequacies of the volunteer system, the Bolsheviks had little choice but to opt for a system of compulsory universal mobilization at the end of May, when the revolt of the Czech Legion and the establishment of the Samara government initiated a new period of full-scale civil war. In view of the weakness of the Soviet apparatus, and the impossibility of carrying out a nationwide mobilization, it was decided to call up only the most reliable recruits: the 21 to 22-year-old workers (born 1897-1896) of Moscow and Petrograd; and the 21 to 25-year-olds (1897-1893) in those military districts (Volga, Urals, Western Siberia) closest to the military front against the Samara regime. Similar mobilizations were called during the summer on a local basis, mainly in the northern and central regions of Russia (for example, in Vladimir, Perm and Viatka). Finally, the local party cells and the *kombedy* (Committees of Poor Peasants) each mobilized, in addition, approximately forty thousand Red Army recruits.²⁶

The results of the mobilization reflected a wide discrepancy be-

²⁴ *Izvestiia Narodnogo Komissariata po Voennym Delam*, no. 10, p. 3. See further, Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 310.

²⁵ This may help to explain why the survey by the Supreme Military Inspectorate noted a general increase in the number of volunteers in September and October, after the end of the agricultural peak season. The establishment of volunteer brigades by the *kombedy* (Committees of Poor Peasants) and local party cells also accounts for the increase during these months.

²⁶ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 42-50; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 311.

tween the ability of the Bolsheviks to mobilize workers and their ability to mobilize peasants. Of the fifteen compulsory mobilizations between 12 June and 29 August, no less than eleven applied exclusively to urban workers. The mobilization of Moscow and Petrograd workers born between 1897-1896 went “without a hitch”, according to Trotsky.²⁷ Of the ten to twelve thousand recruits anticipated from Moscow, nine thousand actually appeared.²⁸ Overall, as many as 200,000 workers were mobilized from Moscow and Petrograd during the summer and autumn of 1918.²⁹ Since it was well known that the authorities lacked the means, even in the biggest cities, to enforce the conscriptions (which should thus be seen as semi-voluntary), these figures should be seen as a reflection of the willingness of large numbers of workers to sign up for military service, given growing unemployment and food shortages in the cities. The urban population of Russia was at least halved during the civil war, as workers flooded into the Red Army and the countryside.³⁰

The mobilization of the peasants, by contrast, produced disappointing results. Of the 275,000 recruits anticipated from the call-up of 1897-1893 in the civil war areas, only 40,000 actually appeared during the first two months (June and July).³¹ Later mobilizations were more successful (overall, 890,000 recruits were registered between June 1918 and February 1919),³² especially those called after the agricultural season. Peasants were reluctant to leave their farms before the harvest; most of those conscripted from the rural areas during the summer came from the mobile and proletarian margins of peasant society.³³ Also, by the autumn many peasants had suffered under White rule in the Volga and the Urals, and were consequently more likely to support the Red Army, at least on conditional terms.³⁴

²⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 300.

²⁸ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Sovetskie vooruzhennye sily: istoriia stroitel'stva* [The Soviet Armed Forces: A History of their Development] (Moscow, 1978), p. 49.

³⁰ See generally D. Koenker, “Urbanization and Deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War”, *Jl. Mod. Hist.*, lvii (1985).

³¹ Molodtzygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, p. 57.

³² *Velikii oktiabr' i zashchita ego zavoevanii* [Great October and the Defence of its Conquests] (Moscow, 1987), pp. 41-2.

³³ Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 310-11. Trotsky cited the devastating effect on army morale of a telegram from Volokolamsk *uezd* (district) in Moscow province, threatening to deprive of their “peasant status” (i.e. their rights in the peasant commune) all those soldiers who failed to return to their villages by 30 June, the beginning of the harvest season: see Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 429.

³⁴ On the relationship between the peasants' experience of White rule and their readiness to serve in the Red Army, see Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 177-83, 314.

However, throughout 1918 the Red Army continued to experience difficulties in mobilizing the peasantry.

There were three main difficulties, according to a secret memorandum to Trotsky written in mid-May by M. D. Bonch-Bruевич, head of the Supreme Military Council: the lack of adequate food supplies, uniforms, boots, weapons, barracks accommodation and cash to provide for the new recruits; the shortage of officers to train and organize the recruits into proper military units; and the almost complete absence of a military apparatus in the localities.³⁵ The first was a problem for the Red Army throughout the civil war.³⁶ The shortage of officers (put at 55,000 in the early summer of 1918) was partially overcome during the summer by the call-up of N.C.O.s from the imperial army. It was later eradicated by the mobilization of "military specialists" (officers) from the same source.³⁷ But the last of the three problems — the weakness of the military apparatus in the localities — was probably the most serious difficulty facing the Bolsheviks in 1918. All the military authorities reporting on the progress of the mobilization campaign in the provinces during that summer and autumn stressed as their main problem the absence of experienced administrators, agitators and instructors.³⁸ Few *volosti* (rural townships) had their own military committee (Voenkom) integrated into the national structure of military command. One survey found that only 28 per cent of the *volosti* in European Russia had established a Voenkom as late as 1919.³⁹

Refusing to set up a Voenkom in their locality proved a highly effective means for the peasants to sabotage the Red Army mobilization, since that organ was exclusively responsible for making an account of the population eligible for military service, enforcing the recruitment, arming and training the recruits, and sending them on to the higher authorities. Where a Voenkom was established at the *volost'* level, its work could easily be slowed down — and even brought to a halt — by the non-co-operation of the mir (village commune), since the register of those eligible for the military call-up

³⁵ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, ll. 67-8.

³⁶ See below, section III, pp. 190-8.

³⁷ *Velikii oktiabr'*, p. 48. On the Red Army's mobilization of N.C.O.s, see White, *Growth of the Red Army*, pp. 52-5. On the mobilization of "Tsarist officers" and other personnel from the imperial army, see A. G. Kavtaradze, *Voennye spetsialisty na sluzhbe respublikii sovetov, 1917-1920 gg.* [Military Specialists in the Service of the Soviet Republic, 1917-1920] (Moscow, 1988).

³⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, l. 41.

³⁹ A. I. Lepeshkin, *Mestnye organy vlasti sovetskogo gosudarstva (1917-1920 gg.)* [Local Organs of the Soviet State (1917-1920)] (Moscow, 1957), p. 257.

required up to fifty different categories of information, most of which were available only from the mir. Throughout the early phases of the civil war, the Red Army suffered from grossly inaccurate methods of accounting. People were often called up who had died, disappeared or emigrated (migration, and employment on the railways, were two common ways to avoid military service). Sometimes more recruits turned up at the mobilization point than had been anticipated. The first full register of the population eligible for military service was not completed until the beginning of 1919, and it was only later that year, with the introduction of roll-call meetings (*poverychnye sbory*) at places of work, that it became remotely systematic. Until then the compulsory mobilizations were in effect semi-voluntary for, without reliable registers or a military infrastructure in the rural localities, the Red Army could not compel anyone to join it.⁴⁰

Peasant resistance to the mobilization was widespread — and highly effective — in 1918. Many village communes and soviets passed resolutions condemning the civil war as an unnecessary “war between brothers” (*bratoubiustvennaia voina*) and calling on both sides to end it through negotiations.⁴¹ Some even declared themselves “neutral zones” or “neutral republics” and formed their own brigades to keep the civil war armies out of their territory.⁴² Others refused to implement the compulsory mobilization, but allowed volunteers to join up.⁴³ Where the military authorities sent recruiting brigades to enforce the conscription order, the latter were likely to meet open, and armed, peasant opposition. In Pskov province, peasant uprisings — many of them led by bands of deserters — were noted in dozens of *volosti* during the autumn of 1918 in protest against the Red Army mobilization.⁴⁴ Similar uprisings were noted during November and December in Moscow, Tula, Kaluga, Riazan’, Tambov, Smolensk, Vitebsk, Mogilev and Samara provinces. Some involved peasants refusing to be conscripted or trained. Others consisted of newly mobilized recruits protesting against the requisitioning of their family’s livestock (the households of Red Army soldiers were legally

⁴⁰ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 43, 61, 154-7, 162-7.

⁴¹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, l. 54; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 312-13; M. Gavrilova, “Moe uchastie v grazhdanskoi voine” [My Part in the Civil War], *Krest’ianka* (1925), no. 5, p. 5.

⁴² N. Rabichev, “Krasnaia armiiia i rabota na sele” [The Red Army and Work in the Village], *Proletarskaia mysl’* (1923), no. 2, p. 41.

⁴³ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 49.

⁴⁴ “Iz istorii organizatsii krasnoi armii v Pskovskoi gubernii v 1918-19 gg.” [From the History of the Organization of the Red Army in Pskov Province in 1918-19], *Krasnaia letopis’* (1930), no. 34 (1), pp. 73-5, 79.

exempt from taxes), the short supply of uniforms and food rations, or simply the lack of heating in army barracks.⁴⁵ A report by the chairman of the Military Revolutionary Tribunal, P. G. Smidovich, to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) on the big peasant risings in Tula and Riazan' provinces during November concluded that one of their primary causes was the poor organization of the Red Army mobilization. Hundreds of horses requisitioned from the peasants had died for lack of feed. Some of the peasant recruits, having been forcibly conscripted, had been sent back home for want of a gun. Many others, fed up with conditions in the barracks, had deserted, taking with them their guns and forming armed detachments. These "Greens" (so called because they made the woods their strongholds) played a leading role in the peasant uprisings. Not surprisingly, the destruction of all local military records was one of their major objectives. "Where we went wrong", concluded Smidovich,

was to declare the mobilization simultaneously throughout the region, since this enabled the peasants to unite against the central authorities, while making it difficult for the latter to concentrate their military forces and intervene effectively to enforce the recruitment. In future, the mobilizations should be spread out over time, and the conscripts taken out of the region in which they signed up as quickly as possible.⁴⁶

II

MASS CONSCRIPTION

The Red Army's capture of Kazan' on 10 September proved a major turning-point in the history of the civil war. Until then, the Red Army had been in constant retreat on the crucial eastern front, surrendering town after town to the small but well-disciplined Czech and volunteer forces of the Samara government. The fall of Kazan', on 6 August, marked the high point of the anti-Bolsheviks' fortunes in the summer of 1918, bringing them within striking distance of Moscow itself. "For the first time", recalled Trotsky, "everyone realised that the country was facing mortal danger", and that Soviet power might fall.⁴⁷ It was this realization, argued Trotsky, that brought discipline back into Red Army ranks, and made possible the organization of a mass conscript army based on regular units with a centralized chain of command.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, l. 45; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 313.

⁴⁶ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 277, l. 183.

⁴⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 454.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

Trotsky's was a romantic view, but not without an element of truth. The Kazan' campaign did indeed mark the beginning of the Red Army's growth on a mass scale. The experience — or fear — of White rule galvanized thousands of peasants into joining the Red Army. It is not coincidental that after 1918 more peasants were mobilized from the Volga military district than from any other in the Soviet Republic, since it was here that the peasantry had gained most from the redivision of gentry land during the revolution, and it was here that the threat of the White counter-revolution was greatest, with all the losses of land this would entail for the peasantry.⁴⁹ The Kazan' campaign also marked the start of the Red Army's reorganization on more disciplined and centralized lines. At the beginning of September the Soviet Republic was declared by the VTsIK to be a single military camp, headed by the RVSR under the chairmanship of Trotsky. On 11 September, the day after the capture of Kazan', the RVSR put forward its plan to reorganize the Red Army into five army groups, with eleven divisions, each consisting of six to nine regiments plus reserve units, on three properly structured fronts (eastern, northern and southern) and a fortified western area.⁵⁰ During the following three months, as Kolchak's White forces in western Siberia and Denikin's in the Don and the Kuban built up, the Bolsheviks were primarily concerned to work out how the fragile economic structure of the Soviet Republic could support the maximum number of soldiers. On 3 October Lenin declared at an enlarged meeting of the VTsIK that it had been "decided to have an army of one million men by the spring; now we need an army of three million. We can have it. *And we shall have it*".⁵¹ Lenin's own Defence Council (*Sovet oborony*) was forced to conclude on 18 December that the Soviet economy could actually support an army of only 1.5 million, and 300,000 horses.⁵² However, plans were simultaneously laid to conscript and train another million reserves through the Voenkoms of the military districts (*Voennye okruga*).⁵³ Although these reserve units developed slowly at first, we shall see that they were to become — in terms of numbers alone — the most important component of the Red Army in 1919-20.

The Red Army still experienced difficulties in mobilizing the

⁴⁹ See Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 126-8, 314.

⁵⁰ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 52-3.

⁵¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, xxviii, p. 102.

⁵² *Velikii oktiabr'*, p. 42.

⁵³ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 120, ll. 50-1, 79.

peasantry during 1919. The disorganization of the military apparatus continued to present problems, especially in the far western areas, only recently liberated from German occupation,⁵⁴ and the Ukraine, where guerrilla methods continued to be effective.⁵⁵ Most recruitment stations experienced shortages of uniforms, boots, weapons and food; some even had to send conscripts home when the problem became too acute.⁵⁶ In parts of the north and west, such as Novgorod and Gomel', it was reported that famine conditions had made the conscription of the peasants impossible.⁵⁷ Even more so than in 1918, peasant uprisings against the mobilization were commonplace, many of them organized by the "Green" bands of deserters. At the height of the agricultural season, in June (when the rate of desertion reached its seasonal peak), the whole of the Red Army rear was engulfed by peasant uprisings. In Voronezh, Tambov and Saratov provinces the "Greens" numbered several thousand, and were well armed in organized bands that at times posed a serious threat to the Red Army rear on the southern front. The presence of "Green" bands several thousand strong, and a wave of peasant uprisings against the mobilization in Gomel', Vitebsk, Minsk and Smolensk provinces, were said to have presented a major threat to the Red Army on the western front during the summer, when it was pushed back towards the Dnepr by Polish forces. In Pskov, Novgorod, Tver, Yaroslavl', Kostroma, Vologda, Cherepovets, Moscow and Riazan' provinces, peasant uprisings were said to have combined in a highly effective manner with the deserters' bands to disrupt the mobilization, destroy the railways and lines of communication, and terrorize the local officials of Soviet power: "suppressed in one region, they soon broke out again in another as large-scale rebellions, sometimes with well-armed bands of up to several thousand men".⁵⁸

Despite these problems, the Red Army grew rapidly in size during 1919. (See Table 1.) Two million recruits were enlisted in 1919 and a further two million by the end of 1920, when the overall size of the Red Army was estimated at over five million. Over 80 per cent of the

⁵⁴ See the reports from Vilna and Smolensk at the beginning of February 1919, in TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, ll. 2-3, 6.

⁵⁵ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, pp. 457-9.

⁵⁶ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 449, ll. 1-2; d. 529, l. 12; Molodtsygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 422, l. 244; d. 529, l. 55.

⁵⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198, l. 14. See also S. Olikov, *Dezertirstvo v krasnoi armii i bor'ba s nim* [Desertion in the Red Army and the Struggle against it] (Leningrad, 1926), p. 27; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 138. For similar reports from 1920, see TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 4, d. 281.

TABLE 1
THE GROWTH OF THE RED ARMY IN 1919*

	Total size of the army at beginning of month	Recruits joining the army during month
January	800,000	65,000
February	1,000,000	240,000
March	1,400,000	345,000
April	1,500,000	110,000
May	1,700,000	155,000
June	1,900,000	200,000
July	2,100,000	200,000
August	2,300,000	110,000
September	2,400,000	95,000
October	2,500,000	70,000
November	2,600,000	225,000
December	2,800,000	160,000
January 1920	3,000,000	

* Source: N. Movchin, *Komplektovanie krasnoi armii* [The Recruitment of the Red Army] (Moscow, 1926), pp. 100-1.

recruits mobilized in 1919 were registered as peasants, a disproportionate number of them from central Russia itself.⁵⁹ Given the limitations of Bolshevik power in the countryside, how can we explain this rapid numerical growth?

First, a note of caution has to be added to the figures themselves. The number of registered Red Army men at any one moment included not only the active fighters, but also the wounded and sick, reserves, trainees, those on labour duty and in transit to the front. It also included those — a number running into tens of thousands — who had disappeared, or deserted from their unit and had not yet surrendered or been caught. Most of the apprehended deserters from the units — a number running into hundreds of thousands — were sent back to the reserves, where they were registered as Red Army men for a second time. Since the Bolsheviks had no effective means of checking, man by man, the deserters who left from one unit against those who returned to another, many Red Army men must have been counted more than once (and some even more than twice). Indeed, since the individual units were in fierce competition with each other over scarce supplies, they had a vested interest in concealing their losses through desertion in order to keep the number of men on Red Army rations artificially high. Thus the Red Army's real strength

⁵⁹ Thus the Red Army in the Ukraine was more Russian than Ukrainian: Gorlov, "O sotsial'noi strukture krasnoi armii", p. 57.

was a good deal smaller — and more variable — than suggested by the grandiloquent statistic of five million men so often cited in both Soviet and Western history books. It really only approximated to that number for the last three months of 1920, after which the Red Army was rapidly demobilized (only 1,428,000 soldiers were left by January 1922).⁶⁰ At the height of the civil war in the spring of 1919, there were 383,000 active fighters on the various fronts out of a total Red Army force of 1.8 million men — a ratio of fighters to eaters of 1:4.7.⁶¹ That ratio varied during the civil war as a whole from about 1:3 in the units in the field to about 1:10 in the entire Red Army. It fluctuated seasonally in line with the rates of desertion and the general

TABLE 2
“EATERS” AND FIGHTERS IN THE RED ARMY 1920*

	Number on rations	Number of fighters	Ratio of fighters to eaters
Troops in the field			
1 June 1920	873,829	294,349	1: 3
1 August 1920	948,728	393,683	1: 2.4
Red Army in general			
1 June 1920	4,587,061	337,620	1: 13.6
1 August 1920	4,876,110	494,572	1: 9.9

* Source: Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 229.

supply of foodstuffs. (See Table 2.) Even at the height of its strength, in October 1920, when the Red Army amounted to nearly 5.5 million men, there were 2,250,000 recruits undergoing training who had still not been formed into military units; 391,000 in reserve units; 159,000 in labour armies; and only 2,250,000 in the armies at the front, of whom no more than 700,000 would have been active fighters (and no more than 500,000 of these properly armed).⁶² Given its enormous social and political significance, the Russian civil war was actually fought between miniscule armies (the forces deployed by either side on a given front rarely exceeded 100,000). Proportionate to the civilian population, this was no more than the number of fighters in the English civil wars of the 1640s.⁶³

⁶⁰ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 237-9, 259.

⁶¹ *Velikii oktiabr'*, pp. 112-13.

⁶² Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 228-9. John Maynard was not far off the mark when he wrote: “Though the Red Army in the Civil War ultimately totalled over five million men, it never had more than half a million rifles, and the maximum number of combatants in it never exceeded 600,000, with 700 guns and 2,800 machine-guns”: H. J. Maynard, *The Russian Peasant: And Other Studies* (London, 1942), p. 116.

⁶³ During the English civil wars about 140,000 men were under arms out of a total population of about five million (2.8 per cent). During the Russian civil war perhaps four million men were armed and put into active units out of a total population of about 160 million (2.5 per cent).

The growth of the Red Army during 1919-20 was facilitated by several political factors. The completion of the military register allowed the Red Army to abandon the semi-voluntary “*volost'* mobilization” called at the end of April (whereby each *volost'* was to enlist and equip between ten and twenty recruits) and to concentrate instead on the universal mobilization of particular age groups. The results of the former had proved disappointing: of the 118,000 recruits anticipated (on the basis of twenty per *volost'*) from twenty-seven provinces in European Russia, only 13,633 (11.5 per cent) had actually appeared by the middle of June.⁶⁴ Part of the problem was that the *volost'* mobilization represented an unfairly heavy burden for the smaller *volosti*, whose authorities thus felt justified in ignoring it.⁶⁵ The conscription of all the males born in one year, to which the peasants had grown accustomed during the First World War, was seen to be fairer since it affected everyone equally (sometimes the peasants cast lots to see who should go to the army from the age groups called up).⁶⁶ It also created fewer administrative problems — the main one now being the tendency of the peasant communes to send to the army only those enlisted from the biggest household farms, on the grounds that the loss of an adult male worker was more likely to harm the smaller family farms.⁶⁷ This was said to have resulted in “kulak” elements joining the Red Army, which some commanders used to explain the poor military discipline and performance of their units.⁶⁸

The enforcement of the universal mobilization was facilitated by a second political factor: the general strengthening of the Soviet apparatus in rural areas.⁶⁹ During 1919-20 the *volost'* soviets became more reliable, centralized and bureaucratized organs, under the domination

⁶⁴ Molodttsygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, pp. 135, 254.

⁶⁵ For this reason, the instructions on the *volost'* mobilization were revised on 20 May to allow the smaller *volosti* to lower their recruitment quotas: *ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶⁶ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, l. 61; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 72-3; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 314.

⁶⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, ll. 68, 70, 107. The result of this selection bias was that the larger peasant households tended to lose a higher proportion of their adult males to the army, which left them with a much less favourable ratio of consumers to workers compared with the smaller households, since they contained a relatively larger number of dependants. Thus the military conscription was likely to have encouraged the bigger households to partition — itself already a mass phenomenon during this period because of the threat of revolutionary expropriation: Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 315-16.

⁶⁸ Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 314.

⁶⁹ On this subject generally, see *ibid.*, ch. 5.

of local Bolshevik party cadres. The whole apparatus of the *volost'* soviet was supposed to be subordinated to the immediate tasks of recruitment during the call-up period. The head of the Voenkom was to become the chairman of the soviet. The Voenkoms themselves were increasingly appointed by the higher military authorities rather than elected by the peasants, so that urban workers and party members tended to become a dominant element within them.⁷⁰ A final political factor behind the growth of the Red Army during 1919-20 was the tremendous effect of Bolshevik propaganda — a subject discussed elsewhere.⁷¹

The Red Army grew on an extensive rather than an intensive basis. In other words it called up more and more age groups rather than trying to increase the rate of recruitment from targetted groups or reducing the rate of desertion (this only became a priority after all the eligible age groups had been called up). The extensive system of mobilization inevitably developed into a vicious and recurrent cycle: as the number of recruits grew, so too did the pressure on military supplies; the number of deserters increased as a consequence, so that more and more reinforcements were required. As the chairman of the Military Inspectorate put it to Trotsky: “each new mobilization produces a diminishing percentage increase in the size of our armed forces”⁷²

By June 1919, all the eligible age groups — bar the very youngest (1901) — had been mobilized. The call-up of 1901 was held back for as long as possible (and was only implemented during the war with Poland in 1920).⁷³ This was probably because of the burden which the call-up of this age group was likely to place on military supplies. For the younger age groups tended (with the exception of 1898-1897) to produce a higher rate of recruitment. (See Table 3.) When the Revolutionary Military Council of the Southern Front found itself in desperate need of reinforcements towards the end of June 1919, it called on Lenin and Trotsky to call up the youngest possible age groups, since “experience shows that the older the age group, the smaller tends to be the percentage of those called up actually being recruited. The shortfall ranges from 34 per cent in the youngest years to 90 per cent in the oldest”.⁷⁴ This was no doubt partly because

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 312-13.

⁷¹ For an introduction to this subject, see P. Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁷² Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 131.

⁷³ Molodtsygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, pp. 204-5.

⁷⁴ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, l. 89.

TABLE 3
 MOBILIZATION OF VARIOUS AGE GROUPS 1918-1919*

Year of birth	Number turning up for recruitment
1901	550,000 (approx.)
1900	228,546
1899	292,139
1898	341,780
1898-1897	1,056,809
1896-1892	232,848
1892-1891	120,000
1890-1899	130,238
1890-1886	80,666

* Source: Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 57, 268-9.

younger men tended to be more healthy: 70 per cent of the 1900 cohort passed their army medical, compared with only 56 per cent of the 1890-1889 cohort.⁷⁵ It was also because a higher proportion of the older age groups comprised family men, with farms of their own. They had already fought in the 1914-17 war, and were now understandably reluctant to join any army. A final explanation of this phenomenon may be found in the greater revolutionary enthusiasm of the young, a factor constantly stressed by Trotsky himself: "We must draw into the work of creating the army the younger generations, the youth who have not yet experienced war, and who are always distinguished by the *élan* of their revolutionary spirit and their display of enthusiasm".⁷⁶

There is another sense in which the growth of the Red Army could be characterized as "extensive". From the early summer of 1919, the Red Army pushed eastwards into the Urals and Siberia, forcing into headlong retreat both Kolchak's White army and the Allied interventionary forces. During the following autumn and winter, the Reds pushed southwards, forcing the Whites back into the Don, and then through the Kuban to the coast. The expansion of territory under Red occupation during the latter half of 1919 enabled the Bolsheviks to carry out mobilizations in the areas recently liberated from the Whites. This marked a shift in the conscription policies of the Red Army away from the principle of raising troops in the rear, and towards the practice of both mobilizing conscripts and forming military units directly behind the front. In fact mobilizations at the

⁷⁵ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 169.

⁷⁶ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 166.

front had long since become a practical necessity for both civil war armies, since the to-and-fro movements of the front disrupted transport and supply lines from the rear, making the question of raising adequate reinforcements a constant headache for the military authorities. Less than 30 per cent of the Red Army's demand for reinforcements on the eastern, southern and northern fronts was satisfied from its rear army reserves during the winter of 1918-19.⁷⁷ On the eastern and southern fronts during the early months of 1919 the soldiers in the front-line units were deserting and falling sick or wounded much faster than reinforcements could be trained, equipped or despatched. To make matters worse, a large proportion of the reinforcements deserted *en route* to the front, or arrived there unfit to do any fighting because of illness, or lack of equipment or training. Trotsky called the Red Army reversals on the eastern front during the spring of 1919, which brought Kolchak's army to within a few days' march of the River Volga, a "crisis of reinforcements". Much the same verdict could be applied to virtually all the Red Army's major defeats.⁷⁸

Trotsky, as head of the RVSR, was reluctant to allow front mobilizations to become a general practice given all the obvious military considerations: the importance of not antagonizing the civilian population behind the front through rapidly improvised mobilizations that were likely to break down into coercive methods; the poor discipline — and questionable motives — of so many of those recruited at the front; and (for Trotsky this was the key) the decentralization of the Red Army's military organization entailed by the front mobilizations (that is adopting the "guerrilla" or "partisan" methods advocated by the Military Opposition).⁷⁹ During the winter of 1918-19 the RVSR had sanctioned front mobilizations strictly in cases where the supply of trained reinforcements from the rear had completely broken down. But as this became the norm in 1919, it was forced to endorse the stop-gap measure of despatching untrained reinforcements to the front. This effectively gave the front armies the right to form their own military units, while turning the rear reserve armies, which had previously done this for them, into no more than temporary holding-stations for the mass of raw recruits awaiting

⁷⁷ P. Dmitrev, "Sozdanie strategicheskikh rezervov krasnoi armii v gody grazhdan-skoi voiny" [The Creation of Strategic Reserves of the Red Army in the Civil War], *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* (1974), no. 6, pp. 67-8.

⁷⁸ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 79, 109-10, 272.

⁷⁹ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 353, 377.

transfer to the front. According to one recent Soviet source, "the vast majority of military formations and units during the civil war . . . were formed not in the rear, but directly at the fronts, in the course of the fighting itself".⁸⁰ From forming their own units, it was but a short step for the front armies to carry out their own mobilizations as well. Indeed, during the course of 1919, they did this with increasing frequency, often with official approval from the central military authorities.⁸¹

In all, probably something in the region of half a million soldiers were mobilized on the Red Army fronts, usually when and where the civil war was at its fiercest. Some front mobilizations were carried out over a wide area prior to a major retreat so as not to leave potential recruits to the enemy. The entire male population between the ages of eighteen and forty was usually conscripted in these circumstances.⁸² A more common type of front mobilization was that carried out by individual units in urgent need of reinforcements. Where there was enough time for the army to establish political structures and carry out agitation, such mobilizations could prove moderately effective, since many peasants were afraid of the Whites, and could be persuaded to join the Red Army if it was seen to refrain from violence and looting.⁸³ A typical example was the mobilization carried out by the 1st Brigade of the 41st Division during the struggle against the Poles and Petliura's Ukrainian forces near Odessa in May 1920. First, it mobilized the Odessa party organization, whose members were assigned to the political departments of the various regiments. Over the next two weeks, it raised six hundred volunteers through agitation, and organized them into recruitment brigades, along with pro-Communist soldiers selected from the regular units by their political departments. The recruitment brigades then went around the villages, agitating, shooting "traitors to the revolution" and mobilizing — by force if necessary — the able-bodied peasants. In the course of three and a half months, three thousand recruits were raised, along with a heavy-artillery division and a 645-man battalion. Two light-artillery

⁸⁰ Dmitrev, "Sozdanie", p. 66. S. I. Gusev, one of the Red Army's top commanders, put the proportion of units formed at the fronts at about two-thirds: S. I. Gusev, *Grazhdanskaia voina i krasnaia armia* [The Civil War and the Red Army] (Moscow, 1958), p. 81.

⁸¹ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 89, 111-15.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-2.

⁸³ On the relationship between the peasants' fear of the Whites and their willingness to join the Red Army, see the military reports in TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 449, l. 24. See also Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 28-9; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, p. 275; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 176-83, 314.

divisions were also reinforced.⁸⁴ Of course, it was common for mobilizations at the front to be done in a hurry, with the use of coercion. During May 1919 units of the 8th and 13th Armies in the Donbass region carried out forcible mobilizations at the Bakhmut coal-mines by occupying the pits and simply rounding up at gunpoint all the miners under the age of forty. When the Bakhmut authorities complained to the Defence Council in Moscow that this would bring coal production to a halt, Lenin wrote back defending the actions of the army as a necessary evil in time of civil war.⁸⁵

III

PROBLEMS OF SUPPLY AND DISCIPLINE

A bad-tempered Trotsky told a conference of Red Army political workers in December 1919:

We have mobilized millions, but our bayonets are numbered in hundreds of thousands. Somehow, an enormous number of soldiers have slipped through our fingers! . . . the expenditure of material that takes place in the army goes beyond our resources. The figures of the indents made by the Central Supply Administration or the Central Army Procurement Department are fantastic: tens of millions of pairs of underwear, many millions of overcoats, boots — for example, three or four pairs of boots per year per man! . . . Comrades, I don't want to frighten you, but I do want to say that, although we have not been brought down by Denikin or Kolchak, we may yet be brought down by overcoats or boots.⁸⁶

The problem underlying Trotsky's observation was quite simple. The Red Army was growing too quickly — and losing too many deserters — for the Soviet economic system to support it. The problem went back to the winter of 1918-19, when the proliferation of the civil war on a national scale and the move towards mass conscription had coincided with — and directly contributed to — the almost complete collapse of the Soviet economy. The occupation at that time of the Ukraine, the Caucasus and the Urals by anti-Bolshevik forces, together with the blockade of the Baltic, the Black and the Caspian Seas by Allied and White naval forces, deprived the Soviet Republic of vital food and fuel supplies. Industrial discipline and production fell sharply in the hungry north, as workers flooded into the countryside in search of food, and factories closed down for want

⁸⁴ *Sbornik vospominanii neposredstvennykh uchastnikov grazhdanskoi voiny* [A Collection of Reminiscences by Direct Participants in the Civil War], ii (Moscow, 1922), pp. 129-33.

⁸⁵ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, ll. 33-4, 50. See similarly f. 130, op. 3, d. 422, l. 183.

⁸⁶ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 108-9.

of fuel and raw materials. The transport system came to a virtual halt — or rather ceased to work for the state, becoming instead the main artery of the black-market network through which most Russians supported themselves during the civil war. Without the industrial base, the distribution system or indeed the political infrastructure to organize a stable market-based system of state relations with the peasantry, the Bolsheviks used increasing levels of coercion in order to obtain the peasant foodstuffs and recruits necessary for their civil war campaign. Yet, even by making production for the Red Army a top priority, they were unable to supply the millions of conscripts with adequate foodstuffs, uniforms, boots, weapons, transport, medical services and all the other paraphernalia of war. Supply and distribution — rather than production itself — lay at the heart of the problem. The devaluation of money and the rampant inflation of industrial prices resulted in the peasants reducing their food sales to the state and entering the black market, where exchange and barter with the townsmen proved more profitable. Thus the Bolsheviks were constantly faced with the problem of getting adequate stocks of food not only to the Red Army, but also to those workers in munitions and other state industries essential for the supply of basic military goods. The difficulties of transport in fuel-deprived Soviet Russia, especially during the winter and spring, when the climate became an added factor, exacerbated the distribution problem, as did the disorganization and voracious corruption of Soviet supply officials. Given these obstacles it was, as Trotsky detected, becoming an almost Sisyphean task to supply an army in which for every active fighter there were ten inactive men, and perhaps another five or so who had already deserted (taking with them, of course, their gun and their army coat).

The military reports on the supply situation received by the Defence Council during 1919-20 showed that virtually every division in the Red Army had at least some units with shortages of food, fodder, uniforms, footwear, weapons and bedding, or other goods of lesser importance, such as soap, tobacco, sugar and salt. It was not long before the Red Army ration set in February 1919 (0.4 kg. of bread per day) was recalled by the average soldier as only a distant fantasy.⁸⁷ Some unfortunate units, having advanced too far and been cut off

⁸⁷ The Red Army ration is detailed in *Izvestiia Narodnogo Kommissariata po Voennym Delam*, no. 36, 20 Feb. 1919, p. 4. The ration in the imperial army during the First World War was lowered to this level only at the end of 1916; it contributed to the mutiny of the Petrograd garrison during the February revolution of 1917.

from their supply stations, were forced to go several days, and sometimes even weeks, without food, during which time some men inevitably starved.⁸⁸ Horses died or simply fell from exhaustion in all parts of the army throughout the civil war, partly because of disease, but much more often because of simple shortages of fodder.⁸⁹ The supply of uniforms was so bad — with 60 per cent, and even up to 90 per cent, of the men in some units going without one — that fights often broke out between the soldiers, especially during the winter, when the possession of a warm army coat could make the difference between life and death. Thousands of Red Army men fell ill, or died from the cold, during the harsh winter of 1919-20.⁹⁰ The supply of shoes was not such a serious problem, if only because most infantrymen wore bast shoes, which were easily fabricated by local peasant craftsmen.⁹¹ But lack of adequate footwear was sometimes known to prevent whole units leaving the confines of their barracks.⁹²

By all accounts, the outward appearance of the Red Army units was ragged.⁹³ Even Lenin was taken aback by the model troops taking part in the Red Square parade on the first anniversary of the October revolution. “Look at them, how they march”, he was heard to say, “like bags of sand”.⁹⁴ As for the supply of weapons, once Tsarist stocks ran out in 1919, Soviet production — especially of rifle ammunition — fell increasingly behind demand.⁹⁵ In May 1919, as his eastern and southern fronts collapsed, I. I. Vatsetis, Main Commander-in-Chief, reported to the Defence Council that the supply of ammunition was heading for “catastrophe”. While the army was firing between seventy and ninety million rounds a month, the main arsenal at Tula was producing only twenty million. Moreover important armaments factories on the eastern front (for example, Votkinsk, Izhevsk and Lugansk) had recently been captured by the Whites.⁹⁶ Trotsky was to look back on this period as a critical crisis,

⁸⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 192, l. 30; d. 414, ll. 109-13; d. 422, ll. 184, 202; d. 443, l. 4; Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv narodnogo khoziaistva, Moscow (hereafter TsGANKh), f. 3429, op. 1, d. 1487, ll. 33, 121. For a general report on food supply conditions in the Red Army at the end of 1920, see TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 1586, ll. 8 ff.

⁸⁹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, ll. 109-13.

⁹⁰ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, ll. 109-13; d. 436, l. 9.

⁹¹ On the supply of bast shoes and other products to the Red Army by peasant craftsmen, see Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 293.

⁹² TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 1487, l. 88.

⁹³ White, *Growth of the Red Army*, pp. 115-17.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁹⁵ Mawdsley, *Russian Civil War*, pp. 183-4.

⁹⁶ *Direktivny glavnogo komandovaniia krasnoi armii (1917-1920): sbornik dokumentov* [Directives of the High Command of the Red Army (1917-1920): A Collection of Documents] (Moscow, 1969), p. 320; *Velikii oktiabr’*, p. 136.

when "every one of a soldier's stock of cartridges counted . . . and when a delay in the arrival of a special train bringing ammunition resulted in whole divisions retreating".⁹⁷

Another major problem for the Red Army was the spread of epidemics. More people died in the civil war from disease than from battle.⁹⁸ Typhus, influenza, smallpox, cholera, typhoid and venereal diseases were the main killers, but many more men suffered from various skin rashes, stomach bugs, dysentery and toothache. On average, perhaps about 10-15 per cent of the men in a given unit would be ill on any one day. But it was not unusual for a unit to be taken out of operation by rates of illness of up to 80 per cent.⁹⁹ The inadequacy of medical checks on new recruits meant that many brought illnesses with them into the army.¹⁰⁰ But the real cause of the problem lay elsewhere: first, in the unhygienic conditions of an army where soap was a rarity, and the men were known to be on the move without washing for several weeks on end; and secondly, in the chronic shortages of doctors, nurses, hospital space, transport facilities for the sick and wounded, medicines, alcohol, bandages, antiseptic, food and so on.¹⁰¹ Part of the problem was that the rapid to-and-fro movements of the civil war fronts made it impossible to set up proper field hospitals and dressing stations with good transport connections to the rear. In these circumstances — which were all too common (especially in the Ukraine) — the sick and wounded could neither be swiftly evacuated, nor properly cared for at the front.¹⁰² Trotsky complained bitterly in June 1919 about the poor treatment received by wounded Red Army men on the southern front:

Transports arrived by rail at Liski station containing wounded men who were in a frightful condition. The trucks were without bedding. Many of the men lay, wounded and sick, without clothes, dressed only in their underwear, which had long remained unchanged: many of them were

⁹⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 13.

⁹⁸ For a brief survey of the published figures, see Mawdsley, *Russian Civil War*, pp. 285-6.

⁹⁹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 192, ll. 3, 5; d. 347, ll. 47, 122, 149, 209, 253, 332; d. 414, l. 114; d. 105, l. 21; d. 436, l. 15; TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 1487, l. 151; *Izvestiia Narodnogo Kommissariata po Voennym Delam*, no. 8, 14 Jan. 1919, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 167.

¹⁰¹ On such matters, see particularly TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, l. 114; d. 192, l. 5; d. 436, l. 8; f. 5451, op. 3, d. 78, l. 7; G. S. Pukhov, "Stroitel'stvo krasnoi armii v Petrograde i okruze" [The Development of the Red Army in Petrograd and its District], *Krasnaia letopis'* (1929), no. 6 (33), p. 95.

¹⁰² *Izvestiia Narodnogo Kommissariata po Voennym Delam*, no. 175, 12 Aug. 1919, p. 1; *ibid.*, no. 192, 3 Sept. 1919, p. 1.

infectious. There were no medical personnel, no nurses and nobody in charge of the trains. One of the trains, containing over 400 wounded and sick Red Army men, stood in the station from early morning until evening, without the men being given anything to eat. It is hard to imagine anything more criminal and shameful!¹⁰³

Trotsky blamed bad management and red tape for the problem. But there was in fact a policy, at least from November 1919, of deliberately *not* evacuating those with infectious diseases, and of forbidding passenger transport into the infected front-line zones, for fear of spreading the diseases to the civilian rear.¹⁰⁴ It was this policy, above all, that was to blame for the overcrowding in hospitals near the civil war fronts, and the truly horrific scenes of sick and wounded men sitting for days on end, without food or attention, in unheated third-class carriages at God-forsaken railway stations.

The problems of supplying the army from stores in the rear encouraged many units to supply themselves from local army depots, civilian institutions and, indeed, the population itself. Virtually every army unit was forced to practise “self-feeding” at some point in its life, especially when it was cut off from the main supply base because it had advanced into enemy — or inaccessible — terrain. The Caucasus Army Group, for example, having advanced deep into the northern Caucasus (hundreds of miles from its supply base at Tsaritsyn) during the winter of 1919-20, had little choice but to feed itself from the local population; between 71 per cent (in the case of millet) and 97 per cent (vegetables) of its food was supplied in this fashion between October 1919 and March 1920.¹⁰⁵ In parts of the Ukraine, where much of the Red Army’s fighting was done by peasant-guerrilla units (such as Makhno’s) without a supply base at all, self-feeding remained the norm throughout the civil war.¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere, it was often no more than the sheer incompetence and corruption of the Soviet officials running the army supply system that forced the units to feed themselves from local resources. Trotsky, whose impatience with the “criminal red-tape-ism of the army supply organs” was notorious, advocated legalizing independent procurements by the local Red Army units — and even private trade! — in the struggle to overcome

¹⁰³ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, p. 298.

¹⁰⁴ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 347, ll. 35, 84, 110. It was the Main Military-Sanitary Administration that, in November 1919, passed the resolution “categorically forbidding the evacuation from the front to the rear of anyone infected with contagious diseases, with the exception of the Turkestan front”. Those from the latter were to be evacuated only as far west as Syzran’, Simbirsk or Kazan’.

¹⁰⁵ Bubnov, *Grazhdanskaia voina, partiia i voennoe delo*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁶ M. Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War* (London, 1982), p. 99.

shortages. This was a far cry from his views on strict centralization, which he applied in all other areas of military organization.¹⁰⁷

As in the White Army (and no doubt every army since time began), the practice of independent procurements often broke down into looting, uncontrolled requisitioning, and conflict between Red Army units. It was not uncommon for the latter to carry around with them their own supplies (and sometimes their families too) in long lines of carts, for fear of being left without them. Sometimes the units occupied local factories and farms in order to control the production of basic goods.¹⁰⁸ This inevitably antagonized the local Soviet organs of power, as did the Red Army's seizure of foodstuffs from railway stations, government granaries and food collection points under the control of Narkomprod (the People's Commissariat of Food Supply). Hundreds of local provisions committees complained to the central authorities during the autumn and winter of 1918-19 that Red Army units interfered in their work, redirecting foodstuffs from the civilian sector to the military.¹⁰⁹ Even greater friction was caused when the Red Army resorted to requisitioning directly from the civilian population itself, as they all too frequently did, for this often broke down into violence and robbery. Although the Red Army probably managed to maintain a better record on this issue than the Whites,¹¹⁰ its rank-and-file soldiers frequently became involved in violent looting, especially when passing through non-Russian (particularly Jewish) areas. The Red Army, it is important to bear in mind, was predominantly Russian in its ethnic composition. Even units conscripted in the Ukraine and other non-Russian regions (for example, the Tatar Republic) were largely made up of Russians.¹¹¹ Anti-Semitism was a powerful and growing force in the Red Army during the civil war, despite the fact that a Jew, Lev Davidovich Trotsky

¹⁰⁷ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 72-4 (July 1919).

¹⁰⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 2, d. 743, l. 118; op. 3, d. 192, l. 34; TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 857, ll. 63-4; d. 1245, l. 27; d. 1485, l. 450; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 13. It may be that such practices owed something to the traditions of the imperial army before 1914, when the soldiers were made largely responsible for their own upkeep. Sometimes organized into regimental artels, they spent much of their time in economic activities: J. Bushnell, *Mutiny and Repression: Russian Soldiers in the Revolution of 1905-06* (Indiana, 1985), pp. 11-15. During the civil war, Red Army units were deployed for specific economic tasks, such as harvest work, timber-felling or road-repairs.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, TsGANKh, f. 1943, op. 1, d. 448, l. 87; d. 223, ll. 113, 223, 224, 273, 351; d. 513, ll. 99, 242; op. 4, d. 116, l. 82.

¹¹⁰ See D. V. Lehovich, *White against Red: The Life of General Anton Denikin* (New York, 1974), pp. 325-7.

¹¹¹ Gorlov, "O sotsial'noi strukture krasnoi armii", p. 57.

(Bronstein), stood at its political head. Trotsky received hundreds of reports about his own soldiers' violence and looting in Jewish-Ukrainian settlements, some of which he must have known from his youth.¹¹² Mass murders and robberies of the civilian population were also carried out by the Red Army in Bashkir regions during March 1919, partly as a result of antagonisms between the Russian regulars and Bashkir volunteer units allied to the Reds.¹¹³

Within the Red Army itself, the poor and irregular supply of foodstuffs and goods resulted in the frequent breakdown of discipline. Drunkenness was perhaps the most common — one might say universal — form of indiscipline, along with card-playing and generally rowdy behaviour. As the Red Army pushed southwards into the Ukraine during the autumn and winter of 1919, one of Trotsky's main anxieties was that this was a region "well-stocked with alcohol in all its forms, and we may take a heavy fall as a result of that".¹¹⁴ Soldiers found drinking were ordered to be shot in a number of Red Army units on the southern front during this campaign.¹¹⁵ The other really major problem — the refusal of units to carry out orders, or to recognize the authority of officers appointed by Moscow — was also broadly associated with the Red Army's advance into the Ukraine, where the authority of the Soviet regime (or any state authority) was almost non-existent, and guerrilla-style warfare by partisan brigades still predominated. Several top commanders blamed the reverses suffered by the Red Army in the Ukraine during the spring and early summer of 1919 on the influence of anarchist elements (for example Makhno), whose agitation among the rank-and-file soldiers, calling on them to obey only their elected officers and to return to the principles of army democracy embodied in the soldiers' committees of 1917, was said to have undermined all military discipline. Daily reports were received about soldiers demanding leave and better provisions; refusing to take up positions; lapsing into banditry and looting; killing army officers, Jews and Communists; and deserting in whole units to the rear. Some units were also said to have called for Ukrainian independence.¹¹⁶

¹¹² TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 192, ll. 26-35; d. 422, ll. 256, 267; d. 436, l. 12; d. 449, ll. 118-19, 142, 143, 180.

¹¹³ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 184, ll. 37-8, 72, 76. On the alliance between the Bashkir forces and the Red Army, see further R. Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 162-3.

¹¹⁴ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, p. 113. In so far as the Whites occupied the alcohol-rich regions for most of the civil war, it is logical to assume that they suffered more than the Reds from this problem.

¹¹⁵ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, l. 117; d. 422, l. 267.

¹¹⁶ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 192, ll. 27-30; d. 422, ll. 164, 267; d. 449, l. 139.

(cont. on p. 197)

But such indiscipline was not limited to the Ukraine. Virtually every Red Army division had units to report where the men had refused to carry out orders, or had threatened not to fight until promised leave or better conditions. Some reported cases where the men had protested against taking in new recruits and prisoners, because of the added burden on food supplies that this would entail.¹¹⁷ It was commonplace for officers and administrative staff to receive threats — and become the victims — of physical violence from the rank-and-file soldiers, especially if they were suspected (often with justification) of corruption in handling army supplies and wages; or if they were simply seen to be too well dressed, fed and supplied with vodka and women; or if — indeed, worst of all — they were accused of restoring the disciplinarianism of the old imperial army, authorizing capital and other physical punishments for soldiers failing to carry out orders. It was often said — though not proved — that the “Tsarist officers” appointed by Trotsky from the imperial staff were particularly mistrusted by the soldiers because of their upper-class origins and alleged record of treason.¹¹⁸

Soldiers’ uprisings were also widespread, most of them sparked by material shortages, official corruption or some punishment popularly deemed by the soldiers as unjust. These uprisings usually culminated in the occupation of the military headquarters, the arrest or murder of the officers and commissars, and the election of new commanders. But some spread into the civilian sector, often on account of rumours — many of them no doubt true — that the Soviet organs had held up military supplies or provisions for soldiers’ families. Army

(n. 116 cont.)

Trotsky agreed that “guerrilla-ism” had been largely to blame for the collapse of the Ukrainian front, perhaps because it suited his arguments for strict military centralization against the demands of the Military Opposition for looser partisan units: Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 109-10, 308, 323.

¹¹⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 105, ll. 207-8; d. 422, ll. 34, 43, 59, 61, 208; d. 449, l. 97; d. 192, ll. 26-7, 34.

¹¹⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, ll. 17-21, 105-6; d. 422, ll. 11, 20, 31, 43, 191; d. 525, l. 27; f. 4085, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 25-6, 63-4; TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 857, ll. 57-8. See also Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 113, 116. On the soldiers’ attitudes towards “Tsarist officers”, see *ibid.*, p. 140; Benvenuti, *Bolsheviks*, pp. 37, 66-70; White, *Growth of the Red Army*, pp. 50-3, 60-1. In fact there is evidence to suggest that the “Tsarist officers” were less likely than “Red officers” or others (e.g. former N.C.O.s and untrained officers) to desert to the enemy or commit a criminal offence (such as theft of military stores). Between 3 August and 12 November 1919 there were sixty reported cases of desertion to the enemy and sixty reported cases of flight from battle by former (“Tsarist”) officers, compared with 373 reported cases of desertion to the enemy and 416 reported cases of flight from battle by “Red” or other officers: TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 453, ll. 2-46.

depots were seized and ransacked, or the local town occupied, where shops and stores were usually looted and Communist officials arrested or shot. In some towns, especially where a garrison was situated, the soldiers installed in power a new soviet dominated by soldiers' delegates.¹¹⁹

Even where the officers retained enough authority to march their men into battle, they could do little to prevent them from running away as soon as the first shots were fired. The Red Army, in more or less any battle, was likely to lose more soldiers through panic desertions than actual fighting: of the 294,000 "lost" by the Reds between February and April 1920, for example, only 20,000 were killed or wounded.¹²⁰ On several occasions during 1918-19, Trotsky had cause to complain about the ways in which Red Army operational reports were written to "conceal and cover up one's failures and exaggerate one's successes":

When our units capture some locality, this never happens, if the reports are to be believed, otherwise than after a fierce battle. Yet this "battle" is, more often than not, an affair of aimless and fruitless shooting, that is, of squandering of cartridges and shells . . . When our units retreat, this happens, if one is to believe these same reports, only as a result of the onslaught of superior enemy forces and, again, never without a battle. Yet what is often hidden under these phrases is the sad reality of a panicky abandonment of their positions by large units at the sight of isolated mounted patrols, or even just under the influence of panic and provocation rumours about the enemy's approach.¹²¹

All this is reminiscent of Jaroslav Hasek's Schweikian hero, Gashek, the *Red Commissar* in the Bugulma stories. When the Whites break through his unit's lines on the River Ik and attack from the right, he orders his troops to retreat to the left, and sends a telegram to military headquarters: "Great victory. Positions on the river Ik broken through. We are attacking from all directions. Cavalry in enemy's rear. Heaps of prisoners".¹²²

IV DESERTION

The problems of supply and discipline were largely to blame for the astronomical rates of desertion from the Red Army during 1919-20.

¹¹⁹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 184, l. 4; d. 422, ll. 4, 31, 107, 247; d. 414, l. 25; op. 2, d. 631, ll. 4, 6, 8, 13-14, 32, 38, 42-3; d. 648, ll. 1, 7, 8, 12; d. 751, l. 99.

¹²⁰ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 225.

¹²¹ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 287, 288; see also *ibid.*, i, p. 483.

¹²² J. Hasek, *The Red Commissar*, trans. C. Parrott (London, 1983), p. 23.

Table 4 shows that from June 1919 to June 1920 as many as 2,638,000 deserters were registered by the Central Committee for Struggle against Desertion (*Ts.K. po bor'be s dezertirstvom*) and its local organs, upon whose figures the table is based. (See Table 4.) During the same period, the overall size of the Red Army grew from about 1,900,000 to 4,600,000 — an increase of 2,700,000.¹²³ In other words, the Red Army was losing through desertion as many men as it was successfully recruiting. If we add the best available estimates for the number of deserters from the summer of 1918 to the summer of 1919 (576,000), and for the latter half of 1920 (500,000), then we arrive at a rough figure for the whole of the civil war period of 3,714,000.¹²⁴ The number of unregistered deserters is anyone's guess — perhaps something in the region of one million.

Most of the deserters in Table 4 were registered as “weak-willed” (*po slabosti voli*), meaning they had gone missing for less than fourteen days, or had turned up after fourteen days with a “reasonable excuse”. “Malicious” (*zlostnye*) deserters were deemed to be those who had gone for more than fourteen days; run away with Red Army property; deliberately concealed themselves at the time of the call-up; resisted arrest; or deserted more than once.¹²⁵

A common form of “hidden desertion” by the “weak-willed” in the rear was to find a job in a Soviet institution, or in some essential sector of the economy (such as the railways or timber-felling) where, on account of the shortage of manpower, it was in the interests of their employer to apply on their behalf to the relevant authorities for an exemption from military service.¹²⁶ However, the majority in this category were registered as “deserters” simply because they had failed to turn up on time at the recruiting station. Sometimes this was for no other reason than the late arrival of the army's conscription apparatus (that is agitators, copies of instructions and decrees, and so on). S. Olikov, the major authority on desertion from the Red Army, who had first-hand experience of dealing with it, knew of whole districts during the civil war where even the representatives of the Soviet regime knew nothing of the mobilization orders.¹²⁷ Many of these “deserters” did eventually appear at the recruiting station,

¹²³ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 101, 229.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 33.

¹²⁵ Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 27; Molodtsygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, p. 138.

¹²⁶ TsGANKh, f. 3429, op. 1, d. 529, l. 10; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 76; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 127, 199; Figes, *Peasant Russia*, p. 311.

¹²⁷ Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 38, 82.

TABLE 4
DESERTION FROM THE RED ARMY 1919-1920*

	Total	Malicious	Registered deserters (in thousands)			Caught in raids	Caught on railways	Caught elsewhere
			Weak-willed	From units in military districts ^a	Surrendered voluntarily			
1919								
June	200	8	192	—	156	31	3	10
July	266	4	262	17 ^(c)	205	54	2	5
August	284	14	270	40	188	78	6	12
September	262	18	244	13 ^(c)	155	90	10	7
October	191	13	178	14 ^(c)	91	78	7	15
November	170	8	162	30	93	64	6	7
December	172	30	142	12 ^(b)	87	61	6	8
1920								
January	175	25	150	35	101	60	6	8
February	137	21	116	19 ^(b)	62	54	4	17
March	188	30	158	22 ^(b)	88	70	9	21
April	129	22	107	48	42	61	8	18
May	214	35	179	33 ^(b)	108	78	11	17
June	250	30	220	28 ^(b)	155	58	11	26
Total	2,638	258	2,380	—	1,531	837	89	181
(13 months)								

* Notes and source: Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii. Moscow, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198, ll. 17-18, 26, 33, 36, 42, 60, 63, 70, 72, 100-1, 105-6, 115, 125-6; op. 4, d. 281, ll. 5, 10, 16-17, 21-2, 24, 26, 30, 32, 42-3, 50-1, 56-7; Movchin, *Komplektovanié*, p. 133.

^(a) Figures incomplete

^(b) Figures for first half of month only

^(c) Figures for second half of month only

some of them calling themselves “volunteers”.¹²⁸ This explains the large number of deserters registered in Table 4 as having surrendered voluntarily to the authorities.

The primary motivation of these deserters was economic. Some just wanted a temporary escape from the appalling conditions of army life. Others went off for a few days to provide for their families, most of whom had never received the welfare benefits (state pensions, food and clothing rations, and agricultural assistance) promised to them by the government during the recruitment campaigns.¹²⁹ But there were probably just as many cases of soldiers running away to get food from the local villages, especially when their army rations failed to come through. A good pair of army boots and a rifle, or a winter coat, could usually buy enough bread for a dozen or so hungry men.¹³⁰ In the autumn, large numbers of Red Army men without a warm coat ran off to get one for the winter campaign.¹³¹ But the level of temporary desertions reached its peak in the summer, when the peasant soldiers returned to their farms for the agricultural season.¹³² (See Table 4.) This seasonal variation was obviously most pronounced in the central agricultural region (mainly contained in the military district of Orel), where the weekly number of registered deserters from July to September (between twenty thousand and forty thousand) was up to ten times higher than the corresponding figures for October to December (two thousand to seven thousand). In the semi-industrial military district of Moscow, by contrast, the weekly summer figures (five thousand to twenty-four thousand) were only slightly higher, overall, than the weekly figures for October to December (nine thousand to twelve thousand).¹³³

The tendency of soldiers to desert during the harvest season posed one of the major problems of constructing a national army out of peasant conscripts. During the early phases of the civil war, when most of the fighting was done on a local basis, the Red Army partisan brigades had managed to retain close ties with the villages: the latter fed and equipped their own soldiers, who returned home between

¹²⁸ TsGAOR, f. 5451, op. 3, d. 113, l. 8; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 84.

¹²⁹ Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 318-19.

¹³⁰ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198, l. 113; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, iii, p. 18. In the cities deserters from the Red Army were known to sell forged ration cards: TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 4, d. 281, l. 12.

¹³¹ Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 29.

¹³² TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 422, ll. 22, 59; op. 3, d. 198, l. 35; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 51.

¹³³ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198, ll. 18, 26, 33, 36, 42, 72, 101, 106, 115, 126.

military campaigns. The spread of the civil war, and consequently the reorganization of the Red Army on a national scale, threatened these ties, since the peasant conscript was likely to be sent off to fight a long way from his village. Indeed it became a matter of deliberate policy, as part of the struggle against desertion, to send recruits as far away as possible from their native region.¹³⁴ Hence many desertions took place from the military units in transit from their place of formation in the rear to the armies at the front (one source estimated that the figure accounted for 18 to 20 per cent of all desertions).¹³⁵ According to a survey by the Moscow military authorities in 1919, 23 per cent of deserters questioned had run away because their unit was due to go to the front, while 44 per cent had deserted because their unit was close to — or passing by — their home village.¹³⁶ The number of soldiers lost from any one echelon *en route* to the front varied, on average, between 10 and 20 per cent, but at times the figure crept up to 50 per cent, 70 per cent and sometimes even higher, if the men were badly fed and supervised during the journey.¹³⁷

Fewer soldiers deserted from the front-line units — a number, in all, representing perhaps 5 to 7 per cent of the total number of desertions from the Red Army.¹³⁸ Some came under the category of “malicious” deserters, since they would not return voluntarily to the ranks, and if arrested, were likely to run off again, perhaps joining one of the many “Green” bands which roamed the woods, living from banditry.¹³⁹ Panic flight from the battlefield to the rear or (less likely) to the enemy probably accounted for the majority of those deserting from the front-line units, especially during a general retreat. “The natives of districts being abandoned”, explained one of the Red Army’s top commanders, “desert in order to remain near their homes. Thus, during an offensive the advancing party is continuously strengthened, while the retreating party is continuously weakened”.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ For figures on the location of army recruits relative to their place of birth, see Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 246.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³⁶ Molodttsygin, *Raboche-krest'ianskii soiuz*, p. 141.

¹³⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 184, l. 34; d. 198, ll. 16, 22, 24, 38, 103-4, 124; d. 199, ll. 28-9; d. 422, l. 21; op. 4, d. 281, ll. 29, 65; d. 282, ll. 19-21; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 30-1; White, *Growth of the Red Army*, p. 102; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 117.

¹³⁸ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 124.

¹³⁹ In all, fifty thousand Red Army deserters were said to have deserted more than once between June 1919 and June 1920: *ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ M. N. Tukhachevskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* [Collected Works], i (Moscow, 1964), pp. 41-2.

One of the main causes of desertion from the front-line units — in the White as well as the Red Army — was the poor training and preparation given to reinforcements before being despatched to the front.¹⁴¹ The lack of facilities and personnel to organize military training in the rear, and the constant demand for reinforcements, meant that units were sent to the front often with no more than a few days training (and increasingly without any training at all).¹⁴² By the summer of 1919, only 800,000 recruits had been trained out of a total Red Army force of 2,177,000 (37 per cent). Thereafter spiralling desertion and demands for reinforcements dashed all hopes of a fully trained army.¹⁴³

In political terms, most of the reinforcements were also poorly equipped. Few had anything but the dimmest notion of why — and whom — they were fighting. There was little party agitation in the units according to most reports, and what took place was all too quickly broken down into free-for-all meetings (*mitingovanie*), at which it was common to hear soldiers reject outright the authority of officers and political commissars, in the revolutionary spirit of the early partisan detachments.¹⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, the front-line units could be severely weakened by such reinforcements, especially if the latter were taken from regions close to the front, where the peasantry was hostile to the military authorities. A good example was the 202nd Artillery Brigade of the 23rd Division (9th Army), at the core of which stood a Communist brigade and a number of volunteer workers. Having suffered heavy losses in August 1919, it was reinforced by local peasant conscripts from Saratov province, “most of whom were infected by Green elements [deserters]”. During a subsequent attack, two hundred of the peasant conscripts broke off from the main force, killed the political commissar of the brigade, and deserted to the enemy. The result was further losses, and a collapse in the morale of the rest of the troops, necessitating the break-up and reformation of the whole brigade.¹⁴⁵

Mass desertion from the Red Army was a direct expression of general peasant protest against the Bolsheviks. The struggle against desertion was the struggle to win the active support of the peasantry,

¹⁴¹ On the Whites, see Lehovich, *White against Red*, p. 358.

¹⁴² TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 184, ll. 4, 8-9; Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, p. 482, ii, p. 66; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 65, 111-15; White, *Growth of the Red Army*, p. 118.

¹⁴³ Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 64-5, 202.

¹⁴⁴ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 184, ll. 3, 6-7, 34.

¹⁴⁵ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 449, l. 68.

the silent majority of the Russian population. To wage that struggle by administrative means alone was obviously futile. Only a very small number of deserters — no doubt the most hardened, anti-Soviet types — were shot. (See Table 5.) Trotsky's infamous order of November 1918 to execute all deserters on the spot was a propaganda exercise at a time when there was no real apparatus to deal with the problem, and it was not — and never could have been — carried out: there were simply too many deserters to shoot.¹⁴⁶ By the same token, only the most dangerous from the category of "malicious" deserters were brought before the courts, sent into penal units (*shtrafnye chasty*) or imprisoned (the prospect of imprisonment, safe from the dangers of war, would have encouraged many more to desert!). The great majority of deserters (those registered as "weak-willed") were handed back to the military authorities, and formed into units for transfer to one of the rear armies or directly to the front. Even those registered as "malicious" deserters were returned to the ranks when the demand for reinforcements became desperate. On 20 August 1920 the general staff (*Vseroglavshtab*) ordered that only "the very worst of the malicious" deserters should be formally punished, while "as many as possible who could feasibly return to the army" should be put into reserve units.¹⁴⁷ The practice of returning deserters to their original unit — usually with a black arm-band sewn on to their uniforms to set them apart from the other soldiers — had been popular in 1919, but it was phased out at the beginning of 1920, since it antagonized the rest of the soldiers, who were known to beat up or even kill former deserters.¹⁴⁸

Equally unsuccessful were the purely punitive measures increasingly adopted by the military authorities, especially in areas close to the front: confiscating property and land allotments from anyone suspected of concealing deserters; taking as hostages the relatives or fellow-villagers of deserters; occupying the villages thought to be strongholds of deserters; imposing fines on them; shooting the village leaders; or even setting fire to the villages. Such measures rarely had the intended effect, since they were bound to strengthen the opposition of not only the deserters, but also the whole of the rural population. Wherever these measures were adopted, the "Greens" invariably grew in strength. They often united with the peasants, embittered by the grain requisitionings and other Bolshevik policies,

¹⁴⁶ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, i, pp. 487-8.

¹⁴⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 4, d. 282, l. 10.

¹⁴⁸ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 449, l. 68.

TABLE 5
MEASURES TAKEN AGAINST DESERTION FROM THE RED ARMY*

1919	Rejected deserters sent to				Rejected deserters sentenced by court				
	Own unit	Reserve unit	Voenkorm	Unit assigned to front	Court	To penal unit	To prison	To be shot	Conditionally
June	38,000	65,000	52,000	18,000	7,000	12,000	1,300	70	760
July	1,000	159,000	38,000	32,000	6,000	8,000	900	75	550
August	4,000	177,000	17,000	118,000	6,000	4,000	354	53	521
September	6,000	190,000	24,000	75,000	7,000	6,000	950	100	320
October	6,000	131,000	29,000	29,000	5,000	8,000	1,302	188	911
November	7,000	137,000	13,000	4,000	3,000	4,000	378	38	162
December	4,000	123,000	19,000	10,000	6,000	13,000	750	88	888
Total	66,000	982,000	192,000	286,000	40,000	55,000	5,934	612	4,112

* Source: Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 140, 146.

to turn their localities into “no-go” areas. Railways and lines of communication were destroyed, local Communists and Soviet officials were terrorized, and guerrilla attacks were launched on passing units of the Red Army.¹⁴⁹ Much more effective in the struggle against desertion was the introduction of a whole series of political and agitational measures. The establishment of Committees for the Struggle against Desertion at the *volost'* level — and their merger at all levels with the Voenkoms — brought the punitive power of the state closer to the rural strongholds of desertion.¹⁵⁰ Raids on Soviet institutions, railway stations, factories, timber-felling teams and other economic organs in competition with the army for manpower produced much the same effect, and flushed out thousands of hidden deserters.¹⁵¹ As the number of deserters surrendering voluntarily declined during 1919-20, the importance of such raids increased. (See Table 4.) Propaganda and other means of moral persuasion were also known to be effective, particularly the show-trials of captured deserters, and the encouragement of loyal Red Army soldiers to write home appealing to their fellow-villagers not to help deserters.¹⁵² But the most successful means of combatting desertion were the amnesty weeks, the biggest of which was called on 3-9 June 1919. As many as 98,000 deserters returned voluntarily to the Red Army during that week in the knowledge that no punitive measures would be taken against them. During the next week, while the amnesty was extended, the figure rose to 132,000.¹⁵³ It is from this moment that deserters began to return to the Red Army in massive waves. (See Table 4.)

The sharp increase in the number of deserters returning to the Red Army during the summer of 1919 was also explained by another factor — one which says a great deal about the nature of the civil war and why the Bolsheviks won it.

In May and June 1919 on the southern front the Red Army had been desperately short of recruits: the numbers lost daily through desertion, disease and battle far outstripped the number of reinforcements arriving at the front. On 6 July the Command of the Southern Front sent the last of a long series of urgent telegrams to Trotsky and

¹⁴⁹ Figes, *Peasant Russia*, pp. 319-20; Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 53, 61-2; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, p. 142. Detailed accounts of the property and fines exacted from villages are in TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198; op. 4, dd. 281, 282.

¹⁵⁰ Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 17-24.

¹⁵¹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 580, l. 21; op. 4, d. 281, ll. 12, 15, 57, 66-7; d. 282, l. 9; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 142-4.

¹⁵² Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, p. 59; TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 199, l. 12.

¹⁵³ Olikov, *Dezertirstvo*, pp. 27, 42.

Lenin demanding the immediate mobilization of several age groups (including 1901) in the military districts of Kharkov and Orel, situated immediately on the front. It was claimed that “four of our divisions are missing 80 per cent to 90 per cent of their men, horses and carts”.¹⁵⁴ These shortages were largely to blame for the White advance towards Moscow during June and July — prompting Lenin’s famous circular of 9 July, “All Out for the Fight against Denikin!”, in which he called for the Soviet Republic to be turned into a “single military camp”.¹⁵⁵ Yet it was precisely this threat of a White victory that galvanized thousands of peasants, previously registered as deserters, to return to the Red Army between July and September 1919. (See Table 4.) In fact, so many deserters returned during these months that a serious shortage of rifles and uniforms resulted.¹⁵⁶ The Command of the Southern Front dropped its demand for the mobilization of more recruits, and began to complain instead about chronic material shortages. A telegram to Lenin sent from Orel on 22 July complained that: “because of the enormous numbers of deserters returning to our ranks, all the reserve units of Orel province are completely overfilled . . . New recruits are arriving every day. The supply situation is critical. Bread shortages in Mtsensk have resulted in rebellions, with the soldiers breaking into private houses”.¹⁵⁷ Despite such problems, the massive influx of these former deserters gave the Red Army the numerical strength to launch a successful counter-offensive during the autumn and winter of 1919. Pushed south by the Reds, and constantly attacked in the rear by Makhno’s Ukrainian peasant guerrillas, Denikin’s army retreated deep into the Kuban, and finally fled for the Crimea, where in 1920 the Whites made their last stand under Wrangel.¹⁵⁸

Many of the deserters who returned to the Red Army during these months called themselves “volunteers”, ready to fight against the

¹⁵⁴ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, ll. 82, 89-90. Similar estimates of the situation on the southern front by the military command may be found in TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 525, ll. 118-19.

¹⁵⁵ Lenin, *Collected Works*, xxix, pp. 436-55. The importance of the Red Army’s “crisis of reinforcements” has been neglected by Western historians seeking to explain the Whites’ advance on the southern front during this period. See, for example, Mawdsley, *Russian Civil War*, pp. 166-77.

¹⁵⁶ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, ii, pp. 315, 361; Movchin, *Komplektovanie*, pp. 111, 122.

¹⁵⁷ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 529, l. 111.

¹⁵⁸ Again, the influx of former deserters into the Red Army during the summer of 1919 has been overlooked by Western historians seeking to explain the Bolshevik victory against Denikin. See, for example, Mawdsley, *Russian Civil War*, pp. 202-15; Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia*.

Whites in defence of the land gained from the gentry in 1917-18. This explains why so many of them came from the military districts of Orel and Moscow, the central agricultural regions of Russia, where the Whites had directed the brunt of their attack during the summer of 1919. No less than 230,000 deserters from these two districts alone returned to the Red Army during July and August — more than 40 per cent of the total for the whole of the Soviet Republic.¹⁵⁹ These were regions in which the peasantry had made substantial land gains from the gentry during the revolution. In Orel province, for example, the amount of land in peasant use had increased by 28 per cent between 1917-19, mainly as a result of the seizure of the private estates, which before the revolution had occupied 23.5 per cent of all the agricultural land in the province. In the five provinces of Moscow military district (Kaluga, Tula, Riazan', Tambov and Moscow) the amount of land in peasant use had increased by as much as 35 per cent since 1917. Before the revolution, private landowners had owned 28 per cent of all the agricultural land in these provinces.¹⁶⁰ The threat of a White victory signalled to the peasants of these regions the prospect of losing their newly acquired land to the gentry squires, whose sons dominated the officer corps of Denikin's army. Such fears were played on by the Bolsheviks, whose propaganda in the countryside presented the Red Army as the sole protector of the peasantry's land gains against the White gentry counter-revolution. The fact that so many peasants of central Russia rallied to the Red Army on the two occasions when the Whites really threatened Moscow — first on the Volga in 1918; and then in the Orel region in 1919 — suggests that such propaganda was not without effect. The defeat of the Whites was determined, above all, by their failure to win over the peasantry of central Russia, because of their opposition to the land redistribution of 1917-18. The victory of the Bolsheviks was assured by their ability to call on the peasants of these same regions whenever the Whites threatened to break through from their bases in the periphery. The central Russian peasants were bitterly opposed to the Bolshevik policies of War Communism, but the fact that they would take up arms in defence of Soviet power, when —

¹⁵⁹ TsGAOR, f. 130, op. 3, d. 198, ll. 18, 26, 33, 36.

¹⁶⁰ V. P. Danilov, "Pereraspredelenie zemel'nogo fonda Rossii v rezul'tate velikoi oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii" [The Redistribution of Russia's Land Fund as a Result of the October Revolution], in *Leninskii dekret o zemle v deistvii: sbornik statei* [The Application of Lenin's Decree on the Land: A Collection of Articles] (Moscow, 1979), pp. 284-7.

and only when — it was threatened by the Whites, proved decisive in determining the outcome of the civil war.

* * *

Of all the problems confronting the two civil war armies, the mass mobilization of the Russian peasantry proved the most difficult, and the most decisive in military terms. The support of the peasantry was essential to the conduct of all military campaigns in Russia. Any mass army would have to be made up largely of peasants. It would have to be fed and even transported by them. Yet the vast majority of the Russian peasantry, having consolidated its hold on the land and village affairs during 1917-18, proved reluctant to become involved in fighting a civil war, a "war between brothers". Neither the Whites nor the Reds had any real political authority in the countryside to secure the mass mobilization of the peasantry. The White leaders were too closely associated with the old landowning class to have any lasting influence over the peasantry. The Tsarist epaulettes worn by the White officers were associated by the peasants with the old regime and the discipline of the imperial army, both of which they had rejected in 1917. The Reds, on the other hand, lacked a reliable political or military infrastructure in the countryside. They also lacked the active support of the rural population, although, as we have seen, when the peasants sensed the imminent threat of a White victory, they would rally behind the Reds. The peasants' mistrust of the Bolsheviks, it would seem, was not as powerful, and certainly not as ingrained, as their hatred and fear of the old landed order.

The Red Army, with its hold over the densely populated agricultural regions of central Russia, succeeded in mobilizing more peasants than the Whites. In this fact, as Trotsky acknowledged, was rooted the cause of its victory during the civil war. Yet because the Red Army consisted mainly of peasants, it was more susceptible to the seasonal fluctuations of peasant life when compared with the White armies, which remained largely non-peasant in their composition. In the summer peak season of the agricultural year the Red Army suffered from high rates of desertion, as food stocks ran down and the peasant recruits ran off to their farms in preparation for the harvest. After the harvest, the Red Army suffered less from either problem. The food-supply situation improved and desertion declined. Indeed many peasants, having deserted from the Red Army before the harvest, voluntarily returned to it for the winter low season of the

agricultural year. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the Red Army tended to suffer its worst setbacks in the spring and early summer, but usually made advances in the period immediately following the harvest.

At the centre of the Red Army's "peasant problem" lay the issues of mass conscription, supply and desertion. The Bolsheviks' decision at the end of 1918 to go for an extensive system of mass mobilization created enormous problems of supply and training within the Red Army. Material conditions deteriorated, discipline broke down and desertion increased, so that untrained reinforcements had increasingly to be sent into the front-line units. The military system, in short, was being overloaded. Mass desertion was the inevitable outcome of an army growing too fast for the economy to supply it with all the necessary means. The large size of the army in turn dictated the need to maintain the system of War Communism. Large sectors of the economy had to be militarized in order to keep afloat an army full of holes.

The policy of mass mobilization was decided in the autumn of 1918. Lenin's call at that time for an army of three million men was a panic response to the threat of Allied intervention, a threat he almost certainly overestimated. But does this mean that the Red Army was larger than necessary, or that a smaller army would have been more effective as a fighting force? There is no doubt that the reliance of the Red Army on large numbers of peasant recruits, and the consequent problems of supply and training, made it much less effective than the White armies. To overcome the latter, the Red Army had to outnumber them in soldiers by at least four to one, and sometimes by as many as ten or even fifteen to one. It is logical to suppose that after the defeat of Kolchak, Iudenich and Denikin, at the beginning of 1920, the Red Army could have been reduced in size without posing a danger to defence interests. Such reductions might even have increased the Red Army's effectiveness. As A. Potiaev, a member of the Military Revolutionary Council of the Western Front, recommended to Lenin in a memo written on 18 December 1919: "In the interests of increasing the might and combat-fitness of the Red Army it is a thousand times more expedient to have no more than a million Red Army men in all, but well-fed, clothed and shod ones, rather than three million half-starved, half-naked, half-shod ones".¹⁶¹ In the autumn of 1918, however, when the White

¹⁶¹ *The Trotsky Papers*, ed. J. M. Meijer, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1964-71), i, p. 797

armies were growing in strength, and the threat of large-scale foreign intervention appeared imminent, the Bolsheviks probably had no real alternative to the mass mobilization of the peasantry, in spite of the far-reaching political and economic consequences which this policy was to have for the Red Army and the Soviet system.

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