

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 185

### “1919 – Russia III”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The year 1919 would be the decisive year in the Russian Civil War. The White armies would advance on Moscow and Petrograd, and the fate of the Revolution would hang in the balance.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 185. 1919 – Russia, part three.

This is the tenth episode in our 1919 World Tour—wow, ten already?—and the third in our series on Russia. In the previous episode, I brought you up to speed on the situation in Russia as of the beginning of 1919.

I also went ahead into the story of 1919 a little bit. I described for you the view of Russia from the Paris Peace Conference and William Bullitt’s March 1919 mission to Russia and his return with a peace offer from Lenin that the Allies rejected. We looked at the 1919 advance of the Red Army westward, in the wake of the retreating Germans. We saw the consequences of that advance for Poland and the Baltic States in the episodes on those countries and we saw some of the consequences of the Red Army advance for Ukraine last time. Today, I want to talk about the rest of the Civil War in 1919, particularly the fighting between the Red Army and the White movement. This year will be the decisive year for that conflict.

At the beginning of the year, the Whites are divided into three separate forces in three distant regions of the country. In the far north, around Murmansk and Archangel, is the Northern Force, commanded by Yevgeny Miller and built around an Allied force—mostly British and American—that had landed in the northern ports last summer.

Two thousand miles south, at the opposite end of the country, just north of the Caucasus and between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea are the forces of the Don Cossacks and the Volunteer Army, now united under the command of Anton Denikin as the Armed Forces of South Russia.

Between them and a couple thousand miles to the east lies the city of Omsk, seat of the Provisional All-Russian Government under Admiral Alexander Kolchak, officially the Supreme Leader of Russia. The Allies, particularly the British, want to support Kolchak and his government, within the limits of what was politically feasible at home. They hoped that maybe it was possible to overthrow Lenin on a budget.

Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Any way the wind blows...

In order to get and keep that foreign support, Kolchak and his supporters needed to look not just like a scrappy bunch of guerilla fighters but a persuasive alternative to the government in Moscow. And so, the regime in Omsk dressed itself up in the trappings of a modern government, with ministries and official committees, but it was mostly for show, like the sets on a stage. There was nothing behind them. Siberia was sparsely populated and in the old days before the war, it was a neglected region, a place where the Imperial government sent troublemakers, not talented administrators. Hence there was little in the way of an existing administrative apparatus that Omsk could take control over.

Kolchak might have gotten by with a rickety administration if he'd had more support out in rural Siberia, but the population was mostly sympathetic to the Socialist Revolutionaries, at least as far as we can tell from the voting for the Constituent Assembly, and they remembered well that it had been Kolchak who had overthrown the Socialist Revolutionaries, the very people Siberian voters had elected. As a result, the year 1919 saw numerous small left-wing revolts against Kolchak and his government across Siberia. It also saw Siberian separatist revolts in the Far East. Wait a minute, you might well say, who ever heard of Siberian separatists? Well, they were being encouraged, organized, and supplied by the Japanese through their occupation forces, a first step toward creating a Japanese sphere of influence in the Russian Far East, perhaps even an independent Siberian puppet state under Japanese control.

These various leftist and nationalist rebels in eastern Siberia were less of a problem for Kolchak and his government than they might have been, because they never seriously threatened the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was Kolchak's only link to the outside world, and especially to Allied aid.

Credit for keeping the railway open goes to the Czechoslovak Legion. I remember those guys! Hey, we haven't thought about them in quite a while. And I can tell you, that's exactly how *they* were feeling: as if no one has thought about them in quite a while. They had seized control of the railway last summer, mostly as an act of self-defense against Trotsky's orders that they be disarmed and forced into labor battalions. All they wanted was to go home. But here they were, because their control of the railway is now of vital strategic significance. The Allies leaned on

the new Czechoslovak government in Prague which in turn leaned on the commanders of the Legion to keep them in place, garrisoning what is now the principal supply line to the White regime in Omsk.

You can probably guess how the legionnaires themselves felt about this. They'd been POWs for years. Now the war was over and they wanted to return to their homeland and bask in its newly won independence. Instead, they were being told to hang on where they were, for the sake of someone else's war. They were lonely, miserable, and morale was in the basement. Nevertheless, they would hold the rail line and keep it open. For now. Interruptions would not be a problem. For now.

That was important because Allied aid was coming up that rail line all the way from Vladivostok. So were whatever civilian imports the White movement could get. But as we've noted before, the Trans-Siberian Railway is just too long and narrow to be an adequate supply line, even when it's well protected.

After the uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion last summer, the Commissar for Military Affairs, Leon Trotsky, ordered a crackdown on the Red Army intended to prevent further reversals. The secret police, the Cheka, organized field investigative units that would conduct trials and sometimes summary executions of soldiers and officers who retreated from combat without authorization. With this kind of encouragement behind them, the Red Army advanced east in the fall of 1918, taking Samara in October. You'll recall that had been the city where the rump Constituent Assembly had opened for business just a few months earlier. By the end of December, the Red Army had reached Ufa, the city where the two rebel governments had met and agreed to combine.

So Moscow and the Red Army were feeling pretty good about their prospects by this point. Everything seemed to be going to plan. But then the Whites surprised them by capturing the city of Perm, on the Red Army's left flank, at the northern end of the front. You may remember that friend of the podcast Sergei Diaghilev hailed from the Perm region, which I mentioned in episode 44. At that time I also described Perm as "on the threshold of Siberia." Looking at it from the other side, it was also "on the threshold of Great Russia."

For the optimists among the Whites, this seemed an opportunity to continue moving north and west all the way to Archangel, allowing them to link up with the White and Allied forces in the north and potentially even opening another route for Allied military aid. Perhaps it was the first step toward encircling Moscow itself.

But alas for White ambitions, that was overstating the significance of the victory. It put a scare into the Bolsheviks, though. They called this development the "Perm Catastrophe," and sent no less an investigative team than Joseph Stalin and Felix Dzerzhinsky to inquire as to what had gone wrong.

Ha. How would you like to be the soldier charged with explaining to Joseph Stalin and “Iron Felix” Dzerzhinsky, the head of the secret police, how it was that the Red Army lost Perm? Contrary to stereotype though, the conclusion they took back to Moscow was that the defeat was due to the Red Army’s exhaustion and lack of supplies and was an unfortunate anomaly, but not a sign of things to come.

They were right about that, but Kolchak was able to put at least one more scare into them in March when the Whites began a spring offensive in the center of the front line that pushed the Reds back, recaptured Ufa for the Whites, and brought them within spitting distance of the Volga River, significant because the Volga was potentially a transportation link to Denikin’s army to the south.

Then came the *rasputitsa*, the spring thaw that covers large stretches of Russia in oceans of mud. The *rasputitsa* forced military operations to a halt until the end of April, but afterward the momentum swung back to the Red side as they began pushing back the Whites once again.

Spring 1919 marks the high point for Kolchak and his forces. They controlled a vast area of Russia and had held it uncontested for some six months now. They fielded an army that now numbered over 100,000, the largest White force in Russia. They received thousands of machine guns, hundreds of thousands of rifles, and hundreds of millions of rounds of ammunition from the Allies, principally the British, but with substantial American and French contributions. Denikin’s forces received a comparable level of aid; I’ve seen estimates that overall the Allies supplied the Whites with maybe twice as many arms as what Russian factories produced for the Red Army that year.

Of course, it’s not only about arms. Kolchak’s force was outnumbered and they knew it. You can offset a disadvantage in numbers with better quality soldiers, but Kolchak did himself and his cause no favors by emphasizing the recruitment and training of a new generation of soldiers too young to have seen combat in the Great War. He didn’t trust veterans of the Great War. He worried that generation was already radicalized by the Bolsheviks. And so he passed over more experienced soldiers to recruit inexperienced youths.

Neither did Kolchak do himself or his cause any favors with his conservative policies. He kept insisting that his only goal was to undo the Bolshevik takeover and then allow Russians to decide their own political future peacefully and democratically. That sounded good in principle; in practice it meant that when the White forces advanced, they rolled back Bolshevik land reform in the areas they occupied, restoring the rights of the landed elites. The ordinary peasant folk of rural Russia quickly learned they had nothing to gain and everything to lose when the White Army appeared. Kolchak would not even tap the Imperial gold reserve that had fallen into his hands in order to finance the White war effort. He thought of himself as the custodian, not the owner, of that gold, and felt obligated to conserve it until after the war.

What do we make of Kolchak, then? The charitable interpretation is that he was strict and principled—maybe a little too strict and too principled for his own good. The uncharitable interpretation was that Kolchak was a closet monarchist who aspired to put a new Emperor on the throne and recreate the old autocracy. That was certainly how the Bolsheviks interpreted it, and their propaganda reflected that.

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, *Mlada*.]

In March 1919, Moscow hosted the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party. This meeting was significant because it saw the Party, under Lenin's guidance, revising and tweaking its policies to adjust to the realities of the civil war. One such tweak was a revision of rural policy that de-emphasized the class struggle in the rural regions, which is another way of saying they were trying to broaden their support among the peasants by ending attacks on all but the most prosperous among them, the kulaks, as a way of solidifying rural support at the same time the Whites were alienating the rural folk.

The Congress also approved the creation of the Third International. You'll recall I mentioned the First and Second Internationals back when we looked at the history of socialism in episode 18. Back in the days of the Belle Époque, socialism was understood to be international and pacifist. Many dared to hope that the socialist movement had grown strong enough to prevent a general war in Europe. But when the hammer fell and the chips were down and the balloon went up in July 1914, the socialist leaders of Europe were unable to mobilize the power of their movement to stop the war. Especially disappointing had been the German and French socialists. Germany's vaunted SPD, the largest single party in the Reichstag and the best organized and most successful socialist party in Europe, had voted in favor of the war. In France, Jaurès had been assassinated at the beginning of the war, and afterward the socialists had meekly joined the *union sacrée*.

Lenin had been bitterly disappointed by how the socialist parties had failed the biggest test in their history, and he had been castigating them for it ever since. Now he was going to do something about it, by creating a new international socialist movement, an explicitly revolutionary one that would carry the spirit of the new Russia out to the rest of the world. He would also draft 21 conditions that socialist parties would have to meet in order to qualify for membership. The Third International would also be known as the Communist International or Comintern for short.

The Party Congress also laid down the guidelines for how minority regions of the old Russian Empire could be brought back in...you know, after they had their own revolutions and we all become one big, happy, socialist family? The Party approved the idea of creating a federation of ethnic states from the old empire. These federated states would have a great deal of autonomy in the state structure, but they would be governed by communist parties that answered to party headquarters in Moscow. No independent communist party for you! And here we see the groundwork being laid for the future Soviet Union.

Lenin's government and the Red Army would be able to hold their own, more or less, against the White forces in the north and the east. The biggest threat to Moscow, both in the figurative and literal senses, would come from neither of those places, but from the south, and the armies of Anton Denikin.

When we last left Denikin, he and his forces were struggling in southern Russia. But over the winter of 1918-1919, with the Don Cossacks covering his northern flank, Denikin's command of about 25,000 soldiers struck out to the east from Ekaterinodar. They were far outnumbered by the Red armies in the region, but they had two advantages: an experienced corps of officers from the old Imperial Army and a large number of Cossack cavalry. Consequently, they were able to move quickly and strike in a coordinated way.

In January and February 1919, the most important cities in the region fell one by one to Denikin as he moved east toward the Caspian Sea. Stavropol. Pyatigorsk. Grozny. Kizlyar. Soon he was almost to the shores of the Caspian and the Red Army force standing against him, the Eleventh Army, was split in half and cut off. The Eleventh Army disintegrated. The routed Red troops on Denikin's left flank retreated north to join up with the Twelfth Army.

But the Twelfth Army was an undersized force. It was supplied from Astrakhan, the city that lies at the mouth of the Volga River where it empties into the Caspian. Astrakhan was the only city of any size in the region still controlled by the Reds but was itself too small and isolated to supply such a large force. The pursuing Whites quickly shredded the Twelfth Army as well.

Denikin's force had secured the entire south of Russia from the Black Sea to the Caspian and as far south as the newly independent states of the Caucasus. He had done it in ten weeks' fighting in winter weather, and most impressive of all, a force of about 25,000 had destroyed two armies, the equivalent of a front in Russian parlance, or an army group in Western military terms. The Whites took over 50,000 prisoners—double their own numbers—and substantial amounts of supplies and equipment.

For the communists, this was their biggest defeat of the war. Commissar for Military Affairs Leon Trotsky cabled the Red Army commander in Astrakhan and demanded to know, "How could this catastrophe happen so suddenly?" The answer was pretty simple. Moscow had neglected this region. Apart from isolation and supply issues, these two "armies," the Eleventh and the Twelfth, were more disorganized mobs of Red Guard leftovers, than real armies. Trotsky made sure to drive this point home to his fellow Bolsheviks, especially the ones, like Stalin, who still hewed to the view that a socialist state needed only workers' militias to protect itself and that building a new army in the image of the imperialist militaries was a suspiciously counterrevolutionary approach. He reported to Sovnarkom that "a swollen army, really a horde rather than an army, has clashed with Denikin's properly organized troops and in a few weeks has been reduced to dust. For the illusion of [a people's warfare,] we have once more paid a high price."

But while there were fissures in the leadership of the Red Army, that was nothing compared to the White Army. Denikin had incorporated many Cossacks into this Armed Forces of South Russia, and their cavalry skills were paying off. To the north, the Don Cossacks were shielding Denikin from the Red units farther north still, which bought Denikin the time and space he needed to win his victories. But it was an uneasy partnership. For the Cossacks, this was a nationalist struggle. The Don Cossack leader, Pyotr Krasnov, dreamed of allying with other Cossacks and perhaps with nationalist Ukrainians to win independence.

For White Army Russians like Denikin, the Cossacks were scrappy if undisciplined fighters, infected with a romantic but unrealistic nationalism. Russian officers in the Volunteer Army referred to them as *kazachki*, a word that's hard to translate. It's the diminutive of the Russian word for Cossack, and as such suggests both affection and condescension. I'm reminded of William Howard Taft calling the Filipinos "our little brown brothers."

To Denikin, this was a patriotic war for Russia, One and Indivisible, as the White slogan went. That also meant restarting the war against the Germans to take back what Germany had been handed by the traitor Bolsheviks. In that regard, Krasnov's doing a deal with the Germans for arms and support was just as treasonous as anything Lenin had done. Denikin reportedly said that "the Don [Cossack] Host is a prostitute, selling herself to whoever will pay." Krasnov tartly responded that "if the Don Host is a prostitute, then the Volunteer Army is a pimp living off her earnings."

But things changed once the war ended. The Germans weren't bailing out Krasnov anymore and the Allies weren't interested in taking up the slack. The Don Cossacks deposed him and chose a new leader more willing to work with Denikin. The end of the war also opened up the Black Sea to the British, who began supplying Denikin with large quantities of arms and ammunition, as well as about sixty tanks and over a hundred and fifty airplanes. British tank crews would operate the tanks and RAF pilots would fly the planes, the only British involvement in combat on this front.

The first British ship offloaded military supplies in March, but it was August before the bulk of the shipments arrived, and transporting them to the front was slow and laborious work. Still, from the beginning pictures of the arriving aid were circulated by the White leaders and did wonders for morale.

Once his position was secure, Denikin wanted to advance northeast to take another crack at Tsaritsyn. The Whites in south Russia and in Siberia were united on paper; a campaign up the Volga River might unite them in fact. By spring 1919, Denikin had close to 50,000 soldiers available to advance north. The Red Army had some 80,000 soldiers facing them, but like the armies Denikin had already defeated, organization, training, and equipment were minimal.

The Red Army spent the spring of 1919 conducting multiple offensives against Denikin's left flank from Ukraine, where it was also advancing to reclaim that country following the German

withdrawal. But the Red Army in Ukraine was overburdened. It was advancing west, attempting to secure Ukraine and attack the Romanians in Bessarabia. It was attacking east, attempting to push Denikin back. And it also had to hold the vast territory of a lawless and chaotic Ukraine against multiple local opposition forces. Those were three big missions, which turned out to be about three more than the Red Army in Ukraine was capable of undertaking.

But the Red Army in Ukraine was still the biggest threat to the Whites in south Russia, so here is where Denikin deployed his own forces, which were qualitatively superior. They were able to hold the line against the Red offensives, beating back attempts to capture Rostov, and then advanced toward Kharkov, a major population and industrial center and the second-largest city in Ukraine. Commissar Trotsky confidently issued a statement reassuring the citizens of Kharkov that there was no more chance of their city falling to the Whites than there was of the Whites taking Moscow. Less than a month later, the Armed Forces of South Russia marched into Kharkov.

The less effective Don Cossack Host took the center of the White line and advanced in parallel with Denikin as the Reds retreated. Over on the right flank, a White military commander named Pyotr Wrangel led a small detachment toward Tsaritsyn. The city held out again, until the Whites managed to get the rail line that ran into Tsaritsyn from the south working again. Then Wrangel was able to bring up some of those tanks and artillery pieces the British were supplying. On June 30, 1919, Wrangel's force captured the city in an advance spearheaded by a British tank, a terrifying and demoralizing sight to the undisciplined and poorly equipped Red soldiers.

And so Tsaritsyn fell, the city that had been touted as the Red Verdun just a few months ago. This was a tremendous victory for the Whites. It boosted morale and their standing with the Allies. It captured a large cache of weapons and supplies. And it opened up the tempting possibility of an advance up the Volga River to open a line of communications with Admiral Kolchak and his force in western Siberia. And it made Pyotr Wrangel famous. He was another former Imperial Army officer from a Baltic German family, as you might have guessed from his name.

Denikin traveled to Tsaritsyn to savor the triumph and to issue a secret order known as the "Moscow Directive." It was exactly what it sounds like. All three parts of the White Army, the left, center, and right, were ordered to advance farther north and open the line to capture the cities of Kursk, Voronezh, and Nizhny Novgorod, respectively, and from those positions to advance along the rail lines that link those three cities to Moscow itself, a final offensive that would depose Lenin and end Bolshevik rule in Russia.

It was certainly an ambitious plan. The left and center would have to advance over 400 miles. Wrangel's troops would have to advance over 500 miles, link up with Kolchak, and then advance 300 miles farther. That was a lot to ask for, but in the summer of 1919 it looked plausible.



Frighteningly so for the Moscow government. On July 9, Lenin issued a decree titled “All Out for the Fight against Denikin!” It declared that the nation must become a single armed camp.

Red Army leadership was reshuffled. The new command began a counteroffensive in August that quickly collapsed. On September 20, a surprise attack by the Whites captured the city of Kursk, which put Denikin’s best troops on a rail line that ran straight north to Moscow. Tired and demoralized Red Army units retreated, sometimes deserted, and occasionally switched sides.

One of the most feared units under Denikin’s command was the Kornilov Division, named after the late general Lavr Kornilov. They maintained a reputation for fierceness; their insignia was a skull with crossed swords underneath. Two Red Army divisions in their path simply routed and disintegrated upon their approach. I’ll note that one of those divisions included a young Bolshevik political commissar named Nikita Khrushchev. We’ll come back to him in a couple of hundred episodes or so.

The Kornilov Division took thousands of prisoners on its advance northward; its crowning triumph was the capture of the city of Orel on October 14. Orel lies only about 200 miles from Moscow. In between and perhaps even more important is the city of Tula, just 120 miles north of Orel and home to most of Soviet Russia’s functioning arms factories. In the early days of this conflict, the Red Army had relied on stockpiles of arms and ammunition left over from the Great War, but those stockpiles have been used up by now, and the factories of Tula are what is keeping them supplied.

Pyotr Wrangel, meanwhile, had advanced far enough north along the Volga to make contact with some Ural Cossack tribes allied with Kolchak. So technically, you might say his forces had reached their goal of opening an overland route between the White armies of the south and the east. But only technically. Those Cossacks were isolated from the main body of Kolchak’s army, and in any event, there were no good overland transportation links that would have allowed the Whites to take advantage of this opening, say, to shift troops and supplies between the two fronts. So although Kolchak got excited enough to create what he called his “Moscow Group” to assist Wrangel and Denikin on the final push toward the Bolshevik capital, he’d never get the chance, and this technical contact between the two armies had no real military value.

In his memoirs, Wrangel would later blame Denikin for not investing more resources into Wrangel’s push to the east to make that connection with Omsk, which Wrangel claimed might have won the war. But it’s hard to credit this argument. Denikin was pressed hard on all fronts and he didn’t have much to spare, and it’s hard to imagine what Wrangel could have done even with a larger force. The Red Army in the east was already advancing against Kolchak and they would have had plenty enough troops to divert a few to push Wrangel back.

But by autumn of 1919, a new front had emerged in the civil war, commanded by a new general, yet another former Imperial Army commander and a new name for loyal communists to curse along with the detested Denikin and the contemptible Kolchak.

I'm speaking of Nikolai Nikolayevich Yudenich. I mentioned him back in episode 182, when we were talking about the Baltic States. Yudenich had been chief of staff for the Imperial Russian Army of the Caucasus during the Great War, under the command of Grand Duke Nikolai. In that role he had made his reputation with a string of victories over the Turks. After the February Revolution, Yudenich was put in command of the Caucasus Army, and later was dismissed by Kerensky, like so many of his colleagues. After the October Revolution, Yudenich fled the country for Finland, and in spring of 1919 he had traveled to Stockholm to seek support from Allied diplomats to create a White Army force under his command.

The British agreed to support him and he made his way to Estonia. The British cajoled the Estonians into allowing him to enter the country and build up a "Northwest Russian Army," out of disgruntled Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, liberals and monarchists, anyone who didn't like Lenin and was susceptible to British pressure to join with Yudenich. Supreme Ruler Kolchak agreed to appoint Yudenich his commander in the region and provided some money to help supply the new army.

Yudenich, like Kolchak, disavowed any ideology. His goal was simply to oust Lenin. Everything else would be decided later, a position he summed up with the slogan, "Against the Bolsheviks, without politics." He did not cut an inspiring figure. He was 57 years old, making him a decade older than Denikin or Kolchak, and at this stage of his life he was reportedly 5'2" tall and 280 pounds. As was the case with the other White forces, the reluctance to state an ideology was equally uninspiring. Curious how all these old Imperial generals, who rose through the ranks under the czar, are so reticent when it comes to discussing their plans for a post-Bolshevik Russia. It's almost as if they had something to hide.

With British support, Yudenich managed to assemble a force that maxed out at about 15,000, far less than Kolchak or Denikin had under their commands. For the British though, the Baltic coast was the ideal place to aid the Whites. Geographically, it was far closer to Britain and more accessible than the Black Sea or Vladivostok. But alas, there were no Cossacks here to build an army around. There were plenty of Estonians and Latvians and Lithuanians who were uncomfortable to say the least about hosting a White movement that refused to recognize their independence.

Yudenich made his move in October, just about the same time as Denikin's northern advance stalled out at Orel, still 200 miles short of Moscow. Most of the attention of the communists and the Red Army was focused there, to the south, and they were unprepared for Yudenich's sudden advance on Petrograd. In less than two weeks, Yudenich's army advanced eighty of the hundred or so miles from the Estonian border to the former Russian capital, close enough that they could see the gleaming golden dome of St. Isaac's cathedral, in the heart of the city.

The sudden advance caught the Reds entirely by surprise, and there was panicked talk of abandoning Petrograd to the approaching Whites. But Trotsky would not hear of it, declaring, "It

is impossible for a little army of 15,000 ex-officers to master a working class capital of 700,000 inhabitants.” Trotsky ordered the special armored train he used as his command headquarters to Petrograd to oversee its defense personally.

Lenin helpfully suggested that Trotsky draft 25,000 or so of the Petrograd bourgeoisie, then put machine gunners behind them, then order them to charge Yudenich’s army, while emphasizing the urgency of the situation by shooting a few hundred of them in the back. That should do the trick.

Petrograd was no longer the Russian capital, but its fall certainly would have been a blow to the communist government. Yudenich also had hopes of a second force that would advance on Petrograd from the rear. From Finland, to be precise. Yudenich reached out to an old colleague of his from his days in the Imperial Army, Carl Gustav Mannerheim, who had commanded the Finnish White Guard during the Finnish Civil War and whose anti-communist credentials were by now impeccable. The Finnish White Guard was now the Finnish Army. It numbered 100,000 strong, and about 25,000 of them were positioned at the southern end of the border with Russia, just twenty miles from Petrograd. A surprise attack from the Finns, right here, just now, and Petrograd might fall.

Mannerheim loved this plan, but it wasn’t his call. He took the proposal to the man who had defeated him for the presidency of Finland, Kaarlo Ståhlberg, but Ståhlberg was not in love with this plan. Yudenich offered to recognize Finnish independence in return for Finnish aid, but that wasn’t Yudenich’s call. It was up to Supreme Ruler Kolchak who, stubborn as ever, insisted it was the White movement’s duty to roll back every Bolshevik innovation, including Finnish independence. The Allies were not keen on Finnish involvement in Russian affairs either, and most important of all, Finland had just suffered its own Civil War and the bitter feelings lingered. Ståhlberg decided that Finland would sit this one out.

This moment, just here, marks the farthest advance of the White armies. I’ll remind you once again to beware of maps, because if you looked at a map of the Russian Civil War at this moment, you’d see a beleaguered Moscow, with white forces all around: to the east, to the north, at the outskirts of Petrograd and barely 200 miles to the south, in Orel.

What the map doesn’t show you is that the White armies are small and stretched thin. It doesn’t show you that the Red Army has tripled in size over the past year. It doesn’t tell you that Denikin is still as far from Moscow as the German Army was from Paris on August 1, 1914, the day it began executing the Schlieffen Plan. Most important of all, the map does not reveal the eternal truth of warfare: as an army advances, its supply lines are stretched thinner and thinner, while as an army withdraws, its supply lines become ever more efficient.

It is for these reasons principally, and a few more, that what we’re seeing here is not the White movement on the cusp of victory, but on the precipice of defeat.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you all for listening, and I'd also like to thank Sander for his donation, and thank you, Tom, for becoming a patron of the podcast. This is the time of year when I pay for hosting services for the podcast, so I'm especially thankful for your financial support when those bills come in. If you'd like to become a patron or a donor, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon button.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up the story of the Russian Civil War right here, where we left off. The White movement has reached its peak and its decline seems inevitable; nevertheless, when it comes, it will come very quickly. The collapse of the Whites, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I grew up during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union seemed this looming monolithic power that ever threatened the destruction of everything we held dear. In that environment, it was popular to consider historical counterfactuals in which the Soviet state never came into being, or didn't survive.

One much-discussed counterfactual was a White victory in the Civil War. This may have been the natural consequence of the two million or so anti-Bolshevik Russians who fled the country during this period. Most of them settled in the United States and Western Europe. I already mentioned the writer Vladimir Nabokov in the podcast. He would be one example. These émigrés would remain vocal opponents of the communist government in Russia—and of any sort of thaw in relations between Russia and the West—for the rest of their lives.

Those folks certainly spent a lot of their time dreaming of the alternate world in which the Whites won the Civil War. But it's hard to see how that could have happened. The moment where we ended today's episode looks like a time when it might have happened. But as we'll discover next week, the Red Army has been getting bigger and better trained all along, and the White victory that now seems just out of reach is largely an illusion. Denikin is still 200 miles from Moscow. If Yudenich had taken Petrograd, perhaps with Finnish aid, it's hard to imagine how even that would win the war. Indeed, it's hard to imagine how the Whites would have fed Petrograd's 700,000 civilian inhabitants.

The Whites were far from united on their goals. It's not even clear what their goals were, apart from ousting the communists. A White victory would likely have led to further conflict, certainly on the political level, perhaps even on the military level.

The Bolsheviks, by contrast, stood united. That's what got them this far, and that's what's going to take them all the way to victory. By staking their claim to the far left, to being the most revolutionary of revolutionaries, they positioned themselves as the force most likely to bring change to Russia, the side least likely merely to promise changes while secretly sneaking the authoritarian czarist state back into the house through the back door.

And yeah, although many Bolsheviks don't realize it yet, they're going to secretly sneak the authoritarian czarist state back into the house through the back door.

[music: Closing Theme]

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