

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 186

### “1919 – Russia IV”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The White armies fighting the Russian Civil War were within 200 miles of Moscow, and within sight of Petrograd.

But this was not their final push. It was their last gasp. The Red Army has been getting bigger and more numerous all year, and this moment marks the end, not of the Reds, but of the Whites, who would collapse more rapidly than anyone envisioned.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 186. 1919 – Russia, part four.

This is the eleventh episode in our 1919 World Tour, and the fourth in our series on Russia. Last week, we reached the high-water mark of the White movement opposing Russia’s communist government. That high-water mark came after Denikin’s Armed Forces of South Russia advanced some 400 miles over the summer and fall of 1919 and captured the city of Orel, barely 200 miles from Moscow.

But Denikin’s armies were disorganized, overextended, and scattered. Inadequate supply had forced the White units to requisition their needs from local civilians, which is a polite way of saying, “loot the countryside.” Actually, the Whites called it “self-supply.” There’s a euphemism for you. One senior White commander pressed Pyotr Wrangel to indulge in more “self-supply” on behalf of his troops by warning him, “If you demand of your officers and soldiers that they be ascetics, they won’t fight.” Wrangel wrote back, “[I]n such a case, what would be the difference between us and the Bolsheviks?” The other commander replied that “the Bolsheviks are winning.”

Indeed they were. Even as Denikin's forces took Orel, in the east, Kolchak's army was in retreat. On July 1, 1919, the Red forces facing Kolchak had retaken Perm. Six months earlier, the fall of Perm to the Whites was called the "Perm Catastrophe" in Moscow. But this year's Red Army was reinforced and resupplied. Before the month was out, the Reds would advance a further 200 miles, taking Ekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk.

This had the effect of driving a wedge between Kolchak's forces and his Cossack allies to the south. It also shut the door on any possible link-up with Denikin. Perhaps most significantly, Kolchak's modest industrial base in the Urals was now back in Red hands.

From this point eastward, there was a distinct lack of natural obstacles the Whites could use to build a defensive line. The Reds advanced, a White counterattack failed, the Reds advanced faster, and in November, a few Red units managed to advance sixty miles in a single day and captured Omsk, Kolchak's capital, without a battle. Thousands of White soldiers were surprised and captured, and so were most of Kolchak's arms and supplies.

By that time, the extended and inadequately supplied Kornilov Division was already withdrawing south from Orel, outmaneuvered by the Red Army's Latvian Riflemen, who had circled behind and were threatening to trap them in the city.

What followed was a rapid collapse as Denikin's whole army retreated southward, giving up in a matter of weeks all of 1919's gains. Denikin, like Napoleon, had tried to take Moscow, and Denikin, like Napoleon, would find his victories hollow, his retreat harried, and his army shattered.

One of the great strengths of Denikin's army had been its Cossack cavalry, which had repeatedly proved able to outrun and outmaneuver Red Army units. Cavalry has always been seen as an aristocratic branch of the military and the Bolsheviks tended to dismiss it both on the ideological grounds that it was elitist and counterrevolutionary and on the practical grounds that it was obsolete. The Great War had amply demonstrated how little cavalry had to contribute on the modern battlefield.

Only, this war is turning out to be a throwback to 19<sup>th</sup>-century warfare in any number of ways, one of them being the utility of cavalry. Perhaps the communists were being too hasty in dismissing it. By September, Trotsky was complaining that the Red Army's biggest shortcoming was a dearth of cavalry. "The Soviet Republic needs cavalry," he declared. "Red cavalymen, forward! To horse, proletarians!"

The Red Army was able to put together substantial cavalry units in short order, although few of these riders were actual proletarians. Most of them were either veterans of the Imperial Army cavalry or pro-Bolshevik Cossacks.

So when Denikin's army retreated, it found no respite. The new Red cavalry harassed it. The Whites had no reserve forces. They had prepared no defenses to fall back to. And their policy of "self-supply" during the advance north came back to haunt them on the retreat south. What was easy to take had already been taken. On the return trip they found only angry and uncooperative peasants.

Kiev fell to the Red Army on December 16. On the third day of January 1920, Tsaritsyn fell. The Whites retreated across the frozen Don River, but a January thaw blocked the Red pursuit. "Nature favored her sons," one Cossack officer remarked. But the Reds still took Rostov and Novochoerkassk, both of which lie north of the river.

Meanwhile, the Whites in Siberia were collapsing even faster. Omsk was already gone. Kolchak headed east on the Trans-Siberia Railway, intending to reorganize his government and military at Irkutsk. He brought with him that captured Imperial gold reserve, which took up 36 freight cars all by itself. That slowed him down considerably, and so did the Czechoslovak Legion, who were becoming increasingly unhappy with their own plight.

In early January, Socialist Revolutionaries behind the White lines seized control of Novonikolaevsk and Irkutsk. The White army in Siberia was too weak to retake the first city; they were forced to circle around it and proceed to Irkutsk by foot. Kolchak himself was a virtual prisoner of the Czechoslovak Legion. He resigned his position as military commander and surrendered his title "Supreme Ruler of Russia" to Anton Denikin.

The Red Army advanced unopposed into Novonikolaevsk, capturing tens of thousands more Whites and more supplies. The forces farther east were no help. The Japanese occupation force was uninterested in assisting Kolchak; their goal was to claim eastern Siberia for themselves. The Czechoslovak Legion were more interested in staying on good terms with the new socialist leaders in Irkutsk than with Kolchak, because it was now the Irkutsk group that had the power to allow or deny their withdrawal to Vladivostok. And they decided the best way to stay on good terms with the leadership in Irkutsk was to hand Kolchak over to them in exchange for a promise to permit the Legion to withdraw to Vladivostok. The Imperial gold reserve they handed over to the advancing Red Army in exchange for their pledge not to interfere with the Legion's withdrawal. The Czechoslovak Legion were *so* done with Russia and they were finally going home.

The leftist government in Irkutsk held Kolchak prisoner. Six days later, local Bolsheviks in Irkutsk took over from the Socialist Revolutionaries. They wanted to ship Kolchak off to Moscow to stand trial, but the White army Kolchak had commanded was still between them and the Red Army and was approaching the city. Despite a direct order from Lenin to spare his life, the Irkutsk Bolsheviks had Kolchak shot on February 6 and his body dumped into the river, the evening before the White Army reached the city. The Red Army would reach Irkutsk a month later, on March 7.

The commander of the Red Army in the east, the one who had dispatched Kolchak and his army, was Mikhail Tukhachevsky, just 26 years old. He was a capable military commander and ardent Bolshevik who had quickly risen through the Red Army ranks. You may recognize his name from episode 180, where I told you how later in the year 1920 he would lead the offensive against Poland. But first, in between finishing off Kolchak and taking on Piłsudski, he would finish off Denikin.

The rapid retreat of Denikin's army had naturally hurt morale. The onset of winter and the continued Red Army harrying made things worse, and the news of the fall of Omsk and the death of Admiral Kolchak was positively devastating. Denikin was now Supreme Ruler of Russia, but it was an empty title. His shattered army continued retreating south. On March 27, British ships at the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk evacuated about 34,000 White Army soldiers and carried them to the Crimea, still White controlled at this time, owing to the narrow and easily defended isthmus that is its only link to the mainland.

But the evacuation was hasty and badly managed. For every White soldier successfully evacuated, two were left behind to be taken prisoner by the Red Army. One of the last soldiers to board the ships was Anton Denikin. He did not remain in the Crimea for long. He resigned his command, turned over what was left of his army to Pyotr Wrangel, and left for Constantinople.

[music: Borodin, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*]

Allied enthusiasm for overthrowing the Bolsheviks began to wane right after the signing of the Armistice. By April 1919, after the French and Greeks had withdrawn from Ukraine, it was clear that the Allies lacked both a strategy for a successful intervention and the will to see it through. Domestic political opinion in all Allied countries was tired of war. It was hard to justify further sacrifice to go to war in Russia, until recently an ally, after all the enemy powers had already capitulated.

But so long as the White movement appeared credible as the St. George that might slay the Bolshevik dragon, it was equally difficult just to walk away from the fight. At the very least, the British and the French could provide support to the White forces. To do otherwise would seem a betrayal of the Allies' best friends in Russia.

The French government, still bitter over the sellout at Brest-Litovsk and Moscow's repudiation of all those debts owed to French creditors, advocated a hard line against Lenin. The British government was divided. Churchill wanted to go to war with the Bolsheviks, or rather, as he would have put it, have the government recognize that Britain was at war with the Bolsheviks, whether it wished to be or not.

Blockading Russia seemed like one easy and low-cost way of aiding the White movement. If the Bolsheviks were allowed to import machinery, equipment, even consumer goods, they would use those things to fight the Whites and consolidate their own control over the Russian people.

The legal status of an Allied blockade of Russia was a thorny question, though, one that became even thornier once Germany ratified the Treaty of Versailles. Upon ratification, the blockade of Germany was over. Before the Great War, Germany had been Russia's biggest trading partner. Now that the peace was official, what grounds did the Royal Navy have to stop German ships from sailing to Russia? And by fall of 1919, the Swedish government was querying the Allies over the same question: if Sweden resumed trade with Russia, would the Allies use force to keep Swedish vessels out of Russian ports? And if so, what precisely would be the legal justification for such an action?

Even the Wilson Administration in Washington was balking at maintaining the blockade. The US had been pushing its allies hard over its policy of freedom of the seas. In the American view, no single nation, or even coalition of nations, had the authority to impose a blockade. Only the League of Nations should have that authority, and the League was not yet operating.

In fact, as US officials pointed out, once the US ratified the Treaty of Versailles, it would no longer be at war, which would mean the US President and the US Navy would no longer have the authority to enforce a blockade. That would require a Congressional declaration of war on the Moscow government. The Americans suggested instead that perhaps the nations of the world could be persuaded voluntarily to agree not to trade with the Bolsheviks.

And thus, in the autumn of 1919, Allied governments began a diplomatic effort to persuade, or strong-arm, other nations not to trade with Bolshevik Russia. For most countries this was an easy promise to make, since they were doing little or no trade with Russia anyway. The two nations that offered the most resistance were Germany and Sweden. On October 20, 1919, with the Allied demand still on the table, Moscow warned Berlin that to participate in an embargo against Russia would be deemed "a consciously hostile act."

The German government replied to the Allies that while it shared Allied concerns about Bolshevism, it did not agree that an economic boycott was the proper response, and that encouraging closer relations between Russia and the outside world would do more to ameliorate conditions in Russia. It was also true that Germany and Russia both needed trade relations with each other to rebuild their broken economies. This moment is significant, because it marks the first time since the Armistice that the German government said no to the Allies. They made it stick, too, and in 1922, Germany and Russia would sign the Treaty of Rapallo in which the two nations agreed to establish diplomatic relations, renounce all territorial and financial claims against each other, and open trade.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. At this point in the narrative, we've only reached October 1919, when Denikin's advance on Moscow has stalled out and Kolchak is in full retreat. The Germans were being uncooperative about the proposed trade embargo, but for the Allies the bigger question by now was, is there still any point in maintaining it? In the north of Russia, where British and American forces had been holding Murmansk and Archangel for a year against Red

Army counterattacks, the Allies had already abandoned that mission and given the order to withdraw. The small and badly organized White Russian forces left behind in the region were defeated by spring of 1920.

By November, David Lloyd George was floating the idea that maybe trade with Russia would do more good, in Russia and for the world at large, than maintaining the blockade. Over the winter, Allied and Russian representatives negotiated outstanding issues, notably the exchange of prisoners, Russian recognition of the independence of the Baltic States, and an end to the trade embargo. The latter became official on January 16, 1920.

Anti-Bolshevik intervention had been controversial on the left in Britain; peace with the Bolsheviks was controversial on the political right. Lloyd George defended the government's policy, saying, "We have failed to restore Russia to sanity by force. I believe we can do it and save her by trade...Trade, in my opinion, will bring an end to the ferocity, the rapine, and the conditions of Bolshevism surer than any other method...We must fight anarchy with abundance."

The year 1920 was the year of mopping up for the communists. In Siberia, the White government had collapsed. Allied forces withdrew from Vladivostok by the summer, except for the Japanese, who kept their troops in Siberia for two more years, propping up a local provisional government against the Bolsheviks, until the Japanese government finally bowed both to Allied diplomatic pressure and domestic political pressure and withdrew their troops in 1922.

In the south, what was left of Denikin's army was now in the Crimea, about 30,000 soldiers, under the command of Pyotr Wrangel. The Crimean peninsula is almost an island. It's slightly larger than Sicily, and it connects to the mainland only through an isthmus five miles wide. Wrangel's forces were able to hold the isthmus, and since Moscow controlled no naval forces to speak of in the Black Sea, they were safe for the time being.

Tukhachevsky and the Red Army would have headed for the Crimea next after finishing off Denikin, but when spring came, the Polish Army began its advance into Ukraine in support of the Ukrainian nationalist government, forcing Tukhachevsky to turn his attention to the west. This is the 1920 Russian offensive against Poland that we talked about in episode 180, the one that was stopped just before Warsaw at the "Miracle of the Vistula."

This fighting in the west gave Wrangel some breathing room to consider his options. He and his soldiers were still getting British support, but now that the trade embargo was over and British policy was leaning toward working with Lenin instead of trying to overthrow him, the British government warned Wrangel that if he moved against the Red Army, he might lose their support.

Wrangel chose to move anyway. The British cut him off, but the French, who were still pretty hostile to the Bolsheviks, continued to support Wrangel, though French aid was only a fraction of what the British had provided. Still, in June Wrangel's forces advanced into the region north

of Crimea, spearheaded by the most experienced units, and they captured a substantial swath of good farmland, insuring that his troops wouldn't starve.

Wrangel was able to hold his gains until October. That was the month Poland and Russia signed their peace agreement, allowing the Red Army to turn its full attention back to the south. The Reds hoped to trap the White army north of the isthmus to prevent another escape into the Crimea, one that might possibly extend the Civil War into 1921. Wrangel was aware of this risk, but he kept his forces north as long as he could, hoping to seize as much of the harvest as possible before he had to pull back. During the White withdrawal at the end of October, some 20,000 White soldiers were indeed captured before they could escape. That was more than half of Wrangel's entire army, but his most veteran units survived. In early November, the Reds were fighting their way down the isthmus, under orders from Moscow to finish Wrangel off, once and for all before winter, without regard for casualties.

But Wrangel had one last trick up his sleeve. He still controlled the great port of Sevastopol, far larger than Novorossiysk, the scene of the Whites' messy evacuation at the beginning of the year. With British assistance, Wrangel, his soldiers, and their dependents, nearly 150,000 people in all, were able to make an orderly escape to Constantinople. This was ironic considering Constantinople—Tsargrad—was the city that Admiral Kolchak was confidently planning to assault just four years ago; now it would serve as the refuge for the last remnants of his counterrevolution.

[music: Borodin, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*]

So why did the White movement fail? There were many reasons. I listed a few of the obvious ones last week. Russia is a huge country. Moving soldiers and equipment across it is always a challenge. The Great War degraded Russia's rail lines and cost most of the nation's rolling stock, which only magnified the problem. The Reds had the classic military advantage of the interior lines, while the Whites were encircling them, further complicating their logistics.

If you were a Russian peasant farmer, the arrival of White armies into your village was hardly a blessing. After they helped themselves to your harvest, leaving your family to face winter short of food, they'd probably next give your land back to the landlords. Hence the White army saying that "they greet us with flowers and see us off with machine guns."

That's assuming you weren't Jewish. If you and your family were Jewish, you could also expect your loved ones to be robbed, raped, or murdered by White soldiers convinced that Bolshevism was a Jewish plot.

At their peak, Denikin's Armed Forces of South Russia controlled a territory home to forty million people, about two-thirds the population the Reds controlled, but the Whites were never as well organized. Even worse for them, many of those forty million people were indifferent, even hostile to their cause. The White leadership was far better at organizing armies than it was at

organizing civilian administration. Their right-wing leanings alienated many of the local intelligentsia, who were mostly sympathetic to socialism, even when they were anti-Bolshevik. These were the best candidates to lead a civilian administration behind the White lines, but they and the White movement never trusted each other. And half of the civilian population behind those lines was Ukrainian, *not* disposed to help a fighting force of Russian nationalists who kept insisting that Ukraine must remain part of Russia.

The White movement couldn't get along among themselves. They couldn't or wouldn't make common cause with ethnic nationalists or moderate socialists. Support from the Allies was tepid, but it was sufficiently visible to allow Red propagandists to paint the White movement as puppets of the Western imperialist powers, bent on snuffing out the socialist revolution.

Could the Whites somehow have pulled out a victory anyway? Pyotr Wrangel would later blame Denikin for their defeat, arguing that Denikin spread his forces too thinly. But Russia is a big country and it's hard to see how he could have avoided spreading his forces thinly. Denikin himself would blame the Poles for not continuing their successful 1919 offensive eastward, but the Poles were only interested in lands with Polish inhabitants. Expecting them to march all the way to Moscow was expecting too much.

Perhaps it would be better to ask why the communists succeeded. At first glance, it comes down to numbers. The Red Army was larger than the White Army from the beginning, and it grew bigger faster. The Whites hoped to overcome this through their qualitative advantage, but the quality of the Red Army improved significantly from 1918 to 1919. The White Army, by contrast, began with quality forces, but its new recruits were often poorly trained and poorly motivated. Many were Red Army defectors who had little appetite for combat and were prone to re-defecting when the going got tough.

Much of the credit for getting the Red Army up and running, and then molding it into a fighting force capable of taking on the White Army has to go to Leon Trotsky. By the time of the October Revolution, Trotsky had clearly established himself as the number two Bolshevik. Only Lenin himself was more important. That got him the job of foreign minister, excuse me, commissar of foreign affairs. He pretty much botched the negotiations with the Central Powers, which led to a brief restart of the war before the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the one that was harder on Russia than the deal Trotsky had earlier rejected.

You almost feel sorry for the guy getting stuck with the Military Affairs portfolio. Trotsky had no military experience. Like most socialists, he abhorred the military and wanted nothing to do with it. Yet when handed the job, he attacked it with creativity and energy. His program of recruiting officers from the old Imperial Army was controversial among the Bolsheviks and led to a rift with Stalin. But it worked. The old army's officers could be cajoled—or coerced—into helping lead the new army. Desertions were kept to a manageable level. Trotsky himself dashed back and forth across the country in his headquarters train, logging about 65,000 miles in a year.



The Moscow government had won a victory, but the civil war was a catastrophe for Russia. The country was already in economic crisis because of the Great War. The further expense of the civil war was a burden Russia could not afford. The damage done to railroads and farms and factories left the country with an industrial sector in 1920 that was only about 20% of what it had been before the war. And remember that Russian industry was not very well developed even then.

Agricultural production had dropped to only about a third of the pre-war level. Farms had been destroyed. Livestock had died or been confiscated by the warring armies. The number of horses in Russia was only about half of what it had been before the war. And the communist government's habit of confiscating harvests to feed the cities led to peasants refusing to grow more crops than they needed to feed their own families, which further reduced Russia's once-bountiful harvests.

In human terms, Russia had lost over two million soldiers during the Great War, and about a million civilian deaths from war-related causes, including disease and starvation. That amounts to about 1.5% of Russia's pre-war population. And that was before the civil war. Civil war deaths are much harder to measure because of the chaos of the time, but here are some rough estimates. Total deaths of soldiers on both sides amounts to about 1.3 million. This figure includes deaths from disease and exposure, which account for more than half the total.

I told you back in episode 171 that modern military medicine had reversed the 19<sup>th</sup>-century truism that armies lost more soldiers to disease than combat. That was the case during the Great War, when combat deaths exceeded deaths from disease. But the sad state of Russia during the civil war took the nation and its armies back to the bad old days of rampant disease in the ranks.

Then there's the question of how many civilians were killed in the various Red and White campaigns of terror. These estimates are all over the place and subject to ideological bias. Everyone wants to accuse their political opponents of savagery. Still, it's reasonable to suppose that the Reds killed more than 100,000 civilians and the Whites maybe half that number.

But deadliest of all were the diseases and the starvation that afflicted civilians across the country during the civil war period. There was typhus and typhoid fever, dysentery, cholera, and of course the influenza pandemic. Hunger and disease reinforce each other. Sick people can't grow crops and hungry people are more susceptible to disease, so it's hard to separate the two, but in round numbers, perhaps two million Russians died of disease and another million of starvation.

By 1920, the number of orphaned and homeless children in Russia was itself in the millions. Two million Russians had fled the country during those terrible years, many of them among the more educated and skilled, which further damaged the Russian economy.

Unlike the Great War, where most of the deaths were among the soldiers, the civil war racked up about twice as many civilian deaths as military ones. Overall, I'm estimating more than five

million Russians died in the civil war, which is about double the total Russian deaths in the Great War, and this estimate is on the low side compared to some of the sources out there. All told, Great War deaths plus Civil War deaths comes to as much as five percent of the pre-war population.

The October Revolution had seemed so swift and bloodless. But that proved to be an illusion. The Russian Civil War was the inevitable consequence of the October Revolution, of a takeover of the state by a small and uncompromising political sect. If Lenin and Trotsky believed, as they seemed to, that the historical inevitability of Bolshevism was a shield that would block any backlash against their seizure of power, then they were unforgivably naïve.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Ed for his donation, and thank you Sté for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons are my best friends these days. They help keep the podcast going, and even give me a little money to spring for better equipment. I think the podcast sounds a little better now than it did a few months ago. What do you think? If you agree, then thank our donors and patrons for their support.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of Russia, but we'll be focusing on a specific part of the former Russian Empire. I'm referring to the Caucasus, the region where, you'll recall, independent states of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan were declared after the October Revolution. So long as the White armies of south Russia fought on, the Caucasus was cut off from Bolshevik authority and the turmoil of the civil war. But once the remaining White Army evacuated, things were bound to change. The Caucasus, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should say a few words about the fates of the surviving White Army leaders. Those who left Russia joined the millions of Russian émigrés in Europe and America, most of whom were vehement opponents of the communist government in Russia for the rest of their lives.

Anton Denikin left after resigning command of the Armed Forces of South Russia. He lived in Paris until 1945, then moved to the United States. He mostly kept to himself and stayed out of Russian émigré politics. He died in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1947, at the age of 74. He was initially buried in Michigan, though his remains were later moved to New Jersey. In 2005, in accordance with the wishes of his daughter and of Russian President Vladimir Putin, his remains were repatriated and interred at the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow. This monastery was a

avored burial place of the Russian aristocracy in the old days. It was eschewed by the communist leadership during the Soviet period because of its aristocratic associations, and the absence of notable communists buried there makes the monastery an attractive choice for families like the Denikins when they repatriate the remains of their White movement ancestors.

Pyotr Wrangel lived in Yugoslavia for a time, during which he was a prominent figure in the émigré community. He and his family moved to Brussels in 1927, and there he died just a few months later, suddenly, at the age of 49. His family believed he had been poisoned by a Soviet agent, which is possible, but has never been proven. He was buried initially in Brussels, though his remains were moved to Belgrade in 1929.

Yevgeny Miller also ended up in France, where, like Wrangel, he became a prominent anti-communist in the émigré community until 1937, when Soviet agents drugged and kidnapped him. They shipped him back to Moscow, where he was imprisoned, interrogated, and eventually executed in 1939, at the age of 71.

[music: Closing Theme]