BOOKS

The Long History of Russian Brutality

What the fratricidal fury of the country's civil war a century ago can teach us about the invasion of Ukraine

By Adam Hochschild

It is impossible to watch Vladimir Putin's arrogant invasion of Ukraine without being appalled by its savagery. Dead men and women strewn on the streets of Bucha, hands bound behind their backs. Russian soldiers raping women, sometimes in front of husbands or children. Russians seizing loot of every size, from cellphones to giant John Deere wheat-harvesting combines. And, again and again, testimony about torture: beatings, electric shocks, near suffocation with plastic bags.

Yes, all wars are bloody, but they're not all fought like this. The First World War, for example, killed millions. Yet Captain Boris Sergievsky, a fighter pilot in the Imperial Russian Air Service stationed in western Ukraine, who as an émigré years later married my aunt, told me that if you fatally shot down a German aviator over Russian territory, you buried him with full military honors; you then dropped by parachute onto the German airfield his

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personal effects and a photograph of his funeral. That war, like this one, was over territory. But in today's war, even as Putin insists that the would-be conquerors and the invaded are "one people," the Russians almost seem to have an additional aim: to humiliate the Ukrainians, to dehumanize them, to see them suffer.

Most often, we find cruelty like this when human beings are divided by religion or ethnicity. Consider the Crusades, the Holocaust, the lynchings of thousands of Black Americans in the South, and, for that matter, the two recent Russian wars against the Muslim Chechens. But both Russians and Ukrainians are white, Slavic, and, if religious, usually Orthodox Christians. In eastern Ukraine, many victims of Russian atrocities are native Russian speakers—as is the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky.

Any search for perspective on the invasion's brutality must include Putin's background in the secret police, his dictatorial rule, and his drive to extend the reach of that rule. Russia's past is also crucial to the mix. In recent years, Putin has determinedly justified his expansionist ambition by spreading his own version of Russian history. School curricula and a nationwide array of historical theme parks now lavishly celebrate one incarnation after another of a strong unitary state made stronger and larger by all-powerful leaders—from Peter the Great to Stalin—who defied foreign meddling. One particularly savage and revealing slice of that history, however, is a moment when the state was anything but unitary: the Russian Civil War of a century ago, when assorted forces known as the Whites tried for three bloody years to dislodge the new Bolshevik regime from power.

Before the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, in 1991, its rulers portrayed that war starkly: The Whites were evil reactionaries who tried to delay the glorious triumph of Soviet rule. But Putin, whose passion is for empire, not communism, has a different view. He would love to restore the power of both czarist Russia and the Soviet Union, which extended over territory far larger than his own shrunken Russia of today. Last November, in Sevastopol, Crimea, the site of one of the civil war's last evacuations of White troops, Putin dedicated a monument to the war's end and declared that "Russia remembers and loves all its devoted sons and daughters no matter what side of the barricades they once were on." The civil war was a struggle that embodied much of what's in the headlines today: ruthless violence, Russian fears of foreign intrusion, a brain drain of educated refugees, and the tension between dreams of empire and breakaway regions wanting independence.

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Long before the civil war tore Russia apart, the challenges of holding such a huge country together, against threats without and centrifugal forces within, had been handled with widespread oppression as well as tight control from the top. Orlando Figes, a historian who taught at Cambridge and the University of London, gives a useful, compact survey in *The Story of Russia*, which is particularly strong in its sense of the continuities between past and present. For instance, he sees a parallel between the great boyar clans of several centuries ago—allowed to accumulate wealth and power but only at the czar's pleasure—and the oligarchs in Putin's orbit. He is also instructive on the czarist conquest of the Buryat and other peoples across Siberia, a 200-year process beginning around 1580, pointing out that Russian history books have always portrayed it—wrongly—as less brutal and genocidal than the conquest of the American West.

A less democratic regime than czarist Russia would be hard to imagine. Starting in the 17th century, serfdom enslaved a high proportion of the country's citizens—a system maintained by whips, chains, the threat of separating families and exiling rebels to Siberia, and the massacre of tens of thousands of serfs who staged hundreds of revolts over the years. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment passed the country by, and in the early 20th, Russia was the last absolute monarchy in Europe. (A wildly unrepresentative parliament installed after a 1905 uprising was dismissed by the czar several times.)

As in all despotisms, power rested upon violence. In the eyes of the regime, Russian citizens were either loyal subjects who knelt to the ground when the czar passed or deadly enemies most likely bent on assassination. The idea of a space in between barely existed. Over the centuries, five czars were indeed stabbed, strangled, shot, or otherwise assassinated, as were several grand dukes and other high officials.

None of this was promising material out of which to build a new regime. That effort began with the March 1917 overthrow of Czar Nicholas II, who seemed, to his ever more frustrated subjects, blithely unconcerned with the millions of dead and wounded and the catastrophic food shortages his empire was suffering in the First World War. The Bolshevik seizure of power followed that November, a swift coup at the top rather than a nationwide uprising. But what came next, the civil war, affected every person in that huge country, and was truly the foundational trauma of its 20th century.

NO ONE KNOWS the total death toll from the scorched-earth battles, firing squads, and famines that swept back and forth across the land for three years. In *Russia: Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921*, the military historian Antony Beevor suggests that it could be as many as 12 million people. Other estimates range higher still. And that's not counting the millions more who were orphaned, who came close to

starving, or who fled the country as refugees, depriving Russia of a large number of its trained professionals. Beevor's new study is all the more welcome because most Westerners have paid little attention to the fratricidal fury of the Russian Civil War, finding it bewilderingly complicated (true), and feeling that it didn't really involve us (not true).

Beevor's book is a thorough, traditional military history, and some of its flaws are familiar in that genre. The cascade of commanders, regiments, and brigades can be overwhelming. Which side, again, is the Second Cavalry Army on? Although there are a few maps, they don't show all the hundreds of places mentioned in the text; the serious reader needs an atlas. But the narrative benefits from his eye for the telling detail. Vladimir Nabokov's father, a democratically minded politician who had been arrested by a Communist Red Guard, managed to escape and flee the country, but not before the family's cook made him caviar sandwiches for the journey. Darker particulars dominate. The novelist Victor Serge, for example, describes the "prehistoric gloom" of starving St. Petersburg, then known as Petrograd, where "people slept in frozen dwellings where each habitable corner was like … an animal's lair. The ancestral stench clung even to their fur-lined cloaks which were never taken off."

Even an atlas isn't sufficient to map the chaotic ebb and flow of this war. At the beginning of 1918, the Bolsheviks, who soon began calling themselves Communists, were the nominal rulers of a bankrupt realm, its military drained by desertions and its economy in shambles. Their rapidly formed Red Army occupied Moscow, Petrograd, and a large swath of central Russia containing much of the country's industry. The opposing Whites tried to advance into Red territory from several fronts, principally in Siberia, the Arctic, southern Russia, Ukraine, and what is now Poland.

A minority of Whites hoped for a parliamentary democracy, but most wanted something like the old regime. Among their forces were the great majority of Russia's Cossacks, who had long helped carry out the czarist empire's infamous pogroms (Beevor assesses one of them as "probably the least murderous" of the Cossack leaders). The Whites also included a panoply of unsavory local and ethnic warlords, one of whom kept wolves as house pets. Joining these fearsome figures was an assortment of landowners, businessmen, czarist officials, and military officers—including my uncle Boris—who knew they would lose everything under Red rule. The widely separated White armies, top-heavy with colonels and generals, quickly came under the leadership of former czarist commanders such as Admiral Alexander Kolchak, whom Beevor describes as a man with "the expression of an angry eagle." He headed the White regime based in Siberia, traveled with his 26-year-old mistress, and styled himself "supreme ruler."

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Seeing each other not merely as opponents, but as traitors to an imagined ideal nation, both sides fought with an unbridled fury. In Taganrog, a mere 70 miles from ravaged Mariupol in today's Russian-occupied Ukraine, Red forces promised to spare the lives of 50 White cadets if they surrendered. Instead, "their arms and legs were bound and they were thrown one at a time into a blast furnace." Favorite Red torture methods included peeling the skin off people's hands, after first loosening it by plunging the hands into boiling water. In the Baltic Sea and the Volga River, White prisoners were tied with barbed wire and loaded onto barges, which were then sunk. Reds tossed an elderly White colonel, alive, into a railroad locomotive's firebox.

The Red leaders were driven by a righteousness that ran as deep as that of any Inquisition functionary. Communism promised an earthly paradise, and saw a working-class elect who would attain it up against a supremely evil ruling class that had to be crushed. Lenin, Trotsky, and many other Communist leaders came from educated, middle-class backgrounds and hence were all the more determined to prove they were fervent revolutionaries. Lenin called for "mass terror" against "class enemies," and praised civil war itself as "the sharpest form of the class struggle." He and his comrades venerated the radicals of the French Revolution, who had made free use of the guillotine.

The Whites unleashed their own terror. "We were forbidden to shoot prisoners," wrote one White soldier. "They were to be killed with a sabre or the bayonet. Ammunition was too precious and had to be kept for combat." Some captured Reds were burned alive, while Cossacks would whip Reds to death "with metal ramrods, bury them in the ground up to their neck and then cut off the head with their sabre, or castrate them, and hang them on trees in their dozens." White forces sometimes paused their pursuit of the Reds to carry out pogroms; during the civil war, an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Jews were murdered. About such things my beloved uncle Boris did not speak (nor did I, more than 50 years ago, know what to ask him), except to acknowledge, in his memoirs, that in fighting the Communists his fellow Whites "tended not to take prisoners."

Both sides raped the other's women, and looted freely: The Communists had a slogan, "Steal what's already been stolen!" (that is, by the upper classes), while a White general, despairing at the state of his army, complained that some regiments had accumulated up to 200 railway freight cars of stolen goods. Both sides brazenly displayed the corpses of their enemies. The Whites strung up Red bodies on

telegraph poles of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and one Red locomotive was adorned with the bodies of slain White officers. When Supreme Ruler Kolchak was finally captured, he was shot—a relatively merciful fate for the time—but denied a burial. His corpse was pushed through a hole chopped in the ice covering a Siberian river.

The war ended, of course, with a Red victory and Leninist rule that brooked no dissent; within a decade it had evolved into Stalin's dictatorship. Yet even if the Whites had won, their supreme ruler might well have imposed a dictatorship of his own. In any event, those three years of unrestrained ferocity were, as Figes remarks, "a formative experience" for the regime that followed. And, one might add, for the regime today. Enemies are traitors, deserving no dignity. When Putin's sidekick (and the former Russian president) Dmitry Medvedev called his critics in Ukraine and abroad "bastards and scum," we can perhaps hear an echo of Lenin repeatedly speaking of the White forces as "lice," "fleas," "vermin," and "parasites" deserving extermination.

THE STORY OF RUSSIA

Orlando Figes

METROPOLITAN BOOKS

RUSSIA: REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR, 1917–1921

Antony Beevor

VIKING

OFTEN FORGOTTEN is that the Russian Civil War included troops from other countries. Terrified of revolution spreading to their own war-weary, discontented populations, the United States, Britain, France, and their allies were eager to help the Whites, urged on most vociferously by Winston Churchill, then Britain's secretary for war and air. "If I had been properly supported in 1919," he later said, "I think we might have strangled Bolshevism in its cradle." The intervention was mostly a matter of arms and supplies for the Whites, such as 200,000 British army uniforms. But soldiers came to fight as well, including 13,000 Americans—dispatched to both the Arctic coast and the Russian far east.

Altogether, approximately 200,000 foreign troops were sent to Russia, as well as dozens of naval vessels to the surrounding waters. Some of them—most notably French-navy sailors in the Black Sea—mutinied when deployed against Red forces. They did so because, like millions of Westerners at the time, they believed that the Russian Revolution really was what it claimed to be: a matter of workers taking control. I wish Beevor had said more about the clash of ideals represented in the mutinies—there are considerable records to draw on—and about the mark the intervention left on Russia. In a nation so deeply xenophobic to begin with, the ultimately victorious Communists never forgot the foreign troops who had tried to strangle their baby in its cradle.

One more aspect of the Russian Civil War reverberates directly with the conflict we are now watching play out. The war was not just about who would rule Russia, but about whom Russia would rule. As the combat raged across thousands of miles of forest, mountains, wheat fields, and tundra, several wars erupted within the war. Outlying areas of the old Russian empire took advantage of the Red-White struggle to battle for independence. Poland, Finland, and the Baltic states did so successfully, Ukraine unsuccessfully. The fighting in the latter, among Reds, Whites, and several rival Ukrainian forces, convulsed cities in the headlines today: Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mariupol. (In his acknowledgments, Beevor thanks a research assistant who is now a rifleman and medic in the Ukrainian army.) Although mortal, existential enemies, both Reds and Whites were united on one point: They wanted the boundaries of the Russia they hoped to control to be as wide as possible. Both sides had little but hatred for these non-Russian independence movements, especially the one in Ukraine, a land so rich in grain, iron, and coal.

On the heels of the Russian Civil War, Ukraine became one of what would eventually be 15 nominally autonomous republics within the Soviet Union. That structure was a huge mistake, Putin has declared—but of course, for nearly 70 years no one really expected that the once-mighty Soviet realm might dissolve along those lines. Putin has long dreamed of reestablishing a wider empire: He served the Soviet one until its collapse and, unlike his Soviet predecessors, has often paid homage to the czarist one. The last czar and czarina, assassinated by the Bolsheviks, have now been officially declared victims of political repression, and in 2008, Putin gave his blessing to a lavish biographical feature film glorifying Admiral Kolchak. In recent years, his government has restored to a position of honor one of the most notorious forces of that time, the Cossacks, starting dozens of Cossack military academies around the country, with support from descendants of czarist refugees overseas.

In 2005, Putin arranged to bring back from the United States the remains of General Anton Denikin, the commander of the White armies in southern Russia and Ukraine, who had died in exile. "Russia One and Indivisible" was the slogan Denikin fought under. The general was a firm believer, Putin pointed out during a visit to his new grave, in Moscow, that Ukraine is part of Russia. That dream is now at loggerheads with a Ukraine that, however faltering and imperfect, has enjoyed three decades of independence. In this clash of visions, the unresolved tensions in Russia's history still cast a long shadow. *A*

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