

**Jonathan D. Smele.** *The 'Russian' Civil Wars 1916–1926: Ten Years That Shook the World.* London: Hurst & Co., 2015. XXXIV, 423 S. cloth, ISBN 978-1-84904-424-0.

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In the last few years, there have been important developments in the historiography of the Russian Civil war. The older literature, which tended to focus on the armed conflict between the Reds and the Whites in 1919 and 1920, emphasised its political and ideological character. This was due to dominant methodological trends and historians' limited access to Soviet archives. Only since the archival revolution of the 1990s, research on other aspects of the Russian Civil War has become possible. Since then, historians have drawn greater attention to the "green" movement, the peasant war in general, and different forms of warlordism. Several of these conflicts predated the campaigns of Denikin or Kol'chak and continued after 1920 when the Whites withdrew from Russia. Likewise, new methodological approaches encouraged historians to analyse the civil war not only in terms of politics and ideology, but also its cultural and ethnic dimensions.

Historians have increasingly seen the Russian Civil War as a conglomerate of many different conflicts and not just as a Russian affair, hence the plural and the quotation marks in the title of Jonathan Smele's book. While in recent years many publications have addressed different aspects of the civil war, the growth and diversification of research on the topic has led to some fragmentation and nobody accepted the challenge of pulling together the different strands of the broader fabric. Jonathan Smele did just that. The

result is a short but breath-taking book, whose main text of only about 250 pages concentrates an immense research base. While this brevity will surely make the book attractive beyond academic circles, those who want to know more can refer to 200 pages of footnotes and bibliography. This "book in a book" displays the well-known fact that Smele does not have many peers, who fully overview the sources of that period.

The main part of the text is divided into six chapters which break down the larger context into systematic units. The first one deals with the beginning of the Russian Civil Wars which Smele dates to the Muslim uprising in Central Asia in 1916. This idea is not completely new. The 1916 uprising was the first case of massive internal warfare on Tsarist soil, as Joshua Sanborn already pointed out some years ago. Likewise, Peter Holquist's conceptualisation of war, civil war and revolution as "continuum of crisis" introduced the idea of a pre-1917 civil war into the scholarly discourse and made it widely accepted. Periodisation, as we shall see, is very dear to Smele. He presents good arguments that the Bolsheviks were in a kind of civil war mode already during 1917, and that any point from October 1917 onwards is too late to count as a beginning.

The second chapter gives an outline of the general situation in the years 1918/19; the consolidation of the Soviet sphere of power, the creation of the Red Army, but also the preparation of the

Whites, and the developments at the imperial periphery. In this chapter Smele emphasises the rather uncontentious point that the Bolsheviks, despite of all their problems, had several strategic advantages which were crucial for their final victory, namely control of Central European Russia, resources and means of production. The third chapter is devoted to the campaigns of Denikin and Kol'chak and the reasons for their respective failures, namely poor organisation, a lack of military cooperation, and unpopular political programs that added to the structural and strategic problems of the counter-revolutionary forces. The gist of this chapter, written in the style of a classic military history, is that the Whites contributed as much to their defeat as the Bolsheviks did. Chapter four turns the reader's attention to the war theatre in the West and North, mainly to the Soviet-Polish war. The chapter ends with Vrangeli's campaign and the evacuation of the Crimea in autumn 1917.

Only in chapter five does Smele introduce the kaleidoscopic character of the conflict: the war in the interior, war communism, peasant or "green" wars, Kronstadt and Tambov. This is surprising and even a little disappointing given the fact that this is the area where historiography has made most progress in recent times. However, Smele presents a very concise account of these cases of internal warfare and provides the reader with a sound basis to understand the main features of these parts of the civil war.

The sixth chapter discusses the question of the "many ends" of the civil wars. Since fighting in different regions and against different adversaries often rather faded out than found a definitive end, Smele opts for another criterion to define the end of the Russian Civil Wars: the Bolsheviks' deactivation of the last civil war front in Turkestan in 1926 and the transition to a normal mode of government. This seems to be a rather artificial and arbitrary decision. After all, the main battles of the civil wars in Soviet Russia had been

fought by 1921/22, and what followed were rather regional remnants of the civil war which often took the form of organized banditry. Many scholars probably would argue that the Soviet Union of 1922/23 was not any longer in a state of civil war, but rather confronted by the difficult task of state-building in a devastated and unruly former empire. One might suggest that Smele's decision to end his book in 1926 was based on beginning it in 1916, thus producing a ten years span. This would certainly justify the book's subtitle "Ten Years That Shook the World" which is obviously designed to counter John Reed's notorious words about the "Ten Days" of the October Revolution. However, this conceptual bombshell only blasts open doors and the proposed new periodisation will also probably not find many followers. Smele's thesis that the civil wars as a whole, and not only the October events, were precursors to the worst features of twentieth century warfare, including the rise of Fascism, could have been discussed without these kinds of intellectual explosives. Aside from this, Jonathan Smele has successfully conducted a mission that few historians of the period would have undertaken. And, as already Max Weber has pointed out: the most important, anyway, is in the footnotes!

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