

Geoffrey Swain. *The Origins of the Russian Civil War*. New York and London: Longman, 1996. xiv + 296 pp. \$118.40, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-05967-2.



Reviewed by Robert Argenbright

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One might expect a book with this title to survey and interpret the various monographs that pertain to the origins of the Russian civil war, but such is not the case. Instead, Swain has written an unusual study in which definite accomplishments unfortunately are overshadowed by the writer's failure to substantiate his ambitious thesis. The study's strengths lie in the painstaking excavation of the facts of several interesting events which took place in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Although these episodes have long been known in their general outlines, they had not been brought into sharp focus. The book's shortcomings arise from the attempt to quilt these stories together to make a radically new explanation of the profusion of conflicts which we label "the Russian civil war."

The strongest chapters in the book are those that are based on research in Russian archives. Swain's Chapter Two, which concerns the crucial intervention of VIKZHEL (the executive committee of the union of railroad workers and staff employees) in the course of events after the Bolshevik-led coup, justifiably restores the significance

of this remarkable event. Swain covers this story thoroughly and plausibly at the level of high politics, although the Bolsheviks' efforts to undercut the union's leaders by luring away support in the ranks and forming a rival union board also deserve attention.

The most important new material in the book is covered in Chapters Seven and Eight. Here Swain tells the complicated story of the formation, activities, and downfall of the "patriotic socialists," mostly Right Socialist Revolutionaries in traditional parlance, who founded the Komuch government in Samara and the Siberian "directory." This discussion concerns political history primarily, and only in passing mentions peasants, proletarians, military campaigns, or economic circumstances. Nevertheless, Swain's successful determination of who was who politically, and who did what, when, and where, is highly praiseworthy.

The rest of the book comprises a reinterpretation of published works supplemented by research in British archives in support of a unique thesis: what most people consider "the" Russian

civil war, i.e., Red vs. White, was really an unnecessary and relatively insignificant consequence of a "forgotten" civil war of Red vs. "Green." Of course, there is trouble here from the start, because most students of the period hear "Green" and think of Makhno, Antonov, and countless other rough-and-ready peasant leaders. Consider, for example, Michael Malet's use of the term in his study of Makhno: "The common name for their forces was 'Greens', a name given originally to deserters who hid out in the forests to escape the vengeance of either side during the early stages of the civil war. It soon came to be applied to any locally based insurgent movement which did not own permanent allegiance to any of the contenders for national power ..."

This is a precise and useful definition with solid historical foundation. Swain, in contrast, uses "Green" to refer to "patriotic socialists," i.e., professional political activists, most of whom had spent some time in the SR party. But party affiliation is not the main criterion for inclusion among the Greens. For instance, Swain calls the battle of Pulkovo Heights "the first set-piece battle of the Red versus Green civil war" (p. 59), which implies that General Krasnov was a Green. Chaikovskii, Chernov, Maiskii (then a Menshevik), Muraviev, Savinkov, Sorokin—evidently all were Greens. And, if Komuch was "the re-creation of Kerensky's political system," (p. 191), then Kerensky must have been a proto-Green as well.

This simply is too much lumping, but it was evidently needed to support Swain's claim that the civil war of Red vs. White, and implicitly much of what followed, was caused by Lenin's obsession to eliminate the patriotic-socialist opposition. Lenin's hostility toward other socialist parties is well known. Certainly it bears thinking about as one motive, among others, for some policy changes and as a key to Lenin's mentality. But Swain attempts to portray this factor as the primary factor behind the most important Bolshevik policy decisions. Perhaps, but to substantiate such

claims as these, since they mean that just about everybody who has written on these topics was fundamentally mistaken, would require an abundance of solid evidence and careful reasoning. Both are lacking in this volume.

For example, Swain links two of the cornerstones of War Communism, centralized state control over industry and the "struggle for grain" against the peasants, to Lenin's desire to stamp out political pluralism. Lenin's plan to restore hierarchy and discipline in the industrial economy in order to "build socialism," was just "rhetoric" since "there was little practical chance of the programme being implemented" (p. 151). But this was not how the Bolsheviks' erstwhile comrades saw it: "When the Left SRs tried to use their control over peasant soviets to resist the Bolsheviks' new economic policy, Lenin launched a policy of 'class war' in the countryside" in order to monopolize political power (p. 152). On the issue of policy toward the peasants, Swain ignores the view of Pipes and others that Lenin was pursuing an agenda which originated with Marx and was meant to end with collectivization. Also missing is any mention of the alternative argument that the primary issue was the provision of food to the cities and army, as was offered in the classic works by Carr, Nove, and Chamberlin, as well as many others.

The Left SRs may have run afoul of Lenin, but Swain evidently does not consider them to have been Greens because they did not want to work with the Allies. The war really is the point of the Green movement as Swain describes it. According to Swain, Lenin insisted on the Brest-Litovsk peace in order to begin the Red versus Green civil war, (p. 155) and in the process he betrayed the international labor movement (p. 75). On this latter point, Lenin's argument—that it was those leaders who urged working people to slaughter each other in the imperialists' war and betrayed socialism—remains a strong one. Moreover, and Lenin's fanaticism notwithstanding, his party rose to

power in large part because it promised to end the war. The Russian army had already voted with its feet. Swain tries to show "the strength of anti-German feeling after 18 February," but strong feelings would not have stopped the Kaiser's army. The author cites the fact that ten thousand men volunteered for the Red Army at this time, but that figure could more appropriately be used to show how hopeless was the patriots' cause (p. 128).

It is fine to wish that there had been a viable "third way" (p. 11) between reaction and Bolshevism, but in reality the would-be leaders of this movement hamstrung their own efforts by supporting a deeply unpopular war. Without significant popular support, they could not dislodge the Bolsheviks or defend themselves against White officers and reactionaries. It is true that there were political and military conflicts between the Bolsheviks and the patriotic socialists. But this does not warrant the incredible conclusion that the Reds' civil war against such Greens was "difficult," while the struggle with the Whites was "easy" (p. 255).

As it stands this book does not measure up to its title, because it focuses on one factor while downplaying many others that helped cause the Russian Civil War. The book will be interesting to specialists in the period and may be useful in a graduate seminar in conjunction with other approaches.

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