



The Russian Civil War 1918–1921: An Operational-Strategic Sketch of the Red Army’s Combat Operations ed. A.S. Bubnov, S.S. Kamenev, M.N. Tukhachevskii, and R.P. Eideman.

Trans. and ed., Richard W. Harrison. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2020. Pp. xxiv, 563. ISBN 978–1–95271–504–4.
Review by Roger Reese, Texas A&M University (rreese@tamu.edu).

The Russian Civil War 1918–1921 (Russian original 1930) proceeds chronologically through operations in each theater with interspersed chapters that take a broader view of the civil war and war with Poland, with attention to prevailing political, diplomatic, and economic conditions. The book was intended for specialists in military history rather than any broader readership; the narrative is dry and straightforward with only a modicum of analysis. All four co-editors served in the war, three, Robert Eideman, Sergei Kamenev, and Mikhail Tukhachevskii had been officers in the tsarist army before making careers in the Red Army. Andrei Bubnov was a revolutionary before joining the Red Army during the civil war. He left the military for civilian work after the war. Richard Harrison’s translation is excellent.

Because this book was written during the power struggle among Bolsheviks to succeed Lenin—which Stalin finally won—the authors had to give respectful nods to Lenin and avoid offending Stalin. Leon Trotsky was founder of the Red Army and Lenin’s right-hand man in overseeing the civil war. But, as a defeated rival of Stalin’s, he is mentioned only four times in *The Russian Civil War*, twice with negative connotations. Other than that, the authors exhibit a remarkable impartiality, within the context of full support for the revolution and the Bolshevization of Russia. The following is typical of the overall style of the book and its authors’ objectivity.

The entire period under examination by us in this chapter was characterized by an entire series of tactically interesting breakouts from encirclement by individual units of the Red Army. The armies’ very retreat was often carried out with the necessary operational coordination of the armies and individual sectors of the front. The desire to hang on to territory, the timidity of operational thinking, the tendency to cover all axes equally, and fighting of local significance, which did not flow from operational directives precisely uniting the troops’ tactical actions, continued to characterize the actions of entire sectors of the front. (208)

The editors cover the work of the Bolshevik Party in securing victory. It was instrumental in recruiting communists, workers, and poor peasants to the army and bolstering the men’s morale: “On the other hand, political work [by commissars] met the challenge during this period. In the days of the most severe trials, the main mass of the Red Army did not know defeatist attitudes” (208).

The book sorts out the individual campaigns with great clarity. Each is discussed thoroughly and sequentially. Readers will come away with a firm grasp of each campaign and be able to relate it to actions on other fronts. This is an improvement on most academic treatments of the civil war, which try weave it all together and end by creating a confusing mess.

An important bit of information in the book concerns unit designations. Specifically, the Red Army organized its forces into *fronts* (army groups), armies, corps, divisions, brigades, etc., as one

would expect. But the numbers of men making up these units were often as few as one-tenth the size of what one would expect from those designations. Without this knowledge, someone reading about the civil war or war with Poland could mistakenly think far more troops were men involved than was actually the case. A corps, typically ca. 40,000 soldiers, might actually comprise 8–9,000 men or even fewer. The authors further confuse matters by giving numbers of troops assigned to the units *at the start* of a campaign or battle without indicating troop losses or post-campaign strengths. On a related note, in 1920, when the Red Army numbered around 3.5 million men on paper, it could field fewer than 650,000 for combat at any given time. The others were: being trained, dealing with internal opposition, recovering from wounds, requisitioning food, serving as labor, or deserting. A bloated rear area administration also kept tens of thousands of soldiers out of the fight.

Particularly valuable is the authors' treatment of explanations for the Soviet defeat by Poland in 1920, a conflict they believed the Reds could have won. In the aftermath of the war, blame shifted in several directions, even towards Stalin. The authors (two of whom held major commands during the war) tactfully spread the blame to everyone involved including themselves. They blame the Southwestern *Front*, where Stalin served as commissar of the military council alongside its commander Alexander Egorov, as well as the commander of the Western *Front* Mikhail Tukhachevskii, and the commander in chief Sergei Kamenev. The problem was that the Southwestern *Front*, which fought on the left flank of the Western *Front*, failed to subordinate its actions to those of the Western *Front*, considered to be the main force against the Poles. Egorov and Stalin viewed their front as acting independently during the war and thus failed to adequately support Tukhachevskii and delayed in detaching two "armies" to serve with the Western *Front*. This was seen as the reason the Poles were not crushed during the advance on Warsaw and were subsequently able to launch their war-winning counteroffensive. Tukhachevskii was blamed for failing to insist on a timely transfer of the armies in question. Kamenev was indirectly blamed for not making the relationship between the two *fronts* clear at the outset and directly faulted because, through incompetence in coding messages, his staff lost two days in ordering the transfer of the two armies. This may be the clearest explanation of what went wrong on the Soviet side during that war. It is left to the reader to decide (a) who was most at fault and (b) whether it cost the Red Army the war.

The Russian Civil War 1918–1921 is the only work of its kind in English that provides a detailed overview of the conduct of the Russian Civil War and war with Poland from the Soviet perspective. This makes it an essential reference work for anyone trying to understand the flow of those wars on the battlefield. We must be grateful to Richard Harrison for making it accessible to Anglophone readers.