Brian Murphy

Rostov in the Russian Civil War 1917-1920

The Key to Victory

ROSTOV IN THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR, 1917–1920

These documents were collected from the archives in Rostóv-on-Don, and this book makes them available for the first time in print. Since becoming freely accessible, Soviet archives have provided a rich source for understanding the hopes, fears and strivings of the Russians during the greatest crisis in their history. Both Reds and Whites realized Rostóv's vital strategic importance, and the city changed hands six times between 1917 and 1920. These newly published personal stories fill out the social background to its complex mix of classes and nationalities. They convey the daily experience of life in the streets, and the perils faced by either side when changing fortunes forced them to escape across the River Don. Over the last century, the slogans of the Revolution have become stale for us. But if we seek to understand the spirit of those years we must remember that these beliefs gave fresh hope to many individuals, presenting a cause for which they were prepared to endure great suffering, and even to sacrifice their lives. Perhaps the passionate enthusiasm of these revolutionaries may give us some insight into the psychology of young men and women who are called 'terrorists' today.

Brian Murphy was Professor of Modern Languages (Russian) at the University of Ulster 1967–1982. He has carried out research in archives in the National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office, London), Moscow, and Rostóv-on-Don.

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TO JOAN

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PREFACE

Take Rostóv at all cost, for otherwise disaster threatens.
(Lénin, 24 April 1919)

This book makes available for the first time in print a number of documents from the Communist Party archives in Rostóv-on-Don (Centre for Information on the Recent History of Rostóv Óblast', TsDNIRO *fond* 12 *ópis'* 3). Drawn from this source the passages naturally dwell on the misdeeds of the Whites. In the Civil War, Reds and Whites regarded each other as traitors. Neither had any regard for humane treatment of prisoners or civilians. Cruelties and atrocities abounded on all sides. Had I used more White sources some balance might have been established, with many accusations against the Reds. To a limited extent Rhoda Power, Aten, and Sergéy Mámontov provide glimpses of how the scene may have appeared to anti-Bolshevik observers (*see* Select bibliography).

For the use of historians I have thought it important to preserve complete documents without cuts or amendments. Besides military and political history the book presents personal stories, which fill out the social background to Rostóv's complex mix of classes and nationalities. The revolutions of February and October 1917 gave positions of power to fresh voices, who often had only the most rudimentary education. Hence, some of these texts are written or dictated with imperfect syntax and a certain amount of repetition. I have not striven to eliminate these features, hoping that clumsiness in the original text may allow us to feel the climate of those years, so crucial in the history of Russia and subsequently through the whole world. The slogans of the Revolution have become stale and slightly ridiculous to us by dint of frequent repetition over the last century, but if we are to understand the spirit of those times we must remember that for many, these words were symbols of fresh hope, and represented a cause for which men were prepared to endure great suffering and even death. In fact, the passionate enthusiasm of young men such as Spírin may give us some insight into the psychology of those who are called 'terrorists' today.

In the first years after the Revolution, all authority was newly founded and sometimes assumed by individuals who had no proper claim to it. In Russia's large fluid population newcomers to an area could often fabricate the most audacious lies. Therefore every man had to demonstrate that his right to command had been properly based. Both these factors account for the lists of personal names that occur so frequently in documents produced during and after the Civil War. Non-specialists who find these lists tedious may like to skip them in their reading. They are an intrinsic part of the documents from that period,

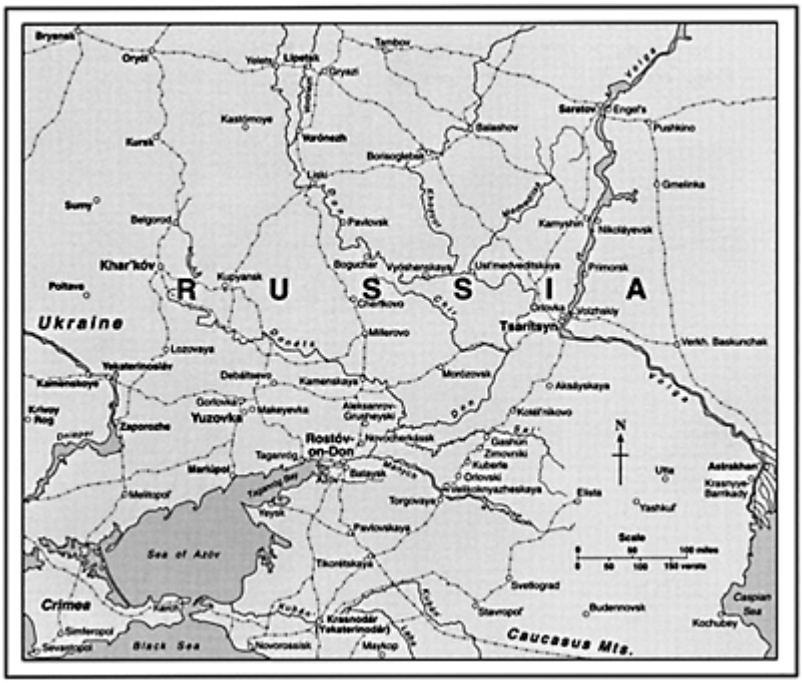
and I have deliberately retained them as such. Some readers find Russian surnames a stumbling block, since they are not sure how to pronounce them. To help with this problem I have generally used an acute accent to denote the syllable where the stress should fall. The old measure *verstá* was roughly equivalent to 1.06 km. I hope readers can make this slight adjustment for themselves, and I have retained the term *versts*, which was in common parlance for many years even after the Soviets changed to 'kilometres'. I have given the exact reference to the document I am translating by marking *d.(élo)1270* etc. to indicate its place in TsDNIRO, fond 12 *ópis'* 3.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

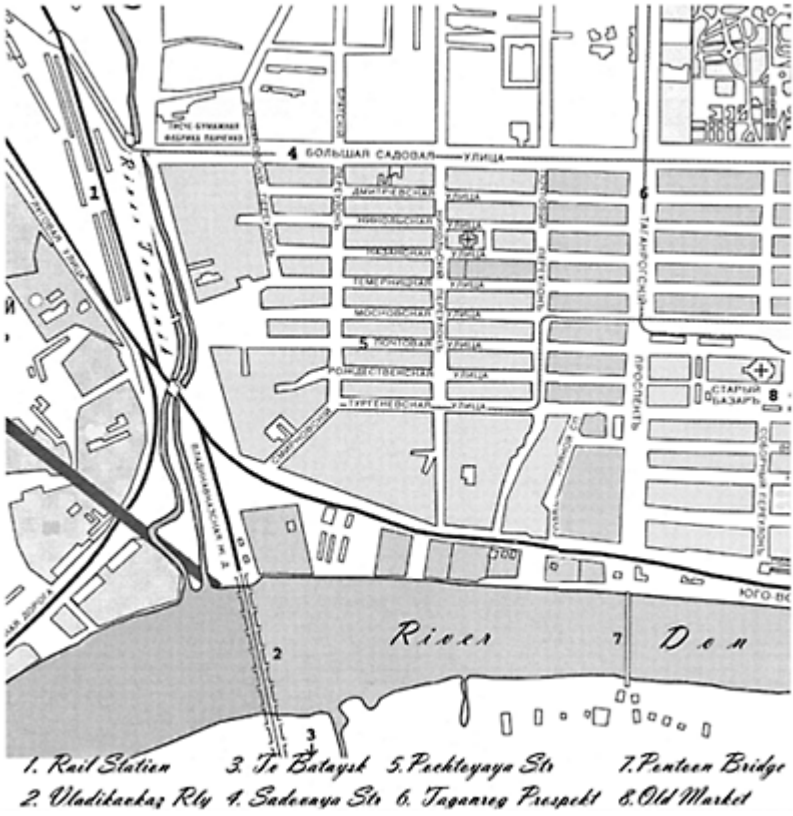
Robert Service suggested the theme for this book. The British Academy awarded me a grant, which enabled me to carry out my research in Rostóv. My research assistant, Stanisláva Parétskaya teased out difficult points in Russian, supplied background information on the history of South Russia and compiled the section on daily life in the area. Dmítri Andréyevich Venkóv pointed out *ópis'* 3 in the Party archive, which has been such a rich source for documents on the Communist underground in Rostóv. From his deep knowledge of the period Professor Venkóv also gave me useful clarification of some points on which I was uncertain. I must pay tribute to the staff in the archives in Rostóv, who work to such a high professional standard and who were so helpful to me. Sarah Badcock helped with information on 1917 Russian elections. Many useful suggestions for improving the text were made by Christine Wood, my wife Joan, my son David, by Geoff and Diana Swain. Natalya Keys has helped to resolve a number of difficulties in the Russian documents. Vaughan James gave great assistance in suggesting improvements where there were ambiguities, misprints or clumsy wording. The map of South Russia was prepared by Sheila Atton of Nuthaven Partnership. Victor Larchenko gave valuable help with preliminary reading and correcting the map of the River Témernik and west Rostóv. Ken Chapman put his great skill with computers to good use for many points, especially in reproducing this town plan of Rostóv in 1914. John Simmons provided assistance in reading the proofs. Photographs were kindly supplied by Andrey Aparshin.

My sincere thanks are due to all these individuals. Any errors that remain are entirely my own responsibility.

Brian Murphy
Ramsden
2005



Map. 1 South Russia.



Map 2 River Témernik and west Rostóv.

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1917: THE TSAR OVERTHROWN

The Provisional Government struggles against Germany

In 1914, Russia had a fast developing economy, but the country was still a weakling when compared to the industrial and military might of Germany. The old Russian Empire was primitive, corrupt and incompetent. The Tsar was completely incapable of dealing with the problems which the war brought to his country, and he had made a disastrous decision to take personal command of the Russian army. The immediate cause of his downfall was the lack of bread supplies in the capital, but by February 1917, the mass of the people were impatient to see an end to the Tsarist regime.

Russia's Social Democrat Party believed in overthrowing the capitalist system by violent revolution. In 1903, the Social Democrats split into two factions, whose differences proved to be irreconcilable. The majority at the London Congress took their name 'Bolshevik' from the lucky chance that they were in the majority on that particular occasion, pushing for revolution at the first possible opportunity. More Social Democrats may well have thought like the Ménsheviks that Russia's economy should first be allowed to grow under capitalism until it was sufficiently advanced to provide an industrial base for the Socialist state they wanted to introduce. But it was a fatal mishap for them that they had not enough supporters in London in 1903, and hence found themselves saddled with the uninspiring name of 'Minority Party'. As the dominant voice among the Bolsheviks, Lénin was quite determined that there should be no attempt to unite the Social Democrats by compromising with Ménsheviks.

In 1917, active and educated Bolsheviks were a tiny number counted against the whole Russian population. But they played their hand very skilfully, by ensuring that they

took over in the two main centres Petrográd and Moscow (to avoid its German connotations St Petersburg was renamed Petrográd from 1914, and held this name for 10 years until it became Leningrád in 1924). The Bolsheviks could see they had little chance of consolidating their power through elections to the Dúma, and coined the slogan 'All power to the Soviets'. Soviets (literally meaning 'Councils') were set up in the large industrial centres, and therefore contained a larger proportion of Social Democrat supporters. Over the next two years the Bolsheviks marginalized the other parties in the Soviets, then vilified and expelled them as traitors to the working class. Lénin knew that the Constituent Assembly would have a majority from the Socialist Revolutionary Party, and would thus promote the interests of the peasants rather than the industrial workers in the cities. To prevent this, the Bolsheviks used armed strength to close the Constituent Assembly after its first day's meeting in January 1918.

In Petrográd, February 1917 brought a popular revolution, when masses of people came out on the streets to free Russia from the autocracy of Nicholas II. The Tsarist regime was replaced by the Provisional Government, which struggled to continue the war against Germany. During their seven months of troubled existence the more moderate democrats were constantly under threat of a coup from left or right—the Soviets wishing to establish a workers' state, whereas right wing nationalists were trying to bring back a more autocratic regime. In October 1917, Lénin's Bolsheviks seized power in Petrográd. The whole history of the twentieth century was determined by Russia's Civil War 1917–21. The victory of the Bolsheviks presented the world with its first Communist state.

The Russians were still using Old Style dates that had been superseded in the rest of Europe by the Gregorian calendar. In the twentieth century, the old calendar was 13 days behind the normal Western dates. In Russia even the Bolsheviks continued to use the old calendar till February 1918, so that Soviet historians generally referred to the Bolshevik Revolution as 'Red October', (albeit New Style dating brought the official celebrations to 7 November). It was symptomatic of the Whites' rejection of any reform that they clung to the Old Style dates throughout the Civil War.

Importance of Rostóv-on-Don

Both Reds and Whites recognized the crucial strategic importance of the city. Bitterly contested, Rostóv changed hands no less than six times, falling to the Red Army in January 1920, before the Whites broke back in February to bring brief chaos and panic to Soviet administration in the city.

The River Don was a major feature in the landscape where Russia's future was determined in the decisive battles of 1919. All strategy had to include moving large bodies of men across its wide stream, which made a great arc to the east before swinging towards the Sea of Azóv. Rostóv is on the north bank of the river at the lowest crossing point before the Don opens into its delta, some 46 km above the open water. In winter, the Don is frozen hard with severe low temperatures down to −20°C, and thick ice also forms on the Sea of Azóv, since it contains a large proportion of fresh water brought down by the rivers.

The River Témernik flows into the estuary from the north. Peter the Great made a dock there to build the ships, which he was sending against the Turkish fortress of Azóv, captured by the Russians in 1696. Rostóv was founded in 1761, and a shipyard was built in 1782 on the Témernik. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great brought Armenians to make a settlement to the east along the north bank of the Don. This centre was named Nakhicheván' after the Armenian town near the frontier with Iran. As Rostóv grew it became part of the Rostóv-Nakhicheván' conurbation, with the 1912 census showing a population of 199,200.

Three railway companies had lines which intersected at Rostóv. The port expanded into a major trading centre, and in 1913 was handling over two million tons of cargo. On this scale, Rostóv ranked as the third largest port in European Russia. It was the nearest point for exporting grain from the fertile black earth steppes of the Don, so that wheat and other cereals formed the main part of its cargoes. Coal from the Donéts Basin was exported by one of the larger shipping lines, owned by a rich Cossack, Kóshkin. Financial misfortunes forced him to close the business in 1905, but in his more prosperous years his ships had ranged out into the Black Sea, and his firm opened branch offices as far afield as Sevastopol', Odéssa and Batúmi.

A factory making nails dammed the Témernik to draw water from it, and other firms dumped their waste into the river. It became so befouled and stinking that in 1916 the local authority felt they must pour several barrels of carbolic acid into it to cut down the risk of infection. For many years, both Rostóv and Novocherkássk suffered from their inadequate water supply. This posed a grave risk to health, and brought outbreaks of cholera. Fire was always a threat in towns with so many wooden buildings. In the newspaper reports on 'Daily life (May to July 1918)' the Chief of Rostóv Fire Brigade warns the City Council of the danger, which was still serious, because it had been difficult to control two recent fires.

The section on railway workers evokes the difficulties the Red Guards faced in May 1918 when they were driven out of Rostóv. In January 1920, as the Red Army recaptured the city the rail bridge across the Don became the lifeline along which the defeated garrison must escape. To close the book I have used the memoirs of Aten and Sergéy Mámontov, who write vividly of the disasters suffered by the Whites as they retreated south.

Before quoting from documents produced in the heat of the Civil War I have thought it useful to open with an appraisal of Rostóv, written by a young Englishwoman. Early in 1917, Rhoda Power travelled there to teach English to a 16-year-old girl in one of the rich families in the city (for Rhoda Power, see the section 'Persons mentioned'). First, I would like to give some explanation of two groups that Rhoda Power singles out for special mention. She writes:

Jews

When I had been there for some weeks I realized that there were more Greeks, Armenians and Jews than Russians and Cossacks, and that society was divided into numberless cliques. The Jews, many of whom were said to have become rich since the outbreak of the European War, were admitted into society, but were considered 'outsiders', and invited to few of the big social functions. For an Englishwoman, accustomed to freedom of opinion and toleration regarding religious sects, the attitude of the Russian bourgeoisie and peasantry towards the Jews was amazing. The peasants quite frankly hated them and made no bones about it. If one mentioned a Jew by name they used to spit on the ground (Power, 1919:14).

What Rhoda Power has noted was a major feature through the whole of southern Russia, and I have given it some prominence in the two pieces

on anti-Semitism, which follow the sections on 'Daily life'. From 1881 Jews had been forbidden to reside in the main centres of European Russia. The Tsarist regime did little to protect them from massacres and the destruction of their shops, even at times encouraging anti-Jewish pogroms (see stories such as Isaak Babel's *The Story of my Dovecote* and Shólokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don*, part 8, chapter 16).

The British committed few armed forces to Russia, but they sent large quantities of equipment, uniforms and other stores, most of which were pilfered by unscrupulous officials in the rear, so that little reached the White units at the front for whom they were intended. Along with military equipment, Britain also sent a few officers to advise the Russians on how to use their guns and tanks. One of these artillery officers was Brigadier H.N.H.Williamson, who became quite disillusioned by the slackness of Deníkin's Volunteer Army. In contrast he singles out the Jews as an honourable exception.

The only bright spot in all the apathy and inefficiency threw a very strong light on one of the most vexed questions regarding social conditions in Russia. That was the keenness, efficiency and persistence in demanding help and advice, displayed by the Jewish doctors, of which there were always one or two in each medical unit. This was the only capacity in which Jews were allowed to serve. It would be simpler to let the Jews run Russia. They seem to be the only people competent to run anything (Williamson, 1970:196–7).

Cossacks

Rhoda Power's memoirs are entitled *Under Cossack and Bolshevik,* and we should explain something of the history of the Cossacks. For references throughout this book, see the 'Select bibliography'. Brief personal details on Rhoda Power are included in the section 'Persons mentioned'.

From the sixteenth century many courageous serfs had escaped from their masters and fiercely defended their independent Cossack societies. They were living round the frontiers of the Russian Empire, and were settled in 12 so-called 'Hosts' *(voyská)*. The Don *Vóysko* was the largest, counting 1,427,000 Cossacks in 1912. When the Whites were in power, Rostóv came under the rule of the Don Cossacks with their capital in Novocherkássk. In the early centuries of their history the Cossacks formed a circle for meetings, where any man who wanted to express his views could step into the centre of the circle and speak his mind. As numbers grew they went over to a crude form of representative government, but the Cossack 'parliament'