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Evan Mawdsley

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Evan Mawdsley

University of Glasgow

JONATHAN SMELE, ADMIRAL KOLCHAK AND THE CIVIL WAR

This article discusses the writings of Dr Jonathan D. Smele, in particular his research on the Civil War (or civil wars) fought on the territory of the former Russian Empire. It does this in the context of the development of western historiography since the 1930s. The author of this article worked in the same field for many years and has known Smele since he was a post-graduate at the University of Glasgow. Smele's first major book was Civil War in Siberia, and this article pays particular attention to Smele's view of developments in that region, and to his assessment of the local counter-revolutionary leader, Admiral A. V. Kolchak. The article stresses that Smele's work has latterly included an imaginative overview of the Russian crisis of the first quarter of the twentieth century, with insights into historical contingency. Smele's most recent interpretation takes in a longer period than just the three years after the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and goes back to the 1916 uprising in Turkestan and forward to the suppression of the Bas'machi movement in Central Asia in 1926. It assesses Smele's view that what happened cannot be seen simply as 'one' civil war or confined to the years 1917-1921. The article also emphasises Smele's unique contribution to the study of these events, however defined, by providing invaluable and comprehensive reference tools, notably his annotated bibliography and his historical dictionary.

My interest in Russia's Civil War began at the end of the 1960s as an undergraduate studying Russian History at Haverford College in the United States. The conflict seemed torturously complex and the sources strictly limited. At that time, the best general account of the period in English was the second volume of William Henry Chamberlin's *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, which was also essential reading for the preceding events of 1917.¹ This now classic work had been published in 1935, thirty years earlier. There were also a number of books on the early years of Soviet power, notably E. H. Carr's first three volumes.² At least my interest could be sustained and my imagination stimulated by David Lean's Civil War epic, *Dr. Zhivago*, released in 1965. Fifty years later Jon Smele, with characteristic wit, would describe this film as 'mostly lamentable, admirably snowy'.³

In the background, Russia, perceptions of Russia, and Russian studies were changing. The USSR and the Communist Party now seemed a permanent, powerful and stable presence in the world, although still a threatening one. The country was

more open than it had been, even after the removal of the reformer Nikita Khrushchev in 1964. Useful historical accounts were being published in the USSR and some documents. In the West, the scholarly historical approach was to some extent moving beyond a top-down ‘totalitarian’ approach (or a stress on institutions) – a classic (and still valuable) work of this school had been Leonard Schapiro’s *Origin of the Communist Autocracy*.⁴ Now social forces and the localities were more in favour.

Working on a Ph.D. dissertation in London developed my understanding of revolutionary Russia.⁵ The subject of my dissertation was the sailors of the Baltic Fleet, going from wartime action against the Imperial German Navy in 1914–17 to the Kronstadt Mutiny in 1921. This saga straddled world war, revolution and Civil War, a ‘continuum of crisis’ *avant la lettre*. This research also introduced me, at a tender age, to Admiral Aleksandr Vasil’evich Kolchak, who had been a senior officer in the Baltic before taking command of the Black Sea Fleet in 1916.

In the 1970s, my awareness of the state of the field was heightened by taking part in the teaching of students at the University of Glasgow. Especially important was the ‘Russian Revolution’ Special Subject course, which I taught alongside James White. As this course evolved, Jim concentrated on 1917 and I taught the period after the October Revolution and up to 1921. My term was primarily about the policies of the Bolshevik/Communist Party and the Soviet state over the first three and a half years after October 1917. However, the curriculum also involved the events of the Civil War and the opponents of Soviet power (through to the *Antonovshchina* in 1921). One of our finest, best informed and most highly motivated students was to be Jon Smele, who attended the Special Subject while undertaking his M. Phil. at the (then) Institute for Soviet and East European Studies in the early 1980s.

Outside of Glasgow, new monographs, articles, and dissertations appeared on many aspects of the whole revolutionary period. A new community of scholars took shape in Britain in the form of the Study Group on the Russian Revolution (SGRR), which met for its first conference in 1975.⁶ I began to think that it might be useful to put together a new general synthesis on the Civil War, especially one incorporating this new Western research.⁷ In the early 1980s, work began on an overall study, one of the first in English since Chamberlin.⁸ This eventually led to *The Russian Civil War*, published in 1987. Unbeknownst to me, at about the same time the American historian W. Bruce Lincoln was working on a similar (and longer) study, which came out in 1989.⁹ A number of other general accounts of the Civil War have appeared since then including, of course, one by Jon Smele which I will be discussing later in this article.

Meanwhile, the situation in the Soviet Union was changing. In the preface to the 1987 edition of *The Russian Civil War*, I remarked that ‘we can see, seventy years later, that [the revolutionaries] certainly created in Russia something remarkable and enduring’.¹⁰ This did not turn out to be a very accurate prediction: Soviet power did not endure past 1991. But the late 1980s and early 1990s were an exciting time for historians. Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* meant much more documentary material became available both in the archives and in published form, and this openness continued for some time after 1991.¹¹ A surprising feature of the times was an evident interest among Russian readers in the formerly disparaged White movement with the reprinting of many memoirs and popular accounts. All this new information about the revolutionary period could be interpreted in different ways, and distinctions opened among Western historians between what might be termed ‘revisionist’ and ‘neo-traditionalist’

currents.¹² In addition, the fracturing of the USSR, beginning in the late 1980s, put the struggle for national independence from ‘Russia’ – including during the Civil War – higher up historians’ list of priorities than it had been before.

Civil War in Siberia: The Anti-Bolshevik Government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918–1920 by Jon Smele came out of this period of the 1980s and early 1990s; it was published by Cambridge University Press in 1996.¹³ The preface correctly assessed the state of research: ‘the history of anti-Bolshevism in Siberia ... has hitherto occupied a minor place in Western historiography of the Revolution and Civil War’.¹⁴ Smele’s book came out two decades after comparable studies on the anti-Bolshevik governments of South Russia by Peter Kenez, published in 1971 and 1977.¹⁵ Until this time there had not been a full-scale published account of events in Siberia (although some excellent Ph.D. dissertations had been produced, especially in the US). Peter Fleming in Britain had published a beautifully written book about Kolchak in 1963, but its scope and source base were limited.¹⁶ This lack of attention was somewhat surprising, as Kolchak had, after all, been the ‘Supreme Ruler’ and titular head of the White movement.

Civil War in Siberia certainly provided this missing element. The book avoided both hero worship of Kolchak and blanket denigration. The volume also took a broad view of political, economic and social developments in Siberia, and to some extent in the Urals and the mid-Volga region. These were cleverly merged / amalgamated by Smele, using the (Soviet) propaganda term, ‘Kolchakia’. The book was organized into six chapters following a chronological thread. The first, entitled the ‘March of Reaction’, outlined in detail political developments in the summer and autumn of 1918. These included the ‘mutiny’ of the Czechoslovak Legion and the creation in June 1918 of a Left Anti-Bolshevik government known as *Komuch* in Samara on the central Volga.¹⁷ *Komuch* morphed into the Provisional All-Russian Government (PA-RG), later based in Omsk in western Siberia. There, it was overthrown in a coup by right-wing forces which put Kolchak in power.

The second chapter dealt with the creation of the initial administrative arrangements – such as they were – of the new government under Kolchak, and here the Admiral’s political limitations were clearly laid out. As Smele put it, ‘Kolchak was without political guile. He was not quite a political illiterate, but he was a political naif’. He lacked the ability to inspire people politically, he lacked the common touch. ‘And how could he, having spent most of his adult life not merely in the distinctly uncommon society of the navy, but in action, in the service’s scientific cloisters, or in the Arctic?’¹⁸ The third, very long chapter outlined policies attempted during the course of 1919. This covered both the offensives of Kolchak’s ‘Russian Army’ and the failure of the leaders in Omsk with their ‘avowed anti-politicism’.¹⁹ Especially interesting was Smele’s careful analysis of why a fatally premature early army offensive was mounted, nominally against Moscow, in the spring of 1919.²⁰ Chapter four dealt with the breakdown in the rear which, as was pointed out, had much less to do with the Bolsheviks than had been accepted by Soviet-era accounts. Chapters five and six covered a cascade of later failures, culminating in the military collapse at the end of 1919. The final chapter dealt with the extinction of the White Siberian government, including the trial and execution of Kolchak.

The conclusion was balanced, not centring the blame for failure on Kolchak himself. Smele was less critical of Kolchak than the people around him. Indeed the problem, he argued, was not that Kolchak was a dictator, but that he failed to

dictate.²¹ As ever in politics and war, economic, and geographical factors were judged to be crucial: '[A]t the wrong end of a fragile 4000-mile long ribbon of steel, Admiral Kolchak was challenging the Bolshevik hold on central Russia'.²²

Seven years after the volume about Siberia and Kolchak, Smele's *The Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921: An Annotated Bibliography* appeared.²³ With the explosion of scholarly publications about early twentieth century Russian history in the West and in the (now former) Soviet Union, it was exceptionally valuable. Included were 5,896 individual entries, with an author index at the end of the volume. The bibliography was organized thematically. To be sure, newer material has come out since the bibliography was published, but nearly twenty years later the volume remains an essential starting place for any researcher. As the original inspiration for the book, Smele generously acknowledged the reading list for Glasgow's Russian Revolution Special Subject.²⁴ Out of acorns, mighty oaks.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century saw further development in the former Soviet Union and in the historiography of the Civil War. The confusion of the Yeltsin years was replaced by the authoritarian nationalism and pseudo-constitutional rule of the Putin era. Few things were more remarkable to historians of the Civil War than the official rehabilitation of the White leaders.²⁵ The remains of General Denikin were moved from New Jersey to Moscow in 2005, a (romanticized) feature film about the life of Admiral Kolchak was released in 2008 (followed by a television mini-series), and the Memorial to White Combatants was opened at Moscow's Don Monastery in 2009 in the presence of Vladimir Putin himself.

In these decades, another trend in Western historiography was about the continuity between the world war, the revolution and the Civil War – or what might be termed the 'long' Russian Revolution. The term 'continuum of crisis' was coined by Peter Holquist, and an excellent example of this is Joshua Sanborn's study of conscription in Russia from 1905 to 1925.²⁶ The 'Russia's Great War and Revolution' project by Slavica Publishers makes the point on an even larger scale. As already mentioned, since the years of my postgraduate studies, I had certainly been conscious of the 'continuum'. In the 2017 edition of *The Russian Civil War*, I argued again that understanding the First World War in Russia was necessary for an understanding of the revolution and the Civil War. Up to the armistice in November 1918, the Civil War was 'in part fought between those who wished to continue the war against Germany and the other Central Powers and those who did not'; after the armistice, Britain, France, and the US gave support to those who had remained faithful to the Allied cause and opposed those whom they perceived as 'puppets of Imperial Germany'.²⁷ This had also been an important feature of Smele's perception of the situation since his first book on the Whites in Siberia. He argued, convincingly, that the unrealistic strategy of the Kolchak and the officers around him in the winter of 1918–19 was based to a large extent on the expectation that the 'German-Bolshevik' government of Lenin in Moscow would be powerless once support by Berlin ended with the collapse of Germany after armistice.²⁸

The 'continuum of crisis' was also a feature of works that Smele published towards the end of this period in 2015–16. He brought out both a comprehensive reference work and a strikingly original monograph. Either would have been a most significant contribution and these were produced nearly simultaneously. The first was the two-

volume *Historical Dictionary of the 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916–1926*; the second was *The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years that Shook the World*.²⁹

The two-volume *Historical Dictionary* was part of an extensive series of historical dictionaries overseen by Jon Woronoff. The quirky title, with apostrophes and plurals, might be questioned for a reference book. It masks the fact that there is great deal here relating to the revolution in 1917, a better known core event than the Civil War(s).³⁰ There are numerous entries on the events of 1917 and, of course, many individuals were involved both in 1917 and in earlier and later years.

Leaving aside dates and quotation marks, for the moment, it is evident that this is, like the *Annotated Bibliography*, an extremely valuable work. Titled, modestly, as a 'dictionary', it is more of an encyclopaedia in view of the length of the entries and the number of them. The actual entries, 'Aaltonen, Ali' to 'Zvergintsov, Nikolai Ivanovich' – the essence of the book – take in 1,270 pages. The larger part of the entries is biographical, referring to individuals, but there are also numerous entries on events, political and administrative (revolutionary) organisations, as well as military organisations and formations. The entries are clearly laid out in lucid English and without excessive abbreviations, and there are numerous cross references within the text to other entries.³¹ Sources are not given for individual entries, but this would not have been practical. Another invaluable element of the *Historical Dictionary* is a 37-page up-to-date bibliography broken down by theme and including numerous websites. There is also a 26-page chronology, a short glossary, and a list of institutions involved in the three-sided ('Red', Anti-Bolshevik, and Nationalist) struggle as well as the personnel who staffed them. A final element to the *Historical Dictionary* is the introduction. At 62 pages, supported by 18 pages of notes, it is a well-argued and informative outline of events and sources; it is short only when measured against the great length of the two volumes.

The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years that Shook the World appeared three months after the *Historical Dictionary* in February 2016 published by Oxford University Press in New York with Hurst & Co in London bringing out a British edition in July 2016.³² This is an outstanding and ground-breaking book, invaluable at several levels. It is necessary, however, to say a few words about the title – which echoes John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* – and about the overall concept. Essentially there are three questions, which might be seen as trivial but which are not without significance. First, should the term 'Russian' be placed in quotation marks? Second, should we think in terms of *multiple* Civil Wars? And can this event (or these events) reasonably be considered to have begun in 1916 and ended in 1926?

It is appropriate to make readers, especially those new to the general subject of the Civil War, aware of the need to avoid oversimplification. Yes, these events were not just about ethnic Russians and the clash of Red and White Armies. Yes, there were also armed struggles for national independence and (later) to regain 'imperial' control. And yes, it is important not to demand too much precision about dates. The years 1916 and 1926 do mark episodes of serious internal disturbances, and in a region of the world – Central Asia – that since the 1970s has been recognized to have great geopolitical importance.

However, this can all be pushed too far. A bald statement like 'there was never such an event as the Russian Civil War' – made in the *Historical Dictionary* – surely has to be challenged.³³ Regarding 'Russian' in quotation marks, the revolution and Civil War

under discussion took place on the territory of a multi-ethnic state known as the Russian Empire (*Rossiiskaia imperiia*). De facto, this state ceased to exist politically in March 1917 and in geopolitical terms it ended in the winter of 1917-18. A successor state, known as the USSR after 1924, has also ceased to exist, and the Russian Federation of today does not contain the sites of all the battles of the Civil War (although it contains the sites of most of them). All the same, there seem to be no convenient replacements for the place name 'Russia' and the adjective 'Russian'. Indeed, this article is *not* being published in a journal entitled *Revolutionary 'Russia'*. Elsewhere, Laura Engelstein has made a more sophisticated assessment of the Russian nature of the conflict. The Civil War, she noted, was 'a Russian (*rossiiskii*) story in the political sense' for a number of reasons: 'because the regional and national elites were formed by the educational and administrative experience of the old regime, which endowed them with a shared political culture [and] because the force opposing fragmentation emanated from the ethnic Russian core, fending off counter-mobilizations and counter ideologies'.³⁴

A Civil War can have different aspects, but that does not mean that each aspect was a wholly different 'Civil War'. Obviously, there *was* an event which generations of historians have known as the Russian Civil War. It is comparable to the English Civil War, American Civil War, Spanish Civil War, Chinese Civil War, etc. Events on this scale inevitably include many elements. Perhaps it is better not to make a complicated subject unnecessarily more complex.

Of course, it was not just a battle between Red and White armies, and the different elements can be unpacked. The most three most obvious ones are (1) the Bolshevik versus anti-Bolshevik military / political struggle; (2) the attempts to win national independence; and (3) popular resistance by workers and peasants to Bolshevik rule and its consequences. Obviously the multi-ethnic Russian Empire was particularly complicated. No one would disagree with the statement with which Smele had begun his epic study of Siberia and Kolchak twenty years earlier: 'The Russian Civil War of 1917-1921 was a cataclysmic series of overlapping conflicts'.³⁵

The date parameters are the final issue. Chronology is arbitrary and there is nothing wrong in principle with historians re-thinking when events begin and end. A new monograph by Mark Edele, *Stalinism at War*, reconceptualises the Soviet experience in the Second World War across the period 1937-1949, proceeding from confrontation with Japan in 1937 to the final suppression of insurgents in the Soviet western borderlands.³⁶ I can confess to having written a book which forcefully argued that this war began in July 1937 and not in September 1939.³⁷ On the other hand, disturbances in Central Asia in 1916 were really not important, had nothing to do with the outbreak of the revolution in February 1917, and in the end took place in a region that was cut off for much of the period 1917-20. It seems to me that the emphasis on Central Asia and Islam in general is not unrelated to the prominence of the region and its dominant religion in the last forty years (since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979).

Even Smele has some difficulty sustaining the argument about the 1916 starting point.³⁸ In the middle of a discussion of the last months of Kerensky's Provisional Government, he suddenly poses the question of when the 'Russian' Civil Wars began (so, evidently, not in 1916). He begins with a discussion of an article on the subject by Rex Wade, who suggested a date in early January 1918.³⁹ After toying with the obvious date of 25 October – which I suspect most historians would favour – Smele winds back to

the arrest of General L. G. Kornilov on 2 September 1917; this follows the general's political confrontation with Kerensky and the Bolsheviks achieving control over the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. This is an interesting proposal, not necessarily wrong, but it is inconsistent with his other arguments.

I myself am an agnostic about exactly when Civil War *ended*, except that the date would have come between November 1920 (the date of the withdrawal of the last major White armies from the Crimea) and March 1921 (the date of the Kronstadt Mutiny and the Tenth Congress of the All-Russian Communist Party). In general, the earlier date seems preferable, in the sense that the last large organized counter-revolutionary army was eliminated then. The same points about the beginning of 'the decade that shook the world' might be made of the end – the Basmachi insurgency which petered out in 1926. Again it perhaps reflects more our attention to global events since 1979 rather than the limited effect that 'banditry' in Central Asia had on Soviet Russia in the early 1920s.

So much for the book's title: stripped down to its essentials, the structure of *The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916–1926* is not all that unconventional. There are six chapters. The first and last chapters can be left aside – for the moment. Of the remainder, chapters two to four provide a straightforward but insightful account of the fighting fronts of what is conventionally seen as the Russian Civil War, while chapter five is about the internal struggle within 'the Soviet zone'.

Chapter two takes the reader from the October Revolution to the spring of 1919, Chapter three covers the major White campaigns from early 1919 until the evacuation of Rostov on the Black Sea by Denikin's armies in March 1920. Smele concludes that 'analyses of the Whites' defeat in the Civil Wars that focus on their tardy, half-hearted, and haphazard attempts to win political support are ... ultimately misguided. 'All for the Army' as the mantra went in Omsk [Kolchak's capital] ... was probably a reasonable response to the circumstances of the time'. Insofar as White strategy is concerned – if the word 'strategy' is appropriate – Smele argues that the fatal failure to mount a simultaneous attack with the armies of Denikin in 1919 was simply due to the fact that the White command in Siberia 'entirely failed to appreciate that it might be necessary to do so'. The early offensive from the east was not due to any desire by Kolchak to beat Denikin to Moscow, and an interpretation to the contrary 'takes no account of the admiral's selfless character'.⁴⁰ Chapter four deals mainly with the Polish-Soviet war and the Vrangeli government in Crimea. All are extremely insightful and provide a wealth of new sources. Chapter five provides one of the best available accounts of Soviet 'internal' policy in 1917–21 and popular resistance, mainly up the beginning of the New Economic Policy in March 1921; it also deals with the defeated left anti-Bolshevik leaders and the Volga famine of 1921–22 (surprisingly the Tambov uprising is dealt with not in 1921, when it was at its height, but as part of the internal fronts in this chapter). Throughout, the reader has the pleasurable experience of shuttling back and forth between the text and informative endnotes.

Only Chapters one and six (and their dates) invite some critical discussion, for reasons already mentioned. Chapter one, which takes the story back to June 1916 and sets out the beginning of the 'Ten Years that Shook the World' narrative, only devotes five pages to unrest in Central Asia (set off by Tsarist conscription). Most of the chapter (25 pages) is a conventional background to the Bolshevik Revolution from February 1917 and among Russian (sic) politicians.

The brief Chapter six on 1921–26 is somewhat more contentious. It is really a coda about the immediate effects of the Civil War. Smele's argument is that it is 'certain' that November 1920 or March 1921 are too early.⁴¹ It is true that Soviet-era accounts (which put much emphasis on 'foreign intervention') often end with the final withdrawal of Japanese troops from eastern Siberia in October 1922. The inclusion of events from 1922 to 1926 stretches the Civil War to a full decade, but not convincingly. This is not to say that what is discussed is not of historical interest, or that the story is not well told; it just is not part of the Civil War.

The conclusion, entitled 'Red Victories, Red Defeats', which begins with a useful (and witty) update about the current state of memorialisation, could essentially have been written conventionally about the 'Russian Civil War, 1917–20'. In explaining the outcome, Smele accepts the crucial importance of the Bolsheviks' consolidation of control of the thirty provinces of central European 'Russia' in 1917–18.⁴² It is, however, hard to agree with the proposal that the 'Bolsheviks' did not actually 'win' the *military* Civil War.⁴³ Indeed, this challenging proposition contradicts not only historical common sense, but also the statement in the introduction to the *Historical Dictionary* that '[o]n the face of it the Bolsheviks were the clear victors in the "Russian" Civil War'.⁴⁴ The Red Army was also *not* 'quite definitely defeated' in the war with Poland in 1920.⁴⁵ It repelled the Polish advance into Ukraine which began in early 1920. Soviet Russia did not successfully 'export ... the Bolshevik revolutionary experiment',⁴⁶ but that is not the same as successfully consolidating 'internal' Soviet space. The outcome of the Soviet-Polish war, in the end, guaranteed – for seventy years – control by Moscow of most of Ukraine. On the other hand, there is no doubt at all about Smele's conclusion that the Red Army and campaigns which led to Soviet victory were 'the military mulch in which germinated the seeds of Stalinist horrors of the following decades'.⁴⁷

An interesting point is made in the conclusion about the effectiveness of Allied intervention as a 'key factor' in preventing the spread of the revolution across (or up to) the borders of the former Russian Empire.⁴⁸ This could be debated, at length and fruitfully, as a counterfactual. For example, what would have happened had Germany not surrendered in November 1918, or if the Allies had committed more military forces to the intervention and for a longer period? My own view would be that the prospects of the Russian Revolution spreading into central or western Europe after November 1918 were always minimal, even without Allied spoiling attacks. This was thanks to geographical factors, the great military (defensive) strength of the victorious Allies, and the 'inoculation' effect of the Russian experience – the vision of ruin wrought by Bolshevik power.

In most respects, Smele's view of the Russian conflict was orthodox, which is not a criticism. He himself noted that 'the new wave of works [in the 1980s–90s] on the Civil War *qua* war ... tended, unsurprisingly, to concentrate on military and political leaders, parties and institutions', and he included within this *nouvelle vague* his own book on Kolchak's Siberia.⁴⁹ This comment appeared in what was essentially a review article on the Civil War studies of Geoffrey Swain, especially his *Origins of the Russian Civil War* and *Russia's Civil War*.⁵⁰ Smele praised Swain's scholarship and described *Origins* as 'breath of fresh air'. Nonetheless, the author was described as 'one of the most controversial ... Western scholars of the Civil War'.⁵¹ The thrust

of Smele's closely argued and convincing piece was to reject 'controversial' arguments about the significance and viability of 'Left Anti-Bolshevik' movements.

Counterfactuals lead, finally, to a recent discussion in *Revolutionary Russia*. This was a special forum entitled 'Rethinking the Civil War'. The opening contribution was a 'thought piece' by Smele.⁵² This was indeed a thoughtful, astute, well-supported, and witty analysis of counterfactual history, going back to first principles. It included an impressive series of examples. I would not disagree with anything that was said, except for the identification (perhaps jocular) of a new field of research entitled 'Russian revolutions and Civil Wars history'.⁵³ Smele did further broaden his scope beyond just 'Russian' Civil Wars to take in the survivability of Imperial Russia – indeed he even went back (briefly) to the Mongols. There was a valuable discussion of the debate between 'optimists' versus 'pessimists' on whether progressive change was possible in tsarist Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century; this binary disagreement between historians was aptly described as the 'Korea of Chroniclers'.⁵⁴

When Smele reached the military side of Civil War in Siberia, he noted that 'Kolchak's early advance [in early 1919] has been described as ill-considered ... but it is difficult to argue that the admiral ... did not have solid grounds for its timing'. In particular, the nascent Russian successor state had a small window of opportunity in early 1919 to regain its prestige, 'to win ... the admittance of Russia to the family of Allied "victor nations", a seat at the Paris Peace Conference, and the opportunity to ensure their country was properly rewarded for the very considerable part it had played in the world war ...'. In Smele's opinion, 'in these circumstances, it seems ... unsurprising that the Supreme Ruler [Kolchak] opted for an early advance: the Civil-Wars dice were already loaded against him and he was right to seize the initiative'.⁵⁵ Smele was also, rightly in my opinion, dismissive of the chances of Kolchak's competitors, the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks of leftist anti-Bolshevism.⁵⁶ Smele's final conclusion about counterfactuals is compelling: 'Conscientious historians, then, must no more succumb to passive fatalism and inexorably linear, Sophoclean determinism – accidents really do happen – than they should accept all contingencies as equally possible – pigs really do not fly'.⁵⁷

Geoffrey Swain provided a response as part of the forum.⁵⁸ Continuing the long-running debate, Swain made an interesting, extended, and specific argument that left anti-Bolshevism – in the form of *Komuch*, the Provisional All-Russian Government, and the Directory – was at least a more probable counterfactual than any other. This element, Swain argued, had achieved successes at several levels in the autumn months of 1918, and was overthrown by the forces of the right (in the name of Kolchak), not because it was weak, but because it was getting stronger.⁵⁹

Laura Engelstein was the third participant in the forum.⁶⁰ Her perceptions of the conflict are very interesting, and she argued that the Civil War 'was an imperial as well as a political conflict', meaning it was about gaining and retaining (or recovering) territory, as much as establishing a set ideology.⁶¹ Her preliminary 'what if' came from the revolution rather than the Civil War: What if Lenin had on the evening of 25 October 1917 been intercepted by sentries while proceeding from his hiding place in Petrograd to the Smolny Institute, where the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution were gathering? Her heart is perhaps not in the 'parlour game' of counterfactuals, but she demonstrated a refreshing and thoughtful way of rethinking revolution and Civil War rather than positing a concrete alternatives. Her conclusion was that the Bolshevik triumph,

however surprising it may have seemed at the time, ‘was never in fact confronted by any viable alternative’.⁶² And ‘[t]he Bolsheviks ... differed from their competitors in their ideological and operational discipline and in the preference for confrontation and exclusion over mediated conflict’.⁶³

Smele wound up the forum with a brief response, which was both measured and thought-provoking.⁶⁴ He had still not been convinced by Swain about the chances for *Komuch* and left anti-Bolshevism, and he took Engelstein’s view about the lack of viable alternatives. He was drawn in particular to her discussion of the Bolsheviks, ‘how their “preference for confrontation and exclusion” long before the revolution (indeed, long before the First World War) served the Bolsheviks so well during the Civil Wars. It was almost as if they had a head start on their competitors, or had enjoyed the advantage of the ideological equivalent of performance enhancing drugs’.⁶⁵

In conclusion, Jon Smele has made a unique contribution to the study of the Civil War that took place across the territory of the former Russian Empire. Not only has he written the definitive study of an important but once neglected major theatre – Kolchak’s Siberia –but he has also produced another even broader book that reconceptualises the whole revolutionary era. The latter is essential reading as one of the outstanding general histories of the Russian Civil War (of 1917-21). In addition, he also provided two gold-standard tools essential for all serious students of the subject, the *Annotated Bibliography* and the *Historical Dictionary*. The writers of reference books and bibliographers are not always stimulating historians, and historians do not always have the patience to produce valuable reference works. Smele has bridged the divide. The breadth of his research is most impressive and his scholarship has been impeccable. He has led readers through the intricacies of events and he has always made them think. All those in the ‘Russian revolutions and Civil Wars history’ research field owe him a great deal.

Notes

1. Smele would much later (in 2003), evaluate Chamberlin’s book as ‘the best general survey of the period and ... a model of objectivity’; *Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921: An Annotated Bibliography*, 538. Chamberlin graduated in 1917 from Haverford College, a small Quaker-based institution outside Philadelphia. One of life’s regrets was that I narrowly missed meeting Chamberlin when he attended his fiftieth reunion at Haverford in 1967; I was myself about to graduate from the college and I only learned about Chamberlin’s presence from a classmate the day after the event. I had already developed a strong interest in Russian history and ‘Soviet’ area studies inspired by Professors Linda Gerstein and Holland Hunter. My senior year dissertation had been on the British Intervention in Russia in 1917-21.
2. Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*.
3. Smele, ‘*Russian Civil Wars*’, 5. Although Robert Bolt’s screenplay is indeed lamentably inaccurate regarding chronology and geography, Lean’s film contains brilliant episodes; Strel’nikov’s armoured train and leather outfit left a lasting impression.
4. Shapiro, *Origin*.

5. This was at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies; my supervisor was J. L. H. Keep.
6. Essential reading on the SGRR and the background to 'revolution studies' in Britain is Smele, 'Study Group'.
7. Some of these would be detailed two decades later in Smele, *Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921: An Annotated Bibliography*. This would have been an extremely useful resource for me in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
8. Footman, *Civil War in Russia*, published in the UK in 1961 covered a series of important episodes rather than providing a fully history.
9. Lincoln, *Red Victory*. This was the third of Lincoln's three major studies on Russia before, during and after the First World War.
10. Mawdsley, *Civil War* (1987), xi.
11. The flood of new materials was one of the reasons my own research moved from the revolution and Civil War into the politics of the Stalin period and then into Soviet military experiences during the Second World War.
12. Prominent examples of the 'neo-traditionalist' school were two powerful books by Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* and *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*.
13. Smele, *Civil War in Siberia*.
14. *Ibid.*, xiii.
15. Kenez, *South Russia 1918*; Kenez, *South Russia 1919-1920*.
16. Fleming, *Fate of Admiral Kolchak*.
17. *Komuch* was built around Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik members of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, which had met briefly in Petrograd in January, before being dispersed by the Bolsheviks. The government was known as the Committee of Members of Constituent Assembly (*Komitet chlenov Uchreditel'nogo sobraniia*, shortened to *Komuch*). 'Left Anti-Bolshevik' is modern term/category used to distinguish such groups from the 'Right Anti-Bolsheviks' of the 'White' movement. The term 'Democratic Counter-Revolution' is sometimes used, after the title of a 1920s account published in the Soviet Russia, but those involved (unlike the Whites) were not counter-revolutionaries.
18. *Ibid.*, 126.
19. *Ibid.*, 249.
20. *Ibid.*, 218-24.
21. *Ibid.*, 671-2.
22. *Ibid.*, 677.
23. Smele, *Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921: An Annotated Bibliography*.
24. *Ibid.*, xxii. 'Dismayed at the prospect of so much reading interrupting my time in the snooker room, "Has that much really been written about the revolution?" I wondered. Later, scanning the shelves of the Institute's superb library I discovered that there were many books and articles on the subject which had not even made it onto the list'. This was the Institute of Soviet and East European Studies, the year was 1982 and the snooker room was upstairs in the Men's Union.
25. On this, see Laruelle and Karnysheva, *Memory Politics*.
26. Holquist, *Making War*; Sanborn, *Drafting*.
27. Mawdsley, *Russian Civil War* (2017), ix-x.
28. *Ibid.*, 220-1.
29. Smele, *Historical Dictionary*; Smele, 'Russian' Civil Wars.

30. In publishing terms, it would have been more effective (making more sense to untutored readers and librarians) to have the more mundane but clearer title, *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Revolution and Civil War*, following on from the title of the *Annotated Bibliography*. Nonetheless, at £170 (a little less in Kindle), it deserves to be much more widely available.
31. At the risk of sounding like an ingrate, an electronic version with hypertext cross-references would have been even better.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 1.
34. Engelstein, 'Might-have-beens', 60.
35. *Ibid.*, 1.
36. Edele, *Stalinism at War*.
37. Mawdsley, *World War II*, 5-6. The dates '1937-1945', however, were not used in the sub-title.
38. *Ibid.*, 17.
39. *Ibid.*, 26-7, 30-4. See Wade, 'October Revolution'.
40. *Ibid.*, 110-11.
41. *Ibid.*, 217.
42. *Ibid.*, 245.
43. *Ibid.*, 240.
44. *Ibid.*, 60.
45. *Ibid.*, 240-1.
46. *Ibid.*, 241.
47. *Ibid.*, 242.
48. *Ibid.*, 251.
49. Smele, 'Still Searching for Third Way', 1794.
50. Swain, *Origins of the Russian Civil War*; Swain, *Russia's Civil War*.
51. *Ibid.*, 1793-4.
52. Smele, 'Counterfactual History'.
53. *Ibid.*, 22.
54. *Ibid.*, 12.
55. *Ibid.*, 16-17. In my opinion, Smele is right about this, but it is the same as Hitler's strategy during most of the Second World War, which also did not end well.
56. *Ibid.*, 17-21.
57. *Ibid.*, 22.
58. Swain, 'More Thoughts'.
59. *Ibid.*, 42-7.
60. Engelstein, 'Might-Have-Beens'.
61. *Ibid.*, 59-60.
62. *Ibid.*, 53.
63. *Ibid.*, 57.
64. Smele, 'Response'.
65. *Ibid.*, 65. This perspective does, however, bring to mind the over-simplification of Adorno's *Authoritarian Personality* or indeed the 'totalitarian' perspective in Schapiro, *Origin*. It is important to remember that eleven out of twelve 'Old' Bolsheviks had not been active in the party for more than a few months before October 1917.

Notes on contributor

Evan Mawdsley is a Professorial Research Fellow and former Professor of International History at the University of Glasgow. He is the author most recently of *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* (Yale University Press, 2019) and *World War II: A New History* (2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2020). His work on Russia in the post-revolutionary period includes *The Russian Civil War* (Allen & Unwin, 1987 / Birlinn, 2017), and a chapter on November 1918 in Tony Brenton, ed., *Historically Inevitable: Turning Points in the Russian Revolution* (Profile Books, 2016).

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