

Optimised Study Guide — The Russian Civil War & the Creation of the USSR

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the Russian Civil War and the creation of the USSR (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C04-U3E2). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2025 Q5 on the significance of the Red Terror to Bolshevik victory and the 2022 Q5 on the early Bolshevik decrees. Covers the Bolsheviks' initial decrees, Brest-Litovsk, the nature of the Whites, Trotsky and the Red Army, War Communism, the Red Terror/Cheka, reasons for Bolshevik victory, and the creation of the USSR. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

Winning power in October was one thing; keeping it was another. The Civil War (1918–21) is where the Bolsheviks consolidated their regime through a mix of organisation, ruthlessness and their enemies' weaknesses — and where the machinery of the future Soviet state (the Cheka, War Communism, one-party rule) was forged. Examiners love this period because it offers clean "weigh the factors" questions.

The marking-key skill this topic tests. The 2025 essay — *"Analyse the significance of the Red Terror to the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War"* — is a **single-factor significance question**. The marking key makes clear that top answers don't just describe the Red Terror; they **weigh it against the other reasons for victory** (geography, Trotsky and the Red Army, War Communism, propaganda, White disunity) and reach a judgement on how significant it really was.

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** Two proven angles: (1) the reasons for Bolshevik victory (often via one factor's significance, as in 2025), and (2) the early Bolshevik decrees — the 2022 essay asked whether they "secured peace, land and bread."
- **Source analysis.** Civil War sources recur (e.g. the 1920 "Land of Freedom" and "Lenin's Dream" cartoons attacking Bolshevik conscription and repression) — you need precise knowledge of War Communism, the Red Terror and the Red/White struggle to read their message and purpose.

Answer the verb. Analyse the significance of X = explain X's role *and* rank it among the other factors. **"To what extent"** = a measured judgement: how far did the decrees actually deliver peace, land and bread?

1. The early decrees and consolidating power (1917–18)

- **Decree on Peace (Oct 1917):** called for an immediate end to the war — but the Allies ignored it, forcing a separate deal with Germany.
- **Decree on Land (Oct 1917):** abolished private landownership; peasants could seize and divide estates. (Note: this largely *ratified* what peasants were already doing.)
- **Workers' decrees:** the eight-hour day, workers' control of factories, social insurance, women's property rights.
- **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (Mar 1918):** peace with Germany at a brutal price — Russia lost vast territory, population and resources (including Ukraine, its "breadbasket"). Signed only after Lenin threatened to resign and renewed German advances forced Trotsky's hand. It secured peace from WWI but helped trigger the Civil War.
- **Closing the Constituent Assembly (Jan 1918):** when the Bolsheviks lost the election (to the SRs), they dissolved the Assembly by force — confirming one-party rule.

For a "peace, land and bread" essay, the marking key wants a balanced verdict: **peace** was secured but short-lived (Civil War); **land** was conceded but the Bolsheviks were really following the peasants; **bread** was *not* delivered — shortages worsened and War Communism's grain requisitioning followed.

2. The Civil War: Reds v. Whites

- **The Whites:** a disparate coalition of monarchists, liberals, SRs and ex-Tsarist officers, plus "pockets" of resistance and Allied (foreign) intervention. Their fatal flaws: **geographic dispersal, lack of unity and common purpose**, and the taint of foreign backing, which let the Bolsheviks pose as defenders of Russia.
- **The Reds' advantages:** control of the central heartland — Moscow, Petrograd, the rail network and the main industrial centres — allowing rapid troop movement and weapons production. Interior lines were decisive.

3. The factors behind Bolshevik victory

This is the examinable core — be able to weigh each:

- **Trotsky and the Red Army.** Trotsky built and led a disciplined, conscripted Red Army (using ex-Tsarist officers under political commissars), and his energy and organisation were pivotal.
- **War Communism.** The emergency economic system (1918–21): nationalisation of industry, forced grain requisitioning from peasants, centralised distribution, labour discipline and

conscription. It kept the Red Army supplied and the regime alive — but caused industrial collapse, famine and mass suffering, and by 1921 had provoked revolt.

- **The Red Terror.** A campaign of repression run by the Cheka (secret police) under Dzerzhinsky from Sept 1918: arrests and executions of "counter-revolutionaries" — kulaks, priests, the bourgeoisie, the Tsar and his family. It eliminated internal opposition and enforced control, but its *significance to victory* is exactly what you must weigh against the other factors.
- **Propaganda and promises.** Effective Bolshevik propaganda and the appeal of land and workers' rights secured a base of support.

4. Crisis and the end of War Communism

- **Peasant revolts (e.g. Tambov) and the Kronstadt Uprising (1921):** once-loyal sailors and peasants rose against War Communism — a shock that showed the policy was unsustainable.
- **The 10th Party Congress (Mar 1921):** introduced the **New Economic Policy (NEP)** as a "tactical retreat," and the **Ban on Factions**, tightening party discipline.

5. The creation of the USSR

- **The USSR was formally created in 1922.** Power was concentrated through democratic centralism (debate permitted until a decision, then total obedience) and a party-controlled bureaucracy — the Nomenklatura system of appointed officials. This structure set up the power base Stalin would later exploit.

6. Historical perspectives

- **Did the Bolsheviks win, or did the Whites lose?** One emphasis credits Red organisation (Trotsky, central control); another stresses White disunity and foreign-tainted illegitimacy.
- **Terror: necessity or choice?** Was the Red Terror a pragmatic survival measure, or evidence that violence and one-party dictatorship were built into Bolshevism from the start (foreshadowing Stalin)?

7. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Analyse the significance of [the Red Terror / War Communism / Trotsky] to Bolshevik victory."** High answers: explain the named factor, then systematically weigh the others, then judge its relative significance.
- **"To what extent did the early decrees secure peace, land and bread?"** High answers: take each of the three in turn and reach a balanced verdict.
- **Source questions:** use War Communism, conscription and the Red Terror to decode anti-Bolshevik cartoons' messages and purposes.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- State what the Decrees on Peace and Land actually did — and their limits?
- Explain the terms and significance of Brest-Litovsk, and why it helped cause the Civil War?
- List the Whites' three fatal weaknesses and the Reds' key geographic advantage?
- Define War Communism's main features and explain both its success and its catastrophic costs?
- Explain the Red Terror, the Cheka and Dzerzhinsky — and weigh the Terror's significance against other victory factors?
- Explain why Kronstadt and Tambov forced the shift to NEP at the 10th Party Congress?
- Define democratic centralism and Nomenklatura and link them to later Stalinist power?