

Reds, Whites and shades of grey

Historian Anthony Beevor tackles the story of revolutionary Russia in 1917 and the civil war that followed, but fails to convince in his central premise

Geoffrey Roberts
Russia: Revolution and Civil War
 1917-1921
 By Anthony Beevor

Widenfield & Woburn, 542pp, £30

Anthony Beevor is one of the most successful and best-loved historians of his generation, renowned for his superlative battle narratives. Yet he cheerfully confessed in a recent interview that his familiarity at Winchester College he failed to read both his English and history A-levels.

Beevor went to Sandhurst for army officer training, where he was taught by the great British military historian John Keegan, and later served in West Germany. He resigned his commission in 1970, wrote several novels and published his first non-fiction book – a history of the Spanish Civil War – in 1982.

Beevor's breakers in 1982, when he was in Stalingrad (1998), a colourful and gripping story of the epic battle that changed the course of the second World War.

The book's big selling point was that, following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, he and his Russian researcher, Lyuba Glazneva, were able to utilise new archival material from Soviet archives that allowed the author and translators to excavate the names of those who had executed large numbers of those who tried to overthrow them, however, (noted to evidence that voluntary sacrifice and mass heroism were as important as the Red Sox victory at Stalingrad as the Red

Army's harsh disciplinary regime. Vinogradova, who was originally a plant biologist, worked with Beevor on many subsequent projects and his latest book is dedicated to her.

Beevor's trademark is a historian is providing the reader with a detailed, testimony and, in this regard, of contemporary politics. This edition of contemporary politics. This edition of contemporary politics. This edition of contemporary politics.

Beevor in his treatment of revolutionary Russia in 1917 but the bulk of the book is devoted to the civil war that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power.

The Russian civil war was a complex, fluid conflict with indeterminate campaigns and battles on many different fronts, together with a good deal of foreign intervention. Beevor's book provides a lot of detail, especially from the western allied perspective, but there is any more successful in finding only through than previous historians of the conflict.

Beevor focuses on the so-called "White" side of the civil war – a ragtag collection of liberals, monarchists and moderate socialists who, aided by the interventionist powers, sought to overthrow the Bolshevik forces of Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik government.

"Lenin believed firmly in the necessity of civil war to achieve absolute power," writes Beevor. From the get-go, Lenin conspired to provoke a civil war that would enable him to destroy his enemies and establish an authoritarian state that would seize "class society" and pursue policies of

The one piece of direct evidence Beevor



Painting by Vladimir Alexandrovich Serov depicting Lenin talking to army revolutionaries in 1917. © GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

cities in support of this hypothesis is Lenin's September 1917 article on *The Russian Revolution and Civil War*. But while Lenin should not be afraid of "civil war" (armed class struggle), he also argues there could be a peaceful transition to socialism in Russia providing all power is transferred to the

easy to safeguard socialism not just in Russia but in the rest of the world. Among his weapons was Red Terror – mass, exemplary executions and punishments meted out to opponents and collaborators with the enemy.

The Whites practised their own terror, and debate still rages among historians about which side committed the most atrocities in a conflict that cost millions of lives.

The culmination of the Bolsheviks' civil war effort came in Crimea at the end of 1920 following the evacuation by western allies of the White Army's White Armies. peninsula, they proceeded to massacre former combatants. As Beevor points out,

“Once the civil war started, Lenin used unsurpassed violence and repression to defeat counter-revolution – a battle he believed necessary to safeguard socialism not just in Russia but in the rest of the world”

the mass killings took place after the Bolsheviks had won the civil war. He might also have quoted Lenin's rationalisation of the Red Terror: "There are 300,000 bourgeois and 300,000 workers. It is a matter of a few days to finish off the capitalists. But we are afraid of them. We will capture them, divide them, suppress and digest them."

Beevor does not excuse the Whites' terror or their anti-Semitic pogroms against Jews, but concludes that when it came to "ruthless inhumanity the Bolsheviks were unbeatable."

But if the Bolsheviks were so bestial, how was it they were able to galvanise the civil war? In an attempt to win the organisational and political failures.

Beevor underestimates the importance of the Bolsheviks' idealism, commitment, faith and power to mobilise the masses. The Reds stood for a radical, more optimistic future, while the Whites represented reaction and restoration of the old order overthrown in 1917.

Geoffrey Roberts is a emeritus professor of Irish Academy, History of the Royal Library, Adair House, Dublin 8, published by Yale University Press

stay to safeguard socialism not just in Russia but in the rest of the world. Among his weapons was Red Terror – mass, exemplary executions and punishments meted out to opponents and collaborators with the enemy.

The Whites practised their own terror, and debate still rages among historians about which side committed the most atrocities in a conflict that cost millions of lives.

The culmination of the Bolsheviks' civil war effort came in Crimea at the end of 1920 following the evacuation by western allies of the White Army's White Armies. peninsula, they proceeded to massacre former combatants. As Beevor points out,

“Once the civil war started, Lenin used unsurpassed violence and repression to defeat counter-revolution – a battle he believed necessary to safeguard socialism not just in Russia but in the rest of the world”

the mass killings took place after the Bolsheviks had won the civil war. He might also have quoted Lenin's rationalisation of the Red Terror: "There are 300,000 bourgeois and 300,000 workers. It is a matter of a few days to finish off the capitalists. But we are afraid of them. We will capture them, divide them, suppress and digest them."

Beevor does not excuse the Whites' terror or their anti-Semitic pogroms against Jews, but concludes that when it came to "ruthless inhumanity the Bolsheviks were unbeatable."

But if the Bolsheviks were so bestial, how was it they were able to galvanise the civil war? In an attempt to win the organisational and political failures.

Beevor underestimates the importance of the Bolsheviks' idealism, commitment, faith and power to mobilise the masses. The Reds stood for a radical, more optimistic future, while the Whites represented reaction and restoration of the old order overthrown in 1917.

Geoffrey Roberts is a emeritus professor of Irish Academy, History of the Royal Library, Adair House, Dublin 8, published by Yale University Press

The complexity of homelessness

Veteran foreign correspondent Christina Lamb recounts a remarkable true story of compassion during the pandemic

Sinead O'Shea

The Prince Rupert Hotel for the Homeless: A True Story of Love and Compassion in a Pandemic
 By Christina Lamb

William Collins, 320pp, £20

Like Matthews, a hotelier in Shrewsbury, close to the England-Wales border, faced a dilemma when the Covid pandemic began. He was supportive of a lockdown but, like many, feared it would be ruinous for him.

Staff not only needed to be paid but his hotel, the Prince Rupert, had to remain open. Some of the plumbing from the centuries-old establishment was so aged that it would seize up if not in time.

After a much criticised delay, prime minister Boris Johnson ordered UK citizens to "stay at home". In a timely programme called "Everyone In", was launched by Britain's homelessness tsar Louise Casey, with the aim of providing all rough sleepers with accommodation by the first week-end of the lockdown.

Matthew's four-star hotel in the heart of the shires was an unlikely target for this scheme, as author Christina Lamb outlines in her introduction to *The Prince Rupert* intended for the homeless: *A True Story of Love and Compassion*. Amid a Pandemic.

Previous guests included Margaret Thatcher, the Liverpool football team and Monica Lewinsky. It was, she says, "posh" but to everyone's surprise, Matthews liked the idea and the first of 100 homeless people moved in. Some staff recoiled from serving the homeless people and chose instead to take advantage of the government for a rough scheme, but Matthews persevered alongside two inspirational figures: the Green Party's Jack Layton, who left the Whites and moved into the hotel to help out.

For Lamb, it was a time of change also. The veteran foreign correspondent was restricted to the UK for the first time in more than 30 years of journalism and it's easy to see why she came to devote much of her attention to the pandemic crisis of homelessness that ultimately hit her and her hospital in the complexity of homelessness.

At the start, the remaining hotel staff – and this reader – nurse hopes of some epiphanies among the new residents but this is a very different concept in this world.

Nearly all the guests are long-term addicts from exceptionally high backgrounds and it becomes clear that their problems cannot be solved via some hot meals or a roof over their heads.

It can be frustrating at times to witness the partial destruction of the hotel that regularly takes place as residents reject the carefully planned menus, refuse to flush toilets, flood their rooms by leaving the showers running to create saunas so they can better inject drugs, steal from each other and the hotel to trade for drugs and yet, it is hard not to fall for them. They are often funny, spirited and touching.

There is the more meaningful transformation that takes place among those in residence. The homeless, as the scheme concludes, are not just a group of new guests to their usual client list. Lamb's telling of the many adventures within the hotel is mostly adventures that might be expected from a journalist of her calibre. Her descriptions of Shrewsbury's Tudor attractions set amid the rolling shores with its ghost stories and tales of monarchs and battles pleasingly evoke the region's finest chronicler, Jilly Cooper.

The book is not without flaws; the structure was sometimes confusing in places. But the questions also about Matthews' role in the central of him at times and the of a sense of fair play with a Californian woman are not opaque that it might have been better put to mention it at all.

More seriously, Lamb provides us with brilliant if harrowing stories from the childhoods of the residents. Some have grown up to receive burning orders from their partners and children and we hear less about how these were incurred. I think readers are able for the book to come.

Prominence in Ireland in the Englishness of its setting, which adds to the book's insights is tragically universal. As Lamb reports, it is 14 times more expensive for UK authorities to deal with someone who has been on the streets for more than a year than if they are caught earlier. A similar calculation exists here, but there has been an increase in the number of people on the streets over the past year. Figures released in 2020 show there are more than 10,000 homeless people in Ireland. Nearly a third of these are children.

In the current economic situation, and especially given Ireland's housing crisis, this book is an important reminder of the humanity behind such statistics.