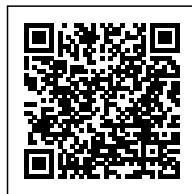


BARON PETER WRANGEL: THE LAST WHITE GENERAL

Posted on February 1, 2021 by Charles



I [recently wrote of the Finnish Civil War](#), where the Whites defeated the Reds. In the twentieth century, that pattern was unfortunately the exception, with the more common result being seen in the Russian Civil War of 1918–20, where the Russian Reds defeated the Russian Whites. That struggle, though not as forgotten as the Finnish Civil War, does not loom large in modern consciousness, and books on it are rare. This volume, the recently-reprinted war memoir of Peter Wrangel, probably the most successful and certainly the most charismatic of the White generals, addresses that gap. It also carries many lessons, including about what might occur in a twenty-first-century ideological civil war in a large country.



The Whites lost for more than one reason, including poor generalship, inability to work in a unified fashion, and betrayal by the Allies, particularly Britain. We will return to all of these as seen through Wrangel's eyes. He was a Baltic German, born in 1878 in the Russian Empire, what is now Lithuania. Trained as a mining engineer, he volunteered for Imperial service, and became a cavalry officer in the prestigious Life Guards. He fought in the Russo-Japanese War, and then all through World War I, receiving numerous decorations for bravery. This book picks up in 1916, as the war dragged on for Russia, and as the Russian elite, corrupt and clueless, shattered upon the shoals of destiny.

Wrangel's memoir, essentially an edited war diary, was first published in 1928, the year Wrangel died, serialized in German in a White émigré magazine. Translated into English the next year by one Sophie Goulston, it fell from view, but was republished in 1957. This second edition added a preface written by Herbert Hoover, but also fell from view. It is not obvious from within the pages of this book why Hoover wrote a preface. It is because when Wrangel died, probably by poison, at only forty-nine, all his papers were sent to the new Hoover War Library, which was aggregating information about the former empires of Europe.

Apparently, to this day the Hoover Archives harbors the single largest collection pertaining to Russian émigré documents, presumably still containing all of Wrangel's documents. (They also contain much else interesting, such as the archives of the Tsar's secret police, the [Okhrana](#), a sadly ineffective body.) Thus, what is now the Hoover Institution must have had a connection to [Always With Honor](#) being republished in 1957.

Until very recently, therefore, this book was functionally unavailable to the public. You could buy a copy for hundreds of dollars, if you were lucky. But [as I have noted before](#), a new publishing house, Mystery Grove Publishing, has been doing yeoman's work in rescuing important books with a right-of-center tilt from the deliberate obscurity into which they have been placed, and this book made their list. True, most people today are frighteningly under-educated, so no doubt sales are not in the millions. It doesn't matter for current purposes; reading the Mystery Grove books allows our future elite to self-educate, avoiding or repairing the indoctrination the Left has used to ruin America.

Other than [Always with Honor](#), there appears to exist only one English-language biography of Wrangel, published in 2010: *The White Knight of the Black Sea*, by a Dutchman, Anthony Kröner. Although it was [blurbled by the Hoover Institution](#), suggesting an ongoing connection, Kröner's book is obscure and nearly impossible to obtain. After chasing down leads (Twitter is sometimes good for something), I was

able to order a copy from a Dutch bookstore. But it just goes to show that even today, serious, mainstream books can become functionally unavailable - it's not just books published decades ago.



General Wrangel in his famous black chokha, for which he was given the nickname, "the Black Baron" by the Reds.

If there is a defect to this book, it is that you have to know at least the basics about [Russian history from 1914 through 1918](#) in order to understand its contents. Wrangel wrote for an audience that was intimately familiar with that history, and makes no effort to either explain events or introduce individuals; he merely drops them, uncoated, into his own personal story. Wrangel begins in 1916, when World War I had ground on for three years, and there was great turmoil at the top of Russian society.

He saw this first hand, because for a brief time he was aide-de-camp to the Tsar, leaving to return to the front right before Rasputin was killed. Although he only touches glancingly on Russian imperial

politics, Wrangel seems to blame the Tsar for not seeing how corrupt many of the men surrounding him were, and for ignoring the needs of the people. He does not offer the details of what was happening as Russia came apart, merely a sketch, along with making two key points.

First, the generals, the High Command, increasingly felt that "things could not go on as they were," and many sought a solution that involved removing the Tsar—and not only to serve Mother Russia. "Others, again, desired a revolution for purely personal reasons, hoping to find in it scope for their ambitions, or to profit from it and settle their accounts with such of the commanders as they hated." That is to say, a fragmenting society finds many eager to accelerate the fragmentation. Second, the people as a whole, and the upper classes in particular, acted as if everything was normal, they paid "no heed to the approaching storm." That is to say, apparent normalcy says nothing about whether a society is about to founder.

In early 1917, after the February Revolution, Wrangel was sent back to St. Petersburg by his superior to remonstrate with the new Minister of War, [Alexander Guchkov](#), who was promoting disorder in the Army, mostly by undermining authority through promoting "democracy" in the Army, in the form of Communist-dominated "soldiers' committees."

Arriving in St. Petersburg (after having on the train thrashed a man with a red ribbon for insulting a woman), he was appalled to see the widespread disorder and profusion of Communist paraphernalia, most of all red ribbons and flags. Although officers not wearing a "red rag" were often attacked, Wrangel, all 6' 7" of him, refused, and seems somewhat surprised nobody bothered him. Wrangel's aim was to strengthen the Provisional Government's hand against the expanding power of the "soviets," that is, groups organized to seize power by the Bolsheviks, [Mensheviks](#), and the [Socialist Revolutionaries](#), but he discovered the truth for himself - the [Provisional Government](#) was utterly incompetent.

Wrangel in passing mentions meeting [General Baron Mannerheim](#) on a train, who was leaving St. Petersburg after the ascendancy of the Provisional Government, as Wrangel himself was returning to Petersburg. In fact, Wrangel's career bears more than passing parallels to those of the Finnish hero. Both were born on the outskirts of the Empire and ably served the Tsar, then fought his enemies after he abdicated. Like Mannerheim, Wrangel was extremely competent and decisive. And both had little patience for politicians, less for bureaucrats, and struggled to balance political imperatives with military dictates. Mannerheim won his struggle against Communism, at least his first one, though, and Wrangel lost.

He describes, from a ground-level view, the struggle between the Provisional Government and the new [Petrograd Soviet](#), including how the Bolsheviks, subsidized by Germany, rapidly expanded their power. It wasn't just money—they seized whatever property they wanted to use, and the Provisional Government took no action against them.

The new government was eager to suppress the conservative press, but never bothered the left-wing press, which was openly treasonous. Sounds familiar. Guchkov, who had rejected Wrangel's pleas, was replaced as Minister of War by [Alexander Kerensky](#), and Wrangel went back to the front in June 1917, in what is now Ukraine, as part of Kerensky's major summer offensive, which he hoped would unify the Russians.

It did not; the unrest Wrangel witnessed in St. Petersburg was merely the run-up to the "July Days," where the Bolsheviks attempted to seize power and were defeated, but unwisely were not slaughtered. The commander-in-chief of the army, [Lavr Kornilov](#), whom Wrangel knew, assaulted the Petrograd Soviet, in what may or may not have been a coup attempt against the Provisional Government. This failed, strengthening the Soviet.

The October Revolution soon followed, and Kornilov, escaping prison, went on to create the [Volunteer Army](#), the largest military grouping of the Whites. Meanwhile, Wrangel had been discharged by the Provisional Government—he was, no doubt justifiably, regarded as completely politically unreliable. Thus, he went with his wife and four children to Yalta, in the Crimea, where he had a home.

Soon enough, though, war came to him. The postwar events in southern Russia are enormously complex. It was not just the struggle of the Reds to establish power, opposed by the gradually coalescing Whites, but also involved many other players, such as the Ukrainian Parliament, seeking independence but willing to cooperate with the Whites, seeing the Reds as joint enemies, and various Cossack groups, generally hostile to the Reds but desirous of managing their own affairs.

For the Whites, whose internal interactions often featured disunity, one point of unity was opposition to breaking up Russia. Thus, a constant challenge was how to fight side-by-side with groups opposed to maintaining the Russian Empire, or who wanted some degree of independence within the Empire. With the Cossacks, federation was a possibility, given history and their own organization; with the Ukrainians, not so much (as we see even today, though I know little about the modern specifics).

Wrangel joined the Volunteer Army, soon commanded by Anton Denikin. In Wrangel's telling, much of the blame for ultimate White failure lies on [Denikin](#), whom he faults for bad leadership and terrible strategic decisions, most of all requiring a premature march by all White forces on Moscow, in 1919. "We wanted to do too much and make ourselves master of every position at once, and we only in weakening ourselves and so becoming powerless."

Wrangel also faults squabbling among the Whites, corruption among their leaders, and a lack of discipline among the men. He admits that "requisitioning" is necessary, but gives constant pained descriptions of how many White officers of all ranks simply engaged in organized looting for personal advantage, turning the Army into "a collection of tradesmen and profiteers."

He also faults Denikin for inflexibility in coming to terms with the Cossacks and the Ukrainians. His relations with Denikin were further soured by third-party agitation for Wrangel to supplant Denikin. "As is usual in such cases, as one man was more and more discredited, another became dearer and dearer to the people. Unfortunately, this other was myself."

One of Wrangel's chief talents appears to have been as a judge of men. I cannot say if his portrait of Denikin is accurate, but it comports with what history I know, and the results Denikin achieved. Nearly every other important person with whom Wrangel meets is judged and given an incisive summary (and Wrangel admits where he made errors, as well).

Thus, in passing, Wrangel mentions that [Captain Baron Ungern Stenberg](#), or simply 'the Baron,' as his troops called him, was more complex and interesting. He was of the type that is invaluable in wartime and impossible in times of peace." This talent to judge men is completely invaluable in a Man of Destiny and completely inborn (though it can be polished with training); it also seems nonexistent in today's American political leaders, perhaps because they have come to rely on money and the media to achieve their ends, rather than on forming a cohesive and dedicated group of men with the same objectives, on whom they can rely.

The main White armies, including the Volunteer Army, were largely defeated by early 1920. Again, this is an area I am not expert in, and one that does not have a lot of historiography directed at it, although I have ordered what appear to be the two main scholarly works on it, by Peter Kenez, written forty years ago. I don't know why this is, though certainly most histories of Russia, or of the Russian Revolution, cover the Civil War to some degree. Wrangel then went into exile in Constantinople, and thus ends Part

I of his memoir.

But by April 1920, he was back, after Denikin resigned and the remaining military commanders asked Wrangel to be Commander-in-Chief of the remnants of the Whites. Part II narrates two difficult tasks Wrangel had—trying to reverse military defeat while achieving political renewal. His hope was that if he could achieve both, and establish stable White rule in Taurida (the Russian province composed of Crimea and “mainland” Russia north of it, including parts of Ukraine and the Kuban), that could form the “healthy nucleus” of a new Russia. From there, they could ultimately completely defeat the Bolsheviks and rebuild a new version of old Russia.

To win militarily, Wrangel had to reconstruct the shattered White forces, gather new men, and not only resist, but push back, the Reds, most of all from the rich agricultural land of northern Taurida. To win politically, he had to satisfy multiple constituencies—the Army, of course, but also the peasants, terrified of the Reds but desirous of land reform, and the middle classes, mostly also terrified of the Reds but many still holding, stupidly, to non-Communist leftism and hoping for the return of something like the Provisional Government. He had to run a government, as well, with too few competent bureaucrats. These intertwined tasks were monumental (and the strain, combined with the morale crusher of ultimate failure, may, in fact, account for Wrangel's early death, rather than poison).

To head the government, he recruited [Alexander Krivoshein](#), who had been Minister of Agriculture under [Pyotr Stolypin](#). Krivoshein had a reputation as being competent, fair, and focused on a good deal for the smallholding peasant. His choice was not random—agriculture was everything to Wrangel in his time in Crimea and the [Taurida Governate](#), since not only was solving the political question of land ownership paramount, agricultural exports were critical to obtaining any supplies from abroad, since foreign governments had abandoned the Whites, and nobody would loan them any money, assuming (reasonably) they had zero chance of repayment.

Wrangel promptly issued proclamations not only ordering land reform, but rejecting the earlier White insistence that national minorities abandon all traces of their own nationalisms. His explicit goal was to create the new, improved Russia (he insisted that his was the “Russian Army,” and the Reds merely contemptible “Bolshevists”). Wrangel himself was a monarchist, but he saw the old monarchy was spent, and something new was needed.

For land reform, Wrangel quickly implemented a policy whereby any peasant could buy, over time, the

land he farmed, with compensation to the landowners. Decisions were decentralized, with safeguards to prevent either capture by the landowners, or stealing from the landowners. Wrangel wanted, after the disorders caused by war and revolution, to "reinststate the hard-working peasants and set them up on their land again, to weld them together and rally them to the defence of order and national principles."

Thus, the rural proletariat, wage laborers, would not necessarily receive free land, though they too could purchase land if not currently farmed. It seems like a good system, and crucially, one that recognized that returning to the old system, which had led them all to this pass, was not an option. It never is.

Wrangel was a hard but just man, and a stickler for order and discipline. In June of 1917, when sent back to the front and waiting for the arrival of the division he commanded, other troops in the town ([Stanislavov](#)), retreating ahead of the Reds, pillaged widely and engaged in a pogrom. Wrangel put the disorder down with floggings and executions.

Early in the Civil War, he needed to replenish his ranks, and he had captured a sizeable number of Reds. "I ordered three hundred and seventy of the Bolsheviks to line up. They were all officers and non-commissioned officers, and I had them shot on the spot. Then I told the rest that they too deserved death, but that I had let those who had misled them take the responsibility for their treason, because I wanted to give them a chance to atone for their crime and prove their loyalty to their country." No surprise, everyone volunteered, and Wrangel says they became among his best troops. (Elsewhere he notes that later in the war most Red troops were conscripts, and eager to join the Whites. And he faults Denikin for not taking a more capacious approach to recruiting Red prisoners, or those who had treated with the Bolsheviks earlier in the war).

Every several pages, Wrangel notes some execution in passing - for example, of some railroad employees bribed to carry passengers rather than munitions, "I had these three employees court-martialed, and they were hanged the same day." (Later, though, he stopped public executions, on the basis that "In view of the prevailing callousness, public executions no longer served to intimidate, they merely aggravated the existing state of moral apathy"). Of course, executions are only a small part of the mountains of corpses that appear in this book. Civil war is a brutal taskmaster; nobody should forget this.

Military victory was not to be. Wrangel did get a breathing space as the Russians fought the Poles in 1919 and 1920. The British government had abandoned him, and in fact pressured him to end the war on Red terms equivalent to unconditional surrender. The English, opportunists all, wanted to reopen trade with Russia, and [David Lloyd George](#) wanted to pander to those of the British working classes who saw in Bolshevism their own possible, supposedly bright, future.

Wrangel views this betrayal with bitterness, and he views Lloyd George with the greatest contempt - although he gave interviews to British and other foreign newspapers, trying hard to shore up support. But the French found it convenient to offer support, including de facto recognition, in order to assist the Poles. However, when the Poles beat back the Red menace, the French withdrew support, and the Reds were able to concentrate their forces on the southern front, dooming the Whites. Nonetheless, Wrangel organized and conducted one last major offensive; it was defeated by the Reds, who thereupon advanced through Taurida towards the Crimea.

Wrangel and everyone else in the Crimea knew what this meant for most of the population. Therefore, moving heaven and earth, Wrangel organized a massive boatlift, such that anyone who desired to go into exile could, though he made no promises of the future. After himself checking all the ports of embarkation, Wrangel was the last White to step off the shore, on November 14, 1920, ending the dream of Red defeat, at least for the next seventy years.

He himself accompanied the diaspora of the Army, at first initially in Greece and Turkey, then mostly forced out of those places by the English, who wanted the Army disbanded, because the Reds wanted it disbanded. Many moved to Serbia or Yugoslavia. Wrangel notes how he tried to get the Army transferred to Hungary, which had itself just suffered under, then defeated, a Red dictatorship and terror, but the French stopped the transfer, because "anti-Bolshevist intrigues contrary to the true interests of Hungary and of the civilized world." Typical. He himself lived for several years in Belgrade, heading up an organization he praises and of which he expects great things in a speech given in 1927, attached as the last chapter, the "General Union of Old Soldiers of Russia."

The truth was much more bitter, as it always is for defeated émigrés, a topic about which I know something, for my grandfather was a Hungarian émigré, who fled Communism in 1945 (and as it happens, I am currently helping edit his own war diary for private, family use). The men were forced to earn their bread any way they could in their new countries, in the Russians' case, usually by hard manual labor such as mining. Wrangel ends with a lament for this, tempered by the hope "But we are

confident the hour of recognition is at hand." He was wrong. In 1927, Wrangel reluctantly handed over control of the General Union to a Romanov grand duke, and moved to Brussels to return to mining engineering. He died within eighteen months.

I find it hard to get a handle on the last generation of the Russian ruling class. My father was a professor of Russian history, so I was exposed to thought about Russia growing up, but perhaps one has to be embedded in Russia to really understand. Was their time just up? Is it the nature of all civilizations that the ruling class eventually becomes unable to overcome a crisis? Wrangel's focus, where and when he ruled, suggests that some in the ruling class were capable of reforming their society.

Now, the word "reform" today has a bad odor; like "dialogue," it is simply a cant word of the Left, used to ease the forcing of their program on an unwilling and unreceptive audience. But it is the nature of all human institutions, because they are human, that they come to require legitimate reform. And it is also in the nature of all human institutions to resist that reform. I suspect there is no way out but to break the society and remake it, which is always a dangerous roll of the dice.

So what does Wrangel's story say of civil war in America, which more than a few people think is looming? Well, the Whites as a whole certainly show what not to do in a civil war. Other than that, it is often supposed that given the intermixing of Red and Blue America, old-fashioned territory-based civil war is impossible here. (We really need to flip those monikers, so the descendants of the Bolsheviks, today's "Blue America," get called what they really are).

The Russian Civil War disproves this. In truth, most people just want to keep their heads down, and will hew to the line of whoever controls the land where they live. Also, complete armies can arise nearly overnight, formed from fragments of an older army, or just organically. Perhaps occupying territory adverse to the occupiers would be harder in America, particularly in heavily-armed Red America (notably, both the Reds and Wrangel made civilians give up their weapons in the areas they controlled).

But maybe even Red America would bow to an occupying force - after all, people here have accepted without revolt the arbitrary and oppressive diktats, issued by modern commissars, tied to the Wuhan Plague. In fact, in other countries, notably recently the Netherlands, they have showed far more resistance. I am just not sure how much resistance Red America would offer an occupying force.

But I am sure that most of all, as Wrangel's career shows, it's all about the leadership. I suspect that if Red America perceived the costs of the insane reactions to the Wuhan Plague as higher, and if they had a leader around whom to coalesce, something could be done. Mutatis mutandis, the same is true, but much more true, of the inevitable final ideological clash looming in America. Let's hope we find that leader soon.

Charles is a business owner and operator, in manufacturing, and a recovering big firm M&A lawyer. He runs the blog, [The Worthy House](#).

The [featured image](#) shows, "Baron Petr Nikolaievitch Wrangel, by G.M Nedovizi.

