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October 1917–May 1918: The Beginning of the Civil War and Foreign Intervention

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May–November 1918: The Emergence of Independent States in Transcaucasia

Map 24

December 1918–November 1919: Denikin’s Dominance in the North Caucasus

During the era of the 1917 Russian revolutions and Civil War, Russia’s Caucasian periphery was embroiled in two related military and political struggles. The first was the conflict between the Red and White forces that roiled Russia proper, while the second pitted supporters of imperial power (*derzhavniks*) against Cossack and native separatists (*samostii-niks* and *natsionals*, respectively). The deepening crisis within the central government after February 1917 spurred the growth of autonomist, centrifugal political movements in regions with populations that were culturally and historically distinct from the “Great Russian” majority. In southern Russia, including the Caucasus, there was a shift away from the federalist impulses associated with the Provisional Government toward “independence as a means of survival”: a move away from what was perceived as a country sinking into Bolshevism and toward national self-determination beyond the Russian imperial state system.

THE NORTH CAUCASUS

The Southeastern Union of Cossack Hosts, Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and Free Peoples of the Steppe was established in October 1917 as an outgrowth of a conservative reaction within the region to the crisis of central government. The Southeastern Union did not recognize the legitimacy of the October Revolution in Petrograd and the Declaration of the Russian Soviet Republic, but its amorphous structure made it incapable of preventing its own constituent parts from disintegrating and fomenting separatism. By January 1918 there were competing

authorities in the Don region and in the North Caucasus. On one hand there were still regional authorities representing the deposed Provisional Government (these officials were forced to act independently given the murky future of “*edinaia i nedelimaia Rossia*” [the one and indivisible Russia]), but there were also pockets from which the military sovietization of the region was fanning out and constituting the republics that would become part of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. (In July 1918, in accordance with the first Soviet constitution, the Russian Soviet Republic officially became a federation of Soviet republics—the RSFSR.) By recognizing or not recognizing the central Soviet authorities (and the legitimacy of the RSFSR’s Council of People’s Commissars), regional governments were responding to the key issues of peace and land. During the winter of 1917–1918 hordes of politicized peasant soldiers (including Cossack veterans) from World War I’s collapsing Caucasus front refused to fight for “the bourgeoisie and the landowners” and instead hurried home to claim the land the revolution was promising them. This horde became a resource for the Soviet government’s military takeover of the Caucasus and later the Bolshevization of the soviets (people’s councils) that were put in power. By April 1918 pro-Bolshevik army units had overturned regional governments in Don and Kuban Provinces (the Kuban Rada), the government of Stavropol Province was in the hands of the Soviets, and a separate government of mountain peoples had been forced out of Vladikavkaz. By July 1918, with the exception of Don Province, all the regional Soviet entities that had been created in the North Caucasus out of the old administrative units were united into one North Caucasus Soviet

Republic and joined with the RSFSR. In April 1918 the military sovietization of Transcaucasia began with the proclamation of the Baku Commune in the east and attempts to take over the Sukhum District in the west.

The social and ethnic diversity of the North Caucasus had a significant impact on the dynamics of the Civil War. The Soviets’ military takeover of the region had the support of workers in urban centers and the non-Cossacks in Don, Kuban, and Terek Provinces whose land rights had been impinged. The majority of Cossacks, however, either wavered or opposed the prospect of the Soviets redistributing their land. The confiscation of crops and livestock by the Soviets and their increasingly brutal tactics helped transform the Cossack-dominated provinces of southern Russia into a bastion of anti-Soviet resistance. In May 1918 Soviet hotbeds were eliminated in the Don region and an “independent” republic was proclaimed by Don Cossacks—the Great Don Host. The Host established military and commercial ties with Germany, whose troops occupied the republic’s western portion, including Rostov-on-Don and Taganrog. At the same time the southeastern portion of the republic was a staging ground for the Volunteer Army of Mikhail Alekseev and Anton Denikin, former generals in the Imperial Army, which aimed to overthrow the Soviets throughout Russia, expel German and Turkish interventionists, and restore a united and indivisible Russia. The opposing aims of the Don government and the Volunteer Army (the Don Cossack’s separatism versus Denikin’s support of a unified Russia) affected the ability of the two to achieve their common goal of defeating Soviet Russia and the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army.