

IS A CIVIL WAR IN RUSSIA A POSSIBILITY?

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The internal crisis that has been unleashed in Russia with the riot led by the head of the Wagner mercenary company seems more like the beginning of a process than a closed event. The leader of said armed group, Yevgueni Prigozhin, at the end of May denounced that his country faced the risk of an outbreak, like the one that took place in 1917 in the midst of World War I, which brought Lenin to power. It should be noted that the aforementioned circumstance led to a bloody civil war that lasted five years. President Vladimir Putin agreed with this appreciation, who in his first statements during the riot pointed out that it could end up in a civil war in Russia. Both, in a coincidental though uncoordinated manner, set the concrete scenario of a civil war, of which Russia has a very concrete historical experience. Neither of them spoke of a *coup d'état* or an institutional crisis. The risk to which both alluded is probably real. To have a vision of what the Russian civil war was -which both Putin and Prigozhin clearly know- it is useful to refer to the book by the English historian Antony Beevor: *Russia: Revolution and Civil War, 1917-1921*, published in 2022, coinciding with the Russian invasion to Ukraine. It is not an improvised work and it has almost 700 pages, that is to say, it was not an occasional work, but circumstances gave it a relevant meaning. Nor is it an essay that seeks to propose explanations or hypotheses. It's a snappy, informed narrative that's self-explanatory.

On June 6, on daily Infobae we highlighted the risk implied by Prigozhin's warning about the civil war simultaneously with the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. We said then that "In May, in the war in Ukraine, while Russia was deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, the head of the Wagner Group warned of the risk of a civil war in his country." What was deployed were not atomic bombs, but missiles with limited payloads, with a controlled shock wave. But if used, they would lead to a dangerous escalation, though not to a "nuclear holocaust." The head of said mercenary organization, Yevgueni Prigozhin, after announcing the taking of Bakhmut, predicted that "this could end like in 1917, in a revolution." The point is that this revolution plunged Russia into a bloody civil war that lasted almost six years. The regional, local, ethnic armies and the military organization of the most

radicalized groups created an anarchic situation that prolonged the conflict, in which the victorious European powers participated, in almost all cases supporting the anti-communist side, which was defeated. We also said that, at the same time, "Prigozhin has a political agenda that takes into account the Russian presidential election, which will take place on March 17, 2024." Faced with the raids of Ukrainian forces into Russian territory, Putin seems indecisive and unable to react. This is what Wagner's leader wanted to take advantage of to escalate his criticism of the Russian military leadership, blaming it for military failures, and beginning to indirectly attack the President, accusing him of not reacting.

There seemed to be a situation similar to the present one in the conflict of 1917, when the Czar's forces were left fighting at the same time on two fronts: the Germans and their allies, and the communists. Today those loyal to Putin denounce Prigozhin's betrayal by rising up in the middle of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. In October 1917 Lenin's coup against the Czar was successful, and after winning, in February 1918 he signed the Brest-Litovsk peace agreement. The war effort against Germany had been going on for four months. For their part, the communists, as soon as they managed to assert themselves in power, signed peace. It was the most expensive in Russian history. The country had to accept unprecedented territorial concessions, which took it back to the 17th century in terms of its geographical extension. It lost Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus and Finland, as well as Poland. It was also left without the Caucasus. He had to agree to hand over territories that involved a third of food production, a third of its population and 90% of the coal it extracted. According to Beevor, the war lasted until 1921, but for most Russian historians until 1923, although in Central Asia it lasted until 1930. Estimates of the dead reach 10 million, a quarter of them due to military actions or repression; the other three due to hunger or plagues. This figure is equivalent to the total deaths in the First World War.

On June 27, before a military audience, Putin sought to rebuild his weakened position as political leader and commander of the Armed Forces, saying that "a civil war has been stopped." It is likely that it was so. The events are different, but Russia shows constants, even if it is not circumstantial. In November 1917, a month and a half after Lenin's coup, the nascent White Army that responded to the Czar began its insurrection against the communist government, which

occupied the city of Rostov, the same city that Prigozhin took. The civil war showed a very high diversity and fragmentation from the military point of view. The Red organized an army of millions of men, where the communist groups, workers, peasants and former officers of the tsarist army converged. The White were a kind of confederation of forces made up of remnants of the tsarist army, the green army of Ukrainian nationalists, most of the Cossack forces and the atamans (hetmans), warlords with a lot of autonomy, shifting alliances and a strong presence of criminals and ex-cons. The hetmans had a profile similar to that of the Prigozhin today. The single command in the finally defeated white forces never really existed. Foreign intervention in this civil war was important and significant. The victorious allies in the war, under the impetus of British War Secretary Winston Churchill, organized a joint American and French expeditionary force, which had a difficulty to articulate leadership, in support of the anti-communist forces. But also, in the far east of Russia, Japanese forces were supporting groups that were engaging Moscow from there. Chinese civilians also intervened as part of the Red's military effort. Czech prisoners held by Russia were released and organized a legion of 30,000 men that gained autonomy and significant military influence. But beyond the similarities, the big difference is found in the nuclear weapon, which did not exist more than a century ago. Added to this is the fact that some advisers to the Russian President himself are advising him not to run for the presidential election in March. It should be noted that, according to the constitution, Putin can remain in power until 2036.

In conclusion: the Prigozhin riot against Putin has not been resolved, and its main protagonists recognize the risk of civil war that it implied. Simultaneously in early June, while Russia was deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, the leader of the Wagner mercenaries reiterated his warning of civil war. The civil war that began in Russia in 1917 between the red and the white, implied that initially, the tsarist forces tried to fight on two fronts: against Germany and its allies, and the communists. Lastly, on June 27, Putin reiterated that a civil war had been avoided, but the situation remains fragile and the prevailing impression is that a process has been set in motion and it is far from over.