The Civil War 1918(?)–1921:

After moving to Moscow early in 1918, Lenin’s regime came under intense military and political pressure. As White forces approached, Lenin set up a ruthless emergency government, which sought to mobilize central Russia’s total resources. Relatively democratic norms of party life in 1917 yielded to dictatorship, and local popular bodies were suppressed.

"The republic is an armed camp. One must rule with iron when one cannot rule with law." Nicholas Bukharin, a member of the Politburo, speaking in 1917

Lenin made major political and economic decisions and reconciled jealous subordinates. Wisely, he let Trotsky handle military affairs, confirmed his decisions, and defended the able war commissar against intrigues by Stalin and others. Jakob Sverdlov ran the party organization until his death in 1919 when Stalin assumed that role. The eighth Party Congress in 1919 created the first operating Politburo with five full members (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev, and N.M. Krestinsky) and three candidates (Bukharin, Zinoviev and M. Kalinin) constituting Bolshevism’s general staff.

The 3 sides in the Civil War

The factions are labelled by colours; however do not fall into the trap of assuming that each was a homogenous group that identified itself under a collective title. Each ‘force’, but particularly the White, was made up of groups with distinct agendas, ideologies and backgrounds.

The Whites

Made up of:

- Socialist party members who often shared political views with the Bolsheviks, but who were angry at being excluded from the new political situation. (Ref - The suspension of the Elected Assembly, Jan 1918; p.74 Corin&Fiehn)
- Ex-Tsarist nobility, interested in reclaiming land and property and reinstating an autocratic state.
- Ex-Tsarist military officers, some nobility (see point above) and some from more humble backgrounds but separated from the mass of the peasantry by education and land ownership.
Cossack troops and officers.
Allied troops, sent to Russia to support the Eastern Front in WW1 and reassigned to prevent the worrying (to the western capitalist countries) rise of socialism. They also resented the Bolshevik withdrawal from war, plus the Bolsheviks had confiscated land owned by the allies and refused to honour loans made to the Tsarist government. As well as troops, supplies were sent. Winston Churchill (British war secretary), for example sent £100million of equipment and supplies to the Whites.
Also soldiers from Japan, Italy, Serbia, Greece, Romania and Canada, all with their own agenda.
Volunteers who felt persecuted by the Bolshevik attack on religion.

The Reds
Made up of:

- Bolshevik revolutionaries
- The Red Guard, the military wing of the revolutionary party.
- Experienced, mainly mid-ranking, Tsarists officers who were permitted to join. There families were threatened if they were thought to be acting against Bolshevik interests.
- Conscripted peasant soldiers, who at first were inexperienced but with time became increasingly efficient due to the training of experienced officers and effective propaganda.
- Sailors and soldiers from the rapidly disintegrating Russian army.

The Greens
Made up of:

- Deserters from the other 2 armies.
- Groups of bandits who raided vulnerable areas.
- Local 'militia' defending their home regions from the unstability.
- National forces after independance, like Nestor Makhno who led a Ukrainian army and fought alongside Whites, Reds and Germans at various points depending on where his advantage lay.

It is worth note that the Greens fought for themselves, also for either other side as suited individual Green forces.
The Causes

1) **Ideological differences** - A key difference was that the Bolsheviks were imposing a new, revolutionary government upon a country that had a strong autocratic tradition, regardless of how unstable that had become. Tsarists found the idea of a socialist society unacceptable.

2) **Land issues** - For many of the Tsarist officers and Cossacks, the knowledge that private land ownership was being abolished and that land was being communally shared with peasants and social inferiors was a direct challenge.

3) **Brest-Litovsk** - Although the end of the war had become a political and economic necessity by mid-1917, many were unhappy with the peace terms. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk demanded enormous concessions from Russia. For example, 80% of Russian coalfields were surrendered, 50% of heavy industry sites, 26% of both the population and the railway system, and 25% of Russian land. For many, this was an unacceptable level of loss. Even Trotsky, a member of the Bolshevik leadership and a staunch supporter of Lenin, refused to agree to these terms and walked out of the negotiations. But Lenin accepted because he needed peace at any cost. Extended war would see him toppled, either through popular unrest at the ongoing effects of the war on the Russian people, or if German and Austrian forces captured his power base as they advanced through areas where the Russian army was rapidly disintegrating through desertion, low morale and battle losses. Many Russians who were offended at the terms volunteered for the White armies.

4) **International worry** - For Britain, France and USA, the emergence of a former ally into a full communist state was a worry. The use of troops to support a counter-revolution seemed a positive step.

5) **Nationalism** - Since the 1900’s, Lenin had been using national self-determination as a policy to undermine the Tsarist state. In 1917, amongst the first Sovnarkom decrees was the right to self-determination for national groups. At the time this was only a paper gesture for support as he did not control the relevant areas of Russia. Since he intended to create a world-wide, single communist state and also realised that the industry, land mass and strategic support of the areas such as the Ukraine were necessary if Russia could be stabilised, he had to turn back on the policy and refuse national self-determination. To make matters worse, this message was often transmitted untactfully. For example, Piatakov (a Bolshevik leader in the Ukraine) announced “On the whole we must not support the Ukrainians, because their movement is not convenient for the proletariat. Russia cannot exist without the Ukrainian sugar industry,”
and the same can be said in regard to coal (Donbass), cereals (the black earth belt), etc....

6) **The Czech Legion** – A force of Czechs, swelled by returning POWs following peace with Germany, intended to continue fighting with the allies in the West, despite Russia leaving the war. Lenin agreed and allowed them to use the Trans-Siberian railway. On route mistrust and tensions between the Bolshevik soviets and Czech soldiers resulted in the Bolsheviks attempting to arrest and disarm the legion. The legion resisted and captured large parts of the railway system. This was the direct trigger for full civil war. (The Czech legion did not complete the war - the 1918 declaration of Czech independence caused large number to desert and go home.)
7) The Outcome

Also the map below, taken from Steve Waugh’s *Essential Modern World History* (2001:426), a GCSE level book but useful graphic summary.

The Poles took advantage of the Civil War and launched a surprise invasion in 1920, capturing Kiev. A counter-attack by the Red Army drove the Poles back to the outskirts of Warsaw and they agreed to a peace treaty.

General Yudenich attacked from the north in the summer of 1919. He threatened Petrograd but by the end of the year he too had been defeated by Trotsky and the Red Army.

General Wrangel in June 1920 attacked from the south hoping to link up with the invading Poles. But the Poles made peace and Wrangel’s army was forced to withdraw.

Admiral Kolchak invaded eastern Russia in the Spring of 1919 and advanced as far as Kazan. Trotsky organised a counter-attack against the White forces and drove them back. Kolchak was later captured and executed.

General Deniken advanced with the White Army from the Ukraine to within 300 kilometres of Moscow. Again Trotsky organised a counter-attack. Deniken resigned his command and his army was disbanded.
The course of the war was in 3 main phases:

1) (Oct. 1917-Sept.1918) Skirmishing anti-Bolshevik resistance in the Don region, along with the revolt of the Czech legion and the establishment of two rival governments at Samara and Omsk with their own military forces. In Sept. 1918 the Red Army was formed by Trotsky.

2) (Mar. 1919-Nov.1919) The most decisive phase. Following initial successes by White generals in the East, South and North, the Red Army was able to inflict a series of defeats on the Whites that had largely broken them as an effective force by mid Nov. 1919.

3) (Nov.1919-Nov.1920) The last white force, under Denikin, fortified itself in the Crimea. After his resignation, and the appointment of Wrangel, the last White general, the remaining White forces were evacuated in November 1920. It is generally accepted that this date was delayed only by the outbreak of the Russo-Polish War.

In short, the Reds, against apparent expectation, broke the military effectiveness of the White forces, finally defeating the last White army, Wrangel's Southern Volunteer Army, in November 1920. The remainder of this final army was evacuated by British and French ships. Following this, the Bolsheviks turned on, and defeated, the most prominent Green force, the Ukrainian Makhno, who had been acting as an irregular Red division in the later stages of the war.

Since 1919, they had been simultaneously fighting the Civil War and the Russo-Polish War. The latter was against Polish troops who had taken advantage of the chaos to take back territory that Poland had previously lost to Russia. This was initially successful, with Kiev being captured in 1920, but with the dwindling of White forces, Lenin and Trotsky were able to direct more forces to this conflict, with the result that the Poles were pushed back to Warsaw. Also, as the Civil War drew to a close, many non-red volunteers joined the Red army, seeing a chance to defeat an old traditional enemy. The Bolsheviks themselves saw this as a chance to extend revolution and communism into other countries by force. They thought that a successful campaign against Poland might trigger a revolution in Germany, which was undergoing social unrest and poverty.

Unfortunately for Lenin, this apparent success led to them going one step too far. Red troops advanced too far and too quickly, leaving the Polish army able to counter-attack. By early 1921, Red forces were not able to continue, and Lenin was forced to sign the Treaty of Riga, whereby peace with Poland was achieved at the cost of large areas of White Russia and the Ukraine.
Explaining the outcome

Why the Reds won and the Whites lost:

- **Geography** -
  - The Red army controlled the central area of Russia, including the main cities. They also had the hub of rail communications, so troops and supplies could quickly be moved. The Red areas also contained the main armament factories, the old Tsarist army supply depots and artillery parks. The central area was heavily populated, so the Reds could conscript many soldiers.
  - By contrast, the White forces were scattered around the central area, and strategically in weak locations. They were isolated from means to manufacture munitions, and relied to a large extent on foreign supplies. There were no communication links between forces, instead messengers on horse were used.

- **Unity and organisation** -
  - The Red army had a single command structure, backed by a rigid party hierarchy. Trotsky used this, and skills in organisation, to drill the Red army into an efficient organisation.
  - The Whites were not united, either physically due to scattered location, ethnically, due to the large mix of nationalities or ideologically. Within the Whites were groups who could not stand each other, such as the difference between revolutionary fighters who wanted to remove Bolshevism but keep the socialist republic, political parties who wanted the Constituent Assembly and democratic ideals to be restored, and Tsarists, who wanted a full return to an autocratic state with private land ownership. On top of this, many white generals disliked each other and refused to work together or co-ordinate strategies.

- **Leadership** -
  - The Red Army had strong leadership, most notably Trotsky who was able inspire soldiers and provide brave leadership along with his special forces who accompanied him, but also in the form of commissars, political officers committed to the Bolshevik and socialist ideology. These officers produced strict discipline. Red soldiers knew that they would be machine-gunned down for retreating in battle. They would also be shot for selling equipment, faking injuries or disobeying orders.
  - White leaders were generally second rate. Many were cruel and this reminded the common soldiers of service in the Tsarist armies. The contempt created a division between common soldier and officer. This led to indiscipline problems. General Denikin said 'I can do nothing with my army. I am glad when it carries out my
Corruption in the leadership meant that supplies of food and clothes often ended up on the black market, to fund the officers' supplies of vodka and cocaine. Russian units often had to wear spare British uniforms and prostitutes English nurses' uniforms.

"The flabby, panicky mob would be transformed in two or three weeks into an efficient fighting force. What was needed for this? It needed good commanders, a few dozen experienced fighters, a dozen or so Communists ready to make any sacrifice, boots for the bare-footed, a bath house, am energetic propaganda campaign, food, underwear, tobacco and matches. The train took care of all this." (Trotsky - describing how the Red Army was created.)

"I issue this warning. If any detachment retreats without orders, the first to be shot will be the commissar, the second the commander. Brave and gallant soldiers will be appointed in their places. Cowards, dastards and traitors will not escape the bullet. This I solemnly promise in the presence of the entire Red Army." (Trotsky issuing orders to frontline troops.)

- Support -
  o Neither side was particularly popular with the peasantry, who formed the main bulk of the common soldiery. Desertion was high from both sides soon after soldiers were conscripted. But Lenin had the advantage over the Whites, because he offered communal land to the peasantry, whilst the Whites made it clear that land would be returned to the elite if they won. White general Kolchak even promised private peasant land to landowners who had not owned it before the war.
  o Although Reds lost popularity with national forces, so did the Whites, who wanted to return Russia to the Imperial pre-1917 borders. National groups refused to help Whites when they were in their territory.
  o The Bolsheviks did not have widespread popular support amongst the peasantry, except for key groups of urban workers, some soldiers and some peasants. However, the peasantry did want to retain what they saw as the gains they had made in 1917. Since the Whites had a general Tsarist association, many peasants supported the Reds as the lesser of two evil, the best means to protect what they had gained.
  o The Whites also, with the help of Bolshevik propaganda, gained a reputation for cruelty. For example, at Rostov, pro-Red miners who were captured were buried alive.

- Foreign Support -
  o Foreign support should have swung the war for the Whites, but it was half-hearted and inefficient from countries who had only a marginal interest and also their own post-WW1 problems. It also
allowed the Reds to gain popular support by claiming to be the defenders against foreign invasion. Most foreign support was withdrawn before the end of the war, leaving Russian Whites alone.

- **Propaganda**
  - The Reds realised the value of propaganda far better than Whites, although both sides made use of it. Lenin’s ideas were particularly imaginative and focused upon the White confiscation of land, the foreign invaders supporting the Whites, and the wonderful new Bolshevik society.

In this picture, a Red soldier is about to be executed by White soldiers.

**Summary**

You need to know why the war started, who was on each side (with the inherent divides that this caused), and why it ended the way it did.

- What were the key factors of the Civil War?
- Why did the Civil War start?
- Why did the Reds win/ the Whites lose?
- Who were the three sides in the war and who made them up?

See notes for War Communism as well. This is a topic that links closely to Civil War, as it was an economic policy that helped to maintain the Bolshevik financial grip on the country to a degree during the war.
These sources indicate one of the major effects of the Civil War on Russia. It also in part explains why War Communism had to come to an end to be replaced by NEP. See your notes on NEP and try to connect them to this.