

History: Foreign Interventions in Revolutionary Russia

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All over Europe, the First World War had brought about a potentially revolutionary situation as early as 1917. In countries where the authorities continued to represent the traditional elite, exactly as had been the case in 1914, they aimed to prevent the realization of this potential by means of repression, concessions, or both. But in the case of Russia, the revolution not only broke out but succeeded, and the Bolsheviks began work on the construction of the world's very first socialist society. It was an experiment for which the elites of the other countries felt no sympathy whatsoever; to the contrary, they fervently hoped that this project would soon end in a dismal fiasco. (It was also a revolutionary experiment that would disappoint numerous sympathizers because the socialist Utopia failed to spring whole, Athena-like, from the brow of the Russian revolutionary Zeus.)

In elitist circles in London, Paris, and elsewhere, they were convinced of the ineluctability of the failure of the Bolsheviks' bold experiment but, just to be sure, it was decided to send troops to Russia to support the "white" counterrevolutionaries against the Bolshevik "reds" in a conflict that was to morph into a great, long, and bloody civil war. A first wave of allied troops arrived in Russia in April 1918, when British and Japanese soldiers disembarked in Vladivostok. They established contact with the "whites," who were already involved in a full-blown war against the Bolsheviks. In total, the British alone would send 40,000 men to Russia.

In that same spring of 1918, Churchill, then minister of war, also sent an expeditionary corps to Murmansk, in the north of Russia, in order to support the troops of the "white" General Kolchak, in the hope that this might help to replace the Bolshevik rulers with a government friendly to Britain. Other countries sent smaller contingents of soldiers, including France, the United States (15,000 men), Japan, Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Greece. In some cases, the allied troops became involved in fighting against the Germans and Ottomans on Russia's frontiers, but it was clear that they had not come for that purpose, but rather to overthrow the Bolshevik regime and to "strangle the Bolshevik baby in its crib," as Churchill so delicately put it. The British, in particular, also hoped that their presence might make it possible to pocket some attractive bits and pieces of territory of a Russian state that seemed to be falling apart, much like the Ottoman Empire. This explains why a British unit marched from Mesopotamia to the shores of the Caspian Sea, namely to the oil-rich regions around Baku, capital of modern Azerbaijan. Like the Great War itself, the allied intervention in Russia aimed both to fight the revolution and to achieve imperialist objectives.

In Russia, the war had spawned not only conditions favourable to a social revolution, but also — at least in some parts of this gigantic country — to national revolutions among a number of ethnic minorities. Such national movements had already reared their heads

during the war, and they generally belonged to the right-wing, conservative, racist, and anti-Semitic variety of nationalism. Germany's political and military elite recognized close ideological relatives in these movements and potential allies in the war against Russia. (Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, were considered useful in the war against Russia, but ideologically these revolutionary Russians were antipodes of Germany's reactionary regime.) The Germans did not support the Finnish, Baltic, Ukrainian, and other nationalists out of ideological sympathy, but because they could be used to weaken Russia; they also did it because they hoped to stamp German satellite states out of the ground in Eastern and Northern Europe, preferably monarchies with as "sovereign" some scion of a German noble family. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk proved to be an opportunity to create a number of states of this type. From July 11 to November 2, 1918, a German aristocrat named Wilhelm (II) Karl Florestan Gero Crescentius, Duke of Urach and Count of Württemberg, could thus enjoy being King of Lithuania under the name of Mindaugas II.

With the armistice of November 11, 1918, Germany was doomed to disappear from the scene in Eastern and Northern Europe and that put an end to the dream of German hegemony over there. However, Article 12 of the armistice authorized German troops to remain in Russia, the Baltic lands, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe as long as the Allies deemed it necessary; in other words, as long as they remained useful for the purpose of fighting the Bolsheviks, which is precisely what the Germans did. In fact, British and French leaders such as Lloyd George and Foch henceforth considered revolutionary Russia as a more dangerous enemy than Germany. The national movements of Balts, Finns, Poles, etc., were now totally embroiled in the Russian Civil War, and the Allies replaced the Germans as their supporters, also militarily speaking, as long as they fought the "reds," rather than the "whites," as they also often did, since much Eastern European real estate, formerly part of the Czarist Empire, was claimed simultaneously by the Russian "whites" and by Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and other nationalists.

In all the countries emerging from the clouds of dust rising after the collapse of the czarist empire, there were basically two kinds of people. First, workers and peasants and other members of the lower classes, who favoured a social revolution, supported the Bolsheviks, and were willing to settle for some sort of autonomy for their own ethnic-linguistic minority within the new multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state — inevitably dominated by its Russian component — that was taking the place of the former czarist empire and would be known as the Soviet Union. Second, the majority, though certainly not all, of the members of the old aristocratic and bourgeois elites and of the petty bourgeoisie, who were against a social revolution and therefore detested and fought the Bolsheviks and wanted nothing less than total independence vis-à-vis the new state being created by the latter. Their nationalism was a typical nineteenth-century nationalism, right-wing and conservative, closely associated with an ethnic group, a language, a religion, and a supposedly glorious past, mostly mythical, that was expected to be reborn thanks to a national revolution. Civil wars also erupted between "whites" and "reds" in Finland, Estonia, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

If in many cases the "whites" emerged victorious and were able to establish resolutely anti-Bolshevik and anti-Russian states, it was not only because the Bolsheviks would long fight with their backs against the wall in the Russian heartland itself and were therefore rarely able to provide much support for their "red" comrades in the Baltic and elsewhere in the periphery of the former czarist empire, but also because first the Germans and then the Allies — particularly the British — intervened *manu militario* to aid the "whites." At the end of November 1918, for example, a squadron of the Royal Navy, commanded by Admiral Edwyn

Alexander-Sinclair (and later by Admiral Walter Cowan) showed up in the Baltic Sea in order to supply the Estonian and Latvian “whites” with weapons and help them to fight their “red” countrymen as well as Bolshevik Russian troops. The British sank a number of ships of the Russian fleet and blockaded the rest of it in its base, Kronstadt. As for Finland, in the spring of 1918 already, German troops had helped the local “whites” to achieve victory and enabled them to proclaim the independence of their country.

It was clearly the intention of the patrician decision-makers in London, Paris, Washington, etc., to also insure victory for the “whites” at the expense of the “reds” in the civil war in Russia itself and thus to abort the Bolshevik enterprise, a large-scale experiment for which too many British, French, American, and other plebeians displayed interest and enthusiasm and which therefore displeased their “betters.” In a note addressed to Clemenceau in the spring of 1919, Lloyd George expressed his concern that “the whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution,” and he continued by saying that “there is a deep sense not only of discontent, but of anger and revolt, amongst the workmen against the war conditions . . . the whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other.”

The Allies’ intervention in Russia was counterproductive, however, because foreign support discredited the “white,” counterrevolutionary forces in the eyes of countless Russians, who increasingly considered the Bolsheviks as true Russian patriots and therefore supported them. In many ways, the Bolsheviks’ social revolution was simultaneously a national Russian revolution, a struggle for the survival, independence, and dignity of Mother Russia, first against the Germans then against the allied troops who invaded the country from all sides and conducted themselves “as if they were in Central Africa.” (Seen from this perspective, the Bolsheviks look very much like the Jacobins of the French Revolution, who had simultaneously fought for the revolution and for France.) It was for this reason that the Bolsheviks could benefit from the support of a large number of bourgeois and even aristocratic nationalists, support that was probably a major determinant of their victory in the civil war against the combination of the “whites” and the Allies. Even the famous general Brussilov, a nobleman, supported the “reds.” “The awareness of my duty toward the [Russian] nation,” he explained, “caused me to refuse to obey my natural social instincts.” In any event, the “whites” were nothing more than “a microcosm of the ruling and governing classes of [Russia’s] ancien régime — military officers, landowners, churchmen — with minimal popular support,” according to Arno Mayer. They were also corrupt, and a large part of the money the Allies sent them disappeared into their pockets.

If the allied intervention in Russia, sometimes promoted as a “crusade against Bolshevism,” was doomed to failure, it was also because it was strongly opposed by countless soldiers and civilians in Britain, France, and elsewhere in the “West.” Their slogan was “Hands Off Russia!” The British soldiers who had not been demobilised after the armistice of November 1918 and who were supposed to be shipped off to Russia protested and organized mutinies; for example, in January 1919 in Dover, Calais, and other Channel ports. In that same month, Glasgow was hit by a series of strikes whose objectives included forcing the government to abandon its interventionist policy with respect to Russia. In March 1919, Canadian troops rioted in a camp in Ryl, in Wales, causing five men to be killed and twenty-three wounded; later in 1919, similar riots occurred in other army camps. These troubles certainly reflected the soldiers’ impatience to be discharged and return home, but they also revealed that all too many of the troops could not be relied on for a tour of duty of indefinite duration in distant Russia. In France, meanwhile, strikers in Paris loudly demanded an end to armed

intervention in Russia, and troops that were already in Russia made it clear that they did not want to fight the Bolsheviks, but wanted to return home. In February, March, and April 1919, mutinies and desertions ravaged French troops stationed in the port of Odessa and British forces in the northern district of Murmansk, and some of the British even changed sides and joined the ranks of the Bolsheviks. "Soldiers who had survived Verdun and the Battle of the Marne did not want to go fight in the plains of Russia," was the sour remark made by a French officer. In the US contingent, numerous men resorted to self-mutilation in order to seek repatriation. The Allied soldiers sympathized increasingly with the Russian revolutionaries; they were becoming more and more "contaminated" by the Bolshevism they were supposed to be fighting. And so it happened that in the spring of 1919 the French, British, Canadians, Americans, Italians, and other foreign troops had to be ingloriously withdrawn from Russia.

The Western elites turned out to be unable to overcome the Bolsheviks via an armed intervention. They therefore changed course and provided generous political and military support to the new states that emerged from the western territories of the former czarist empire, such as Poland and the Baltic countries. These new states were without exception the products of national revolutions, inspired by reactionary varieties of nationalism, all too often tainted by anti-Semitism; and they were dominated by the survivors of the old elites, including large landowners and generals of aristocratic background, the "national" Christian churches, and the industrialists. With rare exceptions such as Czechoslovakia, they were not democracies at all, but were ruled by authoritarian regimes, usually headed by a high-ranking military man of noble origin, for example Horthy in Hungary, Mannerheim in Finland, and Pilsudski in Poland. The outspoken anti-Bolshevism of these new states was matched only by their anti-Russian sentiment. However, the Bolsheviks managed to recuperate some territories on the periphery of the former czarist empire, for example Ukraine.

The outcome of this confusing medley of conflicts was a kind of tie: the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia and as far west as Ukraine, but anti-Bolshevik, anti-Russian nationalists with great and mutually conflicting territorial ambitions prevailed in areas further west and north, specifically Poland, the Baltic States, and Finland. It was an arrangement that satisfied nobody, but was ultimately accepted by everybody — though clearly only "for the duration." A cordon sanitaire consisting of a string of hostile states was thus erected around revolutionary Russia with the assistance of the Western powers in the hope that it would "isolate Bolshevism within Russia," as Margaret MacMillan has written. For the time being, that was all the West was able to do, but the ambition of putting an end to the revolutionary experiment in Russia sooner or later remained very much alive in London, Paris, and Washington. For a long time, the Western leaders kept hoping that Russia's revolution would collapse by itself, but that failed to happen. Later, during the 1930s, they would hope that Nazi Germany would take on the task of destroying the revolution in its lair, the Soviet Union; this is why they would allow Hitler to remilitarize Germany and, via the infamous "appeasement policy," encourage him to do so.

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