

# Intervention and Civil War, 1918 - 1920

Contributed by Lawrence Jorgensen

That the United States actually sent units of the United States Army into Russia at a time especially critical in Russian history, the first months of the Russian Civil War, no one disputes. That these soldiers, three regiments to Northern Russia, to the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel, and one division, some 8500 men, to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan, engaged in combat with elements of the Red Guard and the Red Army is also not disputed. That these soldiers, especially those sent to Siberia, actively assisted the anti-Bolshevik forces in the area in various and numerous non-combatant ways, thus liberating them for combat against the Bosheviks, is also generally agreed upon.

The question that American historians have attempted to resolve has had nothing to do with the fact of "intervention," or invasion, depending upon your point of view, but with the motivation behind those two military expeditions and the policy of which they were a manifestation.

I have already stated the traditional interpretation; let me add a few specifics. It has been argued that the American President, Woodrow Wilson, and his various key advisors, "abhorred the very thought of intervention." The United States, this argument insists, intervened only after considerable prodding by its allies, and then only to assist in the evacuation of the Czech Legion from Siberia, to prevent the Germans from seizing essential war materials, and finally to keep a watch upon the Japanese &ndash; who were also intervening in Siberia.

This interpretation maintains that the intervention continued for sixteen months after the end of the First World War because of indecision, confusion and inertia on the part of American leaders &ndash; and not because of any sinister, imperialistic or anti-Bolshevik intent.

In recent years, various American historians have challenged that traditional argument. Without doubt the most important and influential of these historians is Professor William Appleman Williams, to whose insight, scholarship and fundamental humanism this writer and this article are indebted. Williams's books, as well as those by other "revisionist" authorities are included in the "selected bibliography," but special attention should be given to his article "American Intervention in Russia: 1917-1920," in *Containment and Revolution*, edited by David Horowitz.

When in November of 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power, the initial American response was

non-recognition of the new government. Some years earlier, in relation to the Mexican Revolution, President Wilson had instituted a new principle in American diplomacy — the principle of non-recognition. That is, the United States would extend its diplomatic recognition and blessing not upon the traditional concept of recognizing the de facto government as the de jure government, but instead upon the rather original notion of personal acceptance by the President. Since Wilson did not approve of either the Bolsheviks or the way in which they came to power, the United States would not grant diplomatic recognition to the new Soviet government.

It is also

true that under the moral and political guidance of Woodrow Wilson, the United States had militarily intervened previously in Haiti, Nicaragua, and Dominican Republic and Mexico. Now these earlier military interventions in no way prove that Wilson had determined to intervene in Russia in response to the Bolshevik revolution; on the other hand, however, these earlier military interventions do indicate that the American President obviously did not oppose on principle military interventions in other countries.

Both

President Wilson and his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, were fundamentally opposed to the Bolshevik revolution; however when the President and other members of the administration publicly attacked the Bolsheviks, in November of 1917, the British government advised the U.S. that "any overt step taken against the Bolsheviks might only strengthen their determination to make peace [with Germany] and might be used to influence anti-Allied feeling in Russia."

Colonel

Edward House, a personal advisor to the President, added his suggestion that criticism be suppressed, as "it will throw Russia into the lap of Germany if the allies and ourselves express such views at this time." Accepting this advice, Wilson and Lansing ceased their attacks upon the Bolsheviks for being communists, and began to describe them in terms of "German intrigue," both of them knowing that this was not true. Thus, for a time, the leaders of the administration used two different descriptions in reference to the Bolsheviks: in public, they were referred to as German agents, while in private, they were called "dangerous social revolutionaries."

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Bolsheviks, Lansing wrote in a private memorandum to Wilson, on December 7, 1918, pose "a direct threat at existing social order in all countries." He urged upon the President that "the correct policy for a government which believes in political institutions as they now exist and based on nationality and private property is to leave these dangerous idealists alone and have no direct dealings with them." While this continues to be the basis of United States' foreign policy toward militant communists, December 7, 1918, was but one month after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Not only was their power not consolidated, but they had yet to do anything that the United States — or President Wilson — might oppose. American opposition was on ideological grounds; it was because these new leaders of Russia were communists.

The public charge that the Bolsheviks were agents of German Imperialism enabled the President to dismiss Lenin, Trotsky and the other leaders of the Soviet regime as legitimate products of the Russian Revolution. As you probably know from somewhere in your reading of American History, Woodrow Wilson on several occasions proclaimed his adherence to the principle of self-determination &ndash; that is, that each and every nation has the right to determine its own form or system of government. To be publicly consistent, Wilson had to phrase his opposition to the Bolsheviks in terms of foreign intrigue in the affairs in Russia. The Bolsheviks, according to Wilson, were violating the principle of self-determination, not he &ndash; they were the agents of German Imperialism.

## INTERVENTION

Shortly after Lansing wrote his private memorandum to President Wilson, rumors reached the United States that several Tsarist generals had organized armed opposition to the Soviets in the south of Russia. The Secretary of State then proposed that the Secretary of State then proposed that the U.S. support "a military dictatorship backed by loyal troops." And on the night of December 11, 1917, Wilson and Lansing spent an hour and twenty minutes going over the Russian situation, finally deciding to extend aid to the rumored anti-Bolshevik forces. In fact, the next day, Lansing approached the Secretary of the Treasury, William Gibbs McAdoo, and officially requested the necessary funds.

In other words, the United States, independent of its associated allies, and knowing full well from reports of their own people in Russia that the Bolsheviks were not agents of the German government, had decided to intervene in the Russian Revolution on the side of the anti-Bolsheviks, and in support of a "military dictatorship." The actual American intervention did not take place then, in December, 1917. Those rumored Tsarist generals proved to be generals without soldiers, and the United States had to wait until a more suitable military force arose in opposition to the Bolsheviks. That suitable military force came later, in 1918, and the United States then intervened. The point that must be made here is that as early as December 11, 1917, only one month after the Bolshevik seizure of power, the President of the United States had decided in principle on intervention in Russia.

The predicament facing President Wilson was a common enough one: he wanted to intervene against the Bolsheviks, but he had to phrase the intervention operation in terms that would not force the mass of Russians to enthusiastically support the new Soviet government, or drive the Soviet government and the Russian people into the arms of the Germans, with whom the United States was still at war.

Proof of this contention can be found in the American opposition to a Japanese proposal for intervention in late December, 1917&mdash; when Lansing told the Japanese ambassador that "it would be unwise for either the United States or Japan to

send troops to Vladivostok as it would undoubtedly result in the unifying of the Russians under the Bolsheviks against foreign intervention."

#### Additional

evidence of the essential and primary bias against the Bolsheviks in motivating American intervention came in the first month of 1918, when American military advisors in Russia urged the United States government to assist the Bolsheviks in resisting the continuing German advance -- with whom Russia was still at war. Then, in February, the French government formally asked the United States if it would join with France in a general collaboration with the Bolsheviks, against the Germans.

#### Lansing,

after submitting the formal French request to Wilson, later penciled the notation upon it: "This is out of the question. Submitted to the President who says the same thing." That was February 19, 1918. In Moscow, a few days later, the Bolshevik Central Committee voted to accept assistance from the allies if it was offered -- Lenin himself cast the tie-breaking vote. And on March 5, Lenin and Trotsky gave to Raymond Robins, an official of the American Red Cross mission in Russia, a specific inquiry about the possibility of beginning talks concerning United States aid to Soviet Russia.

#### It seems

clear that had the United States government been more anti-German than it was anti-Bolshevik, February and March, 1918, would have been the time to demonstrate some. As Professor William A. Williams has correctly observed, "American leaders were of course interested in re-establishing resistance to the Germans on the eastern front, but they were not sufficiently anti-German to overcome their anti-Bolshevism." Without assistance, the Bolsheviks had to seek peace with the Germans. Their decision to accept the heavy demands of Germany in order to gain peace and, in their minds, to save the revolution, set in motion a series of events, leading to armed intervention by over a dozen nations, the United States included, and one of the most brutal and costly civil wars in history.

#### By the

terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in March of 1918, Russia had to give up one-third of her farm lands, half of her industrial strength, and some 60 million people. But even more serious than this loss, for this was a loss that could be recovered later, with the recovery of Russia, was the intense opposition of many Bolshevik and Socialist Revolutionary allies of the Soviet leaders to the terms of the treaty. Then, refusing to recognize the Treaty, British, French, and Japanese troops landed in Russia: The British and French, in Murmansk and Archangel; the Japanese, in Vladivostok. By May, the Socialist Revolutionaries were in open political opposition to the Bolsheviks, arming, and aligning themselves with the interventionists. Also in May, began the conflict in Siberia between the Czech Legion and the Bolsheviks, the conflict that precipitated the civil war.

#### With the

withdrawal of Russia from the war against Germany, the 40,000 strong Czech Legion, which had been fighting with the Russians against the Germans, began a slow retreat eastward, through the Ukraine, and then into Siberia. The allies had decided to remove the Czechs from the port of Vladivostok and transport them around the world to the western front in France, but on their way across Siberia on the Trans-Siberian railroad, conflicts developed between them and the Bolshevik officials along the route -- conflicts which by May had become open warfare. The Czechs succeeded in defeating the local Bolsheviks and seized control of the entire Trans-Siberian, from western Siberia to and including the city of Vladivostok itself. Then, around the towns and cities in the hands of the Czechs, sprang up armed bands of Socialist Revolutionaries who joined the opposition to the Bolsheviks. Encouraged by British, French, and American agents, the Czechs and S.R.'s established two independent governments in Siberia.

Wilson was

becoming impatient, probably because the Japanese were making louder and louder noises about intervention, and Wilson did not want the Japanese to gain control of that which was to be taken from the Bolsheviks. At the end of May, 1918, and before he had learned of the fighting between the Bolsheviks and the Czechs, Wilson told a British representative that he was prepared to "go as far as intervention against the wishes of the Russian people knowing it was eventually for their good, provided he thought the scheme had any practical chance of success." He was still opposed to unilateral Japanese intervention, stating that he felt this might antagonize the non-Bolsheviks in Russia. He then told the English, "We must watch the situation carefully and sympathetically and be ready to move whenever the right time arrives."

On June 2,

the president received information about the fighting between Czechs and Bolsheviks in Siberia. A paper then prepared by an Assistant Secretary of State for Lansing pointed out that since the Czechs were antagonistic to the Bolsheviks, they would be "available to be used as a military expedition to overcome Bolshevik influence, and under Allied guidance to restore order." One week later, Lansing became concerned about the increasing public and newspaper discussion of the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Russia, and he offered to Wilson an ingenious proposal -- he suggested that Herbert Hoover, the Food Administrator of the Wilson Administration, take charge of an economic mission that would in turn provide a sort of excuse for military intervention before this work had begun."

In July,

the final decision to intervene was made; in August, United States troops landed in Vladivostok, others reaching Archangel the following month. The United States had begun its participation in the Russian Civil War.

This essay

does not argue that the United States was the prime mover or initiator of the Allied "intervention" or invasion of Russia. Neither is it my contention that the United States was the principle financial backer of the anti-Bolshevik forces; Great Britain, once again, holds that dubious distinction. Rather, it has been my argument that the United States acted in essentials no differently than the rest of the interventionists, and that the primary motivation in that

intervention was the desire to destroy the newly established Bolshevik regime &ndash; to put a stop to the Russian Revolution.

The last

American troops left Russian soil for the United States on April 1, 1920, one year and four months after the end of the First World War, one year and four months after any need to combat either German Imperialism or German intrigue &ndash; and it must be added, only after the last major anti-Bolshevik force had been destroyed.

It is true

that the number of American soldiers involved in the intervention or invasion were too few to be effective in defeating the Bolsheviks. President Wilson even apologized for this small number to Winston Churchill at the Versailles peace Conference, telling him, "Conscripts could not be sent and volunteers probably could not be obtained." He felt guilty, he told Churchill, that the United States had in Russia insufficient forces, but, he insisted, it was not possible to increase them.

Secretary

of State Lansing's explanation to a close personal friend was, "I wish you to know that it was not lack of sympathy which prevented the employment of a large active force in Siberia...We were bound hand and foot by the circumstances."

## CONCLUSION

"History

is the record of man's efforts to transform the real into the ideal. It is therefore a mirror in which man can look himself in the eye. Thus the idea of history is nothing less than the notion of honesty which provokes us to measure our performance." -- William Appleman Williams

The

Russian Civil War, enormously complicated and exacerbated by the "allied intervention" &ndash; including that of the United States, created havoc in a Russia already suffering greatly from her participation in the First World War. Transportation and communication, except for the necessities of war, altogether ceased. The uprooting of people, the destruction of livestock and draught animals, the necessary consumption of seed reserves, and then the great drought of 1920-1921 &ndash; all practically destroyed Russian society. In the famine of 1921 alone, estimates are that some five million Russians perished. Most authorities place the total loss of Russian life for the years 1914 to 1922, the period of war and civil war, foreign intervention, drought and famine at 20 million. In addition, industrial production and capacity were driven back to levels existing prior to 1900.

Regardless of the social-economic system introduced in the country, in the Soviet Union, the road back and ahead was going to be a cruel one; and while the United States did send food and medical relief supplies and workers, the assistance rendered hardly matched America's previous contribution to the havoc and suffering. mmm