

*Robert W. Sellen*

## THE BRITISH INTERVENTION IN RUSSIA, 1917-1920: I

"THE FAILURE TO STRANGLE BOLSHEVISM AT ITS BIRTH and to bring Russia, then prostrate, by one means or another, into the general democratic system lies heavily upon us today." So spoke Winston Churchill in March, 1949.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the first World War Churchill was, indeed, the most irrepressible British protagonist of an anti-Bolshevik war. Lloyd George said of him that "his ducal blood revolted against the wholesale elimination of Grand Dukes in Russia."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of the anti-Bolshevik outcry made by the Winston Churchills at the time and since, historians of various types have asserted that the main motive of Allied intervention in Russia was the destruction of the Soviet regime by force, or perhaps the weakening of Russia for the benefit of British interests in the Near East.<sup>3</sup> This was not true of British intervention during the war, though afterward was another story.

To make any sense of a chaotic train of events, three questions must be answered: first, why was intervention in Russia begun during the war; second, why was it continued after the armistice; and, third, why was it finally ended?

During the eight months of the non-Bolshevik Russian Provisional Government in 1917, the one aim regarding Russia of all members of the British cabinet was to keep that country in the war as an effective force. When in November the Bolsheviks seized control of Petrograd and the central government, some members of the British cabinet were repelled by the thought of dealing with them. Apparently they feared that their subversive doctrines might take root in Britain through men contact, and Great Britain declined for the moment to recognize the Soviet regime.<sup>4</sup>

The Bolsheviks' avowed purpose was to bring peace to Russia, exhausted as it was, and with this in mind they signed an armistice with the Central Powers on December 15, 1917. The enraged Allies thus faced a serious military problem. At the end of October the Italian Army had been routed near Caporetto and, pending Italian recovery, many British and French troops had to be sent to Italy, weakening the western front. With the Russian collapse Germany was at liberty to transfer

large numbers of troops from the eastern to the western front, and operations beginning in November moved over twenty divisions to the West by January, 1918, and by March more than forty. Indeed, for the Allies the question had become not how best to defeat Germany but rather how best to avoid defeat.<sup>6</sup>

Russia appeared to be a key to the situation. General Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, went so far as to say that there was no chance of military victory without an eastern front, and the Allied military representatives at Versailles pointed to the danger of Germany's getting war and food supplies in Russia. General Sir Alfred Knox, former British military attaché in Petrograd, told Lloyd George that in six months Germany could obtain nearly all its requirements from Russia, in effect breaking the Allied blockade. The only way to prevent this melancholy development was to create in Russia some effective force to resist German penetration.<sup>7</sup> The German threat was not imaginary. The Central Powers intended, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to use Russian resources to the fullest extent possible, and in fact these resources may have been responsible for their being able to fight on as long as they did.<sup>8</sup> Reports also reached Washington and London of German prisoners of war in Russia making serious efforts to organize forces sufficient to seize strategic points in Siberia, and later of being the majority of the "red" troops fighting the "white" Russians and Allies there in August, 1918. Most of the prisoners in Siberia were not German, few were armed—and those but lightly—and reports of their activities were grossly exaggerated,<sup>9</sup> but it was only natural for already nervous Allied leaders to worry about them.

One immediate British reaction to events in Russia came at the end of November, 1917, when the British military representatives joined those of the other Allied governments in protesting to General Dukhonin, acting Russian commander, against the Russo-German armistice talks. Another reaction was that of Sir George Buchanan, British Ambassador to Russia, who suggested leaving it to the Bolsheviks "whether they will purchase peace on Germany's terms or fight on with the Allies . . ." Buchanan believed that forcing the exhausted Russians to fight on would merely embitter them, whereas Russian national resentment would turn against Germany if peace were delayed or bought too dearly.<sup>10</sup> Lloyd George was tempted to follow Buchanan's advice, but Clemenceau angrily rejected the idea. By December, 1917, the British cabinet had agreed that Britain's dominant policy would be to keep Russia in the war, or, if that fell through, to ensure that the country was as helpful to the Allies and as harmful to the enemy as possible. Lloyd George was willing at that time to consider using the Bolsheviks as an instrument against Germany,<sup>11</sup> so far were his thoughts from crushing the "red" regime.

When the Bolsheviks seized control of Petrograd they did not automatically inherit the entire Russian Empire. Instead, the already dissolving Russian state disintegrated into a welter of local governments, military and civil. In the midst of this disorder some Tsarist generals formed armies in the South, and supporters of the former Provisional Government formed the so-called Southeastern Federation in the Caucasus.<sup>12</sup> Britain made contact with these factions almost at once: by mid-December British agents were authorized to offer over £20,000,000 to various groups if they would continue fighting the Germans, and they had promised support to the Southeastern Federation.<sup>13</sup>

These first steps were taken almost instinctively, before a joint Allied policy was determined. An Allied conference in Paris on December 22, 1917, decided that unofficial relations must be established with the Bolsheviks in the hope of persuading them to keep Russian resources out of German hands. At the same time, Cossack and Caucasian forces were to be paid, and agents and officers sent to advise the provincial governments and their armies. This was done quietly, to avoid if possible the imputation that the Allies were preparing to make war on the Bolsheviks.<sup>14</sup> The next day, Britain and France agreed to divide Russia into spheres of responsibility, France taking Bessarabia, the Ukraine, and the Crimea (with Poland later tacitly added), and Britain the Cossack territories, Armenia, the Caucasus, and Transcaucasia (with North Russia later tacitly added).<sup>15</sup> In accordance with these agreements Britain acted in four principal areas, defined somewhat arbitrarily as relations with the Soviet Government in Petrograd and Moscow; the landing of troops in North Russia; the landing of troops and lending of support in Siberia; and various maneuvers in the South.

In January, 1918, Ambassador Buchanan was called home on leave "for his health," and Britain made unofficial contact with the Bolsheviks by sending R. E. Bruce Lockhart, formerly acting consul general at Moscow, to Petrograd. His main task was to do as much harm to the Germans as possible, to try to stop or hamper peace negotiations, and to stiffen Bolshevik resistance to German demands. One of his chief tasks turned out to be handling negotiations for Allied aid between the Bolsheviks and his government. The British Government claimed in January, 1918, to look upon the Bolsheviks "with a certain degree of favour as long as they refer to make a separate peace",<sup>16</sup> and the Soviet leaders, especially Trotsky, periodically requested Allied aid against Germany.

Chicherin, later Commissar for Foreign Affairs, told Lockhart on the latter's arrival that while German militarism and British capitalism were equally hated

for the moment Germany was the greater danger and British help would thus be welcome.<sup>17</sup> The Bolsheviks approached the Allies once in early January, when the Allied diplomatic and military missions in Petrograd refused even to notify their governments.<sup>18</sup> Another chance came in February, when Trotsky's "no war, no peace" policy broke down before a renewed German advance. Aid was promised at that time, and Allied officers helped what was left of the Russian Army destroy the railroad tracks to Petrograd, but no more help was available, the German advance continued, and Lenin himself opposed further resistance.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet delegation signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918.

Yet one more chance seemed to remain of keeping Russia officially in the war. On March 5, Trotsky inquired of both Lockhart and Raymond Robins, an American Red Cross official who had taken on himself the job of maintaining contact with the Soviet Government, what Allied aid would come if the Bolsheviks refused to ratify the treaty with Germany. Trotsky wanted to know—if help were certain—what sort of help could be given quickly in war supplies and transportation facilities, what steps Britain and especially the United States would take to stop a Japanese invasion of Siberia and, above all, what steps Britain could undertake to assure this help.<sup>20</sup> On March 16, at the end of the debate on ratification of the treaty in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Lenin asked Robins if he had anything to report on help from the Allies. Robins had not, and Lenin said that Lockhart, too, had no word. Lenin then spoke in favor of ratification, which was accepted overwhelmingly.<sup>21</sup> The story is a curious one, since Lockhart had been instructed in February that the one British interest in Russia was the progress of the war against Germany, and in early March that Britain would help the Bolsheviks all it could. Orders were sent to the British admiral at Murmansk to help the local authorities against the Germans, and his force was increased for that purpose.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, no British assurance of really helpful support arrived, and the only American reaction was a message from Woodrow Wilson to the Soviet Congress, expressing sympathy for the Russian people and regretting that no aid could be sent. This was greeted with something akin to ridicule.<sup>23</sup>

According to Robins, Trotsky had stated that Lenin would oppose ratification of the treaty if the United States promised help, and the entire affair seemed to be a golden but lost opportunity. Actually, as one scholar put it, "the implacable determination of the German High Command and the growing evidence that Germany was . . . only 'pregnant' with revolution and that parturition was not imminent" was what made the Bolshevik leaders even consider the disagreeable idea

of asking for Allied help. Furthermore, Lenin realized that the only Allied motive for helping was to hold Russia in the war against Germany, and he was convinced that a delayed peace would be a more onerous one; hence his real view was that it was necessary to come to terms with Germany at once and try to increase Soviet power for future self-defence.<sup>24</sup>

A certain amount of confusion was added to the Allies' obvious inability to give substantial aid to the Bolsheviks. The Department of State in Washington was not informed of Trotsky's most important request for aid until after ratification of the peace treaty, and when it did learn of the request it sent word that Wilson's derided message to the Russian people was an "adequate answer."<sup>25</sup> Bernard Pares indicted his own government when he wrote, "Not only Russia, but our policy, too, was all in pieces." It had no sequence or consistency, for "the Foreign Minister was not in the War Cabinet, but was overridden . . . on every critical question by the Prime Minister, who dealt with the various emergencies by a series of temporary shifts which were utterly bewildering . . ." Confusion in London was increased by the apparent inability of the so-called Russian Committee to perform its assigned task of reconciling War Office and Foreign Office opinion regarding Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Bewildering, too, were events after the Russian acceptance of peace with Germany. Although in February, 1918, the British Government refused to have any dealings with Leo Kamenev, sent to London to ask for assistance against Germany,<sup>27</sup> the Foreign Office in April withdrew recognition from the Russian Embassy, which had represented the Provisional Government, and told Lockhart that Britain was willing to treat with the Bolsheviks. Such questions as the repayment of Tsarist debts were not to be raised because the sole aim was the defeat of Germany. This news pleased Trotsky, who asked for a naval mission,<sup>28</sup> and presently offered to place an Englishman in charge of all Russian railways, as well as to meet Allied wishes regarding the stores at Archangel and the occupation of Murmansk. When Lockhart forwarded these requests, the only reply from Balfour, then Foreign Secretary, was to the effect that this was all good news and if Lockhart could persuade Trotsky to resist the Germans he would indeed have earned the gratitude of all humanity. But Balfour added a list of British grievances against the Bolsheviks, and no naval mission or railway expert ever arrived. In such a way, despite Balfour's professed belief that it was necessary if dangerous to co-operate with the Soviet Government,<sup>29</sup> the apparent opportunities slipped by, and at the end of May Lenin, the only Bolshevik who really mattered, championed peace a

any price. The Soviet Government was then saying that Allied intervention would result in a German capture of Petrograd and Moscow (it had in fact received a German ultimatum requiring the immediate departure of Allied forces from Murmansk), and the chances of a Russo-German war were decreased by the Bolsheviks' failure to organize a dependable army.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Trotsky's continued requests for aid, even after the ratification of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, there seems to have existed no real hope of the Bolsheviks' inviting Allied intervention. Trotsky was moved by pessimism regarding the permanence of peace, perhaps assuming that a new war with Germany was inevitable, and he may have been willing to accept any help to keep the Soviet regime in existence. This pessimism was laid to rest in May, 1918, with the inauguration of official German-Soviet relations and the realization that Germany did not intend to use its army to crush Bolshevism. Furthermore, Lenin appears never to have countenanced such intervention, which would undoubtedly have brought down upon Russia the full wrath of the weakened but still mighty German armies of the East.<sup>31</sup>

The outbreak of fighting between the Czech Legion and Bolshevik troops in Siberia in May, 1918, apparently convinced the Soviet leaders that the Czechs were to become a vanguard of Allied intervention designed to crush the communist government and cause. As late as May 23, Trotsky remained friendly to Lockhart, but in early June Chicherin reproached the Allies bitterly for siding with counter-revolutionaries.<sup>32</sup> When in July, 1918, the Allied diplomats left Vologda (whither they had fled from riot-torn Petrograd) for Archangel, having heard of the impending British occupation of that port, the Bolsheviks saw the move as a prelude to hostile intervention, and on July 29 Lenin declared in a speech that Soviet Russia was at war with "Anglo-French imperialism."<sup>33</sup> The Bolsheviks decided to resist further Allied landings, and when Archangel was captured on August 2 the Cheka rounded up as many British and French nationals (about 200) as it could lay hands on. Lockhart, too, was imprisoned, and with his exchange for Litvinov (who had tried to be Russian Ambassador to Great Britain) in October, 1918, even semi-official relations between Britain and the Soviet Government ended.<sup>34</sup>

A small squadron of the British Navy had been operating out of Murmansk in 1917 to protect supply ships from submarines, and part of it remained in Murmansk during the winter of 1917-1918. In early March, 1918, the Bolshevik leaders thought for a few horrifying hours that the treaty with Germany had fallen through and in a panic wired to the local Soviet at Murmansk to cooperate with the Allies

in defending the port from the German "robbers." Hence, the local authorities in North Russia applied to Rear Admiral Thomas Kemp, the British commander, for help, turning over to him three Russian destroyers. The Allies reinforced Kemp's squadron,<sup>25</sup> but with the conclusion of peace between the Bolsheviks and Germany his tiny force was left alone to face a German army of 55,000 men in Finland. German submarines still operated in Arctic waters, and there seemed at the time to be nothing to prevent their acquiring a base at Murmansk. The British Government became apprehensive about the situation, pleading for American help, and at the end of May some 500 Allied marines, backed by an alliance with anti-German Finns, occupied Murmansk. They were reinforced in June, and the local Bolsheviks made and kept an agreement with the Allies, who could supply the food and munitions which the Moscow government lacked.<sup>26</sup> Major General Sir Charles Maynard, commanding the Allied forces at Murmansk, gathered what local troops he could and began to push the Moscow-controlled Bolsheviks southward to Lake Onega, over 550 miles from Murmansk. His object, apart from protecting the port, was to raise an anti-Bolshevik Russian army against the German-Finnish threat.<sup>27</sup>

A prominent characteristic of Allied military planning throughout the latter part of 1917 and early 1918 was a search for reinforcements for the western front, and in December, 1917, it was arranged that the Czech Legion should be evacuated as quickly as possible from Russia to France. This group, eventually almost 7000 strong and the only large military group on the eastern front still a disciplined unit, was made up of Czechs from Russia and Czech and Slovak soldiers who had deserted from the Austrian Army. After many difficulties in evading the Germans and dealing with the Bolsheviks, the Czechs began in March, 1918, the long journey to Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Railway, their eventual goal being France.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the eagerness of French authorities for reinforcements for the western front (especially after the Germans mounted their spring offensive in 1918), British military leaders began to foresee other possible uses for the Czech Legion. On April 1, a British War Office memorandum to the Czechoslovak National Council expressed doubt whether the Czech troops could be brought to Europe and broached the idea of their being employed in Russia or Siberia, proposing either a concentration around Omsk, co-operation with Gregory Semenov (an anti-Bolshevik leader in Manchuria) and perhaps the Japanese, or evacuation to Archangel. The British idea was that the Czechs would join forces with other pro-Ally groups in Siberia

to form a new front against the Germans.<sup>39</sup> French military representatives finally approved the British plan, but the French Government itself remained opposed to any diversion of the Czechs from the western front. Hence, British military men devised a new scheme to keep the Czechs in Russia without actually admitting such a goal. The Czechs were to be split, those already beyond the Ural Mountains going on to Vladivostok and the others being routed to Archangel and Murmansk. The impression was given to French and Czech leaders that the object of the plan was evacuation of the Legion to France, though that was not the real purpose, and the plan was approved by the Supreme War Council in May, 1918.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, British military leaders had, they believed, found troops for a renewed eastern front, and a small Allied force was landed at Archangel at the beginning of August, 1918, to serve the several purposes of guarding stores, training a pro-Ally Russian army (to be at least 30,000 strong), and meeting the Czechs and other pro-Ally Siberian forces to engage in joint operations. Since few troops could be spared for Archangel, British agents there fomented a *coup d'état* against the communist government of the city when the Allied force was ready to land. The Archangel garrison dutifully fought its way inland, but British plans were based upon a serious misjudgment of geographic and political reality in Russia; events in Siberia had already destroyed chances of meeting the Czechs, and the force at Archangel was finally reduced to guarding its stores and raising a local Russian army.<sup>41</sup>

The Allies began to discuss operations in Siberia soon after the Bolshevik *coup d'état*, and British troops at Hong Kong were even alerted for movement to Vladivostok, though final orders were not issued at that time. In January, Foreign Secretary Balfour expressed agreement with the American belief that any occupation of Russian territory would tend to unite all Russians against it, to German benefit. But, Balfour added significantly, events might soon "create a different situation."<sup>42</sup>

In December, 1917, the Allied military representatives at Versailles reported that little resistance could be offered the Germans in South Russia without more direct communication with that area. Such contact could be only through Turkey or by way of Vladivostok and the Siberian railway.<sup>43</sup> By the end of January, 1918, the British Foreign Office was pressing upon American leaders the view that the Siberian railway was the only effective way to help anti-German forces in Russia,<sup>44</sup> and in February the War Office submitted to the French General Staff a paper calling for a "resolute" Japanese intervention in Siberia for the purposes



of reinforcing the national element in Russia, saving Rumania, and preventing Germany from moving more troops to the western front.<sup>45</sup> There were still other British motives for landings in Siberia: the protection of vast quantities of military supplies at Vladivostok (648,000 tons in January, 1918), the reported exploits of German prisoners, aid to the Czech Legion, protection of the oil fields of the Caspian from Germany and Turkey; however, the hope of reestablishing some kind of eastern front was perhaps most important.<sup>46</sup> Thanks to optimistic reports from Lockhart on Trotsky's behavior, Balfour was able to say, in urging the United States to approve intervention, that the Soviet government had no objections to such a move. Nevertheless, nothing was done until August, 1918, because of American reluctance to see Japanese troops in Siberia and because of Japanese reluctance first to have American help and then to go in without it.<sup>47</sup>

In January, 1918, when Britain began urging the United States to permit Japanese intervention, Balfour explained to Colonel House an additional British motive: worry over a pro-German party in Japan. Britain apparently wished to make Japan feel that she was trusted and also to bring Japan into direct conflict with Germany, thus forestalling any possible Japanese-German rapprochement.<sup>48</sup> Discussion dragged on for months without result while British officials warned the United States of German troop movements from east to west, German procurement of food and raw materials in Russia, and the need of an eastern front to put pressure on Germany. One message asserted that unless the Allies intervened in Siberia at once, they had no chance of being ultimately successful and risked serious defeat. It called attention to the growing exhaustion of British and French manpower and contended that any possible victory in the West could not by itself be enough to force the Central Powers to withdraw from Russia, whose resources they could still use to win world domination.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps Britain did not press the issue as vigorously as she might have done, for both Lloyd George and Balfour inclined to delay Japanese intervention in the hope that the Bolsheviks themselves would invite it. Britain even cut off aid to the anti-Bolshevik Semenov and tried to restrain him, but no invitation arrived;<sup>50</sup> and Lloyd George was persuaded, by pressure from France, Italy, and British military men, to renew pleas that the United States consent to Japanese landing in Siberia.<sup>51</sup> The Allied Supreme War Council, meeting in June, laid down certain conditions, designed to quiet American fears, for Japanese intervention. Japan was to respect Russia's territorial integrity, take no side in Russian politics, and advance as far westward as possible to encounter the Germans.<sup>52</sup> Still, only the

dangerous position of the Czech Legion in the summer of 1918 led President Wilson to change his mind.<sup>53</sup>

In March, 1918, the Soviet Government had, despite German pressure, agreed to permit the Czechs to leave Russia through Vladivostok,<sup>54</sup> and in May it added consent for some of them to go instead to North Russia. The Czechs, however, reacted unfavourably to being split, some of them at Chelyabinsk became involved in an incident on May 17 with Hungarian prisoners, and Soviet orders that the Czechs be disarmed caused the Czech officers to decide to "shoot their way through" to the Pacific. Since the Czechs were then spread out along the railway from the Volga to Vladivostok, fighting between them and the Bolsheviks became general throughout Siberia, the Czechs soon seizing numerous towns along the Siberian railway and, in late June, Vladivostok itself.<sup>55</sup> At this point the United States agreed to intervention, President Wilson proposing that his country and Japan each send 7,000 troops to Vladivostok to relieve the Czechs there for fighting inland. British troops, too, were sent to Vladivostok in August, even helping the Czechs fight a Bolshevik army (said to contain mostly former German prisoners) on the Ussuri River.<sup>56</sup> By late summer British leaders hoped the Czechs would meet General Alexeev's "white" army on the Volga, and urged that more Japanese troops be landed to support this move. The Czechs were unable to meet Alexeev but, with an anti-Bolshevik Russian force, they held all Siberia on November 11, 1918.<sup>57</sup>

#### NOTES

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  21. Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-292, 300-304.
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