The Russian Civil War: Indecision within the British Cabinet

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Russia, the great motherland that was home to the Romanovs and Tsars of the Russian Monarchy, ceased to exist on March 5th 1917. With the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the vast European nation began to disintegrate, tearing itself from within. By November, the first communist regime was established and the world shrieked with fear at the red tyranny that threatened to infest democracy. When the Great War finally ended in 1918, no nation was prepared to deal with Bolshevik Russia, and no nation had a concrete and defined policy towards the new regime, least of all Great Britain. David Lloyd George’s coalition war cabinet faced tremendous obstacles in generating an all-inclusive policy towards Russia. The Prime Minister was tired of war, ready for compromise and determined to accept the wishes of free peoples, regardless of their beliefs and ideologies. The Secretary of War, Winston Churchill, disagreed and was unrelenting in his views. The hatred he
harbored for communism directed his policies, rhetoric and opposition to any strategy but intervention. Recognizing the lack of public opinion, and motivated by a desire for peace and the belief that the Russian people deserved the right to self-determination, the Prime Minister blocked Churchill’s efforts to enact some kind of interventionist procedure and instead, pushed through cabinet a policy of evacuation, so that by 1920, all British and allied troops had left Russia.

The Bolshevik takeover in Russia in November 1917 was surprising. Vladimir Lenin and the Soviets had previously attempted a coup in July that was repelled. Their promise of land, bread, freedom and peace would be the catalyst to their eventual success. By the end of the year, peace was gained, land was distributed and the peasants were satisfied. The middle class bourgeoisie, army officers and political opponents were furious, angered by the Marxist revolution and the betrayal of the Soviets’ signed peace with Germany. Allied powers reacted to the revolution with skepticism and distrust. Lloyd George remarked shortly after the war that “the Bolshevik episode rendered one supreme service to civilization; it terrified democracy back into sanity…”¹ Wealthy aristocrats were threatened by the communist ideology, and the Treaty of Brest-Litvosk outraged the Allied Powers. They had sacrificed their fighting troops to help defend Russia, and now

¹ David Lloyd George, Where are we going (New York: George Doran Company, 1923), 301.
the soviets had betrayed their assistance. Some “13,000 British troops remained in North Russia and further 1000 in Siberia.”\(^2\) With a change in government, the 14,000 troops that were supposed to aid the tsarist military were caught in limbo. Politicians at home could not decide their fate, conflicting over whether to withdraw them or reinforce their numbers.

Churchill entered the war cabinet of Lloyd George as a Liberal in January 1919, holding the prominent position of Secretary of War and Air. Charged with the massive task of demobilization and quelling the rebellious Sinn Fein in Ireland, he enacted his duties skillfully. Yet, he took particular interest in Russia and the Civil War that was engulfing its cities and countryside. He advocated a policy that would sweep away the Bolshevik menace with fury and force, quickly and effectively. In a speech in April 1919, Churchill called Bolshevism the “worst tyranny, the most destructive and the most degrading. It is sheer humbug to pretend it is not far worse than German militarism.”\(^3\) Additionally, he warned of the destruction already implemented by the Bolshevik machine stating, “Political, economic, social and moral life of the people of Russia has been utterly smashed. It is assuming an aggressive and


predatory form, where famine and terror are the order of the day.”

Consequently, he traveled the country pleading with the workers and soldiers to stand strong and solid. In May 1919, he told his constituency in Dundee that, “there are three great lines of policy which we can pursue; the first is to make peace with Germany, the second to aid those forces in Russia making war successfully upon the Bolshevist tyranny and third, keep firm friends with France and the United States.”

However, Lloyd George would have none of it. The Prime Minister had long since rebuked Churchill’s proposals for escalating Allied involvement in the Russian Civil War. He contended that a force of nearly half a million men was needed to bring about some kind of satisfactory resolution to the conflict. He stressed this could not be guaranteed for a number of reasons. First, public opinion was against war and any intervention in Russia following years of carnage and destruction. He pointed out that “organized labor viewed the rule of the proletariat in Russia with a certain measure of sympathy and this sentiment was coupled with a genuine distaste for another war. Therefore the attempt for raising a force of volunteers for the purpose of waging war against the Bolsheviks was a miserable failure.” Secondly, no Allied power was willing to contribute troops to fight against the Red

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4 Churchill, Churchill Speaks, 374.
5 Ibid., 376.
Armies which were realistically, although regrettable, now the effective government and military of Russia. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States “wanted all foreign troops in Russia, including American, to be withdrawn.” 7 Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau strongly opposed the red tyranny, but nevertheless remained distressed with the idea of intervention. For the French prime minister, his primary concern and duty was to stop the spread of Bolshevism into France and other countries. “To sum up, he would temporize and erect barriers to prevent bolshevism from spreading and instead proposed to call together representatives of all parties to a conference.”8

Lloyd George and Churchill agreed that any policy towards Russia must be a united Allied plan. Therefore, without any guarantees of a volunteer army materializing or public opinion supporting an interventionist policy, the Prime Minister felt compelled to compromise and echo the sentiments of Clemenceau. During the Paris Peace Conference Lloyd George had explicitly informed Churchill that no additional British troops would be sent to Russia. Troops that were already there were to be withdrawn and “aid to the Siberian and South Russian Anti-Bolshevik forces would continue, but must not be too expensive.”9 Instead, Lloyd George embarked on implementing the proactive policy that would see the allied powers come together with

7 Gilbert, Churchill: A Life, 409.
8 Lloyd George, Memoirs of the Peace Conference, 235.
9 Gilbert, Churchill: A Life, 410
representatives of the Bolshevik government. Other countries involved in the conflict, like Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania would also be invited in order to ensure a viable and peaceful settlement. Thus, on January 22 1919 a draft proposal was prepared by President Wilson and endorsed by the Allied powers.

It appealed to the Russian people as friends, not enemies, to their absolute right to direct their own affairs without dictation or direction. It recognized the revolution without reservation and importantly emphasized its wish not to favor or assist any organized groups contending for leadership in Russia. Additionally, it invited every organized group exercising political or military control in Siberia and European Russia to send representatives to Princes Islands, Sea of Marmora. Finally, it called for all military aggressiveness to cease immediately and set the conference date for February 15th 1919.¹⁰

This proposal was the only one agreeable to the delegates at the peace conference. Already in favor were Lloyd George, Wilson and Clemenceau. Orlando of Italy quickly followed suit expressing that, “no country could continue in anarchy and that an end must come eventually. They could not proceed to make peace and ignore Russia and this proposal gave a possible solution.”¹¹ Lloyd George was particularly convinced of the necessity for compromise. He had presented this proposal to the War Cabinet on December 31st 1918, well before the conference began. He justified its principles by calling attention to the tremendously serious undertaking intervention required. Germany had occupied only a relatively small part of Russia and failed to overrun

¹⁰ Lloyd George, Memoirs of the Peace Conference, 329.
¹¹ Ibid., 236
Petrograd with an army of a million troops. The Allies had only 100,000 against a Bolshevik army nearing a million men.\textsuperscript{12}

Furthermore, Lloyd George was of the belief that not all facts were known in Russia. Reports varied day to day and thus made it clear that “Britain could not make a position to form a correct judgment.”\textsuperscript{13} Another factor was the growing military capabilities and strengths of the Bolshevik army, as well as its appeals to the peasants. The land it had distributed to the peasants rallied support around them. Their tortures and prosecutions were comparable to Tsarist Russia, possibly even milder. Lloyd George explains;

The fortress of Peter and Paul was not erected, nor its dungeons dug by the Bolsheviks. Siberia was not set up as a penal settlement for political offenders for the first time by the Bolsheviks. Prosecution of suspected religious leaders was not started by the Soviets. The revolution was rendered inevitable by the ineptitude and corruption of the old system and especially by the terrible suffering and humiliation on Russia in the Great War.\textsuperscript{14}

Moreover, Lloyd George found numerous similarities between the November revolution and the French revolution of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, which helped to dissuade him against a policy of intervention. He was convinced of the Bolshevik appeal to ordinary Russians and the support their policies garnered. The atrocities committed by the Reds were

\textsuperscript{13} Lloyd George, \textit{Memoirs of a Peace Conference}, 218.
\textsuperscript{14} Lloyd George, \textit{Where are we going}, 303.
equivalent to those of the Jacobins. He compared Toulon and La Vendee to Riga and Ukraine, and explained that “the very fact that we intervened enabled Danton to rally French patriotism and make the terror a military instrument.”\textsuperscript{15} This was indeed comparable to Lenin and Trotsky’s cries as protectors of the Russian people from Tsars, brutal landowners, and imperialistic Allied powers. Therefore, Russia needed to repel Bolshevism by its own strengths and accord, for no British or Allied intervention would be regarded as deliverance. Lloyd George exclaimed that, “the one thing to spread bolshevism was to try and suppress it. To send our soldiers to shoot Bolsheviks would be to create Bolsheviks over here. The best thing is to let Bolshevism fail on itself…”\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the genuineness of the Allied intentions, none of the parties concerned in the Civil War were willing to meet the others in a conference. The Bolsheviks did not want to recognize their opponents and believed an armistice would only benefit the White forces. The Anti-Bolshevik forces were unwilling to cooperate with “a junta of anarchists, pillagers and assassins.”\textsuperscript{17} Hence, a policy that could have mitigated the Civil War was rejected and opportunities were lost. At home and within his cabinet, Lloyd George faced considerable pressure to intervene. Churchill was most prominent in the interventionist camp, calling on Britain to support the White forces or quit and face the consequences.

\textsuperscript{15} War Cabinet. \textit{War Cabinet Papers}, December 31, 1918.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{17} Lloyd, George, \textit{Memoirs of a Peace conference}, 240.
Now that negotiation had failed to bear fruit, Allied powers needed to act quickly and resolutely to quell the Bolshevik menace. In fact, Churchill flew to Paris to meet with President Wilson and Prime Minister Clemenceau on February 14th 1919. Once there, he proposed “that the council at least examine what the military problems of intervention might be, to which he was supported by the Italian and Japanese foreign ministers.”\textsuperscript{18} Lloyd George was beside himself with fury, warning that “an expensive war against Russia is a way to strengthen Bolshevism in Russia and at home.”\textsuperscript{19}

The entire cabinet was itself divided on the policy of Russia. Lord Curzon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs declared that Bolshevik armies were gaining superiority against the White forces. He attributed this, like the Czech militaries had, “to the lack of decision and uncertainty of the allied policy.”\textsuperscript{20} Like Churchill he entertained the policy of intervention but only in Georgia where he had visited and “had great admiration for its gallant mountaineers. The thought of abandoning them to the despotism of Lenin and Trotsky filled him with horror…”\textsuperscript{21} Others, like Austen Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pointed out the question of finance, and the financial responsibility that

\textsuperscript{18} Gilbert, \textit{Churchill: A life}, 410.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 410
\textsuperscript{21} Lloyd George, \textit{Memoirs of the Peace Conference}, 214.
rested on Britain and France. Moreover, he was anxious of the political stability of the White forces, claiming “no one believed the non-Bolshevik governments in Russia could by themselves stand for a moment.”\textsuperscript{22} Nevertheless, Lloyd George was most at odds with Churchill about Russian policy, characterizing Churchill as “the most formidable and irrepressible protagonist of an anti-Bolshevik war. He had no doubt a genuine distaste for communism and his ducal blood revolted against the wholesale elimination of Grand Dukes in Russia.”\textsuperscript{23} Lloyd George clearly respected Churchill and the clout he garnered and remained anxious of his Secretary of War’s ambition to formulate a divergent policy. He correctly anticipated Churchill as an obstacle to the desired policy of evacuation, for both men were steadfast and firm in their views. Despite frequent disagreements, compromise did allow for meetings to adjourn and progress to be made, if only for a moment.

For instance, at the conclusion of the Cabinet meeting on February 12\textsuperscript{th} 1919, it was agreed that the War Office would prepare statements on alternative policies with regard to Russia, those being: intervention, evacuation, financial and supplies assistance and the defense of newly created States. Churchill, of course, wanted a policy of intervention or at least one of political, moral and material support for the White forces. General Denikin was already receiving British

\textsuperscript{22} The Cabinet, \textit{Conclusions of the Meetings of the Cabinet: February 12, 1919.}
\textsuperscript{23} Lloyd George, \textit{Memoirs of the Peace Conference}, 214.
assistance which had begun during the Russo-German war. He had an army of some 230,000 men, well equipped with a “quarter of a million rifles, two hundred guns, and thirty tanks, large masses of munitions and equipment, all sent through the Dardanelles and Black Sea Port of Novorossisk…” 24 In Siberia, Admiral Kolchak’s armies reached 300,000 men. Finland had 100,000 available, and Polish forces occupied a further front with Russia. All these forces were preparing an attack against the Bolsheviks, and had they been used collectively in Churchill’s opinion, “they could easily have been successful. They have been dissipated by a total lack of combination and this has been due to a complete absence of any definite or decided policy among the victorious Allies.” 25

Churchill explicitly blamed the Allies for the devastating losses the White forces were taking. Lloyd George was unwilling to adhere to his policy of intervention. The actions followed by the Allies seemed to Churchill to resemble a policy of peace or strict neutrality. Russia was in a state of war. That was the reality of the situation. The Bolshevik government was developing its armies which were far stronger than the forces opposed to them. Allied policy was not compatible with war. This had been highlighted by Lord Curzon numerous times. He exclaimed at the uncertainty plaguing Allied policy and denounced the lack of

25 Ibid., 266.
political vision and harmony. Like Churchill, Lord Curzon wanted matching support for the White forces, “an organized policy whereby effort could be concentrated and a due co-ordination established between political, military, and financial measures.”

Churchill saw the terror and oppression of the Bolshevik forces and was determined to aid those fighting against democracy’s nemesis. He believed this was Britain’s fight, one that needed to be won, and one that was worse than German militarism. “It is a delusion to suppose that all this year we have been fighting the battles of the Anti-Bolsheviks. On the contrary, they have been fighting ours.”

In his sentiments, Churchill’s hatred for communism is evident. He despised its ideology, rhetoric and pull on the masses. Indeed, he feared it and the possible strength it could gather. His strategy had been to aid the White Russian armies battling Trotsky’s Red army. By September of 1919, Churchill still hoped to get approved a policy that would dissuade any cooperation with Bolshevism, instead promoting one that would remove it entirely from Russia. He presented a survey to the Cabinet in which he stressed,

Our policy should continue to keep in friendly touch with Denikin, complete the dispatch of munitions, help him in his difficulties with other anti-Bolshevik forces, and guide him with political counsel. Moreover, we must develop trade and credit in

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26 Ibid., 246.
27 Ibid., 270.
liberated regions, and prevent him from falling into the hands of the reactionaries.  

However, by this point, although British and Allied strategy remained unclear and highly confused, the War Cabinet had called for immediate and complete evacuation.

In March 1919, the War Cabinet directed Churchill as Secretary of War to see the evacuation of the 14,000 British troops still in Murmansk and Archangel. It allowed him to raise a volunteer rescue force of some 4,000 men “to go to their assistance and help the exhausted and ill-equipped troops.” Churchill stomached the decision and executed the Cabinet’s policy. Naturally, he was opposed to evacuation and mockingly wrote of the policy; “Every friendly Russian knew that he now fought under a death sentence and his safest course was to make terms with his future master at the expense of his departing allies. This reaction was inherent in the wise and indeed inevitable policy of evacuation.” Given his stance on this policy and his disdain for Bolshevism, Churchill ordered the War Office to secure for the Northern government and military of Admiral Kolchak all necessary help it needed to fend off the Red Armies as the British withdrew. Lloyd George too was supportive of this endeavor, although he set a number of conditions. He stressed that no attempt be made to conquer Bolshevik Russia, and

28 Ibid., 261.
30 Churchill, the Aftermath, 248.
support continue so long as areas controlled by Kolchak and Denikin remained anti-Bolshevik in sentiment. Finally, he stressed that “the anti-Bolshevik armies must not be used to restore the old Czarist regime which would reimpose upon the peasants the old feudal conditions…”31

Therefore, Churchill proposed a detailed plan to the Cabinet to authorize a major offensive to coincide with the evacuation. Supported by a royal naval flotilla and commanded by General Ironside, the scheme directed the troops to “make a good punch towards Kolchak’s Siberian Army and make contact in the town of Kotlas.”32 This would have effectively surrounded the Red armies and enabled a final push into Moscow. However, six days later, Kolchak’s Siberian army was defeated. Churchill was distraught but urged the advance to Kotlas be continued. This was disregarded and on July 9th 1919, the Flotilla withdrew from Archangel to avoid being stranded. Churchill despaired at the British lack of effort and when told by Lloyd George that the plan had failed, he replied, “It was never attempted.”33 Kolchak’s defeat marked the beginning of the end in Northern Russia. By July 25th all Allied troops were withdrawn and in January of 1920, Kolchak’s army was no more. He would be captured and murdered on February 7th, 1920. The last Anti-Bolshevik hope thus remained with General Denikin in the south.

31 Lloyd George, Memoirs of the Peace Conference, 250.
32 Gilbert, Churchill: A Life, 412.
33 Ibid., 413.
After some initial successes where Denikin captured Kiev and Kursk, Churchill begged Lloyd George to “support Denikin by all means in our power…”\textsuperscript{34} Churchill was giddy with hope that some successful resolution would result from British assistance and that Bolshevism would be eliminated. The Prime Minister’s reply was anything but reassuring. He called on Churchill to forget Russia and devote his energies to preparing army estimates. “I have found your mind so obsessed by Russia.”\textsuperscript{35} No British help was forthcoming. In November, Denikin’s armies would be swept away, leaving Churchill dazed and confused. In February 1920, Denikin’s support would be withdrawn completely, leaving him to his own devices. Churchill recalls “It became my duty to instruct General Holman to put the facts plainly before the Russian Leader. I cannot hold out any expectations that the British government will give any further aid beyond what has been already promised in the final packet.”\textsuperscript{36}

With the White armies defeated and Allied troops removed from Russia, Trotsky and Lenin could breathe a brief sigh of relief. The Russian Civil War had been won by the Bolsheviks, and communism consolidated. Lloyd George was content to deal with the Russian government for it was not the communists who suffered from continued war, but the peasants. Above all, the Prime Minister longed for peace and

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 415.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 415.
\textsuperscript{36} Churchill, \textit{the Aftermath}, 270-271.
recognized that, “it is time we made up our minds that the Soviets have come to stay, whether we like it or not. The sooner we have the courage to recognize this fact the sooner will real peace be established.”

Unsurprisingly, Churchill’s sentiments did not align with the Lloyd George. In fact, he was outraged at those “defeatists, who at every period in the war, whenever they saw the slightest chance, obstructed the measures necessary for victory and eagerly urged upon us a patched-up peace.” Therefore, by their rigid stance, no party was able to decisively and completely institute a policy in Russia. Negotiation was unresponsive. Intervention failed to gain effective backing and evacuation essentially consolidated Bolshevism as supreme.

37 Lloyd George, Where are we going?, 311.
38 Churchill, Churchill Speaks, 384.