

Best Integrated Writing


Volume 2

2015

Woodrow Wilson's Ideological War: American Intervention in Russia, 1918-1920

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Recommended Citation

Hapner, S. (2015). Woodrow Wilson's Ideological War: American Intervention in Russia, 1918-1920, *Best Integrated Writing*, 2.

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**Best Integrated Writing: Journal of Excellence in
Integrated Writing Courses at Wright State**

Fall 2015 (Volume 2)

Article #8

**Woodrow Wilson's Ideological War:
American Intervention in Russia,
1918-1920**

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HST 4220-01: Soviet Union

Spring 2014

Dr. Sean Pollock

Dr. Pollock notes that having carefully examined an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, Shane demonstrates in forceful, elegant prose that American intervention in the Russian civil war was consonant with Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination. Thanks to the sophistication and cogency of the argument, and the clarity of the prose, the reader forgets that the paper is the work of an undergraduate. Indeed, the paper reflects unusually strong research skills and powers of analysis that would serve the author well in graduate school and beyond.

On November 7th, 1917, in the depths of the First World War, the Bolshevik party of Russia launched a revolution that ousted the pro-war democratic government of Alexander Kerensky and replaced it with a communist dictatorship. This new government alarmed and antagonized Russia's previous allies Britain, France, and the United States almost from the moment of its inception. The Bolsheviks' refusal to acknowledge any of Russia's debts, alongside their government's hope for immediate peace with Germany, raised doubts among the British and French over their chances for victory.¹

For American President Woodrow Wilson, however, it was the fall of democracy and the ascendancy of communism that seemed the most disturbing part of the Revolution. President Wilson believed strongly in democracy and self-determination of peoples, and saw communist ideology as a suppression of these natural rights.² As time passed and Russia's absence from the fighting began to weigh heavily on British and French war efforts, these powers sought to intervene in Russia's civil war to install a government capable of re-opening the eastern front, among other objectives.³

Despite cold relations with the Bolshevik government, Wilson initially declined all proposals for military intervention, believing them to be infeasible. As time passed and conditions within Russia rapidly changed, however, Wilson began to consider intervention a possibility. Though intervention in Russia might be interpreted as a departure from Wilson's principle of self-determination, he did not view it as such. American intervention in Russia was designed to complement and expand upon earlier peaceful attempts to end the Bolshevik movement. Intervention was used to satisfy the Allies' desire for action while simultaneously attempting to achieve Wilson's primary goal of restoring democracy and self-determination to a nation he believed had been forced into communism against its will.

¹ Carol Melton, *Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918-1921* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 3.

² David Foglesong, *America's Secret War against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 66-67.

³ Supreme War Council to President Wilson, 2 July 1918, in Betty Unterberger, ed., *American Intervention in the Russian Civil War* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1969), 37-38.

Even before the Bolshevik revolution, Wilson had never had any qualms about using the military to stabilize a country that appeared ready to slide into anarchy. The president had used the military to intervene in Mexico in April of 1914 when that nation was suffering a disruptive civil war. Many of Wilson's actions during this intervention would mimic his later decisions in Russia.⁴ His objective in Mexico was to restore order and democracy, the same goal he would later echo when discussing Russian intervention.

Prior to direct intervention in Mexico's civil war, Wilson first attempted to find a method of ending Mexico's troubles that did not involve the military. Before deciding to intervene, the president considered non-recognition of the new government, arms shipments to counter-revolutionary groups, and searching for "strong men to restore order" as viable strategies; ultimately these tactics would all be employed in both Mexico and in Russia.⁵ These similarities suggest that Wilson's goals for Russia were in line with his goals for Mexico, namely the restoration of order and the establishment of democracy in a nation that appeared to the president to be falling to anarchic elements.

Even with a history of intervention and a personal belief in self-determination, committing troops to a distant front during wartime would be dangerous at best, something Wilson's Chief of Staff Newton Baker often mentioned to the president.⁶ Wilson's ideological beliefs were highly important to him, and it was ultimately ideological concerns that convinced the president, against the advice of his chief of staff, to agree to intervention. These ideological concerns took the form of a genuine fear of socialism, particularly its potential to incite revolution and its harsh anti-individualist rhetoric.

Wilson characterized socialism as a disruptive and destructive force, claiming that socialist "method is madness," and that he would "reject, as [I] would reject poison itself, the prescriptions of Socialism."⁷ Wilson feared that Bolshevik ideology would come to

⁴ Melton, 16.

⁵ Foglesong, 17-20.

⁶ Melton, 24.

⁷ Woodrow Wilson, as quoted in Foglesong, 28.

America via immigrants and in many speeches expressed mistrust of new American citizens, culminating in a Red Scare directed against immigrants in the late 1910s.⁸ His hatred of socialism would eventually lead him to claim in 1919 that “Bolshevism was a greater menace than the risk of a reversion to tsarism.”⁹

Wilson’s Secretary of State Robert Lansing shared and even surpassed Wilson’s mistrust of socialism. He believed radical change was indicative of rash decisions and believed socialism could only be achieved through strong central government, which would ultimately destroy American individualism.¹⁰ Lansing’s hatred of socialism made him one of the leading figures in the campaign to convince Wilson to intervene in Russia. He was the minister who first suggested intervention to support the reactionary leader of the White Army, General Kaledin, in his attempt to topple the Bolshevik government.¹¹ These examples indicate that two of America’s highest-ranking policymakers had a strong antipathy to socialism, and Wilson’s personal views toward self-determination and democracy made him an early enemy of the Bolshevik regime.

In spite of this willingness to intervene and Wilson’s personal antipathy to socialism, when Kerensky’s government fell in the Bolshevik Revolution, intervention was not the first thing on President Wilson’s mind. Wilson was initially firmly against any type of intervention in Russia, although he was sympathetic to the turmoil the country was experiencing. Wilson originally believed, prudently, that intervention in Russia would either be misconstrued or propagandized as a hostile or imperialist action and that it might ultimately turn liberal Russians away from their democratic principles.

This view was stressed to the Japanese government, one of the most ardent supporters of intervention, in a diplomatic note of March 5, 1918.¹² When Secretary of State Lansing forwarded requests for Siberian intervention from other Allies later that same month,

⁸ Foglesong, 41.

⁹ Foglesong, 186.

¹⁰ Foglesong, 30.

¹¹ Lansing to Wilson on Kaledin Movement, 10 December 1917, in Unterberger, 27-28.

¹² Wilson’s Draft Statement against Intervention, 5 March 1918, in Unterberger, 31.

Wilson wrote yet again of his reservations: “I have put to [the British ambassador to the United States] Lord Reading and all others who argue in favour of intervention... What is it to effect and how will it be efficacious in effecting it?”¹³

Wilson did not initially believe that sending troops to Russia would achieve any purpose beneficial to the Russian people and was privately concerned that Japanese interests in Siberia were territorial rather than altruistic in nature.¹⁴ Wilson was always willing to provide support to counter-revolutionary groups, but in the months immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution he was unwilling to commit to direct military intervention. It would not be until later in 1918 that new developments would provide Wilson with the justification he believed he would need to send American troops to Russia.

This is not to suggest that the Allies passively accepted Wilson’s reluctance to intervene, for they did not. For Britain and France, the issue of Russian intervention was primarily a military one and was viewed as critically important by both governments. With Russia out of the war and the Germany free to divert all of its forces to the western front, both powers feared the possibility of a rapid defeat. According to Carol Melton, “almost immediately after the November Revolution... Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Generalissimo of the Allied armies, suggested that the allies undertake armed intervention in Russia... using it as a means to restore the Eastern Front.”¹⁵ While this idea was initially dismissed, it gradually gained support with the Allies until it became a major point of contention with the noncommittal United States.

What followed was several months of diplomatic prodding from virtually all of the Allies in an attempt to persuade Wilson to change his mind and approve of, if not participate in, Russian intervention. The first formal request came from the British Foreign Office in January of 1918, but this was only to be the beginning of a much

¹³ Lansing to Wilson, 22 March 1918, as appears in Unterberger, 32.

¹⁴ Foglesong, 146-149.

¹⁵ Melton, 3.

larger campaign.¹⁶ On February 26-27, both the British and French sent renewed requests to approve of intervention, and throughout the entire month of March Wilson was inundated with requests from every member of the Allies, including the Supreme War Council, to agree to intervention.¹⁷ In spite of the immense diplomatic pressure he was under, Wilson was unwilling to approve of any intervention that appeared to violate his self-determination principles, and he thus vetoed all proposals for direct intervention that he received. The Allies were likewise unwilling to accept a total lack of intervention, but by the beginning of April it was obvious that Wilson would not approve military intervention unless new developments arose, and the Allies thus grudgingly let the matter drop.

Wilson's initially cool attitude toward military intervention was balanced by a more vigorous approval of other forms of intervention, partially stemming from a desire to prove to the Allies that in other forums the president could be a team player. Wilson's concerns about military intervention did not preclude the possibility of supporting counter-revolutionary groups in other ways, and via these methods the president set out to prove himself. Barely a month after the Bolshevik Revolution, Lansing drafted a proposal to the president that recommended the support of General Kaledin and a military dictatorship as a better alternative for Russia than Bolshevism.¹⁸ Kaledin and his fellow counter-revolutionaries desperately needed money, but without formal diplomatic recognition the United States could loan them nothing.

In spite of this, Wilson considered the support of these counter-revolutionary groups important enough that he worked out a plan with the British and French to circumvent the obstacle. Instead of supporting Kaledin directly, America loaned money to the Allies, which was then used by those governments to supply the counter-revolutionary White armies.¹⁹ This move is exemplary of Wilson's

¹⁶ Melton, 3-4.

¹⁷ Melton, 5-7 and Unterberger, 32.

¹⁸ *Secretary Robert Lansing's Memorandum and Draft Telegram on the Kaledin Movement*, December 10, 1917, as appears in Unterberger, 27-28.

¹⁹ Foglesong, 88-90.

early strategies for intervention, which were often shrouded in secrecy so as to avoid antagonizing any Americans sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause and almost universally involved supporting these counter-revolutionary groups with American funds.

In another example, Wilson permitted the diplomatic envoy for the provisional government of Kerensky, Boris Bakhmeteff, to retain his status as a diplomatic representative of “Loyal Russia.” Along with this recognition came access to millions of dollars in leftover loans that the United States had provided for the now-defunct provisional government. Bakhmeteff’s embassy would use these funds to support counter-revolutionary actions by purchasing and transferring supplies, such as rifles, for the White armies.²⁰ While Wilson was initially hesitant to directly interfere in the quagmire that was the early Russian Civil War, he did not hesitate to provide financial support to the factions that appeared most likely to restore a democratic Russia. It would only take a just cause for Wilson to conclude that direct intervention could be used to help Russia.

That just cause came in the form of a telegram received in June of 1918 from the American ambassador to China, Paul Reinsch. Reinsch was writing of several thousand Czechoslovakian prisoners of war that were attempting to reach the Siberian port city of Vladivostok. From Vladivostok they intended to find passage to France, where they could rejoin the war effort on the side of the Allies. The Soviets had given permission to these POWs to leave via Vladivostok, but Reinsch advised against permitting the pro-Ally troops to do so. He claimed that they could be invaluable to any future Allied operations in Siberia, especially in preventing the expansion of German influence.²¹ Wilson agreed with him, replying just a few days later, “There seems to me to emerge from this suggestion the shadow of a plan that might be worked, with Japanese and other assistance. These people are cousins of the Russians.”²²

²⁰ Foglesong, 58-60.

²¹ Ambassador Paul S. Reinsch to Lansing, 13 June 1918, in Unterberger, 34.

²² Wilson to Reinsch, 17 June 1918, in Unterberger, 35.

While Reinsch was thinking of the Czechoslovakian presence in terms of German influence, from Wilson's mentioning of "*Japanese and other assistance [emphasis added]*" and the consideration of their Slavic ties to the Russians, it is clear that Wilson was considering their role in a larger intervention.

While Wilson was formulating his plan for this new intervention, Lansing sent him a memo that now claimed that these troops were being attacked by Bolsheviks attempting to prevent them from reaching Vladivostok, and suggesting that support be sent to them immediately as a means of securing the Trans-Siberian Railway.²³ In terms of Russian policy, this memo was one of the most important to reach President Wilson's desk. The document provided Wilson with the diplomatic pretext he needed to intervene in Russia without appearing to infringe upon Russia's right of self-determination. Intervention was now instead a rescue operation for these Czechoslovakian troops, something that the American people would support and could also diplomatically shield Wilson from claims that he was deviating from his Fourteen Points.²⁴ Wilson could now commit troops to Russia without fearing the significant diplomatic and socialist backlash he expected would follow an unjustified intervention.

Although the president had begun these tentative plans for Russian intervention as soon as he received the Peking memo, to suggest that Wilson made the decision to intervene in a vacuum would be a serious fallacy. As previously discussed, from January to April the Allies had pressed seriously for intervention, and when the Czechoslovakian situation arose, their efforts to secure American intervention re-doubled. Just a few weeks after receiving the Peking memo, both Japan and the Supreme War Council of the Allies sent requests reiterating hopes for American cooperation in intervention, and in the case of the Supreme War Council, detailing the reasons they believed intervention was necessary. These reasons included

²³ Lansing on Czechoslovakian situation, 23 June 1918, in Unterberger, 35.

²⁴ Foglesong, 144.

“To assist the Russian nation to throw off their German oppressors... To shorten the war by the reconstitution of the Russian front... To deny to Germany the supplies of western Siberia and the important military stores at Vladivostok... To bring assistance to the Czecho-Slovak forces.”²⁵

In principle Wilson did not object to any of these goals, and now that he had a valid reason for intervention he was inclined to placate his allies by cooperating in operations within Russia.²⁶ It is important to differentiate these motivating factors from deciding factors, however. Allied pressure upon Wilson encouraged him to enter Russia, but Allied pressure alone could not override his ideological concerns, the primary factor discouraging his involvement. Only the situation surrounding the Czechoslovakian legion, and the pretext of protection that it provided the United States government, allowed Wilson to agree to intervention. If he had agreed prior to having a just cause, he would have been knowingly violating his self-determination principle, something the president was never willing to do, while also exposing himself to diplomatic and socialist backlash at home. Therefore, while Allied pressure played an important role in convincing Wilson to send troops to Russia, that pressure did not actually permit him to do so; the Czechoslovakian legion’s supposedly dire situation was what granted Wilson the diplomatic pretext he needed to finally agree to the requests of the Allies.

Wilson’s response to the Czechoslovakian situation is not enough alone to condemn intervention upon their behalf as a pretext, and so other sources must be used to help clarify the situation. The American commander of the Siberian expedition, General Graves, also addresses the issue and provides important context. Graves notes that Czechoslovakian forces had control of the railroad in Siberia “*two months before Japan and the United States decided to go to their relief* [emphasis his],” and that their unofficial leader, Professor Tomas Masaryk, had ordered them not to retreat via Vladivostok weeks

²⁵ Japan to Allied Governments on Siberia, 26 June 1918, and Supreme War Council’s to President Wilson, 3 July 1918, in Unterberger, 35-38.

²⁶ Foglesong, 38.

before Wilson decided to send troops to Siberia, ostensibly to assist them in leaving.²⁷

It could be argued that intelligence during the time was unreliable and Wilson did not know of these facts, but when General Graves arrived in Siberia in September of 1918 and learned of the stability of the Czechoslovakian situation, he telegraphed Washington, saying, "Conditions are very satisfactory for Czechs in Siberia," but he received no response or change of orders.²⁸ General Graves also claims that American Consul General Poole sent a message to the Czechoslovakian legion in mid-June 1918 that congratulated them on their successes against the Bolsheviks and suggested that the United States would be in favor of their occupation of the Trans-Siberian Railway.²⁹ It seems reasonable to extrapolate that the United States did not believe that the security of the Czechoslovakians in any way altered the purpose of the Siberian expedition, and potentially that the United States was fully aware that the Czechoslovakians were in no danger at all. This suggests that the true purpose of the expedition was never a rescue mission, and that the excuse of protecting the Czechoslovakians was always merely a diplomatic pretext for some other goal of Wilson's.

Although the steps toward intervention have now been clarified, Wilson's hopes for what intervention in Russia could accomplish have yet to be addressed. The president's goals for intervention were never directly stated, and it is therefore difficult to see what Wilson intended it to accomplish. Only by carefully analyzing the usage of American troops in Russia can the outline of his goals be discovered. One of the most important documents in regards to the usage of troops in Russia is the Aide Memoir, a document drafted by President Wilson which outlined the acceptable use of American forces in Russia. Despite having agreed to intervention, Wilson sets an extremely conservative tone in the Aide Memoir, saying, "the only legitimate object for which American or allied troops can be

²⁷ William Graves, *America's Siberian Adventure, 1918-1920* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, Inc., 1931), 340-341.

²⁸ Melton, 51.

²⁹ Graves, 70.

employed, [we] submit, is to guard military stores... and to render such aid as may be acceptable to the Russians in the organization of their own self-defense.”³⁰ Wilson had no control over the Allied forces, and so his hopes that they would be used in this manner were in vain. Nevertheless, it is clear that Wilson did not intend for American troops to use force to achieve any particular objective. If this is so, why would Wilson send troops to Russia in an effort to destroy Bolshevism if they were not permitted to take any action against the government?

In practice, American troops in Siberia were sent to stabilize the region by assisting in operating the Trans-Siberian Railway and pacifying the people of Siberia, an expanded version of the same goals that Ambassador Reinsch advised Wilson the Czechoslovakians could accomplish.³¹ Wilson hoped these ostensibly benevolent goals, which he believed would not agitate the Bolshevik government in Moscow, would allow the Czechoslovakians to entrench themselves and gain local support. The Czechoslovakians’ nature as “cousins of the Russians” would allow them to gain the trust and respect of the Russian people, who could then “make Siberia safe for Russian democracy.”³² Wilson never intended to use American troops as combat forces to bring down Bolshevism. It was his policy to use American forces as stabilizers to allow other groups such as the Czechoslovakians or later White forces under Admiral Kolchak to become nuclei for further resistance movements. These movements could then be encouraged to march on Moscow and oust the Bolshevik government. In this way the president could intervene without being accused of violating his own principles of self-determination, for ultimately it would be a Russian group that would oust the Bolsheviks and choose, ostensibly independent of any outside influence, their new form of government.

³⁰ Graves, 8.

³¹ Ambassador Reinsch to Wilson, 13 June 1918, in Unterberger, 34.

³² In Unterberger, 35, and Foglesong, 164.

Wilson's hopes for intervention did not match its reality. Almost immediately, the Allies attempted to expand the scope of their operations in Russia. First they suggested the Czechoslovakian legion move further west, which the United States protested as a hostile move toward the Bolshevik regime.³³ After this, the French petitioned the United States to send commissioners to Siberia, which Secretary of State Lansing believed was an attempt to "impress our action in Siberia with the character of intervention rather than relief."³⁴

When the United States proved unwilling to expand intervention diplomatically, the other Allies began to act of their own accord. General Graves regularly wrote of the divisions of the Allies in Siberia, often stating his belief that the Japanese funded the disruptive and brutal regimes of the Cossack chiefs Kalmikov and Semenov in the hopes of discrediting the White movement, in effect disrupting the work of all the other Allies.³⁵ General Graves held a decidedly negative opinion of Allied operations in general, holding the personal belief that it was Japan's goal to "occupy Eastern Siberia," and that the Allies overtly attempted to destroy Bolshevism contrary to the spirit of Wilson's agreement to intervene in Russia.³⁶ While Wilson wanted the Bolshevik government to be toppled, he believed that the Russian people should be the ones to do so, and that the only duty of the Allies in Russia was to make the nation stable enough for the Russians to accomplish this on their own. Wilson miscalculated in believing the Russian people would fight for a democracy, and the gross excesses and reactionary natures of Kalmikov and Semenov prevented any Russian democracy from ever forming in Siberia.

In the northern Russian theater, the Allies deviated even further from Wilson's plans, and events there seem to support Graves's belief that the other Allies were not inclined to follow Wilson's ideological approach to intervention. American troops in the

³³ Lansing's Memorandum of 20 August 1918, in Unterberger, 43.

³⁴ Lansing to Wilson, 22 August 1918, in Unterberger, 43.

³⁵ Melton, 55-58.

³⁶ Graves, 62, 194.

northern port of Archangelsk, which were under the command of British General Poole, were actively used in fighting the Soviet regime rather than merely guarding the supplies at Archangelsk as Wilson had ordered.³⁷ Although Wilson had entered Russia with the hopes that no Allied soldier would need to raise a weapon to end the Bolshevik regime, this was not the same mentality that the other Allies held. Japan's interests in Siberia were expansionist in nature, while the French and British still believed an eastern front could be reconstituted and were willing to topple the Bolshevik government by force to see it done. The Allies did not respect Wilson's wishes for intervention in Russia, and thus his hopes were dashed. The Czechoslovakians and the regime of Admiral Kolchak both failed to unite Siberia into a force strong enough to fight the Bolsheviks, and the disastrous Archangelsk campaign failed to even recover the supplies they were sent to retrieve. War-weary and disillusioned, Admiral Kolchak's government collapsed in December of 1919, and Secretary of State Lansing promptly suggested the withdrawal of American troops.³⁸ America's Siberian adventure had failed.

Even in failure, President Wilson's policies of intervention and democratization had long-lasting, and unintended, effects. A British attaché in Moscow in the fall of 1918, Robert Lockhart, held the view that the direct effect of the Archangelsk landing and General Poole's subsequent decision to attack with such a small force "was to provide the Bolsheviks with a cheap victory, to give them new confidence, and to galvanize them."³⁹ Lockhart believed that the Allied policy of intervention assisted the Bolsheviks to consolidate their control over Russia, in effect reversing its goals.

Even if Lockhart's summation of the situation is exaggerated, the intervention in Russia had other profound effects, particularly diplomatically. The Bolsheviks saw intervention as capitalism's inevitable attempt to crush socialism and viewed the powers that participated as hostile.⁴⁰ This mistrust did not dissipate with time, and

³⁷ Foglesong, 211-219.

³⁸ Lansing to Wilson, 23 December 1919, in Unterberger, 50.

³⁹ Robert Lockhart, as quoted in Foglesong, 221.

⁴⁰ Foglesong, 272.

indeed it can be viewed as a major factor in the relations of the cold war. Speaking in America in 1959, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev said, “armed intervention in Russia was the most unpleasant thing that ever occurred in the relations between our two countries.”⁴¹ Clearly there was a continuity of mistrust between Russia and the West over this infringement upon her sovereignty, even though Wilson attempted to achieve it in the most diplomatic and peaceful way possible.

Although Wilson succeeded in satisfying his allies by agreeing to intervene in Russia, he did not succeed in restoring democracy to the country, and indeed he can be viewed as accomplishing nothing more in Russia than setting the stage for the later and greater mistrust of the Cold War Era.

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⁴¹ Nikita Khrushchev, as quoted in Foglesong, 7.