VERSAILLES\_EPISODE\_44\_OUT\_NOW

In our latest episode, we introduce you to the revolutionary wasteland that was Russia in 1919. Russia was a very confusing place at this time, because it was the subject of a lot of debate regarding that key question – should the allies launch some kind of military expedition against the Bolsheviks? That apparently simple question was complicated by the fact that the allies already had forces in different corners of Russia – 180,000 soldiers in total. How had they gotten here, why were they here, and if allied disunity over Russia’s future was the order of the day, then why hadn't they simply been allowed to return home?

These questions were all difficult to answer, but as we will learn in this episode, understanding Russia is impossible unless we first get to grips with the context of 1919 Russia, and the impact which the closing months of the Great War had had on the psyche of all sides. Different factions in Russia were a dime a dozen, with Siberia, Crimean, Ukrainian, Caucasian and Far Northern fronts, among others, but the Bolsheviks had one key advantage over all of these separated foes – they were not separated, they were more united in vision and purpose than these White factions could ever claim to be. Worldwide revolution, though it had lost some of its shine, had lost none of its edge, and Lenin still very much intended to unleash this nightmare on the Western world.

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 44 of the VAP. Last time, we looked at the adventures of the Freikorps, that destructive and vengeful organisation of embittered former soldiers, which rampaged through the Baltic States. The Freikorps had marched with the blessing of the allies originally, we learned, because it was the allies’ desire to see the Germans liberate the Baltic from the Bolsheviks, who had invaded the region in the first few weeks of 1919. In the back and forth which followed, the Bolsheviks would be expelled, the Freikorps would take root, but they refused to behave or stand down, instead initiating a campaign of bloody violence and retribution, as the Baltics groaned under the strain. The Freikorps, we learned, would not be expelled from the Baltic States until late 1919, and many would join with the White Russians against the Bolsheviks in the on-going civil war.

*But what of that Russian CW*? It is a topic we have mostly skirted around, as we noted numerous occasions where the allies referred to the unsolvable Russian problem and debated on the next steps to take. To properly grasp how disruptive the RCW was in allied minds, to understand what allied soldiers were doing there, and to appreciate the aims and vision of William Bullitt when he set off on 6th March 1919 for his fact finding mission to Russia, it is necessary to delve at least a little bit into the Russian situation by spring 1919, so that’s what we’re going to do here. It’s quite a chunk episode, unsurprisingly, so let’s just get right into it, as I take you, not to the RCW itself, but to the very first day of the PPC, and consequently, the very first occasion where an allied leader recommended immediate action be taken against the Bolsheviks – the 12th January 1919…

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The meeting of the SWC on 12th January 1919 was full to the brim with significance. Here was the first time that the allied leaders had gathered together to talk and plan in the same room. Here was the first real occasion to show the world what they intended to achieve, how they intended to make the GW worth it, and what kind of new world order they envisioned to take root. There would indeed be time for all that high-minded activism, but it is incredibly significant that on the same day that the world appeared to convene at Paris, many of these leaders decided that the time was right to engage in what amounted to a massive escalation of the situation in Russia. By now, it was 14 months since the Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia, put forward Lenin as their leader, and removed the Russian colossus from the war. That event was created a sense of overwhelming urgency in the allied camp, and the reaction of the allies to the removal of Russia and the subsequent eruption of the RCW help to explain why Marshal Ferdinand Foch was able to argue for the destruction of the Bolsheviks, and why both Winston Churchill and GC felt compelled to agree with him. Churchill insisted that a plan be drawn up which would detail how a comprehensive military campaign would be launched against the Bolsheviks, while Clemenceau agreed, as the minutes for that day record that:

...[Clemenceau] agreed with all that Mr. Churchill had said; and he attached great importance to the creation of a proposed [military] Council. He did not favour the policy of leaving Russia to her own devices…He favoured the policy of encirclement: the policy of setting up a barrier around Russia.... He did not court defeat in Russia, after having been victorious on the Rhine.

Considering this enthusiasm for military action in Russia, the American President and the British PM placed themselves clearly in the opposite camp. This was not out of WW’s love for the Bolsheviks; the ‘poison of Bolshevism', as Wilson termed it, was readily accepted by many people not because it was a military threat, but because ‘it is a protest against the way in which the world has worked’. Therefore, the best way to fix Bolshevism was by fixing this order, and replacing it with a new one. It was the business of the PPC to fight for such a new order, and even if Wilson subsequently had great difficulty defining what it all meant, he was clear on the pointlessness of a military venture in Russia, adding:

...there was great doubt in his mind as to whether Bolshevism could be checked by arms, [and] therefore it seemed to him unwise to take action in a military form before the Powers were agreed upon a course of action for checking Bolshevism as a social and political danger.

WW was not the only figure convinced that Russia’s salvation lay in the creation of a new world order, a euphemism for the LON. DLG was adamant that military intervention in Russia would not solve anything, and would only exacerbate the terrible situation. Furthermore, LG believed that the League would save Russia from itself, by making the world a better place, and facilitating the transformation of conditions such as were seen in Russia at the time. In a memo release in late March, LG demonstrated that he had not lost heart in the promise of the League to fix such problems, when he noted:

The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent, but of anger and revolt, amongst the workmen against pre-war conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other...There is a danger that we may throw the masses of the population throughout Europe into the arms of the extremists whose only idea for regenerating mankind is to destroy utterly the whole existing fabric of society. These men have triumphed in Russia…If we are to offer Europe an alternative to Bolshevism we must make the League of Nations into something which will be both a safeguard to those nations who are prepared for fair dealing with their neighbours and a menace to those who would trespass on the rights of their neighbours, whether they are imperialist empires or imperialist Bolshevists. An essential element, therefore, in the peace settlement is the constitution of the League of Nations as the effective guardian of international right and international liberty throughout the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We can discern the creation of two trains of thought then by spring 1919. In the minds of Clemenceau, Churchill and FF, this train involved choo-chooing their way into Russia with a large army and destroying the Bolsheviks, using whatever auxiliaries be they Poles, Greeks, or even Germans to do it. If you remember our massive episode looking at the last two weeks in February, episode 41, then you may remember Foch’s lengthy diatribe regarding the plan for dealing with Russia. We don’t need to quote it in full, but they demonstrate that Foch clung to this perspective right until the end, and that he never stopped believing that military intervention was the best way to defeat the Russians. On the other hand, in the minds of Wilson and LG, their train would choo-choo through the LON, and it would not merely protect those states under threat from the Bolsheviks, it would also alleviate the terrible social and economic conditions which allowed Bolshevism to flourish.

One camp thus wanted to ignore the League altogether, and initiate an military campaign independent of such organisations, compiled of a polyglot army and driven by the mutual interest in destroying Bolshevism for good. The other camp wanted to use the League as its silver bullet to kill Bolshevism essentially with kindness, to refrain from engaging in any military campaign but to use the mechanisms and resources at its disposal to ease the pain of Russians by delivering supplies of food and providing assurances, while also containing the spread of Bolshevism with a defensive belt of nations.

Of course, an undeniable fact of the day in spring 1919 was that military intervention by the allies had already taken place in Russia, and it had been as haphazard, piecemeal and badly planned as so many other acts had been in the war. And the allied intervention in the RCW was the product of the war; it had begun as a scheme for propping up the Russians, protecting the allied investments and avoiding the nightmarish scenario where Germany emerged supreme on the continent. By landing soldiers and providing equipment, especially in Siberia, it was imagined that the allied could prevent the Russian house from collapsing, even after the treaty of BL had been signed. It was therefore bizarre that allied leaders quibbled over their policy in Russia, because as far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, the imperialists had already made their choice. Following this intervention, and the failure to revive the Russian war effort against Germany, and following then the collapse of Germany and signing of the armistice, the presence of these allied soldiers in portions of Russia – a presence sought due to a feeling of pained urgency – now presented a tremendous opportunity.

The manpower was present, and the Bolsheviks were only a new regime – now was as good a time as any to crush Lenin’s legions and re-establish not the Tsardom, but the provisional republican government headed by Alexander Kerensky. In the second half of 1918, the allies struggled in their turn with this question of acting against the Bolsheviks now that the war was won. It is worth examining as briefly as possible the struggles which each power faced in this regard, as well as the wider strategic concerns felt by allied command with regards to Russia as a whole. I will now present you with a speed-runner’s guide to allied intervention in the RCW…

We begin with the most controversial figure in the RCW equation – WW. ‘I hold it as a fundamental principle,’ WW declared in January 1915, ‘that every people has the right to determine its own form of government.’ While addressing a crowd in Indianapolis, Wilson insisted that it was none of his business and none of their business how the people of Mexico chose their leaders. ‘And, so far as my influence goes,’ Wilson vowed, ‘nobody shall interfere with them.’ As the historian David Foglesong has pointed out, there was something ironic in the President’s statement to the effect that people must be left to their own devices, when he presided over the most interventionist policy in American history. Not merely intervention in the GW of course, but also interventions which have long been forgotten, help to underline this point. As Foglesong wrote:

No president has spoken more passionately and eloquently about the right of self-determination. Yet no president has intervened more often in foreign countries. Wilson directed the navy to seize Veracruz in 1914, ordered U.S. forces to occupy Haiti in 1915, commanded marines to pacify the Dominican Republic in 1916, sent soldiers deep into Mexico in the same year, and dispatched military expeditions to Vladivostok and Archangel in 1918. Less blatantly, Wilson used diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, arms embargoes, and arms shipments to influence political developments from Central America to Siberia and from the Caribbean to the Baltic.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It would be easy to see WW’s decision to send troops to Russia in July 1918 as an example of his inability to keep his nose out of other country’s business, but while it would be easy, it would also be incorrect. Wilson did not act in Russia in pursuit of a consistent policy; where initially the aim had been to protect the Russian front and guard allied supplies from falling into the hands of the Germans, upon the surrender of Germany a few months later everything changed – Russia had lost its strategic importance for the allied war effort, since there was no allied war effort, and while it could not be guaranteed that the war would not resume in the future, one could ask with some justification why the allies didn’t simply evacuate their soldiers from Russia’s disparate corners now that their original aim was obsolete. And it must be emphasised that the allied intervention in Russia had taken place very much in the context of the GW – we should not view either this allied intervention or even the Bolshevik government as issues separate from the on-going GW. The allied intervention was a product of the war just as surely as were the Bolsheviks themselves; had the Tsar’s regime not banged its head against a wall for over three years, it is highly unlikely that such revolutionaries would ever have seen the light of day, literally, since many would have been imprisoned.[[3]](#footnote-3)

When WW made his FPs in January 1918, no American soldiers were present in Russia, so Wilson felt no embarrassment when issuing point number 6, which called for the evacuation from Russia of all soldiers. At that time, Wilson believed that foreign armies – in particular the Japanese, who seemed best positioned to take advantage of Russian disunity in the east – were preventing Russians from determining their own future, and that until foreign armies left Russia, the Russians would never be able to decide how they wished to be ruled. Wilson of course wished that when selecting their rulers, Russians would not select the Bolsheviks. He failed to appreciate, as did so many of his contemporaries, what the situation was actually like in Russia, and he did genuinely agonise over the best method for sorting out Russia’s problem, confessing as much to House on the eve of deciding upon intervention in July 1918. ‘I have been sweating blood over the question of what is right and feasible to do in Russia’, Wilson said, ‘it goes to pieces like quicksilver under my touch.’ In fairness to Wilson, the Russian situation in 1918 was endlessly confusing.

Matters had come to a head for the allies in March 1918, with the signing of the Treaty of BL. With that signed, and Germany secure in the east, the fear had become one not only of facing a renewed German tide, which was then already on the move, but also in protecting what valuable goods the allies had sent through the Siberian and Crimean ports, and guarding the additionally valuable resources like wheat and oil which could be harvested. By guarding these, the allies intended to prevent them falling into German hands. It was a genuine fear in allied circles that Germany would gain a second wind economically by sucking the juice out of Russia; she already had the manpower advantage, but with Russia’s resource wealth, the German shortages could be made up for in double time, just as her soldiers were storming over the Western Front. So ingrained was this idea that even a year later, when allied soldiers were plainly no longer guarding these goods from the Germans, the fear went that if they left now, the unstable Russia would fall helplessly into the German sphere of influence, and Berlin would continue to suck Russia dry for its gain.

During this time of uncertainty, the Japanese had moved first, and had seized Vladivostok before moving steadily westwards. There was a legitimate danger that the Germans would take advantage of the Russian collapse by demanding more and more at the peace table, and thanks to the development of the Trans-Siberian railway, the Germans would have a solid artery through which Russian produce would be delivered. However, a further complication with this railway was felt by mid-1918 as well – the appearance along much of the length of this railway of the Czechoslovak Legion, former prisoners of war turned anti-Bolshevik flying columns, who occupied the major stations along the Trans-Siberian route, and in an incredible coup managed to capture the gold reserves of the old Tsarist regime. With these invaluable pawns in such unlikely hands, the Czechs not only gained fame and sympathy in the West, as we have seen, they also acquired a unique strategic advantage in the RCW which was to the benefit of the intervening allies.

The Japanese had been in place since late 1917, and when the British arrived in the spring of 1918, shortly after the treaty of BL had been signed, it was clear that a new front, quietly launched though it had been, had nonetheless been launched. In the south of Russia was a Ukrainian front, under the command of General Anton Denikin, and in the North in Siberia, based at Omsk, was the Siberian front. In between the allies had seized critically important port cities like Murmansk and Archangel, and a British-Canadian force had also been established in the Caucasus.[[4]](#footnote-4) The story of the RCW thus consisted of these separate fronts interacting with one another while the Bolsheviks worked to consolidate their hold. The Bolsheviks were at a disadvantage, in that the world was essentially hostile to them, and the Bolsheviks were a relative minority within the wider country. However, that was where the disadvantages for the Bolsheviks ended.

They possessed a formidable strategic advantage, in that they occupied the centre of the Russian country, and held the most important cities like Moscow, St Petersburg and Smolensk. They also possessed a unity of vision and purpose under Lenin, unlike the Whites, who were a loose conglomeration of factions and egos rather than a single party. The Bolsheviks had an additional advantage which was becoming still more potent the longer allied armies remained in the country – propaganda. The rhetoric and grandstanding of the Bolsheviks would be parroted over the subsequent years by Soviet chairmen as they consolidated their regime, but it was always the capitalist, imperialist west which was the target of Bolshevik attacks. Where during Stalin’s time these points rarely hit home in terms of facts, Lenin’s regime could quite reasonably point to the presence of allied forces in Russian territory as proof of the imperialist conspiracy to never leave Russians alone, and to force them to cleave to capitalism and all of its ills.

The allies, mostly LG, noted the potency and relevance of this message, as well as its usefulness for Lenin’s regime; the allies had perpetuated the capitalist GW, and now they were returning to avenge themselves upon the Russians, who had attempted to escape its final wrath. By late 1918 LG was warning his Cabinet that they would spread Bolshevism simply by trying to supress it – it was better to let it collapse by itself, and it surely would collapse, since such a cannibalistic ideology was unsustainable in the medium term. Yet still, it seemed that in spite of LG’s warnings and WW’s ideological window dressing, the allies could not bring themselves to genuinely leave Russia alone. By late 1918, some 180,000 allied soldiers were stationed in Russia, and every single one of them longed to come home, and for the war to be over for them just as it was over for their peers in the West.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Perhaps no power failed more spectacularly to achieve its ends in Russia than the French, a fact which is somewhat ironic considering how enthusiastically Marshall Foch and GC pushed for intervention. Under an agreement with the British, France was supposed to be in charge of the Ukrainian and Crimean fronts, while Britain was supposed to be in charge of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Yet from an early stage a French commander in the Crimea complained bitterly that ‘I do not have enough forces to settle into this country, all the more so since it would not appeal to our men to experience Russia in winter when all their comrades are resting.’ To the misfortune of this commander and his men, the French government back in Paris ignored these warnings, which led to scenes of desperation and panic once the combined effects of enemy numbers and the elements became too much. By April 1919, the French and some auxiliary forces had fled from Ukraine and the Crimea, in the latter case withdrawing with some 40k Russians who did not wish to face the Bolshevik music, including the mother of the late Tsar. In May 1919, the French Black Sea Fleet mutinied, and it became increasingly impossible for the French to have any impact upon the RCW. Almost as if to compensate for these shortcomings, the French government became increasingly hostile and belligerent towards the Bolsheviks. We may recall Foch arguing for a multinational force to be led into Russia on 25th Feb, and this was not the last time Foch would take this view, notwithstanding the complete inability of his country to carry the policy out.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Since the allied interventions in Russia were evidently not ridding the world of Bolshevism, and were leading instead to rampant discontent among the allied soldiers forced to carry this burden, when they wanted to return home, allied leaders surely had to develop a plan B. In the minds of LG and WW, as we saw, this plan B took the form of the LON. The league would guard against Bolshevik expansion while also alleviating the shortages and shortcomings of the international order, and under these improved circumstances, the Russian people would feel less obliged to rely upon the Bolsheviks, who would then be alienated and removed. In this way, this very vague and naïve way, two allied leaders imagined the League would sort out Bolshevism for them, and it would not cost them the same expenses as a straightforward invasion of the Bolshevik strongholds, which nobody wanted to initiate. However, we would probably not be surprised to learn that the Bolsheviks viewed the League with as much scorn and suspicion as they viewed the more honest allied military expeditions – both were policies of the same capitalist system which worked towards communism’s destruction. Gathering for the first Communist International Congress or Comintern between 2-6 March 1919, it was loudly announced by the Bolsheviks, who dominated the gathering, that:

In Paris the imperialist extortioners are trying to create their own ‘black international’, the so-called League of Nations. Conscious workers throughout the world know perfectly well that the so-called League of Nations is in fact a league of bourgeois robbers for the oppression of nations, for the division the enslavement of workers, for strangling of the proletarian revolution… The gigantic pace of the world revolution, constantly presenting new problems, the danger that this revolution may be throttled by the alliance of capitalist States, which are banding together against the revolution under the hypocritical banner of the 'League of Nations'…compel us to take the initiative in placing on the order of the day the convening of an international congress of revolutionary proletarian parties…The League of Nations, no matter how it is organized on paper, nevertheless will only play the role of a Holy Alliance of capitalists for the suppression of the workers' revolution…The revolutionary proletariat of every country in the world must conduct an unyielding struggle against the ideas of Wilson's League of Nations, and protest against the admission into this League of robbery, exploitation, and imperialist counterrevolution."[[7]](#footnote-7)

This was by no means the end of a torrent of venom which the Bolsheviks poured onto the League. Lenin singled out the League as something which should never be accepted, and something which true Bolsheviks would never compromise with, saying:

It is important to single out those questions which manifest the principle type of impermissible, treacherous compromises…and to exert all efforts to explain them and combat them…After the war, the defence of the robber 'League of Nations'...became one of the principal manifestations of those impermissible and treacherous compromises, the sum total of which constituted the opportunism that is fatal to the revolutionary proletariat and its cause…the financial oligarchy of the leading capitalist countries organized an international joint-stock company under the title, 'League of Nations', which, on the one hand must divide among them plundered riches, and, on the other hand, guarantee with its 'high' authority the payment of interest and the payment of war debts.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There was evidently no love lost between the Bolsheviks and the West, and Lenin’s regime had clearly developed to despise the exact kind of high-minded international moralism which Wilson so passionately advocated. Interestingly, Wilson had desired the creation of a democratic republican Russia to emerge from the ashes of Tsarism, and was perfectly willing to sacrifice the independence of the Ukraine and the Baltic States for the sake of that regime’s empowerment, but only on the condition that this iteration of Russia was a genuinely democratic, republic one. Wilson was also in the majority camp which wished to see this good Russia take its seat at the great power table when the LON was open for business, believing that this would accelerate the whole process of improving Russia and making the Bolsheviks obsolete. The vociferous hatred which the Bolsheviks felt for the League though, and the failure of this democratic republican Russia to emerge, left the allies unable to find a solution. In the end the allies settled essentially for plan C, which amounted to France’s cordon sanitaire plan of surrounding the Bolsheviks with strong neighbours like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Not only did this weak policy mean the abandonment of the Whites to their fate, it also meant that the intervention there had been a military defeat, and a massive waste of time, lives and resources, which the Chancellor of the Exchequer Austen Chamberlain believed had cost £100 million by its end.[[9]](#footnote-9) To some degree, it may surprise us that the three major allied powers, with additional military help from Japan and Italy and Canada, were unable in the end to defeat the Bolsheviks. In a constantly changing world, it should come as a surprise that the newly established Bolsheviks were able to hold on in the end. As the historian I. Moffat noted in his book on the allied intervention in Russia, the reasons for the Bolshevik survival can be explained not only by the Bolshevik unity of purpose and fanaticism, but also by other less exciting factors:

From the perspective of almost a century hence, it is difficult to understand how the allies’ Russian intervention of 1918-20 could end in such a tragic way. The experiences of alliances and coalitions that span those of the SWW and the existence of the long enduring alliance structures of NATO and NORAD show that international alliances do work. While not without their own difficulties, they have functioned with far more success and much less obvious chaos than the allied intervention experienced. But the decision makers of this earlier period had no such precedents to go by, nor could they be instructed by the collective historical experience available to us. Moreover, they had just fought through four years of mutual slaughter and national exhaustion. During that conflict we know that they did not resolve their alliance cooperation quickly or easily or, arguably, even adequately. In this situation then, one can understand how the Russian involvement developed into the chaotic diplomacy and failure that it did. The allied intervention demonstrates what can happen when adequate thought and a collective spirit of cooperation is lacking, especially when decisions are made base on personal beliefs and goals, while suffering from inadequate, incorrect or just plain substandard planning.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It should also be emphasised that the two most important anti-Bolshevik White forces in the Civil War were Alexander Kolchak in Siberia and Anton Denikin in Ukraine, and that neither man could stand the other. This was emblematic of the problems which the Whites faction as a whole suffered from, because the group was a concoction of so many opinions and aims, it was inevitable that they would fail to coexist. The personalities of Kolchak and Denikin were too strong individually to facilitate cooperation, but this did not prevent the allies from trying. The most notable effort in this direction was in the event of Prinkipo, the proposed conference of Russia’s leading lights which would take place at the largest of the Princes Islands in the Sea of Marmara. Prinkipo, one of the largest of these islands, had been a popular picnic spot for residents of Constantinople, who lived nearby; now it was to serve as the best hope for arriving at a peaceful solution in Russia. It was with heavy encouragement from LG and WW that the conference was extended to the Bolsheviks, but for the sake of compromise, the conference was hosted on that remote island rather than the French capital, where the poison of Bolshevism might infect the Europeans that resided there. The SC communicated this vision on 22nd January 1919, proclaiming:

The single object the representatives of the associated Powers have had in mind in their discussions of the course they should pursue with regard to Russia has been to help the Russian people, not to hinder them or to interfere in any manner with their right to settle their own affairs in their own way. They regard the Russian people as their friends, not their enemies, and are willing to help them in any way they are willing to be helped. It is clear to them that the troubles and distrust of the Russian people will steadily increase, hunger and privation of every kind become more and more acute, more and more widespread, and more and more impossible to relieve unless order is restored and normal conditions of labour, trade, and transportation once more created, and they are seeking some way in which to assist the Russian people to establish order. They recognize the absolute right of the Russian people to direct their own affairs without dictation or direction of any kind from outside. They do not wish to exploit or make use of Russia in any way. They recognize the revolution without reservation and will in no way and in no circumstances aid or give countenance to any attempt at a counter-revolution… In this spirit and with this purpose they have taken the following action: They invite every organized group that is now exercising or attempting to exercise political authority or military control anywhere in Siberia, or within the boundaries of European Russia as they stood before the war just concluded, except in Finland, to send representatives, not exceeding three representatives for each group, to Princes' Islands, Sea of Marmora…These representatives are invited to confer with the representatives of the associated Powers in the freest and frankest way, with a view to ascertaining the wishes of all sections of the Russian people and bringing about, if possible, some understanding and agreement by which Russia may work out her own purposes, and happy, co-operative relations be established between her people and the other peoples of the world. A prompt reply to this invitation is requested. Every facility for the journey of the representatives, including transportation across the Black Sea, will be given by the Allies, and all the parties concerned arc expected to give the same facilities. The representatives will be expected at the place appointed by Feb. 15, 1919.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We might expect the Bolsheviks to respond with additional scorn and hostility, but we may be surprised to note similar noises coming from the other factions within Russia, many of whom lived in exile in France at the time. Nicolai Tchaikovsky was the leftist revolutionary, but still anti-Bolshevik leader of the Government of the North, based in the city of Archangel, and he issued a stinging rebuke of the idea that all the parties of Russia would somehow gather together and talk as though a solution was possible. Tchaikovsky outlined the grimly uncompromising options available to Russians everywhere when he noted:

The suggestion that we other Russians should enter into negotiations for an accommodation with the Bolsheviks is impracticable, because we have no common ground with them. They deny every democratic principle that we affirm, fundamentally the liberty of the subject. There is only one settlement possible between us: either we prevail over them or they prevail over us. The policy of the conference is not only useless, is not only impracticable, but it is humiliating to the representatives of Russia. We cannot enter into discussions with criminals and outrage-mongers. To do so would be to recognize Bolshevism as a party, or to recognize crime as a normal political weapon and to tolerate the loosening of the foundation of democracy.[[12]](#footnote-12)

These Russian elements needn’t have worried, because the only powers to respond positively to the allied message were the Latvians and Estonians, and then with the caveat that they were coming to demonstrate their country’s independence from Russia, and not as a Russian party. On 15th Feb, the day when the conference was supposed to be held, we find the SWC instead shorn of its most important members, and veering more towards the extreme end of the policy, thanks in large part to Winston Churchill, the secretary for war at the time, who argued for ‘the immediate setting up of an allied council for Russian affairs with political, economic and military sessions, with executive powers within limits to be laid down by the present conference.’ Churchill wanted the military plank of this Allied Council to be set up asap to ‘draw up a plan for concerted action against the Bolsheviks.’ Then, Churchill insisted…

…if the Prinkipo proposal gave no results, the SWC would be in possession of a definite war scheme, together with an appreciation of the situation and an estimate of the chances of being able to carry through to success the suggested plan. The SWC could then make their choice, either to act or to withdraw their troops and leave everyone in Russia to stew in their own juice.

At this point, Clemenceau, House and Sonnino all weighed in in their turn, insisting that they agreed with Churchill’s forward approach, and that they had never really believed in the policy advocated by the PM or President. As the historian Donald Hankey wryly noted, ‘they were all very brave and downright in the absence of DLG and WW.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, it was the President and the PM who did more than any other figures to shape the outcome of the allied interventions in Russia. Both men have been examined by historians in the context of the RCW, but as is usually the case, Wilson has suffered more wounds by the historian’s pen in this theatre. According to Moffat though, this by no means absolves LG from his responsibility for hampering the allied chances of success. LG was responsible for holding the allies back, Moffat says, because the PM at no point believed that the British people would not tolerate additional war in the name of Russian freedom. As Moffat wrote:

Ever the pragmatist, LG’s greatest fear was unrest among the British population. Military intervention in Russia, in the view of the Labour Party and articulated by the Trades Union Congress, was cause for a general strike. For this reason, LG could not risk openly supporting a full-scale intervention against the Bolsheviks. He maintained this stance despite overt pressure from Winston Churchill, the one man who constantly pushed for a military solution to the Russian problem. To add to the chaotic nature of British politics was the problem that LG never quite said no and never quite said yes – perhaps to cause delay in making any decision, thereby gaining time. But whatever the case, such overt inaction meant that others like Churchill took action and were difficult to control. Nonetheless, it was LG’s actions and inactions that prevented adequate British support for the anti-Bolsheviks and together with President Wilson ensured the failure of the intervention. And the others acted as they saw fit in the chaos created.[[14]](#footnote-14)

But when I looked at the fact that neither Wilson nor LG were happy about intervening in Russia, and did it largely for wartime reasons, I kept returning to that burning question. The war was over in November 1918, so what were they still doing there? The British and American forces which were maintained in mostly Siberia and Caucasia were strong enough to defend against incursions from the Bolsheviks, but not strong enough to engage in any proper military campaigns. Thus, we should bear in mind that when Churchill talked about military intervention or some kind of scheme to make it possible, what he meant was investing additional resources in the pre-existing allied presence, so that a campaign would be possible. But back to that question of why the British and Americans didn’t leave, especially when the French did in April 1919 as we saw, and the answers in both their cases have to do with political pragmatism, and in WW’s case, something akin to realpolitik. This was the perspective furthered by Georg Schild in his book examining the American intervention, and Schild noted:

The hotly contested question among Western historians of whether Wilson intervened in Russia to defeat the Bolsheviks, to help the liberals, or to keep the Germans and/or the Japanese out of the country is of only secondary importance. More important for the understanding of Wilson's policy is that for ideological reasons he did not consider any intervention there necessary, and he only joined the Allied endeavour to satisfy a practical need for unity.[[15]](#footnote-15)

So does the idea of allied unity help explain Wilson’s actions? In my view, not completely. The historian David McFadden opined that Wilson permitted American forces to stay behind in Russia after the armistice for three key reasons: (1) to aid the anti-Bolshevik forces, (2) to prevent the Japanese from getting control of eastern Siberia and northern Manchuria, and (3) to let the Paris Peace Conference make a final decision on the "Russia question."[[16]](#footnote-16) A simple fact of the era was that if allied forces were not present in Russia and did not possess some kind of leverage, they would never be able to determine its fate in the PPC. Wilson first passionately believed and then hoped against hope that the Bolsheviks would be cast aside, but he appreciated that unless the allies had some boots on the ground, however unpalatable, none of their decisions would have any weight. That, of course, assumed that decisions of some kind could be made, which was not at all clear by spring 1919 where Russia was concerned. In the British case, it is also worth considering the possibility that simple economic interests drew LG’s government to Siberia,[[17]](#footnote-17) that the Empire’s material and strategic interests compelled them to hold onto the Caucasian theatres to protect their interests in Asia and India, and also led British policymakers to favour the creation in the end of a weak Red Russia rather than a strong White one.[[18]](#footnote-18)

A final consideration, and one which is often overlooked when attempting to find the more conclusive answer, is that less exciting explanations in isolation or combined can help answer the question of why Anglo-American forces and others stayed put in Russia. First, it was safer politically to do nothing, since the left would have been outraged at LG if he had upped the ante in Russia, while the right, led by Churchill, would have been furious to see Britain pull out. The situation was broadly similar in the US; where one looked they could find factions arguing on the one hand for the allies to ‘keep hands off Russia’ as the slogan went, while other sources published horror stories about the Bolshevik excesses and urged action yesterday.

Second, we must remember that Russia was one issue among a sea of others, and that when apportioning time and attention to this long list, matters which seemed distant or static were often relegated to the bottom of the list. Russia suffered this fate several times, and even while it often came up for discussion, on the first day of the SWC on 12th January, on 15th Feb and again on 25th Feb, nothing of substance was ever decided upon because no allied consensus could be found. As Churchill’s confident surge demonstrated, many other allied leaders including Clemenceau would have relished the chance to properly invade Russia and destroy Bolshevism, but they had chosen instead to fall in line with the President and PM for the sake of allied unity.

And this allied unity was a vital resource for the likes of Clemenceau and Orlando, who relied upon the decisions of the allies when it came to things they truly cared about, like reshaping Germany, reparations, or those tasty morsels which Italy had been promised. So long as the allied support for a given scheme was conditional, apathetic and prone to changing with the wind or latest news, it was highly unlikely a new scheme for solving the Russian problem would emerge. With the failure of Prinkipo to mobilise the Russians sufficiently, the Russian question was delayed until 19th Feb, and while on his way, Clemenceau was infamously shot at by a crazed anarchist. Subsequent discussions of Russia were put on the backburner, but two important developments were underway which would, it was hoped, break this deadlock.

The first was forming in the mind of Alexander Kolchak, by far the strongest anti-Bolshevik force in play, based in the Siberian city of Omsk. Kolchak planned for a new offensive, which would kick off on 13th March, and which would surely draw additional allied soldiers into the fray, thereby cutting off the Bolsheviks and strangling their wretched ideology in its cradle. The second development was less ominous, and germinated in the mind of Edward House, who sought participants for a secret delegation to be sent to Russia with the core aim of finding information about the situation there – an essential task if there ever was one. The man selected for this mission was William Bullitt, and in spite of the relatively unambitious aims which were attached to this plan, William Bullitt’s mission soon took on a life of its own, at least, it did in the mind of William Bullitt, who came to believe that he was being sent to Russia to craft a peace settlement in the name of the Anglo-Americans. Where everyone else had failed, Bullitt believed that he would succeed, and his contemporaries seemed either too busy or too disinterested to take the time to bring him back down to earth…

1. See Donald I. Buzinkai, ‘The Bolsheviks, the League of Nations and the Paris Peace Conference, 1919’, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Oct., 1967), pp. 257-263; pp. 257-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David S. Foglesong, *America's Secret War against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David W. McFadden, "When the United States Invaded Russia: Woodrow Wilson's Siberian Disaster," *The Historian* 77, no. 3 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 77-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, pp. 80-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in Buzinkai, ‘The Bolsheviks, the League of Nations and the Paris Peace Conference’, p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I. Moffat, *The Allied Intervention in Russia, 1918-1920: The Diplomacy of Chaos* (Springer, 2015), see Conclusion Chapter. Accessed on Google Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Available: https://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/HIS242/Documents/Prinkipo.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See D. Hankey, *The Supreme Control at the Paris Peace Conference 1919 (Routledge Revivals)*, pp. 69-70. Accessed through Google Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Moffat, *Allied Intervention in Russia*, conclusion chapter – no pages available as accessed on Google Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Georg Schild, *Between Ideology and Realpolitik: Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. McFadden, ‘When the United States Invaded Russia’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Arno F. Kolz, ‘British Economic Interests in Siberia during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sep., 1976), pp. 483-491. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)