

First Shots of the Cold War

By Anthony Brandt Originally published by *Military History* magazine. Published Online: February 25, 2015



In a mission U.S. Secretary of War Newton Baker later termed "nonsense from the beginning," the first Allied troops landed in North Russia in 1918, while the last to leave (celebrating above) finally departed Vladivostok in 1920. (National Archives)

'Whatever slim chance there might have been for a dialogue between communist Russia and the United States was gone'

North Russia, 1919.

The roads ran through forests and swamps so dense a man could not see more than 20 feet in any direction, and in the swamps the water was hip-deep. Get lost in them, and one's body would never be found. In winter storms the snow quickly reached 2 or 3 feet deep, while temperatures dropped to 30, 40 even 50 below. Some idiot on the British general staff had decreed his troops use water-cooled machine guns; to keep them from freezing, some gunners slept with the weapons beside them. Frostbite was common. Everyone—including the French and Americans—was under British command, and even the lowliest Tommies perceived the incompetence of many of their commanders. Units sent on flanking maneuvers through the forests and swamps never found their targets, got lost and then needed rescuing. Maps, when available, were sketchy. Communications were poor or nonexistent.

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And among soldiers was the building refrain—*What are we doing here? Why are we here, in north Russia, fighting Bolos (Bolsheviks)?* The stated Allied objective was the town of Vologda, some 300 miles south of their position at the junction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad and lines leading south to Moscow and north to Arkhangelsk. But as the inept Bolshevik forces the Allies had faced in the fall of 1918 stiffened into the stronger, better-trained Sixth Army over the winter, it became obvious Vologda was out of reach. Why were they there? On taking over in November 1918 Brig. Gen. Edmund Ironside had bluntly explained to his officers and troops they were there fighting for their lives. It was true. By December the ice that gave the White Sea its name was closing the port of Arkhangelsk. Thanks to the warm waters of the North Atlantic Current, the port at Murmansk, on the Barents Sea, remained open, but to reach it would have meant crossing hundreds of miles of roadless swamp and forest in the winter. There was no escape, then. They had no choice but to hold their ground.

But what were they doing there? Why, in the opening stages of the Russian Civil War, were American troops being sent not only to Arkhangelsk and Murmansk in far western Russia but also to Vladivostok and up into Siberia in extreme eastern Russia? What business was it of the United States that the Bolsheviks had seized control, or that forces were gathering within Russia to try to reclaim the country? President Woodrow Wilson had insisted that, while he wanted to make the world safe for democracy, it was American policy not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Yet that was exactly what he was doing. What had changed his mind?

The intervention would turn out to be one of the notable missteps of Wilson's career, and the world is still living with its consequences. It would turn communist Russia, whose rulers were already hostile to Western powers—though indeed willing to exploit their technical know-how and personnel to organize their railroads and help them industrialize—into a permanent enemy. The late diplomat and historian George Kennan wrote that U.S. military intervention killed whatever germ of hope existed for a better relationship between the two countries. "It was precisely this possibility [of some level of cooperation and understanding]—the most important that could be imagined from the standpoint of the long-term future of both the Russian and American peoples and indeed of mankind generally—that was sacrificed to the slender and evanescent baubles of the military intervention."

That intervention took shape late in World War I after the Bolsheviks rose up in October 1917 and promptly sued for a separate peace with Germany and the Central Powers. Even before the Bolsheviks took over, the Russian army had been falling apart. Major campaigns had failed spectacularly; morale had collapsed; there were mutinies in Ukraine. Many Russians, regardless of ideology, were fed up. The effect was to essentially close the Eastern Front. Suddenly, vast numbers of battle-hardened German troops—more than 40 divisions—could be transferred to the Western Front, enough of them, Germany believed and the Allies feared, to break the four-year stalemate the war had become. The United States had officially entered the war in April 1917, but not until the spring of 1918 did American troops began to arrive in Europe in significant numbers, and they were untested in combat. By then the governments of Russia and the Central Powers had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which officially ended Russian participation in the war and also put large swaths of western Russian territory (present-day Eastern Europe) into German hands.

For the Allies these developments were disastrous. They saw the Russian collapse not only as a defeat and a possible deathblow to the Allied war effort in the west, but also as a chance for Germany to extend its power, not to mention its territory, even farther east than the boundary designated by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. This fear was not unreasonable; even as the treaty was under negotiation, German forces pushed deeper into Ukraine. Finland was embroiled in a civil war, with Germany supporting the White side against the Bolshevik-backed Reds, and the Allies

worried Germany would move its own troops toward Murmansk and Arkhangelsk under cover of this support. In 1917 the Allies had sent Russia thousands of tons of military supplies, which sat on docks in Arkhangelsk, Murmansk and Vladivostok, free for whoever could take them.

To complicate matters, the treaty freed thousands of prisoners of war from camps in Siberia, which placed Germans, Hungarians, Czechs and a half-dozen other nationalities on the railroads inside Russia, making the situation inside the sprawling and fractured nation yet more volatile. Bolshevik control of the country was at best tenuous and concentrated in the cities. Open civil war had not broken out, but dozens of what came to be known as White Russian—primarily nationalist and anti-Bolshevik—forces were quietly gathering throughout Russia, waiting for the right moment to strike.

On March 21, 1918, using forces beefed up by the troops transferred from the Eastern Front, Germany launched an offensive against the exhausted Allied armies on a 50-mile front in France and penetrated farther than they had at any other time in the war. German forces advanced to within 60 miles of Paris, putting the City of Light within range of their new long-range superguns. The French and British were desperate to reopen a front in the east.

And they wanted to include the Americans. But Wilson would have none of it. In his "Fourteen Points" speech, delivered on Jan. 8, 1918, the president had made his support for the self-determination of nations quite clear, and he had no wish and saw no reason to interfere in Russian internal affairs. Such an intervention went against his own idealistic policy and had little support in the U.S. War Department, which thought it wildly impractical. The British and French did all they could to persuade Wilson to change his mind, but he would not budge.

Military intervention seemed a bad idea on many levels. No invading army since the Mongols in the 13th century had ever fared well on the Russian steppes, and the Allies did not intend to send an army, only a small force to keep the military stockpiles out of hostile hands, rouse the Russians to resist German domination and persuade the new Soviet leaders they stood to lose more under German hegemony than they had to gain. "It was not our business to determine whether the Bolshevik or the anti-Bolshevik sections of the Russian peoples would ultimately dominate," insisted British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. "Our one concern was to prevent the vast and productive area of the Russian empire from becoming subject to the Central Powers and a source of supply for them in the war." To do so, the Allies would reopen the Eastern Front, in turn taking pressure off the Western Front.

Was it a reasonable idea? Not in the chaotic, highly unpredictable situation that prevailed in Russia at the time. The Bolsheviks were weaker than they themselves knew and were laboring under the profound delusion that their takeover of the Russian government would spark a global revolution of the proletariat, who would throw off the yoke of capitalist servitude, refuse to continue fighting the world war and forever end imperialism. But on the tactical level the Bolsheviks were divided among themselves. Leon Trotsky, then minister of war, welcomed Allied intervention in the north to keep the Finns and/or Germans out of Murmansk, while Vladimir Lenin wanted no Allied help of any kind. The Russian revolution, meanwhile, was not liberating the proletariat from any chains. If it was having an international effect at all, it was among Russia's neighbors, where long pent-up nationalistic feelings among Poles, Ukrainians and Latvians as well as other ethnic groups in the Russian south were bursting forth.

To make the situation even more complex, an entire foreign army—the Czechoslovak Legion, with some 60,000 armed men—was moving east inside Russia toward Vladivostok. The Czechs and Slovaks, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, were among those nationalistic groups who sought independence and had joined the Allied cause when the war began in 1914 in hopes of winning it. They had fought, very effectively, alongside the Russians. Russia may have left the war, but the Czechs and Slovaks had not. Since there was no exit from Russia to the west, the Allies planned to send them east on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Vladivostok, then take them to Europe by sea to help rescue the Allies from the German Spring Offensive—a move that, of course, required the cooperation of the Bolsheviks.

Chaos and confusion were the order of the day—and it would get worse.

On May 14, 1918, at a siding in central Russia, a westbound train carrying released Hungarian prisoners pulled alongside an eastbound train carrying Czechoslovak legionaries to Vladivostok. The occupants of the trains taunted one another. Then one of the Hungarians threw a chunk of scrap metal through an open train window, mortally wounding one of the legionaries. Infuriated, the legionaries pulled the Hungarian from the car and killed him on the spot. The legionaries were armed; the Hungarians were not. One can imagine the uproar. When Trotsky heard about it, he ordered Soviet units up and down the line to disarm the legionaries. He seemed to have forgotten he did not have much of an army. Nowhere in the Russia's vast interior were Soviet enclaves up to this task. The Czechs fought their way to Vladivostok and by the end of the summer controlled most of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, including Vladivostok itself. This was enough to bring White Russian resistance to the Bolsheviks into the open. The civil war was on. It would last until 1921 and claim more than 7 million Russian lives—"five times as many," wrote military historian John Keegan, "as had been killed in the fighting of 1914–17."

This was the context that finally changed Woodrow Wilson's mind. He knew it was a mistake, his own War Department knew it was a mistake, but the Allies had pressed him so hard for so long that he began to feel they would lose all confidence in him if he didn't accede. The irony is that by July 1918, when he made his decision, American soldiers were beginning to make a difference on the Western Front. Germany's Spring Offensive had ultimately come to grief. The Allies were counterattacking, and American soldiers were demonstrating an enthusiasm for action that astonished the war-weary French and British. The offensive had cost Germany dearly—300,000 casualties in March, 120,000 in April—leaving it with no further manpower reserves.

The first Americans sent to north Russia arrived in late summer. In Murmansk the governing Soviet was happy to see them; officials perceived the threat from the Germans and Finns on their border, and they knew Moscow cared nothing about the local situation. Trotsky had acted alone when he invited the Allies to help defend the north against German or Finnish encroachment. Lenin hated all the Western powers, and believing worldwide revolution was coming, he countermanded Trotsky's orders, but it was too late. In increasingly bitter exchanges between Murmansk and Moscow, the local Soviet in effect declared its independence from Moscow. Allied forces landed, took over the railroad and began to move south. In Arkhangelsk, a couple hundred miles away, officials were hostile, but by the time Allied ships arrived in August, a coup had replaced the local government, and the troops landed without any loss of life.

The plan was to advance south in a multipronged movement toward the railway intersection at Vologda in order to link up with the Czechoslovak Legion—which had supposedly been diverted from its drive toward Vladivostok and turned back to the north—and form a new Eastern Front. The possibility of such a hookup was evaporating even as the need for such a front was vanishing. In north Russia some 7,000 British and Commonwealth troops, 5,000 Americans, 2,000 French, 1,000 Serbians and Poles, and several thousand White Russians ended up facing not Germans but the increasingly powerful and capable Red Army. All the elements were in place for a fiasco. To cap it off the indomitable Ironside was told only when he took command that the Supreme War Council had decided to continue fighting in north Russia even if the Germans gave up—a decision his superiors had not bothered to communicate or explain to the Allied officers in the Russian north.

It was a small war, but a very real one. There were many separate fronts, and the action in places was very intense. The Red Army enjoyed artillery superiority; it had longer-range guns—and more of them. The sides fought each other all through the fall, into late December and in some spots even later. In the snow and intense cold, frostbite multiplied the usual agonies of combat.

The Americans, who called themselves the Polar Bears, fought well but chafed under British command. The war was over in Europe, but they continued to fight, and no one could tell them why. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, were fighting for their ideology on Russian soil, and getting better at it. All winter long there were artillery duels but little infantry action. Everyone had dug in. In February 1919 troops of a Yorkshire battalion ordered to the front refused to move, only relenting after their colonel put them through rigorous exercises and wore down their resistance. Then a French battalion flatly refused to fight. They were sent home. The message was clear: *The war on the Western Front is over. Why are we still fighting?*

At one contested bridge crossing the Bolsheviks routinely propagandized the Americans, even sending a subaltern to stand on the bridge at night to harangue them. The Americans were pawns of the British, he claimed. Why were they fighting Russians? In mid-March the fed-up men of a U.S. company on the Dvina Front signed a formal petition announcing they would "refuse to advance on the Bolo lines, including patrols." The war was over, they insisted, the Germans had been defeated, and what they were doing now was against the announced policy of their own government. They were threatened with hanging, but ultimately nothing came of it.

Regardless, in February, Wilson had changed his mind again. He had never explained to the American people, much less to the men themselves, what U.S. troops were doing in Russia. And he didn't explain why he was bringing them home. In June the bulk of the American force left Arkhangelsk. Half of the bodies of their 235 dead were never recovered. They still didn't understand why they had fought and died in north Russia. The British left in August, leaving the campaign against Soviet forces in the far north to the White Russians. Over the following year some 30,000 of those outmatched men died before the guns of the Red Army.

The American intervention in Siberia was just as futile. Eight thousand Americans, drawn largely from units trained on the West Coast, landed in Vladivostok in the summer and fall of 1918. There they joined British and Commonwealth troops, the Czechoslovak Legion and various other foreign contingents, including some 70,000 Japanese. Tokyo meant to use the chaos in Russia to seize as much of Siberia and the Russian islands off its coast as possible, not to mention a large bite of Manchuria. The Japanese troops in Russia were as arrogant as they would prove to be in World War II, and tension between them and the Americans became endemic.

U.S. units landed with the same confusing mandate they had been given in north Russia: Don't take sides in what was by then a full-blown civil war; at the same time help the Czechoslovak Legion and protect the railroads. American engineers were already in place, trying to maintain the railroads and not take sides, but how were they supposed to do that? Control of the railroads meant control of the country. The Bolsheviks raided railroad stations, killed personnel, tore up tracks and cut telegraph lines, while White Russian and Cossack units rode the rails in armored trains and attacked villages suspected of aligning with the Bolsheviks, each side committing barbarous atrocities.

Overseeing this mess was the U.S. commander Maj. Gen. William S. Graves, who stuck rigidly to his orders not to interfere in Russia's internal affairs. He managed to keep his men out of combat until the spring of 1919, when Bolshevik units attacked U.S. and Japanese troops guarding the Suchan coal mines, which were crucial to the operation of the railroads. The Bolsheviks struck again in the town of Romanovka, where partisans surprised a sleeping unit of Americans in their tents and killed 24 men. The survivors drove them off, but it was clear the Americans would have to take sides.

Graves reinforced all units stationed along the railroads. Skirmishes between the Bolsheviks and U.S. units continued through the summer, then dropped off. In early October 1919 Wilson suffered the stroke that effectively ended his presidency. Whatever explanation he might ultimately have given the forces he sent to Russia would never materialize. The last American forces left Vladivostok on April Fools' Day 1920, and what survived of the Czechoslovak Legion left by year's end. U.S. Secretary of War Newton Baker called the Allied expedition "nonsense from the beginning," while Army Chief of Staff General Peyton C. March deemed it a "complete failure." Whatever slim chance there might have been for a dialogue between communist Russia and the United States, as George Kennan noted, was forever gone.

A frequent contributor to Military History, Anthony Brandt is the author of The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage. For further reading he suggests George F. Kennan's The Decision to Intervene: Soviet-American Relations, 1917–1920 and Robert L. Willet's Russian Sideshow: America's Undeclared War, 1918–1920.