



A look back at the Allied intervention in Russia from 1918 to 1920: the failure of a coalition at the heart of the civil war

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Military history pays little attention to the extent of Allied intervention on Russian territory during the civil war between the "Whites" and "Bolsheviks" from 1918 to 1920. This episode, overshadowed by the victory of the Great War, was a bitter failure of the diplomacy and armed forces of the Allied Command.

Indeed, after the October Revolution in 1917 and the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which put an end to the war between Moscow and Berlin, the Allies tried to avoid the transfer of German divisions from the Eastern Front to the Western Theater. Moreover, tons of equipment and weapons, initially intended for the Tsarist troops, were stored in Russian ports such as Murmansk, which the Germans coveted by taking advantage of their Finnish ally's offensives against the Communists.

Also, in Abbeville, on May 2, 1918, the Supreme Inter-Allied War Council decided to send an expeditionary corps. Its mission was to protect the arms and ammunition in Russian, Ukrainian and Siberian ports, to prevent the transfer westwards of the prisoners of the central powers interned in these regions (estimated at 1 million men) and to preserve an exit door at Vladivostok for the Czechoslovak army corps (50,000 men who had been fighting alongside the troops of Nicholas II before the revolution), which was to be repatriated to France in order to continue the fight against the Germans. As for the Japanese, they agreed to intervene because they saw the opportunity to control the Pacific side of Siberia. But the prevarications, conflicts of interest and incipient rivalries between the Allied governments and armies prevented the planning of a joint and effective operation, especially since the Bolshevik authorities took control of many cities, while the "white" armies, which were in favor of the Entente's action, were divided over the objectives to be achieved.

Events took a new turn when the Czechoslovak corps, threatened by Trotsky's Red Guards at Chelyalursk, entered into battle on May 14, 1918 with Bolshevik troops, over whom it quickly gained the upper hand. Theoretically under the orders of Marshal Foch, who had given authority to the French general Janin (former head of the French military mission in Russia), the Czechoslovakians nevertheless took the unilateral initiative of seizing the Trans-Siberian railroad lines in order to reach Vladivostok as quickly as possible. Spread out along this route, they will initially hold the ground before losing all coherence in their progressive and chaotic retreat towards Siberia. The Allies were once again torn between the desire to help the Czechoslovak corps and the desire to spare the Bolsheviks, who were feared to be allied with the Germans. An expedition was nevertheless decided on July¹, but it was not formalized on the ground because the Americans and the Japanese disagreed about the number of troops to be deployed: Wilson wanted to send 7,000 men, while Tokyo wanted to land 40,000 infantrymen.

Unilateralism

From then on, each country decided unilaterally to send contingents or ships, and General Janin, appointed commander-in-chief by Marshal Foch on 24 August 1918, only controlled the French battalion in Arkhangelsk and the Czechoslovakian corps. Churchill appointed Major-General Knox for the British troops in Omsk who supported Kolchak's "white" troops, while Japanese General Otani, who was to command the Allied troops east of Lake Baikal, was withdrawn from control of the American troops by Washington. This inexorably led to incidents, such as the hundred or so Japanese soldiers massacred by the Russians at Khabarovsk after the American General Graves refused to come to their aid. Foch tried to establish a concrete intervention project for 1919 with the establishment of an economic blockade, a convergence of efforts of the allied contingents from Finland, Poland and Romania as well as the creation of multi-ethnic forces (Latvians, Estonians) supported by the great powers and capable of acting alongside the "white" troops.

Unfortunately, the countries concerned struggled to come to an agreement and concrete actions remained limited to the conquest of ports. This was the case in Arkhangelsk, where the nascent Red Army was driven out by an expeditionary force comprising a battalion of the 21st French Colonial Infantry Regiment (900 men), a detachment of 400 British riflemen, a section of Polish artillery and the 339th American regiment. These forces, without logistics, suffered from the harsh living conditions (cold, hygiene, mud, etc.) and suffered heavy losses. After the efforts made between 1914 and 1918, many soldiers did not understand the reasons for this commitment, especially since they often noticed the corruption and exactions of the "white" troops they were supposed to support.

Leaving Russia in the grip of civil war, unable to coordinate the actions of the very divided "white" Russians (Koltchak, Denikin, Youdenitch...), the Allies ended up conducting ad hoc operations without any link to each other but according to political objectives that remained national. For France, Clémenceau's policy being to stifle the Bolshevik regime, after the armistice of November 11, 1918, an operation was launched on Odessa to support Denikin's troops in the Crimea with 1,800 French soldiers under General Borius. After a series of successes, the French troops, joined by Greeks and Italians, finally had to retreat in February 1919 due to military defeats or mutinies of soldiers (the 58th infantry regiment refusing to go to the line in Tiraspol), tired of fighting and influenced by

Bolshevik propaganda. Further north, the British General Maynard defended Murmansk until October 1919, supported by French artillery and American detachments, but he eventually abandoned the area.

Similarly, the Japanese won some victories before being forced to give up the field due to lack of international support. Gradually, Moscow's troops regained control of the territory and defeated the leaders of the "white" armies.

The Allies, for their part, decided, from 1920 onwards, to adopt a more peripheral strategy, with France supporting the fledgling Polish state in the face of the Red Army, and the British moving into the Caucasus to close the door of its Indian colonial empire to Communist influences.

In the end, despite tactical successes and the sacrifice of many soldiers, the Allied coalition was never able to adopt a clear operational vision of the expedition to Russia and ended up fighting in isolation with minimalist logistics and a strategy without a clear objective. Worn out by four years of world war, the troops engaged in support of disorganized "white" armies were unable to carry out coherent actions in the face of a nascent but increasingly strong Red Army, both morally and militarily. United in the effects of announcements, the countries concerned remained divided on the implementation of a single chain of command and the conduct of operations, causing real operational incoherence before an emergency disengagement.

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