

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 184

“1919 – Russia II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Bolshevism threatened to impose by force of arms its domination on those populations that had revolted against it and that were organized at our request. If we, as soon as they had served our purpose, and as soon as they had taken all the risks, had said, “Thank you; we are exceedingly obliged to you. You have served your purpose. We need you no longer. Now let the Bolsheviks cut your throats,” we should have been mean—we should have been thoroughly unworthy...

David Lloyd George, addressing Parliament in April 1919.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 184. 1919 – Russia, part two.

This is our ninth episode in our 1919 World Tour, and the second in our series on Russia. Last week, I described how the armed anti-communist resistance in Russia gathered its strength during 1918. Today I want to finish bringing us into “sync” with the World Tour. I’ll just remind you briefly that one of the major events in Russia in 1919 is that Red Army advance westward, an effort to take back the territories Germany claimed in the now-defunct Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. We talked about this Red Army advance in episodes 179, 180, and 182, so I won’t go over it all again. As you know, ultimately Poland and the Baltic States, with support from the Allies, were able to resist the Red Army enough to force Soviet Russia to agree to their independence, but just keep in mind for the sake of context that the events we discuss today are happening at the same time as that westward advance.

Another major event of 1919 is, of course, the Paris Peace Conference, so before we delve into Russia’s internal struggles today, I want to take a step back and have us take a look at Russia through the eyes of the West.

From outside the country, Lenin's Russia was an enigma. A black box. News from Russia was hard to come by in the Allied countries. After the October Revolution, Allied governments refused to recognize the Bolshevik government and were angry that it had capitulated to the Germans and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Nevertheless, as you'll recall, the Allies and the Bolsheviks remained on reasonably friendly terms during the first half of 1918, because neither one dared to antagonize the other. Not with Germany lying between them. The Allies held out hope that Russia could be induced to reenter the war against the Kaiser; the Bolsheviks needed Allied goodwill to counterbalance German bullying. Despite the official policy of non-recognition, the British, French, and US governments maintained diplomatic missions in Petrograd and kept up informal contacts with Sovnarkom.

All this began to change by summer, after the killings of the deposed Emperor and his family and especially after Lenin was wounded in an assassination attempt on August 30. The following morning, agents of Cheka, the new secret police, forced their way into the British Embassy in Petrograd. Shots were exchanged, and at least one Cheka agent was killed and another wounded. Also killed was the British naval attaché. Some forty embassy personnel were taken into custody, most of them British subjects, and embassy records seized.

The Bolsheviks claimed that the seized records proved that the British government was secretly supporting anti-Bolshevik activities in Russia, including that assassination attempt on Lenin. The British government has always denied these accusations, dismissing them as Bolshevik propaganda, but in our time there is some evidence this was in fact true. The British Foreign Office continues to keep secret records from that time that would shed light on the question.

But either way, the seizure of the British Embassy and its staff was roundly denounced by Allied governments and seriously damaged Russia's relations with them. The US and the French closed their own embassies. The British seized Russian representatives in London in retaliation. The two nations would eventually work out an exchange of prisoners.

This incident marked the end of efforts by the Russian government and the Allies to make nice with one another. Over the following months, as the civil war in Russia escalated and the Allies landed their own armed forces in Russian territory, the Western press also withdrew most of its reporters from Russia, so by January 1919, very little news from Russia was getting out into the wider world. Even telegraph communications were spotty and unreliable.

In the absence of hard information, rumors flew, rumors of violence and torture and murder under the new regime. Some of this was true, as this was the time of the Red Terror, when some fifteen thousand government opponents were killed. Some was wild propaganda, reminiscent of the accusations made against the German Army in Belgium. Most striking, at least from my modern point of view, are the repeated claims of Russian women being confiscated as state

property and handed out to the men as a form of socialist redistribution. Yes, this was a widely repeated accusation during this period.

Anti-Bolshevik voices in the West decried a situation in which a modern, advanced nation was collapsing into some kind of post-apocalyptic barbarism. No one illustrated this better than our old friend Winston Churchill, who, in a speech given during the 1918 general election campaign, described Russia like this: “Civilization is being completely extinguished over gigantic areas, while Bolsheviks hop and caper like troops of ferocious baboons amid the ruins of cities and the corpses of their victims.” It’s almost as if someone had shown him *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*.

More moderate figures like David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson reckoned that the old imperial order in Russia had been both incompetent and cruel and was now reaping the whirlwind. Eventually the grievances that had fueled the flames of revolutionary violence would be consumed and those fires would die out.

Lloyd George wanted to invite the Russian government to the Paris Peace Conference. The Conference was going to be adjudicating claims of nations that bordered on Russia; he reasoned that to do so without inviting the Russians to argue their own side would be unjust. Georges Clemenceau, on the other hand, couldn’t get past how the Bolsheviks had betrayed the alliance and made a separate peace with the Germans, which in turn had made possible the German spring offensives of 1918 that had come uncomfortably close to costing the Allies the war. And then there was all that Russian debt held in France that the Bolsheviks were now refusing to honor. As far as Clemenceau was concerned, the West owed Russia nothing.

As for Woodrow Wilson, his view remained the one derived from his experience with the Mexican Revolution: if the Russians wanted to raise hell, then let them raise hell, and after they were done raising hell, then the Allies could talk with them.

The hallmark of Allied policy toward Russia was this incoherence. Even as some Allied leaders were arguing for negotiations with the Russians and others were arguing for an aloof approach, over a hundred thousand Allied soldiers were already on Russian soil, occupying the Russian north, Vladivostok and later the Black Sea coast, and Allied navies were patrolling Russia’s coastlines and subjecting Russia to blockade.

What was the goal? Allied governments didn’t like the Bolsheviks. They didn’t like Bolshevism. Okay, fine. What are you going to do about it? Landing a few thousand soldiers here and there around the periphery of the largest nation in the world might make a few people in London and Paris and Washington feel better, but the actual impact on the situation in Russia was insignificant.

If the Allies really wanted to play a role in determining the future of Russia, they would need to intervene much more forcefully in the Civil War, overthrow the Bolsheviks, and put a Western-friendly White government in power. Churchill was all in on this idea. So was Marshal Foch in

France. But the forces the Allies had in place weren't nearly enough. Which Allied nation was going to be first one to step up and volunteer the soldiers and the money that a serious military intervention in Russia would require? There wasn't exactly an abundance of offers. The Allies were sick of war and close to broke. Lloyd George declared that he would rather see Russia Bolshevik than Britain bankrupt. And intervention would be divisive at home; left-leaning groups in the Allied nations—socialist political parties, labor unions—were hostile to intervention in Russia. In the north of Britain, “Hands off Russia!” was the slogan of the day.

The Allied leaders at the peace conference never did resolve this muddle, although they did go so far as to send a young Russia expert in the American delegation on a fact-finding trip to Moscow. His name was William Bullitt. He was the son of an elite Philadelphia family, just 28 years old and thrilled to give up his technical duties at the conference in Paris in exchange for this unexpected opportunity to help shape the post-war world. Bullitt was a fervent supporter of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy principles and also something of a radical, sympathetic to the stated goals of the Bolsheviks. He traveled to Russia with the like-minded American journalist Lincoln Steffens, whom we've met before in the podcast.

The two spent three weeks in Russia, and the Bolsheviks rolled out the red carpet for them. They stayed in a palace, ate caviar, attended the opera, and met with Lenin and foreign minister Chicherin, both of whom left them with favorable impressions.

Lincoln Steffens returned to the US an enthusiastic supporter of the Bolshevik government, making a famous declaration: “I have seen the future, and it works.” Bullitt came back to Paris with a peace offer from Lenin: his government would agree to normalize relations with the Allies and honor Russia's foreign debt, if in return the Allies would withdraw their soldiers from Russian soil, end the blockade, and cut off aid to the White movement. But the Allied governments would not take up the proposal. The sudden coup in Hungary, with Béla Kun taking over and declaring a Bolshevik-style revolution at just this same time no doubt influenced their thinking. Just then, Bolshevism seemed too dangerous to treat with. Bullitt himself was bitterly disappointed by this turn of events. He believed he had come up with the formula that would repair the relationship between Russia and the Allies, only to see it rejected by his own side. He resigned his position in the American delegation and returned home.

Whether Lenin's peace offer was genuine, in which case the Allies passed up a better deal than they eventually got, or whether it was just another volley in the Bolshevik propaganda war against the imperialist West, well, that's a question historians still debate in our time.

[music: Tchaikovsky, *The Seasons*]

I've seen maps and videos of the Russian Civil War on the internet. You may have, too. If you look at one of these maps as of the beginning of 1919, you'll see that the government in Moscow controls only a small fraction of the total land area of the former Russian Empire, less than 20%.

If all you had to go on was one of those maps, you might think the Bolsheviks are hanging on by a thread.

But these maps are deceptive. Russia is a vast and open country, and much of the land area ostensibly controlled by the White movement is in fact uninhabited or sparsely inhabited and actually controlled by no one. Siberia is so vast and so empty that the largest explosion in human history, the Tunguska meteor of ten years ago, was only barely noticed, and it will be another two years before anyone bothers to have a closer look at the blast site.

The region of Russia still under Moscow's control at this moment is roughly the traditional Russian homeland, called Great Russia, which is inhabited by ethnic Russians, or "Great Russians" as they are sometimes called, to distinguish them from "Little Russians," or Ukrainians, and "White Russians," or Belarusians. In our time, Ukrainians and Belarusians don't much like being called Little Russians or White Russians, so I'm going to stick to *Ukrainian* and *Belarusian* to refer to them, and Great Russians will be just *Russians*.

So the Moscow-controlled part of Russia is the Russian part of Russia. It is ethnically homogeneous and home to half of Russia's population and most of its industry. The Red Army is nearly triple the size of the forces arrayed against it, though the Red Army soldiers are less well trained and experienced.

Some sources will tell you that these large, sparsely populated regions of Russia are in revolt principally because of grain expropriations. Moscow has been sending Red Guards out across rural Russia seizing grain supplies to feed hungry workers in the big cities. Even some Russian socialists grumbled that the dictatorship of the workers and peasants was becoming a dictatorship of the workers over the peasants.

I'm sure those confiscations had something to do with alienating the hinterlands, but bear in mind that within Great Russia there are also lots of farmers and farmland, and they stayed loyal, even though once the other regions of the country rose up and their grain became unavailable, Moscow's demands on Great Russian peasants only got more extreme.

Lenin and his government and his party were in no mood to compromise on anything. You've probably noticed that, and you may be wondering why they remained such ferocious ideologues even now, in circumstances when a certain flexibility in thinking and willingness to compromise might have eased the crisis facing them.

Well, the reality of Bolshevik history is that uncompromising inflexibility has so far served Lenin and the party quite well. Back in 1917, the other parties were afraid to weaken or dismantle the Russian state, or to "lose" the war, as conventional thinking would have it. The Bolsheviks welcomed both these developments, because for them, Russia didn't matter. The war didn't matter. They were after global revolution. They believed that nations and governments were about to be swept away worldwide in any case. As a corollary to that, no political or social

institution within Russia was important, either. Existing institutions were obstacles, in fact, and needed to be torn down. The only institution that mattered was the Party itself, since the Party were the vanguard of the coming socialist revolution.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can perceive that in dismantling Russian institutions the Bolsheviks are not facilitating socialist revolution, but are in fact laying the groundwork for a one-party state. Bear in mind, though, that at this moment, the beginning of 1919, they themselves do not realize this. They continue to believe that the final confrontation between capitalism and the proletariat is at hand.

It's also a mistake to think of the coming Russian Civil War as a two-sided conflict between a Bolshevik government and a coalition to overthrow it. Yes, it had those two sides, the Reds and the Whites, but there were also secessionist nationalist groups around the periphery of Russia who sought independence. They were enemies of both the Reds and the Whites, since both of those movements sought to keep the old Russian Empire intact. And then there were the various Allied interventionist forces, which supported the Whites and thus opposed the Red Army and often also opposed the nationalists.

So more of a four-way conflict, actually. Among the nationalists, Finland, Poland, and the Baltic States were able to secure their own independence, but there were many others who took up arms and failed, including Armenians, Azeris, Georgians, Siberians, and most conspicuously, the Ukrainians. The Allies were reluctant to recognize any of these new self-proclaimed states, except for Poland, not out of respect for the Soviet government in Moscow, but in deference to the White movement, especially Admiral Kolchak, who was no more interested in recognizing any of these would-be new nations than Lenin was.

Speaking of Ukraine, let's turn our attention there for a moment. You'll recall from episode 157 how during the treaty talks in Brest-Litovsk, the Germans decided to negotiate a separate peace deal with the Ukrainian Rada. Trotsky dismissively claimed the Rada controlled nothing more than their hotel rooms in Brest-Litovsk, because by that time, Red Guards had already seized Kiev and forced the Rada to flee the capital. But the deal was done and in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia was compelled to honor Ukraine's border.

But in 1918, the Rada was unable to control the country or supply Germany and Austria with the grain they had promised. So the Central Powers occupied Ukraine, deposing the Rada and installing a handpicked authoritarian as its replacement. This occupation had the knock-on effect of buying some breathing space for the anti-Bolshevik forces mustering farther east in southern Russia. Germany and Austria never did benefit from the promised grain, and after the Armistice and the repudiation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Russian Red Army began moving into Ukraine once again.

This advance into Ukraine was part of the larger Red Army advance westward to re-occupy the territories that Germany had taken from Russia in the Treaty. We already looked at that 1919

Red Army advance against the Baltic States and Poland. Now we'll look at the Ukraine piece of the story.

I should note at the outset that Ukraine is a large country. It's bigger than France. The Red Army had a much greater challenge before it than it had in occupying, say, Latvia. Their goal was no less than to occupy all of Ukraine, and beyond that, take back Bessarabia, the former Russian province annexed by Romania. This would require the new Red Army to advance more than 400 miles across hostile country that neither the Rada nor the Germans had ever managed to secure, and not only secure it, but run supply lines through it all the way to Romania, where the Red Army would then potentially have to engage the Romanians.

Well, as you know, that was more than the Red Army could handle. They never did get all the way to Bessarabia, much to the regret of Béla Kun, whose Bolshevik government in Hungary will now be overthrown by a Romanian Army not tied down in a war against the Red Army, episode 178. Also, by diverting the Red Army away from Anton Denikin and his now unified Armed Forces of South Russia, Moscow is giving Denikin and his soldiers time and space to regroup. The White forces in South Russia spent the winter of 1918-19 just barely hanging on, fighting for their lives, so you can understand why Lenin and Trotsky judged taking back Ukraine a higher priority than finishing off what was left of the Whites in south Russia.

But that judgment was premature. In fact, Denikin will be able to use this breather to build up the Armed Forces of South Russia into the largest and most dangerous anti-Bolshevik force in the country. We'll talk about that next time, but for now I'll note that since the decision to invade Ukraine will not get Bessarabia back for Russia, nor give Béla Kun any assistance in Hungary, you might be tempted to think of it as a strategic blunder. Some historians think it was, but I'm not so sure, because it did accomplish a couple of things that were very helpful to Lenin's cause.

First, the Red Army was able to take Kiev and sweep away the authoritarian pro-German government that the Central Powers had installed. Stripped of German protection, that regime had little popular support and no way to defend itself. Second, in December 1918 French and Greek soldiers had landed at various Black Sea ports, notably Sevastopol and Odessa. These Allied troops were intended to take over occupation duties in Ukraine from the Germans, but in January 1919 as the Red Army advanced on Kiev, the French commander had only about 5,000 soldiers at his disposal to garrison this country larger than France. He reported back to his superiors in Paris that he would need twenty divisions to complete his mission. Clemenceau hoped they could at least hold the Crimean Peninsula and retain an Allied foothold on the Black Sea coast, but there was no stopping the Red Army and in the end the French wisely chose to withdraw rather than get into a shooting war.

So the Red Army advance into Ukraine did remove the German puppet government and force an Allied withdrawal, both of which helped solidify Moscow's control. The end of the German-installed government did lead to the reappearance of the Rada though, the former Ukrainian

government the Germans had ousted, but by spring the Red Army would control most of Ukraine and the Rada would be left with only a small strip of territory in the far west. Here is where the narrative links back up with our episodes on Poland, where we saw how the Polish government and the Ukrainian Rada agreed to a treaty under which in exchange for Ukraine conceding Galicia to Poland, Poland would assist the Ukrainians in pushing back the Red Army.

The Poles would be successful at first, as you already know. By the summer of 1919, the Red Army was overextended, in the Baltic States and in Belarus and in fighting both Denikin's and Kolchak's White Armies. Advancing Polish forces would recapture Kiev in August.

The arrival and swift departure of the French from the Black Sea coast underscores the ambivalence of Allied policy toward Russia. In 1918, when the Great War was still raging and the outcome in doubt, the Allies were willing to pull every lever they could find, including the one marked "overthrow the Bolsheviks and get Russia back into the war." But that was 1918. This is 1919. The war is over, peace is all the rage, the Allied governments are broke and the Allied publics are tired of war. Better Russia should be Bolshevik than Britain bankrupt.

On the other hand, the Allies had encouraged the Whites to take up arms against the communists. Now that the war was over, did that mean the Allies were just going to walk away from the civil war they had helped incite? You can hear in the Lloyd George quote I read at the top of the episode how uncomfortable a thought that was. The killings of the Romanovs and the Red Terror that followed the assassination attempt on Lenin were ample demonstrations of what fate awaited the White movement's leaders should their revolt fail. In an age that highly prized personal and national honor, to cut and run and leave the Whites to a grisly fate would seem cowardly and shameful.

This left the Allies in an impossible position, involved in a war they could neither win nor quit. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that Western powers are going to find themselves stumbling into this same kind of impossible position again and again for the rest of the century. And indeed, into the 21st.

And so the Allies would remain in this posture, kinda, sorta, involved in the Russian Civil War, only not too much, for another year. The French left the Black Sea ports, but the surrender of the Ottoman Empire still meant that Allied ships could reach the Black Sea, which opened up supply lines through which the Allies could assist Denikin and his Armed Forces of South Russia. I already told you about the Allied landings at Vladivostok in 1918, which were ostensibly to keep Allied military aid out of Bolshevik hands and cover the escape of the Czechoslovak Legion. But now it is 1919, the Allies are still in Vladivostok, the Czechoslovak Legion is still garrisoning the Trans-Siberian Railway, and the Allies are now using it as a supply pipeline to Admiral Kolchak and his government in Omsk.

More about them next time, but first I want to turn your attention to the Russian Far North, where yet another Allied military force has landed. You'll recall that the Allies were also using

the northern Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel as a route for shipping military aid to Russia, bypassing the Central Powers' blockade. Those cities, like Vladivostok, had built up substantial stockpiles of Allied military aid when the October Revolution came. By summer of 1918, the British government was concerned that those stockpiles might fall into either Bolshevik hands, or even German hands, through the now-independent Finland, which was aligning itself with Germany. The British engineered the overthrow of the Bolshevik government in Archangel and landed soldiers, about 6,000 in all. They also persuaded the US government to dispatch about 5,000 doughboys to Archangel. The US Army's official name for this force was the North Russian Expeditionary Force, but the soldiers themselves dubbed it "the Polar Bear Expedition." There were also about a thousand each of Canadian, French, and Italian soldiers involved.

At this point enters our narrative an Imperial Army general named Yevgeny Miller. As you might guess from his name, he came from a Baltic German family. Miller was another one of these Imperial-era generals who had a falling out with the Provisional Government after the February Revolution, then escaped during the October Revolution. Unlike most of the others, though, the 51-year old Miller made his way to Archangel, where with the approval of the British and of Admiral Kolchak, he set himself up as the head of the regional government.

So with some assistance and some prodding from the Allies, and especially the British, there were by early 1919 three regions of Russia in open revolt against Moscow, each with its own military, its own leader, and receiving Allied military aid. We have Miller in the north, Denikin in the south, and Kolchak in the east. Denikin and Miller have both acknowledged Kolchak as the head of the White government, although keep in mind that this is mostly a formality. These three regions are separated by great distances and are effectively operating independently.

But even so, they were all officially part of one movement and though the Allied governments never formally recognized Kolchak and his government in Omsk, by 1919 they were very much dealing with it unofficially, and hoping—fingers crossed!—that the White movement could, with no more than a limited level of Allied aid, overthrow Lenin and establish a democratic Russia that could join the new postwar world being constructed in Paris.

And this brings me back to where I was a few minutes ago when I was talking about maps of the situation in Russia at this moment and how the Bolsheviks control less than 20% of the land area of the country. But despite what the map says, Lenin and his government control half the population and most of the industry of Russia. They also benefit from having the central position. The Whites are on the outside, divided, with vast distances separating them. The smart bookies are listing Red Russia as a heavy favorite in the next chapter of the story.

But we'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening. I'd also like to thank Alan for his donation, and thank you to Jacob, for becoming a patron of the podcast. And thank you to everyone who has emailed or posted comments at the website or ratings and reviews. And thank

you all as well for being listeners. Your enthusiasm and support makes everything I do worthwhile.

Next week will be a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we get down to the nitty gritty of the Russian Civil War. Reds versus Whites in 1919, the decisive year of the conflict. That's in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Before we plunge into an account of the fighting in the Russian Civil War, I want to say a word about Leon Trotsky in his role as Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs, basically the war minister of the communist government in Moscow.

No Bolshevik, no socialist in Russia or anywhere had the slightest interest in military affairs. Socialists were pacifists and held the army in utter contempt. It was the instrument of imperialist oppression. No one in the Bolshevik government had any sort of background in or understanding of military affairs. In the months after the October Revolution, as it became clear that whatever your ideology might be telling you, Soviet Russia needed an army and it needed one right now, Lenin and his government were up against the fact that they were all spectacularly unqualified to create one.

Leon Trotsky took on this assignment and did remarkably well, given the obstacles before him. As he himself put it, "Disintegration of industry is of course an unfavorable condition for the creation of an army. But this was not all. The collapse of the old army left in its wake a bitter hatred of everything connected with militarism. The old army had exacted unbelievably heavy sacrifices; it had known only defeats, degradations, retreats, millions of corpses, millions of cripples, and billions in expenditures. It is hardly surprising that this war left in the minds of the popular masses a terrible revulsion to military life and everything connected with the old military clique. And it was under such conditions...that we began building the army..."

The new Red Army was poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly motivated, though Trotsky set to work investing all his time and energy in attacking every one of those problems. There were political meetings to explain the war to the conscripts, most of whom, honestly, couldn't have cared less who would win the war. If ideological exhortations failed, well, Trotsky placed reliable soldiers behind the front lines with orders to shoot anyone who deserted.

Trotsky also put himself onto the front lines, racing back and forth across Russia in a special armored train, logging about 100,000 kilometers of travel in less than two years. He also made it a point to carry spare coats and boots and a few luxury items like tobacco aboard his train, items in short supply in the Red Army, and he would pass these out whenever he visited an army unit. He never had enough for everyone, but even small gestures like these built his reputation.

Trotsky's time as foreign minister was a bit of a debacle, as he ended up signing a peace deal with the Germans less generous than the one he had turned down a few weeks earlier. But his

tenure as war minister marks the high point of his career in Russian government and his most important and enduring contribution to the success of the October Revolution.

[music: Closing Theme]

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