A Study in Confusion

The British Decision to Intervene into the Russian Civil War

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On the day of November 11, 1918, most of the world celebrated the end of 'the war to end all wars.' Many scoffed at such a term, but few realized how hollow it really rang. That very day 200 British soldiers and 400 Americans fought a tremendous battle in a small North Russian town called Tulgas against 4,000-10,000 Red Army soldiers who were probably led by Trotsky the Soviet revolutionary himself. The ironically named Battle of Armistice Day (or Peace Day's Bloody Battle) raged from November 10-13, 1918. There were only a few Allied deaths against the prolific Russian casualties, and none on either side knew why they were truly there. Most in the modern West do not remember what transpired that night, but they do in Russia. For those whose brothers left their blood on that desolate snowy plain, they would never forget the agony of learning that the reason for fighting that day was now void. The end of WWI left many with no coherent objective while they stayed in the bleak and inhospitably cold winter of the Russian northern provinces. As one soldier said,

> There we were, fighting the enemies of a tyrannical government, going mad and dying like rats of wounds and disease, while a world far removed from our cause was settling back after a wild demonstration of joy, preparing to build up the broken universe. Neither Trotsky nor our own government gave us so much as a sign of peace. We were forgotten by our own country, ignored by the one for which we were fighting and drenched in belligerent blood for a thankless people.[1]

The Cold War may be known as a war never fought,[2] but there can be no doubt as to whether the main powers behind NATO and the USSR ever fought each other in a real conflict. It is known simply as the Russian Intervention. From 1918 to 1920, America, Britain, France, Japan, and many smaller nations invaded and fought Soviet Russia during its formative Civil

[1] Gordon W Smith, "Waging war in 'Frozen Hell.'"
[2] Some historians have argued that the Cold War began with the Intervention. See André Fontaine, *Histoire de la Guerre Froide*, (Fayard, 1965) vol. 1.

War (1917-1921). These allied nations fought their former ally, the Red Army, in Siberia, Trans-Caspia, Murmansk province, and Archangel province. They also indirectly fought them by supplying aid and munitions to many groups trying to fight the Bolsheviks such as the White Russians and the Social Revolutionary Party. For a time, it seemed as though the Allies would destroy the fledgling communist nation, but the intervention was too weak, dispersed, and disoriented. The intervention gained nothing and helped less than it hurt everyone involved. As George F Kennan said, "Never, surely, in the history of American diplomacy has so much been paid for so little."[3]

There are many possible reasons for these strangely forgotten events to have taken place. Historians have been arguing over them beginning within a couple of decades after they happened.[4] Some historians focus on the concurrent events of WWI at the beginning, while others focus on the reasons that fit what the communists have said about it.[5] What historians choose as their focus has made for radically different points of view. There is plenty of room for interpretation of the intervention, but it does make for a lack of scholastic cohesion. One thing is certain - the intervention is a confusing subject.

That confusion comes directly from the sources themselves. They are rife with subtle ironies and obvious dissonances. Historians who have studied this subject can find any number of amazing incidents to illustrate their points. Some political leaders change their positions from one decision to the next. Many confused battles, including oddities such as broad-siding

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[3] George F Kennan, *The Decision to Intervene*, 471.

[4] The first major argument was between Leonid Starkhovsky (*The Origins of the Intervention in North Russia*) and Raymond Dupey (*Perish by the Sword*) over the military's decision and not the political side.

[5] If history is written by the victors, then the Soviets would be the people to write it. Unfortunately, historiographically speaking, the Soviets have had a very jaded view of the intervention, and so will not be used in this paper. See Kennan, *Soviet Historiography and America's Role in the Intervention.*

armoured trains, took place. The British bloodlessly conquered Archangel, more than sixty years after their horrendously failed first attempt. One could focus on so many particulars or incidents, but it is necessary to focus on what is deemed of importance.

The British, from the beginning to the end of the Russian Intervention, were the orchestrator of the event. They pushed the Allies to attack and keep fighting. Even during WWI, they were still the world's most powerful empire, and would remain so until WWII. They would lead the world in its affairs with Russia. This paper pays special attention to the British Cabinet minutes and other Cabinet documents from the time, in order to understand Britain's key role in the intervention.[6] These documents (secret at the time) explain what was discussed, reviewed, and decided at the highest level of the British government. The focus on these sources offers a unique perspective on the thinking of the men of the British Cabinet, who made the decision to intervene in Russia as well as every other subsequent interaction. What they fundamentally convey is an intricate web of confusion through the necessities of the current situation the British were dealing with on a global level at the time.

Most scholars choose to focus on why the intervention. The split in academia about why this took place is over whether it was a pragmatic decision to help the war effort or a counterproductive enterprise to squash communism in its cradle. The 'pragmatic argument' is mostly given by the orthodox historians, while the 'anti-Bolshevism argument' is given by the revisionists. The work off historians such as Leonid Starkhovsky and Michael Kettle define the

[6] "War Cabinet Meeting Minutes," *British National Archives*. Herein simply beginning with the archival reference CAB.

orthodoxy,[7] while David Foglesong, Michael Sayers, and Albert Kahn form the revisionists.[8] Both are correct and wrong in various ways. One clearly loses ground after the end of WWI, and the other is unsubstantiated by the actual conversations of the people making the decisions. One interesting exception lies in the personage of George F. Kennan, who was mostly orthodox in his explanation, but wrote the most important book on this subject.[9] He, being personally involved US-Russian diplomacy, took a more nuanced approach, explaining the troubles from both sides. This nuanced approach has been the trend in recent scholarship on this subject,[10] and is what is needed for the future.

Historians have rightly emphasized the role of confusion in the intervention, but none have analyzed its earliest source. As one peels away the layers of evidence, the 'pragmatic argument' and then the 'anti-Bolshevism argument' come to light, but neither satisfactorily explain the decision. The Russian Intervention was a sordid affair where confusion ruled the decision making process. The men involved in making decions blundered into this mishap through bad information and indecision, or utterly ignorant ambivalence, making policy decisions that lead to further problems. This confusion characterized early Anglo-Soviet relations, and may have led to much enmity between the Russia and her former allies. In order to illustrate this confusion, it is best to not only look at what happened at the beginning of the intervention, but also what subsequently happened between the two nations. The Anglo-Soviet

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[7] Leonid Starkhovsky, *The Origins of the Intervention in North Russia 1918,* (Princeton University Press, 1937).
Michael Kettle, *The Road to Intervention*, (London: Routlege, 1988).
[8] David Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism: US Intervention in the Russian Civil War,* (NC: Chapel Hill press, 1995).
Michael Sayers and Albert Kahn, *The Great Conspiracy against Russia*, (NY: Boni & Gaer Inc, 1946).
[9] George F Kennan, *Soviet American Relations: The Decision to Intervene*, (Princeton University Press, 1956).
[10] A good example of this is Donald Davis and Eugene Trany, *The First Cold War*, (MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

Trade Agreement of 1921 with the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the name of Soviet Russia before the USSR) is a prime example of this early confusion in the dealings of the British with Russia, as well as being the symbolic ending of the Russian Intervention. It is also necessary to disassemble the actual intervention chronologically before and after the armistice of WWI, for it carries a particular significance for the decision to intervene. In each of these moments, the confusion can be explained away, but for the people who were living the confusion, the inability see with clear lenses what they were doing and what was happening in that faraway land shaped the West's muddled understanding of the RSFSR for years to come.

I) The Decision to Intervene

There was no distinct decision to intervene in the Russian Civil War, no point where British Prime Minister Lloyd George said, "Invade now." It was a progressive slide towards the action. There were hundreds of separate decisions that went into the decision to intervene, and there were several dissenting opinions that made up those decision, as well as a general lack of information all around. At no point in the discussions recorded in the Cabinet minutes does it seem possible for the English cabinet to come to a conclusion on what to do about Russia, even after they had invaded her.

The beginning of the Russian intervention was very much like Brer Rabbit punching the tar baby. With each successive push, the Allies became more and more involved. It began with small incursions into Russian territory, and at its fullest the Allies supported governments formed in opposition to the Bolsheviks, making the Allies a belligerent in the Russian Civil War. It was

a buildup of tensions. There is no point that one can call the beginning of the intervention, since it had several small incursions before a full invasion. Throughout this process, the British showed shifting opinions and a lack of good information. That and the overall pressure from WWI created the initial confusion.

World War I loomed large in every decision made about Russia. Britain thought she needed Russia to win. The war's gruesome stalemate had reached an apocalyptic tone by the beginning of 1918. Blood mixed with the mud of perpendicular trenches that spanned hundreds of miles at a rate never before seen in the history of mankind. "[WWI] was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth."[11] In 1918, within this backdrop of everyday carnage, the Allies lost their most powerful ally - Russia. Aside from Germany, Russia had the most troops engaged in WWI, and the British thought they could not manage without her.[12] Russia dropped out of the war in March of 1918, but had been crumbling away before that at a dismal rate.

The trouble with Russia began almost as soon as the Bolsheviks took power, though problems with Russia's ability to prosecute the war had surfaced before that. As early as May 9, 1917, the British Cabinet was looking at the very real possibility of the Russians leaving the war.[13] During that year the Russian army had been steadily losing ground, which intensified after a botched offensive in July. The October Revolution took place on November 7, 1917, placing the Bolshevik party in power after the former wartime-liberal government of Alexander Kerensky had replaced the Czarrist regime during the February Revolution. The Bolsheviks had spread defeatist propaganda before they took power and wanted to make peace, but they had trouble on

[11] Ernest Hemingway, *Men of War*. From the introduction.
[12] CAB/23/49 IR/78, 9 May 1917.
[13] CAB/23/49 IR/78, 9 May 1917.

their hands when they took power. They still had to try to take back as much land as they could from the Germans, who were deep in Russian territory, and deal with the fierce resistance to the new government at home, which would later develop into a full-blown civil war. They started to try to negotiate with the Germans in a little town called Brest-Litovsk on December 22, 1917. The talks broke down quickly, and the Germans gathered their strength for a bigger push. They took a huge amount of territory in Russia in early 1918. During this time the Red Army was formed as a defense force against the Germans, but they would be used to great effect against the Allies later on. The talks resumed, and on March 3, 1918, the Bolshevik government signed an armistice, ending Russia's involvement in WWI and ceding all the captured territory to the Germans.

As all of this was happening, the British were trying to keep Russia in the war. In December 31, 1917, the British issued a plea to the Bolshevik government to "have sufficient force to inflict a decisive military defeat in 1918 or 1919." [14] They wanted the Russians in WWI for the long term, but that rapidly became infeasible. With the United States entering WWI, the British focused on trying to keep Russia fighting just long enough to tip the scales in their favor. They became angrier in dealing with the Russians. The prime minister sent telegrams trying to, as the minutes said:

> Notify the Russian Bolsheviks that if they had not taken the responsibility of entering into negotiations with the enemy by themselves, we should have stood by the Russian democracy, as we intended to stand by the French democracy. The Prime Minister gave as his reasons for including this statement that it was necessary to give warning to the Bolsheviks that we did not any longer consider ourselves bound to fight on in Russian interests.[15]

[14] CAB/23/13 IR/33, 31 Dec 1917.
[15] CAB/23/5 IR/6, 4 Jan 1918.

The British even were willing to allow the newly formed government to be boxed in by other allies, who were willing to take Russia's access to the Pacific Ocean and Baltic Sea as a punitive action, effectively cordoning off Russia from the outside world.[16] That idea would surface again.

The Bolsheviks did not pay attention. The Russian Civil War had broken out on New Year's Eve 1917, and they now were fighting on two fronts. Britain was still trying to work with the Russians when they formed the Constituent Assembly, which was a democratically elected body of representatives much like parliament, but without a prime minister or king. Almost immediately though, the Bolsheviks dissolved the Assembly, reinstating themselves as the power holders. This caused great consternation with the British, and was cited as one of only two reasons the Prime Minister would be willing to cause a rupture with the Bolsheviks, the other reason being their willingness to negotiate with the Germans.[17] There was even a mention, during that same meeting of January 21, 1918, of trying to make a punitive action by the Japanese and Americans through Siberia to help the rebellion in South Russia.[18] Tensions were heating up between the two powers.

The idea of sending troops into Siberia was too enticing. The British returned to it throughout February, and came to a decision on the 24th.[19] Now real intervention was a clear possibility. The Cabinet was by no means unified in their decision. They argued for hours, even though they had been talking about it for a month. The very real eventuality of the Bolsheviks losing their ability to rule and defend Russia was the first thing identified in discussion.[20] Russia was still in WWI, but the British knew they were getting out. They simply could not afford it.

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[16] Ibid.
[17] CAB/23/5 IR/19, 21 Jan 1918.
[18] Ibid.
[19] CAB/23/13 IR/36, 24 Feb 1918.
[20] Ibid.

Most of the arguments offered for intervention were as an extension of WWI by the Japanese through Siberia to the Russian front. These were brushed aside in conversation though. The most compelling reason was given by Lord Curzon, a former viceroy of India, appealed to the possibility of the Germans using Siberia as a means to invade British colonies in Asia.[21] There were several strong arguments against the intervention. The main opponents were Lords Balfour and Cecil. Cecil offered several arguments. He pointed to the unlikelihood of the US agreeing to intervention and the possible malice towards the Japanese by the Siberians (because of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904). He also, seeming to predict of World War II, stated that

> The proposal now made would probably result in the domination of the Japanese over the whole of Siberia, and would have far-reaching results upon the world's history, as it would make the Japanese a prodigious Power in Asia, including the virtual domination of China.[22]

Balfour argued that the Japanese could not take all of Siberia and would instead concentrate on the most eastern region of the country. He also argued that "The introduction of the Japanese would probably involve war with the Bolshevik Government."[23] All of these arguments were immediately shot down by Lloyd George, who clearly wanted the invasion to happen. He even said that, "Any attempt of the Germans to interfere in Russia would be like an attempt to burgle a plague-horse."[24] Lloyd George was for the intervention then, and beat back any arguments against it. There was no agreement during the meeting of February 24 on such a pivotal issue, yet they still came to a decision by vote.[25] The British decided that day to push the Japanese into intervention, and then to inform the other Allies afterwards.[26]

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

This would seem to be a definitive decision to intervene, but it was limited and not meant punitively. There was not an adequate reason given for the action during the meeting. They argued over the reasons, and Lloyd George would sweep the arguments away with grandiose words, and without concern for the content of the opposition. He never argued for the intervention, but rather let Cecil and Balfour fight with everyone else. The only person who seemed to not have already decided was Curzon, who simply argued what seemed to be appropriate. Otherwise, they simply bickered back and forth, somehow coming to a joint decision to let the intervention happen.

The Japanese 'invasion' was too small at first to be of concern to any nation, including the Soviets or the Germans. At first the Siberian front was tiny, and the Japanese never really stepped beyond the vicinity of the port town of Vladivostok on the eastern Siberian coast. The Japanese intervention was so limited that the British Cabinet could not determine whether it had taken place yet.[27] If a full intervention was to take place, it was going to take another ally's support. Until then, the small front in Vladivostok was only an incursion.

A further incursion happened on the day of the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The British seized the port city of Murmansk in North Russia on March 4, 1918. This was strictly a military maneuver, and the British even tried to convey to the Bolsheviks that it was not meant as a hostile invasion.[28] Now two port towns were held by Allied forces against the Bolsheviks, though no fighting was occurring over them. The British languished in their holdings, not doing anything substantial with them for months. Instead of trying to create

[27] CAB/23/5 IR/50, 4 Mar 1918.
[28] Ibid.

another Eastern front, the British navy in Murmansk was left in garrison. The Cabinet had more pressing matters with WWI to look at.

It took until July 17, when President Woodrow Wilson chose to send troops to Siberia and North Russia.[29] He had been being pressured by the British to help in an intervention in Russia since February.[30] At first he severely disapproved of the minor invasion that had been going on in Vladivostok and Murmansk. The president had given his famous "14 points speech" which gave the goals he wished to achieve in WWI, in which point six of the fourteen given read,

> The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.[31]

Essentially, the President was ideologically against invading Russia, since it would violate their "independent determination." A new direction managed to convince the President. A recent rebellion of a legion of Czechoslovakian soldiers in Siberia meant that there were potentially 80,000 new troops to add to the fighting forces of WWI. The British wanted to bring them out of Siberia and into the war. Also, the munitions stockpiles that had been sent as war aid to Russia were now sitting in Archangel (the largest northern Russian port city) and Vladivostok, and were supposedly in need of protection from the Germans. These claims were pitched to the president

[29] Woodrow Wilson, "Aide-Memoire," *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. 2 pg 287, 17 Jul 1918.
[30] CAB/23/13 IR/36, 24 Feb 1918.
[31] Woodrow Wilson, "Fourteen Points" speech, Washington DC, 8 Jun 1918.

by the British.[32] Wilson apparently found these claims persuasive. He proclaimed, in the *aide-memoire* that was sent out justifying the intervention on the July 17th, that

> [America] hopes to carry out the plans for safeguarding the rear of the Czechoslovaks operating from Vladivostok…[and] to guard military stores which may subsequently be needed by Russian forces and to render such aid as may be acceptable to the Russians in the organization of their own self-defense.[33]

This meant that the Americans could be counted on to provide the troops for the intervention, though they would be under British General Edmund Ironsides in North Russia. Wilson, in the *aide-memoire*, put particular limitations on the American soldiers in Russia, which would hamper all decisions made by Ironsides in the field. Further adding to the confusion on the ground beforehand, the American soldiers who would go to North Russia (self-named the "Polar Bear Expedition") were en route to France when suddenly diverted to Russia without warning. Now a full invasion could be launched with the main strength coming from the British troops already on the ground and at sea, and reinforcements provided by the "Polar Bear Expedition."

In August of 1918, the full invasion began. The Murmansk holdings were expanded to the entire province, Archangel Province was taken in a week, the Trans-Caucuses were held by small bands of British and French soldiers amongst Russian rebels, and the Allies took over the Trans-Siberian railroad between Vladivostok and the Czech Legion. If one were to pinpoint a day in which the Russian Intervention began, it would be sometime in August.

Where was the explanation given for the invasion? The British Cabinet, after coming to a conclusion in February, had only sought others to join with them in Russia.[34] They had yet to come to a reasoned conclusion about what to do in Russia. Even after August, they pressed past

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[32] CAB/23/41 IR/9, 9 Jul 1918.
[33] Woodrow Wilson, "Aide-Memoire."
[34] See decisions made in CAB/23/5 IR/61, 21 Mar 1918 - CAB/23/6 IR/32, 13 Apr 1918 - and CAB/23/41 IR/9, 9 Jul 1918

the subject of the intervention quickly, only receiving news and making further decisions, but not discussing why they were there.[35] Yet there were still some revealing conversations about what to do while in Russia.

The British began to support the rebel governments. There were several "white" governments formed at various times and places during the civil war, all in opposition to the Bolsheviks. Some of these "white" governments were very red indeed, for they were Social Revolutionary Party or Mensheviks in the beginning, but they have received the moniker "white" by historians since they were backed by the Allies. Only in the South was there a White General commanding the first white army called the "Volunteer Army." The Whites (which included the Allies) versus the Red Army of the RSFSR became the staple of the Civil War. If the British had purely intended on reopening the Eastern Front of WWI, they would not have supported governments that had no hope of establishing that front. The Allies did not give enough aid to the White forces that would make them defeat the Bolsheviks, as evidenced by them never taking over Petrograd or Moscow. The Cabinet never discusses the deviation from Wilson's *aide-memoire* to some off-handed form of anti-Bolshevism. They simply approved of aid being sent without discussion.[36]

As early as September, the Cabinet considers some drastic measures in Russia. The invasion force had been experiencing defeats and setbacks that were troubling to the Cabinet.[37] They considered conscripting Russians from Murmansk into the British army, but denied that as

[35] The lack of discussion of why they had intervened is clearly evident in the discussion held about the overarching strategies in the field such as conscription and martial law. See CAB/23/7 IR/33, 6 Sep 1918
[36] CAB/23/7 IR/33, 6 Sep 1918.
[37] CAB/23/7 IR/29, 30 Aug 1918.

a liability.[38] They tried to buy support from the locals by giving them food.[39] Also, against the protests of President Wilson, the British imposed martial law in their controlled territory.[40] This shows that British willingness to further their involvement in Russia, but not through sending more troops.

A spy network also complicated the Intervention. Earlier in 1918, a Soviet diplomat named Maxim Litvinov had been arrested by the British for trying to foment revolution in England. The British then attempted their own coup in Russia, but failed.[41] The main orchestrator, the "Ace of Spies" Sidney Reilly, managed to escape Russia, but Ambassador Lockhart was captured and imprisoned. Despite their obvious animosity towards one another, both the Soviets and the British concluded an agreement to exchange prisoners.[42] Both were released to return home, but Commissar Chicherin warned that he was having troubles keeping the mobs from lynching Lockhart. This exchange was made harder by the Intervention.

A final complication, and perhaps the most confusing of all, was the bad information being received by the British Cabinet. They did not know enough about the regions they now held. For example, sometimes they would refer to anything directly east of Archangel as Siberia (the Ural Mountains are hundreds of miles away, which make up the border between European Russia and Siberia).[43] Other times they received laughably false information, the most memorable of which was the message they received telling them that both Lenin and Trotsky had fled the country, supposedly leaving a power vacuum in their stead.[44] This kind of bad

[38] CAB/23/7 IR/33, 6 Sep 1918.
[39] CAB/23/44a IR/11, 12 Aug 1918.
[40] CAB/23/44a IR/11, 12 Aug 1918.
[41] John Long, "Searching for Sidney Reilly," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol 47 No 7 (Nov 1995) 1225-1241.
[42] CAB/23/7 IR/35, 13 Sep 1918.
[43] CAB/23/7 IR/29, 30 Aug 1918.
[44] CAB/23/44a IR/11, 12 Aug 1918.

information meant that the cabinet could not make well informed decisions, even if they did choose to discuss the issues.

The Cabinet chose not to address the core issue of why they were there. President Wilson's *aide-memoire* was still supposedly the guiding principle of the intervention, but it was uprooted by practice. The Cabinet meeting in February had not given a reason for their decision to begin the process, but the Intervention had continued to escalate. In early November, over 200,000 Allied troops controlled more of Russia than the Bolsheviks did. WWI was coming to a close and the fundamental reasoning for being in Russia, given by the *aide-memoire*, would be directly challenged by WWI's armistice.

II) The Loss of Meaning

The younger people in the West who lived through WWI, especially the artists, are often called "the lost generation." The experience of the war had drastically disillusioned them. They became famous for their depiction of the futility of warfare. The remaining Allies strewn across the frozen reaches of the Russian landscape directly after WWI, learned this futility firsthand. Many had been told that they were there as part of the Great War, and others thought they were sailing to France only to arrive in Russia. As soon as word that the war had ended reached the soldiers, they thought the war had ended for them too, but they were mistaken. The worst fighting of the Russian Intervention happened that winter, continuing into February. The troops were not told why they were still there. Many even concluded that they had been forgotten.

They had not. In the British cabinet, they understood the gravity of the situation. The difference between intervention during and after the Great War was clear, but they did not know

what to do. The armistice changed everything, and the cabinet would now have to justify to themselves what they were doing in Russia. As Lord Balfour said in a policy overview on the Intervention,

> [The Intervention] was of the first importance to prevent, as far as possible, the withdrawal of German forces from Russia to France; but with the conclusion of a German armistice this motive has no further force.[45]

The cabinet began arguing over what to do about Russia before WWI had ended. On October 18, the cabinet held its first discussion of the dilemma.[46] Each time this subject was broached, there were a few people for whom the Intervention was a new and altogether off-putting subject. There would be the inevitable question of "what are our boys doing in Russia?"[47] What made it worse was that the cabinet had yet to decide the answer to that question. There would be a brief discussion and then a fervent argument over the subject, and then the subject would be brushed aside until later.[48] They continued to argue over why they had invaded Russia all the way until December 31, 1918.[49] They argued over not only whether to stay, but what they were doing there altogether. This was at least six months into the Intervention and the British Cabinet was still arguing over its reasoning.

There were many reasons given to stay in Russia. Cabinet members made a number of different arguments. At points the British were more concerned about their honour, rather than the real war that was increasingly meaningless. Secretary of Foreign Affairs Balfour said "If we now withdrew our forces from European and Asiatic Russia we should suffer a serious loss of

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[45] CAB/23/8 IR/32, 10 Dec 1918, Appendix.
[46] CAB/23/8 IR/10, 18 Oct 1918.
[47] CAB/23/8 IR/32, 10 Dec 1918.
[48] Ibid - and CAB/23/8 IR/10, 18 Oct 1918.
[49] CAB/23/42 IR/20, 31 Dec 1918.

prestige."[50] Others took a very different point of view. People were concerned about their previous allies. Lord Curzon said that

> If we withdrew our troops from some of the theatres of operations, such as Trans-Caspia, and left the people there to fight it out, it would mean misery to thousands of people who regarded themselves as our Allies, and almost certain massacre.[51]

It was thought that the Bolsheviks would kill any opposition surrendering to them. This was not entirely unfounded. The newly formed Cheka in Russia (a secret police organization as well as a spy agency) had begun executing people as part of the Civil War, which has become known as the Red Terror.[52] The Terror had been in full swing for some time, and those in the West were well aware of the executions and famine that was occurring in Red Russia. The cabinet wanted to protect their allies from this fate.

Lord Balfour was concerned about how the public was coming to see the intervention. In a November 14th memo, he said,

> It seems commonly supposed that these military expeditions are partial and imperfect efforts to carry out a campaign against Bolshevism, and to secure, by foreign intervention, the restoration of decent order and a stable Government… This view, however, indicates a complete misapprehension of what His Majesty's Government are [sic] able to do, or desire to do.[53]

Later in the same memo, Balfour tried to put forth a reasoned approach to why the Allies were in Russia. In it he said,

> We have constantly asserted that it is for the Russians to choose their own form of government; that we have no desire to intervene in their domestic affairs ; and that if, in the course of operations essentially directed against the Central Powers, we have to act with such Russian political and military organizations [sic] as are favourable to the *Entente,* this does not imply that we deem ourselves to have any

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[50] CAB/23/8 IR/32, 10 Dec 1918.
[51] Ibid.
[52] For more information on the red terror see Stephane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism*, (Harvard Press, 1990) 71-81.
[53] CAB/23/8 IR/32, 10 Dec 1918, Appendix.

> mission to establish, or disestablish, any particular political system among the Russian people.[54]

He then seemed to contradict himself by saying,

> New anti-Bolshevist administrations have grown up under the shelter of Allied forces. We are responsible for their existence and must endeavour to support them.[55]

While declaring the support of both Russia's ability to politically self-determination and direct support for the White forces, this memo represented a disconnect in meaning between the given purpose and whatever real one there was. It was unsuccessful in providing a reason for the Intervention, because the Cabinet would engage in the same arguments about the Intervention twice in December.[56]

In these December debates the main people arguing for and against the intervention were Winston Churchill and Lloyd George. Churchill was for, and Lloyd George against. Despite being the Prime Minister, the rest of the cabinet held sway over the decisions made.

Winston Churchill vehemently opposed the Bolsheviks and saw them as a menace to the world. He made such arguments such as "the more the Allies attempted to get away from this problem, the more it would stick to them" and "Bolshevism in Russia represented a mere fraction of the population, and would be exposed and swept away by a General Election held under Allied auspices."[57] He pushed hard for further intervention. When he did not succeed, he secretly conspired against the Bolsheviks. He tried to get some of the newly formed border countries around Russia to invade on behalf of free elections.[58] He especially had a strong

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] CAB/23/42 IR/20, 31 Dec 1918.
[57] ibid
[58] See Markku Ruotsila, "The Churchill-Mannerheim Collaboration in the Russian Intervention." for further treatment of this subject.

relationship with Carl G.E. Mannerheim of Finland. The Fins were unable to invade Russia, so the conspiracy quickly faded away. Churchill was an outspoken member of the coalition government of Lloyd George though. He was not well liked by the other cabinet members, and was sidelined because of that.

Lloyd George, on the other hand, was explicitly against continued action in Russia. Despite being the prime minister, his opinion did not win out. He argued over and over again that Britain "could not go on keeping troops in Northern Russia in order to protect some of the inhabitants from their fellows."[59] In a New Year's Eve meeting, he gave an impassioned speech about trying to get out of Russia:

> No British troops could be found for the purpose without conscription, and if Parliament endorsed conscription for that purpose he doubted whether the troops would go. Our citizen army were prepared to go anywhere for liberty, but they could not be convinced that the suppression of Bolshevism was a war for liberty...Military intervention would only strengthen the very force which we set out to destroy. It was impossible to ignore the parallel of the French Revolution. There, too, there [sic] had been horrors as bad as, or worse than, those of the Bolsheviks, perpetrated by a small fraction, which had secured the control of France. There, too, we were invited to help...The one thing to spread Bolshevism was to attempt to suppress it. To send our soldiers to shoot down the Bolsheviks would be to create Bolsheviks here. The best thing was to let Bolshevism fail of itself and act as a deterrent to the world, just as the failure of similar movements in 1848 had had a salutary effect in Europe.[60]

"He was definitely opposed to military intervention in any shape."[61] He was opposed to Bolshevism, but did not want to be involved militarily in its suppression.

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[59] CAB/23/42 IR/20, 31 Dec 1918.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

Two things resulted. The intervention continued, but the British felt the need to explicate it as being not an anti-Bolshevik affair. They produced several memos that presented the intervention as a way of protecting their allies and not anti-Bolshevism.[62] The war would continue in North and South Russia until mid-1919, and Siberia until mid-1920. A second effect was an economic blockade of Russia that would continue until 1921 after the signing of the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement. This economic blockade included what was called a *cordon-sanitaire*, which was the existence of White forces throughout the border regions of Russia physically stopping Soviet attempts to trade. Though the *cordon-sanitaire* was short lived, it represented the policy of containment that the US would later take after World War II.

The intervention continued after the big debate over it in December. The reasoning would not come up again. The intervention would not be escalated, in accordance with Lloyd George's concerns, but it did continue for another six months in the North and South as well as a year and a half in Siberia. It did not accomplish anything, since the governments the Allies supported fell to the Bolsheviks.

The strange and long process was over, and the Intervention had ended. The confusion at the top levels led to blundering into the situation, and the confusion perpetuated it. Only Lloyd George accepted at the time how confused the situation was. He admitted during a meeting,

> He had found himself frequently leaning first in one direction, and then in another, owing to the absolute contradiction between the information supplied from Russia by men of equally good authority. We were, in fact, never dealing with ascertained, or, perhaps, even ascertainable, facts. Russia was a jungle in which no one could say what was within a few yards of him. In any case nothing could be worse than having no policy, and it was better to proceed resolutely on a wrong hypothesis than to go on hesitating as the Allies had been doing.[63]

[62] CAB/23/8 IR/32, 10 Dec 1918, Appendix.
[63] CAB/23/42 IR/20, 31 Dec 1918.

He could not have been more correct in his perception. He understood the confusion and still did not manage to abate it. Lloyd George was not happy with the Intervention, and it was not without remorse that he said these things.

Churchill would look back at this time with remorse for what could have been a crushing defeat of communism. He said, "If I had been properly supported in 1919, I think we might have strangled Bolshevism in its cradle, but everybody turned up their hands and said, 'How shocking!'...The day will come when it will be recognized that without a doubt throughout the civilized world, that the strangling of Bolshevism at birth would have been an untold blessing to the human race."[64]

Many soldiers never understood why they were sent to Russia. As one soldier said,

> When the last battalion set sail from Archangel, not a soldier knew, no, not even vaguely, why he had fought or he was going now, and why his comrades were left behind - so many of them beneath the wooden crosses.[65]

They were in the dark about why their leaders had decided to intervene.

Most of the cabinet was either apathetic or dejected about the intervention. Writing about the end of the Siberian intervention, a secretary had written, "so ends a highly creditable enterprise." Lord Curzon overseeing this letter, struck out the phrase and made it into, "so ends a highly discreditable enterprise."[66] Most of the cabinet were still confused upon the "Russian issue," and they would continue to be. Amicable relations seemed impossible but there would have to something. The confusion continued.

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[64] Winston Churchill, "Foreign Affairs Speech," House of Commons, 11 May 1953.
[65] John Cudahy, *Archangel: the American War with Russia*, as quoted by Ernest Dupuy, *The Little Wars of the United States*, 190.
[66] CAB/24/110 IR/79, 14 Jul 1920.

III) Embittered relations

One would think, after the Allies had invaded Russia and supporting the governments that opposed the Soviets, that the Soviets would choose to not deal at all with the British. Instead it was the other way around. The British tried to ignore the Bolsheviks, but they eventually chose to talk with them. This relationship was a quick change from their *cordon-sanitaire* plans. The Cabinet did not debate as before, but instead acted on Lloyd George's directions. Though they would come to a trade agreement, it was not without its contradictions and problems. Before the trade agreement was even signed the British Cabinet was going through the same throes of confusion.

In 1920, the British were following the American lead in Soviet affairs. America had set up a policy of non-recognition of Russia, known simply as the Colby Note.[67] The note laid out the terms for which the US would recognize the RSFSR as the legitimate state of Russia. It did not specify anything about economic relations, which would become a striking difference in policy by the British. In the note, it specifies that

> It is not possible for the Government of the United States to recognize the present rulers of Russia as a government with which the relations common to friendly governments can be maintained...We cannot recognize, hold official relations with, or give friendly reception to the agents of a government which is determined and bound to conspire against our institutions; whose diplomats will be the agitators of dangerous revolt; spokesmen say that they sign agreements with no intention of keeping them.[68]

[67] Bainbridge Colby, "The Colby Note," Washington DC, 10 Aug 1920.
[68] Ibid.

Non-recognition would still play a big part in British policy until a different government was elected, but for the time being, Lloyd George chose not to recognize the Soviets, though the British would do so in 1924, after he had left office.

Though the Americans would not open trade relations with Russia until the 1930's, the British would take drastically divergent path. They admitted a delegation from Russia to discuss terms about how trade could be ameliorated between the two previously hostile countries in mid-1920. Troops were still being withdrawn from Siberia at the time, but the trade policy seemed like it could work in the favor of the British, so they proceeded. The words of the Colby Note were somewhat prophetic though, because the trade delegation would do exactly what it said.

The Russian trade delegation quickly 'conspired against British institutions.' They formed what the British government called a "Council of Action," which was a revolutionary organization that tied together many leftist groups throughout England. Through the Council of Action, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was created, combining many separate older parties and organizations together under its auspices. This agitation was seen as a serious threat, especially since the Council of Action was directly related to the Third Comintern (an international organization created by Lenin to promote the 'world revolution' of communism). In discussing of this subversive activity, Home Secretary Edward Shortt detailed the activities of the delegation in feverish detail.[69] He said, "the Russian Trading Delegation has become a greater menace to the stability of this country than anything that has happened since the Armistice."[70] The trade delegation was in Britain to promote trade, but it was troublesome for

[69] CAB/24/111 IR/30, 2 Sep 1920.
[70] Ibid.

the British, because they were bound to promote revolution at the same time. The British could do nothing about these subversive activities, because they had accorded diplomatic immunity to the delegation. Supposedly, the delegation was not supposed to engage in propaganda, because they would be removed from England otherwise, but they created the Council of Action in spite of that limitation. The cabinet did nothing about the creation of the Council and continued the trade negotiations.

It must be noted that the communists were not the only ones engaging in activity hostile to the negotiations. The British were causing equal problems with the RSFSR. They had tried to destroy the South Russian Fleet, purposely right before the trade negotiations took place.[71] They had even tried to set up a full blockade after the *cordon-sanitaire* failed to work.[72] They had sent a telegram declaring non-hostility so long as Russia did not invade Poland, but Poland forced the issue by invading Russia during the Polish-Soviet War. Great Britain was sending aid to Polish forces secretly.[73] All this swirling doubt and underhanded dealings were happening during the trade agreements. It is a wonder how Gregory Chicherin (the Soviet Foreign Commissar) was willing to accept the terms of the negotiation.

On July 7, 1920 Chicherin agreed to Lloyd George's points that would make up the main body of the Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement. These points were

> "(a) That each party refrains from hostile action or undertakings against the other and from conducting outside of its own borders any official propaganda direct or indirect against the institutions of the British Empire or the Russian Soviet Republic respectively, and more particularly that the Russian Soviet Government refrains from any attempt by military or diplomatic or any other form of action or propaganda...

[71] CAB/24/110 IR/59, 9 Aug 1920.
[72] CAB/24/110 IR/79, 14 Jul 1920.
[73] CAB/24/110 IR/59, 9 Aug 1920.

(b) That all British subjects in Russia are immediately permitted to return home and that all Russian citizens in Great Britain or other parts of the British Empire who desire to return to Russia are similarly released."[74]

The rest of the agreement had to be hammered out throughout the end of 1920 to March of 1921. The official agreement was signed in March 16, 1921. The agreement dealt with many subjects, such as help in demining Russian ports, no more blockades, treatment of traders and particular companies that represented trade, and acceptance of former debts between the two countries.

It was a landmark decision that heralded the end of hostilities between Russia and Great Britain. It was thought that the agreement amounted to *de facto* recognition of the RSFSR. Despite the obvious conclusion, the Cabinet members were seriously confused about what to do. The cover letter to the agreement, written by a Cabinet member under the direction of Lloyd George, would illustrate conflicting sentiments about the agreement.[75]

As a cover letter to the agreement, Sir Robert Horne wrote a lengthy article about what it meant for Britain.[76] Instead of praising the document for which it covered, Horne used it to draw attention to Comintern activities where they supported Indian sedition. It gave point after point about how the Soviets were destabilizing the British Empire. Cabinet members endorsed this cover letter, despite its obvious contradiction of the very agreement it covered. They were concerned with maintaining their loosening hold over India. The letter illustrated a disdain for the Soviets and could be considered propaganda, since it was sent out to the entire British Parliament for review. The trade agreement had not been in their favour as they had hoped, and they were left with another confusing mess.

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[74] "Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement," (London, UK) 16 Mar 1921.
[75] CAB/24/121 IR/24, 16 Mar 1921.
[76] Ibid.

The British chose to come to terms with Russia, which was the one clear decision Lloyd George ever made in regards to the RSFSR. Despite the tremendous decision, it was underwritten with the very propaganda it was supposed to abate. Instead of solving the 'Russian affair,' the problem would continue on beyond Lloyd George's ministry.

Conclusion

Confusion is not a simple thing to define in history. It may come in many forms. In the case of the Russian Intervention and the British Cabinet, confusion came from the dissenting opinions within the Cabinet. The opposition to the intervention and the ambivalence about its purpose drastically undermined the intervention. The members of the Cabinet had to deal with a lot, considering the monumental events of WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution, but when they did decide, that decision was tainted with the arguments of the Cabinet members who opposed the intervention. When they did give a reason for invading Russia, they contradicted it in policy, sometimes in the very documents they gave in which the reasoning appeared. Further confusion resulted from the problems of bad information and worries that the Cabinet had about the Bolsheviks. Their bickering over why they had intervened six months after they had done so, is the greatest evidence to this confusion.

The chaos of Russia after her revolutions was immeasurable. The invasion by the Allies made it worse. Intervention bolstered new opposition to the Bolsheviks and worsening of the Russian Civil War. The Allied soldiers had no idea why they were there. They fought a pointless war over large expanses of desolate snowy plains. Why were they fighting? The British, who initiated the Intervention, could not supply an adequate answer. Throughout their

discussions they jumped from one issue to another, without coming to a conclusion as to what they were doing in the first place. They were seriously confused as to what they were doing. That confusion carried on past the intervention, at least until the end of Lloyd George's ministry in 1922.

The intervention left a tremendous wake, its legacy being called by George F. Kennan "a blunder comparable to the worst mistakes of the Crimean War...Its direct effect was to provide the Bolsheviks with a cheap victory, to give them new confidence, and to galvanize them into a strong ruthless organization."[77] The animosity that this conflict sewed would haunt the West for a long time to come. Kruschev vitriolically said to an American audience in 1959,

> "[The Russian people] remember that in the hard time after the October Revolution, U.S. troops led by their generals landed on Soviet soil to help the White Guards fight our Soviet system. And they were not the only ones to land. The Japanese landed too, the French landed in Odessa and the Germans advanced as far as the Soviet Caucasus. The armed forces of bourgeois Poland seized Kiev. The British, too, landed their forces to fight us. Many European capitalist countries, as well as the United States and Japan, sent their troops into an offensive against the young Soviet state in an effort to strangle our Revolution."[78]

Lloyd George's realization of the confusion in December 1918 was the defining instance of the confusion of the Intervention. In that moment, he saw that "Russia was a jungle in which no one could say what was within a few yards of him."[79] He showed that even the Prime Minister of Britain did not know why they were doing what they were doing, only that "it was better to proceed resolutely on a wrong hypothesis than to go on hesitating as the Allies had been doing."[80] He acted out of confusion.

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[77] George F Kennan, *Soviet American Relations: The Decision to Intervene*, 249
[78] "Khrushchev in America," (NY: Crosscurrents Press, 1960) 110
[79] CAB/23/42 IR/20, 31 Dec 1918.
[80] Ibid.

There is no good reason for these things to have happened. They simply did, but we must ask ourselves a few hard questions. Was it ever right to engage in such an action? Should we act while in a confused state? Should we not look before we leap? Lloyd George said that "and it was better to proceed resolutely on a wrong hypothesis than to go on hesitating as the Allies had been doing," but is he correct in that assumption?[81] We see these problems in a modern context, with wars and policy. What happened between the Allies and the USSR is well known after WWII, but before then, there remains a deep enigma. The confused situation the Allies were put in was no easy task. There is no blame to be issued or condemnation, merely a benevolent understanding of the predicament these men were put in. Let us try to learn from their mistakes.

"And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night"[82]

[81] Ibid.
[82] Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach* - used by EM Halliday to begin *The Ignorant Armies.*

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