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<u>U.S. and Japanese Intervention in the Russian Civil War:</u> <u>Violence and Barbarism in the Far East</u> March 19, 2018 – June 19, 2019 Moscow, Russian Federation

Research Abstract

My dissertation presents a comprehensive examination of the foreign intervention in the Far East from 1918 to 1922 during the Russian Civil War. Whereas most studies focus exclusively on the U.S. intervention and U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, my project incorporates the perspectives of Russian actors operating in the Far East and Japanese military and diplomatic leaders. Whereas the American military intervention was relatively small (8,500 troops) and short (20 months), the Japanese expedition was large (72,000 soldiers) and protracted (over four years). Previous examinations of the American intervention, which ended in the spring of 1920, largely leave out the main actors (Russians and Japanese) and can tell us little about how and why the civil war ended. The goal is to discover how the foreign intervention affected the course and outcome of the Russian Civil War in the region, and in turn to analyze the civil war's impact on U.S.-Russian-Japanese relations. Based on American, Russian, and Japanese political, diplomatic, and military archival sources, the dissertation uses an analytical approach to violence to study the relationship between the intervention and the civil war. This study has broad implications not only for the history of the Russian Civil War, U.S.-Russian-Japanese relations,



and Northeast Asia, but also for the general study of the dynamics of intervention, violence, and civil war.

Research Goals

My goals in Moscow were as follows. Having completed research at the state archive in Vladivostok, which is particularly strong on the 1920-22 period and the Communist-affiliated governments of the Far East, as well as local city and zemstvo administrations, my work in Moscow focused on the following areas. First, after the civil war, the Soviets took most of the important documentation of the anti-Bolshevik (White) governments that dominated the region during the foreign intervention from 1918-20. Therefore, the vast majority of information about the governments that actually controlled the Russian Far East during the period of intervention are held in Moscow. My goal, then, was to access these documents in order to obtain a view of how the anti-Bolshevik leaders understood the foreign intervention's impact on the civil war. How did they see their own roles in the conflict? What were their aspirations and how did they try to achieve them? How did they go about trying to build government institutions and raise armies? What was their approach to combatting partisan (insurgency) warfare? How did they think about the use of violence and the outbreak of atrocities?

The archives in Moscow also shed light on how the Bolsheviks approached these questions. On the highest political level, Moscow's view of the civil war in the Far East has been relatively well documented. My interest was in obtaining the view from the local level. How did local pro-Soviet and Soviet-allied leaders conduct the civil war? What was the Red Army's approach to fighting it? Why were the Bolsheviks able to gain and maintain alliances with local



leaders, many of whom did not share the same overall methods and goals of social transformation? How did these local leaders see the foreign intervention? Were the government commissions to investigate White- and foreign-perpetrated atrocities merely propaganda? What advantages and disadvantages did local military and political leaders face in combatting the anti-Bolsheviks? Did their views differ of the Japanese and American interventions? Ultimately, all these questions have significant bearing on answering why the civil war in the Far East ended in victory for the Bolsheviks, who were essentially able to reconstitute the borders of the former Russian Empire.

Research Activities

In order to answer these questions, I conducted extensive research in three archives and spent a significant amount of time collecting Russian-language secondary literature in the



Russian State Library. The books that I read and photographed at the Russian State Library will not only inform my dissertation, but also allow me to be in conversation with Russian scholars and to highlight their arguments for an English-

Figure 1. Reading Room 3, Russian State Library.

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speaking audience. In this way, I hope to bridge the national and linguistic divides that often separate historians from each other.

The bulk of my time in Moscow was split between the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Russisskogo Federatsii; GARF*) and the Russian State Military Archive (*Rossisskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arhiv; RGVA*). GARF contains the documents of the anti-Bolshevik and some pro-Soviet governments and collections of prominent individuals on both sides of the civil war. At GARF, I combed through over 100 files (*dela*) in



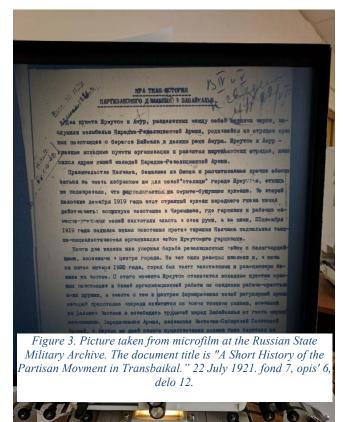
Figure 2. Author in front of the State Archive of the Russian Federation.

over 20 collections (*fondy*). These included the files of governments operating in the Transbaikal (*Zabaikal'e*), Amur (*Priamur'e*), and Maritime (*Primor'e*) regions. I was particularly interested in how these governments approached violence, and thus I focused on government investigations of atrocities, and reporting on and efforts to combat criminal activity. Since I was also interested in these governments' relations with and views of the foreign intervention, I also looked at documents describing cooperation and tensions with the Japanese

and the Americans. Most of these documents were not on microfilm and thus, due to the price of



photocopies being prohibitively expensive, I read and took notes in the archives as I went along. Some collections, however, have been microfilmed, and I was able to photograph these for free. I took photographs of 24 reels of microfilm from fond R-130, the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (*Soviet narodnykh komissarov RSFSR*). These are important files because they show the perspective of the Moscow central government's agents tasked with reporting on local events in the Far East. They include reports on the general situation, as well as more specific correspondence, for example, on Japanese movements or anti-Bolshevik counterintelligence operations. I also took photographs of 21 reels from the personal



collection of Sergei Lazo, the most famous and prominent Soviet official, who led the insurgency in the Far East after the Soviets fell from power in 1918.

At the Russian State Military Archive, I focused on how the Red and White armies prosecuted the civil war. I was again able to look through over 100 files in over 20 collections, although much of this material was more fragmentary than the information I obtained at GARF. I looked at files containing documents ranging from the unit

or brigade level all the way up to the General Staff of both White and Red armies. Some of these



files focused on military intelligence. I also focused on military tribunal investigations of atrocities and incidents committed by various sides of the civil war. As at GARF, some files at RGVA were on microfilm, which I was allowed to photograph. I photographed eight reels from fond 7, the Staff of the Worker-Peasant Red Army, which included general reports on the military situation in the Far East. I also took photos of six reels of fond 106, the Administration of the Armies of the Eastern Front, which included operational reports and correspondence.

Finally, I worked in the archive of the Solzhenitsyn House of the Russian Abroad (*Dom russkogo zarubezh'ia imeni Aleksandra Solzhenitsyna*), which holds the papers of Russians who emigrated from Russia and the Soviet Union, many of them during the Russian Civil War. I found and read through the collections of 17 individuals who experienced the Russian Civil War in the Far East. Some of these files contained only a few pages, others a few hundred. In contrast to the personal recollections held in state archives, these files held the memories not of prominent officials but relatively "ordinary" people and offered a glimpse into how these emigres experienced the civil war and whether or not they had any opinions of or interactions with Japanese or American soldiers. At this archive, I also read through and photographed relevant articles in émigré journal publications that are not widely available outside Russia, for example, *Russkaia Atlantida*.

Important Research Findings

My research in Moscow built on my previous archival work in Vladivostok, Chita, and Khabarovsk. The archival holdings in these cities describe how local people experienced and local governments operated in the Russian Civil War in the Far East. In contrast, the documents



in Moscow provided the perspective of how central governments, both Red and White, tried to manage relationships with local as well as international actors. In particular, it has become clear from my research that the Reds (who in the Far East were not exclusively Bolsheviks but also included a coalition of leftist political parties) were no less violent than their White counterparts. However, the two sides did use violence in different ways, and this in turn affected the outcome of the foreign intervention and civil war. For example, the Reds used violence to target infrastructure, whereas the Whites focused their energy on rooting out "Bolsheviks" among the local population. This meant that White violence was perceived by Americans (and local residents) in the Russian Far East as being much deadlier and more arbitrary. It also gave rise to the perception that the Reds were better state builders, when in fact they simply rebuilt the infrastructure they had already destroyed (and which the Whites were hesitant to attack). Meanwhile, I've found evidence that confirms the hypothesis that the White movements could have succeeded if not for their own internal divisions and the disagreements and competition between the American and Japanese intervening forces.

The archive in Vladivostok was rich in documents on the local Soviet-affiliated governments from 1920-22, but had almost nothing on the anti-Bolshevik government that controlled the Maritime Province in 1921 and 1922, called the Priamur Provisional Government (often called the Merkulov government, after the Merkulov brothers who headed it). In Moscow, I was able to do extensively research in the collections on this government, particularly their military and foreign ministry files. My research shows that this government had several advantages over its anti-Bolshevik rivals and predecessors. In contrast to much of the



historiography which portrays the regime as working hand-in-glove with the Japanese, I found evidence that the Merkulov government went to great lengths to distance itself from the foreign interventionists and tried to appeal to the population as a Russian nationalist movement. They also initially tried to avoid the types of punitive expeditions against insurgents that had caused an outcry under previous regimes. They tried to investigate atrocities committed by the Japanese and other anti-Bolshevik troops. However, they were undermined by their own conflicts with other anti-Bolshevik movements and the Japanese military, which was intent on making the government in Vladivostok dependent on Tokyo.

On the Soviet side, my research in Moscow shows that local, Soviet-allied leaders in the Far East were given a significant amount of leeway in pursuing their own initiatives and implementing directives from the center. Contrary to popular narratives, I found that the region's incorporation into the Soviet Union was far from inevitable even up to the last several months before Soviet victory in October 1922. Part of the reason for this is that the Bolsheviks in Moscow did not have a clear picture of the situation in the Far East, nor were they the master puppet directors of their proxies in the region, as they are often portrayed.

In addition, I found almost no evidence that the Soviets in Moscow, the local Sovietallied governments, or the population felt threatened by the U.S. intervention. Rather, they recognized that the threat came from the Japanese, and spent almost all their resources focused on documenting Japanese-perpetrated atrocities. They actively tried to obtain American support for containing the Japanese military expedition. Local participants rarely mention the Americans at all because they rarely came into contact with them because the U.S. contingent was so small.



This focus on the Japanese, by high-level officials as well as local participants, confirms one of the hypotheses of my project: that the Soviets viewed U.S. participation in the Russian Civil War as an opportunity to reconstitute the territory of imperial Russia into a new Soviet state that would stand as a bulwark against Japanese expansion. In other words, the significance of the foreign intervention in the Russian Civil War is not that it sowed the seeds of the distant Cold War, but that it set the stage for U.S.-Russian-Japanese relations in the interwar period and had a major impact on the way that World War II played out on the East Asian mainland.

One of my most concrete findings concerns an article I published in *International History Review* in 2016, which detailed secret Japanese correspondence that was leaked to the American railway mission in Harbin by a Czech operative named John Luebeck-Essensky. I discovered the exact same correspondence (although not all of it) in GARF, in the foreign ministry collection of the Merkulov government. These telegrams, translated from Japanese into Russian (without the Japanese originals), are signed by the same person who signed the Russian translations in the U.S. archives. Originally, I speculated that these telegrams were leaked by the Czech officer working inside the Japanese mission. The presence of these documents in the Russian archives opens the possibility that this agent was leaking the documents to both the Americans and the Merkulov government, or the correspondence was delivered by the Japanese directly to the Merkulovs, and then leaked to the Americans. This is important because it could show an attempt by the Merkulov regime to enlist the Americans in trapping the Japanese (who at the time were avowing their disinterest in territorial gains in Siberia, although the correspondence shows them secretly trying to extend their military presence in the Far East). It might be no



coincidence, then, that prominent members of the Merkulov regime emigrated to the United States (rather than Japan) after the end of the civil war. Finding these documents is further evidence that the person who leaked these documents was Czech because the documents are part of the Russian émigré archive (Russkii zagranichnyi istoricheskii arkhiv) that the Soviets brought to Moscow from Prague after World War II.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

There are several policy implications that flow from my research. My work adds more weight to the argument put forward by theorists of counterinsurgency (COIN), civil war, and foreign intervention that current U.S. Army COIN doctrine is misguided, overly focused on ineffective efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population. My research agrees with Paul Staniland's analysis that an insurgency's prewar social context and subsequent evolution play a larger role than wartime strategy and tactics aimed at winning over the population. According to his theory, the Bolsheviks started out as a "vanguard" party and evolved by making compromises with local leaders to become more embedded in the social fabric of the Russian Far East. On the other hand, it is clear from the evidence that the anti-Bolshevik movements began as "fragmented" groups, hamstrung by internecine struggles for power, and failed to evolve into a more "integrated" insurgency. They were only successful in seizing power by virtue of outside intervention-tens of thousands of Czechoslovak and Japanese soldiers. Once their outside allies left, the anti-Bolsheviks quickly succumbed. It mattered more that the leaders of the so-called White movements had little connection to local conditions and failed to build local leadership networks than their various ideological pronouncements about nationalism, the monarchy, and



the dangers of communism. This has major implications for U.S. policy. It means that the United States should be careful to analyze not only the ideology and policies of potential insurgent allies (or governments in power fighting insurgents) before intervening, but also to examine the extent to which a movement's leaders are united and have roots in the society they are trying to change as well as their capacity to adapt and compromise.

My research on the Russian Civil War also supports Stathis Kalyvas's view that how violence is deployed matters more than the overall level of violence. Arbitrary and criminal violence leads to large-scale defections to other side. By focusing on Bolshevik ideology as the connector between insurgent and community, the anti-Bolsheviks made unnecessary enemies of much of the local population. They spent considerable resources imprisoning and punishing people for being suspected Bolsheviks, rather than focusing their efforts on establishing and maintaining rule of law. Bolshevik-affiliated governments, by contrast, were intensely focused on tamping down crime and eliminating any semblance of arbitrary violence.

On the other hand, Red insurgents were not "less violent." They participated in the systematic destruction of railways, telegraphs, and other forms of infrastructure. This indicates that criticism of the White governments for failing to focus on state-building efforts might be misplaced. The anti-Bolsheviks' ineffectiveness was not for a lack of effort: their governments were just as organized and driven toward state construction as any other. The Bolsheviks appeared to be more effective due in no small part to the fact that when they seized power, the anti-Bolshevik insurgency refrained from destroying infrastructure as it fled and regrouped across the border. When the Whites came to power, the Red insurgency, by contrast, pursued a



scorched-earth policy that inhibited government efforts to improve state infrastructure and services. Then when the Reds came back to power, they were lauded as state-builders for rebuilding what they had been responsible for destroying.

These insights offer lessons for U.S. involvement in today's civil wars and counterinsurgencies around the globe. First, when examining the chances of insurgent victory (whether in combatting insurgents, as in Afghanistan, or assisting them, as in Syria), it is absolutely paramount to explore the insurgent leadership's social context prior to the outbreak of hostilities as well as its capacity to evolve and spread over time. Second, as Jacqueline L. Hazleton has argued, COIN doctrine should be more forthcoming about the level of violence counterinsurgency requires. The ability to win "hearts and minds" is heavily dependent on the level of control over space and the insurgent leadership's social embeddedness. This is one lesson of the Russian Civil War, a lesson that must be re-learned given the varying outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, when considering intervention in civil wars, it is paramount that U.S. officials on the ground have a clear view of their potential allies. In the Russian Civil War, the Whites were portrayed by some officials as "democratic" prior to intervention, but U.S. military officers quickly came to see them as despotic and barbaric. This quickly led to disillusionment and curtailed the intervention. On an international level, it is also important that allies be united in purpose and in agreement about the postwar settlement. In the Russian Civil War, intense suspicion between the American and Japanese governments destroyed the prospect of international cooperation and often meant that the two foreign expeditions were working against each other. We've seen a similar dynamic in Syria, where divergent Russian, Turkish,



and American interests have prolonged the conflict and resulted in periodic clashes that could conceivably spin out of control. The tensions between Pakistan and the United States in Afghanistan is another example of this dynamic.

On the other hand, the American intervention in the Russian Civil War demonstrates that U.S. officials should be willing to end military involvement swiftly as soon as it becomes clear that the mission has little chance of success, rather than (as has more often been the case) doubling down on a wasted effort. Instead of cutting diplomatic and military ties altogether, however, it is better to leave the diplomats in place (as the United States did in the Russian Far East from 1920-22 after military withdrawal) to continue gathering and reporting information, so that U.S. leaders in Washington can continue to maintain a clear picture of events on the ground in the hope of brokering peace at a future date, or at the very least keeping an eye on the involvement of U.S. rivals.

Co-Curricular Activity

American Councils Title VIII funding afforded me the opportunity to improve my language study through a program at Moscow International University. In addition to helpful language classes, I also met weekly





with a history professor, Aleksandr Arkhipov, to discuss my project. During these discussions he not only gave me leads on new sources, but also provided me with new ways of conceptualizing the foreign intervention in the Russian Civil War.

In addition to enjoying the historical and cultural sites of Moscow and daily interactions with Russians, I was also able to participate in the "Immortal Regiment" (*Bessmertnyi polk*) parade on May 9, which celebrates the victory over the Nazis in World War II. In this parade, Russians bring portraits of their relatives who served in the war and carry them into Red Square. I marched in the parade with a group from American University. Marching with them shoulder-to-shoulder gave me a new appreciation for the effect of the world war on Russia and the enduring power of Russian nationalism. However, I was also encouraged by the inclusiveness of Russians who welcomed our participation in the festivities. It was a shared victory we could celebrate together as former allies.

Conclusions

My American Councils Title VIII funding helped me conduct research that is vital for finishing my dissertation. Without this generous support for my work in Moscow, my dissertation would be considerably weaker and I might not have been able to finish it. Instead, I am confident that I will be able to complete a quality dissertation in a timely manner that contributes to several fields of study. My Russian-language capability improved dramatically, and I have a new appreciation for the ways in which the history of U.S.-Russia relations affects the present. My experience confirmed my belief that the history of the U.S. intervention in the



Russian Civil War in the Far East continues to hold important lessons for policy makers as they consider using American military power in conflicts around the world.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

I plan to spend the next year organizing the research that I have already completed and writing my dissertation as an Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Being at the Belfer Center will allow me to make connections with other scholars engaged in various fields of research, sharpen my arguments (particularly those that are policy related), and make my work more visible to the academic community and the public. Since returning, I have been interviewed by Voice of America Russian TV for a segment on the hundredth anniversary of the U.S. intervention in the Russian Civil War. Next year I also hope to participate in several conferences. Currently, I am putting together a panel for the World History Association Conference in Puerto Rico next summer. I will likely be presenting papers based in part on the research I conducted in Moscow for years to come. At Moscow International University, I worked with the Russian-language department to help translate into Russian a paper I had previously presented in Vladivostok, which will be published in a conference proceedings collection.

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