

"THE RUSSIAN QUESTION SEEN FROM POLAND AND
CZECHO-SLOVAKIA" BY R. A. LEEPER

Edited by Paul Latowski

By the Spring of 1920, the political future of Bolshevism looked assured despite the Allied intervention in the Russian civil war. Although the victorious allies in the west had committed men and treasure to the cause of the White forces, in the end their investment in the counterrevolution yielded only substantial political losses. With the demise of Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak's White struggle in Siberia in January 1920, the Bolshevik triumph over their Russian opponents was complete. Only one major task remained for the Bolsheviks: confronting the Polish armies in Ukraine.

In late April 1920, the Polish leader Józef Piłsudski launched a military operation with the political aim of detaching Ukraine from Russia and including it in an ill-defined East European federation¹. On 7 May, Polish forces occupied Kiev and Piłsudski seemed on the verge of realizing his aims. The fortunes of the Kiev offensive, however, quickly rebounded. The Bolsheviks, freed from their White opponents, launched a counterattack against the Poles in early June. By the end of the month, the Bolsheviks had regained the initiative, expelled the Poles from Ukraine and began their march on Warsaw.

The resulting crisis threatened not only the survival of Poland but also the Versailles peace settlement. If Warsaw fell the road to Berlin lay open. Moreover, the crisis brought into the open the question of the role of the successor states in Eastern Europe – particularly Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania – *vis-à-vis* allied policy toward the problem of Bolshevism. Were the successor states an integral part of allied strategy to eradicate (or at least contain) Bolshevism? This question, while certainly pertinent in 1919–1920 to allied policy makers, has since occupied the attention of historians.

Arnold J. Mayer, one of the most provocative and stimulating interpreters of the post-World War One peace settlement and allied policy toward Bolshevism, has directly addressed this question. In his *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* he argued that "the Paris Peace Conference made a host of decisions, all of which, in varying degrees, were designed to check Bolshevism"². He went on to write that "the victors made territorial concessions to Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia for helping to stem the revolutionary

¹ See: Dzięwanowski, M. K.: Józef Piłsudski: A European Federalist, 1918–1922. Stanford 1969.

² Mayer, Arnold J.: *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919*. London 1967, 9.

tide beyond their own borders; they gave military assistance and economic aid to these and other border lands as well as to the Whites for their armed assault on Soviet Russia"³.

While Mayer's thesis has attracted criticism from other historians of the Peace Conference⁴, it is worthwhile to consider how valid Mayer's thesis is a year after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

R. A. Leeper, in a document dated one year to the day after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and drafted during the looming crisis in the Polish-Soviet war (see below), provides some interesting insights into the validity of the Mayer thesis in the context of British foreign policy.

Reginald Wildig Allen "Rex" Leeper enjoyed a distinguished career in the British diplomatic service. He was born on 25 March 1888 in Sydney, New South Wales and his education brought him from the antipodes to England where he graduated from New College, Oxford. His career in the British civil service began in the Intelligence Bureau, Department of Information in 1917. A year later he joined the Foreign Office as a temporary clerk when the Intelligence Bureau became the Political Intelligence Department (PID) of the Foreign Office⁵.

In January 1920 his temporary post in the Foreign Office became permanent when he obtained an appointment as a second secretary in the diplomatic service. Leeper's subsequent assignments took him to Warsaw, Riga, Istanbul, Durazzo, and back to the Foreign Office in London. The outbreak of the Second World War first engaged him in propaganda work at Woburn (where, no doubt, his earlier association with the Intelligence Bureau served him well). Between 1943 and 1946 he was Ambassador to Greece and then Ambassador to Argentina until his retirement in 1948⁶.

Leeper was no stranger to Eastern Europe. He served as *Chargé d'Affaires* in Warsaw between 1923 and 1924 and again from 1927 to 1929. In August 1923 he earned a special allowance for his knowledge of Polish⁷. His more than casual interest in the affairs of Eastern Europe stemmed from his wartime work in the Intelligence Bureau and later in the PID, which undoubtedly brought him into contact with the many East European politicians residing in London during the Great War.

Soon after receiving his permanent appointment to the Foreign Office, he took a month's leave and in May 1920 travelled to Czechoslovakia and Poland. With the Bolshevik armies marching on Warsaw and both Poland and the Versailles peace settlement tottering on the edge of destruction, Leeper's *séjour* to these countries could not have come at a more auspicious moment. While in Prague he met Masaryk and later met Piłsudski in Warsaw.

Upon returning to London, Leeper submitted to the Foreign Office a paper on "The Russian Question Seen from Poland and Czecho-Slovakia" dated 28 June 1920⁸. The

³ Ibid.

⁴ In particular see: Lundgreen-Nielsen, Kay: *The Polish Problem at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Policies of the Great Powers and the Poles, 1918-1919*. Odense 1979.

⁵ *Who Was Who 1901-1970*. Vol. 6. London 1972, 663.

⁶ *The Foreign Office List 1949*, 281.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. A. Leeper, "The Russian Question Seen from Poland and Czecho-Slovakia", 28 June 1920 can be found in the Political Intelligence Department files of the Foreign Office, FO 371/4375-906, at the Public Record Office, Kew, London.

document is more than a summary of his conversations with Masaryk and Pilsudski. In it he outlines the reasons behind the fundamentally different attitudes of the Poles and Czechoslovaks toward Bolshevik Russia. His paper's relevance to British policy toward the problem of Bolshevism was patently obvious.

Leeper's paper attracted the interest of important readers in the Foreign Office. Lord Curzon, the Foreign Secretary, and Lord Hardinge, a Permanent Undersecretary, both read the document and took the trouble of appending minutes (included below). As the attached minutes indicate, Leeper's paper raised some uncomfortable questions regarding the efficacy of British policy toward Eastern Europe and the problem of Bolshevism. Leeper's paper has the same effect concerning contemporary historical debates regarding allied policy toward Bolshevism.

THE RUSSIAN QUESTION SEEN FROM POLAND AND CZECHO-SLOVAKIA

Most of the leading countries in Europe have in popular opinion come to be associated with a certain policy with regard to Bolshevik Russia. France, for example, is considered to be definitely unwilling to negotiate with the Bolsheviks, Italy has pledged herself to peace, while Britain stands half-way. Indeed, if one travelled through Europe at the present moment one could probably collect a different point of view about Russia from each country, some countries being anxious for full peace and normal intercourse, others being sceptical about the possibilities of a full peace and uncertain whether it is even worth attempting.

There are two Slav countries, Poland and Czecho-Slovakia, which are particularly interested in the present and future of Russia, and the public opinion of the two is strongly opposed. Poland is definitely anti-Bolshevik, more so at the moment probably than any other country, and to a certain extent anti-Russian in general, while Czecho-Slovakia is extremely pro-Russian and inclined to conclude peace with the Bolsheviks.

These differences are due to a variety of causes:

1) The Czechs have never suffered from Russian aggression and have in the past always looked to Russia against Germany. Thus a strong pro-Russian tradition has arisen. With the Poles the case is entirely different. The only Russia they have known has been Tsarist Russia or Bolshevik Russia, both of which have followed the same policy towards them. They mistrust the Russians politically and feel, whether rightly or wrongly, that the Russian temperament is fundamentally opposed to their own. As the well-known Polish writer Zdzichowski has expressed it in a book recently published in Cracow: "The fundamental tendency of the Russian is Maximalism – all or nothing. In the Russian one finds the anarchical tendency of the Slav mixed with the blind submission of the Mongol to superior force".

2) The Czechs view the question of Bolshevism more from an economic than a political point of view, whereas in Poland the political question assumes much greater prominence than the economic. The imperialistic character of Bolshevism does not alarm the Czechs, whereas it is this aspect of Bolshevism which is always present to the Poles. Thus the Czechs are willing to discuss Bolshevism in much the same detached way as the question is discussed in England, whereas to the Poles a pro-Bolshevik or a semi-Bolshevik is anathema. That does not mean that the Poles are reactionary. If Bolshevism ruled in Madrid and not in Moscow the Poles might be ready to come to terms with it in the same way as the Czechs are now, but Bolshevism in Moscow controlled by Jews and Russians is a very different thing to the Poles from a similar movement elsewhere. It is impossible for anybody who has been in Poland to overlook this aspect of Bolshevism or to deny that the Poles have good reason for their fears and suspicions.

The Poles and Czechs, looking at the question of Russia and Bolshevism from such totally different points of view, have naturally come to different conclusions with regard to the question of present policy. It would be difficult to find anything more striking than the change of atmosphere on the Russian question in passing from Poland to Czecho-Slovakia. It is best therefore to consider these points of view separately and in greater detail.

a) *The Polish View.*

Ever since the Armistice when the Polish State came into being Poland has been at war with Bolshevik Russia. In spite of the fact that Poland was taken at a disadvantage without any preliminary organisation the Poles have so far been remarkably successful. They have pushed the Red Army back from the neighbourhood of Brest Litovsk to the Beresina some 50 miles east of Minsk on the Northern front, while on the Southern front they still hold the line of the Teterev some hundreds of miles east of Congress Poland. Kiev has been lost and the policy of setting up an independent Ukraine has had a serious set-back, but from a purely military point of view the situation is not considered to be dangerous. The Polish military reverses in the south have been due to the superior numbers of the Bolshevik cavalry which succeeded in breaking through a loosely held front. The Polish infantry, however, has consistently shown itself superior to the Bolshevik infantry and the moral of the Polish troops is still very much higher than that of their opponents.

The war in the East, however, is not a purely military matter. Success does not depend so much on military as on moral and psychological factors. The Poles are a highly-strung and emotional people, very good, indeed brilliant, when things are going well and when they are playing before a sympathetic gallery, but easily and quickly dispirited when they meet with indifference or hostility from those whose friendship and assistance they value. At the present moment Poland appears to be passing through the latter phase and signs of real uneasiness are appearing. The atmosphere is not altogether healthy and the uneasiness is caused more than anything else by the attitude of Great Britain. In England one finds opinion extraordinarily divided on the question of Bolshevism and the more one reads the English press the more complete becomes one's confusion; in Poland itself the issues are much clearer and Bolshevism is shorn of the enchantment that its distance from England has lent it. To the Poles it is a matter of genuine astonishment and dismay that England should show, if not Bolshevik sympathies, a readiness to enter into direct relations with the Bolshevik Government. The Pole, while admitting that he is struggling first and foremost for his own existence, also feels sincerely that he is the bulwark of Western civilisation against Eastern savagery. We may not regard the Pole as altogether Western, for he is far more Slav than Western, but fundamentally he is right in his contention that he is fighting for the same principles that Western Europe fought for during the war and that it is just as difficult for him to come to terms with Bolshevik Russia as it was for us to come to terms with Germany before the latter was beaten.

While admitting this side of the Polish argument there is another aspect of the Polish-Russian question which is more disquieting and which it is impossible for Western Europe to sympathise with. So long as the Poles are fighting Bolshevism and not Russia there will always be a large measure of sympathy for them in England and elsewhere in Western Europe, but once the Poles go further and prepare to convert the present war into a war against Russia it is inevitable that all support of their cause in Western Europe should disappear, not so much perhaps because of pro-Russian sympathies here as because of the wider political issues involved. Unfortunately in the course of a three weeks' visit to Poland – including Warsaw, Minsk, Lemberg and Cracow – I have seen a good many traces of the latter tendency. Many Poles with whom I talked appeared to me to make little effort to conceal the fact that in their opinion the Russians were just as much their enemies as the Bolsheviks and that they themselves were fighting Russia just as keenly as they were fighting Bolshevism. At Minsk especially I noticed this tendency. Minsk is a purely Russian and Jewish town, but during the Polish occupation it has been almost entirely polonised superficially. No Russian sign-boards are allowed over the shops and the Russian names of the streets have been removed in the same way as at Warsaw. In conversation with Poles I noticed that I was being given more anti-Russian propaganda than anti-Bolshevik and that the tendency

was to impress me more with the wickedness of the Russian in general than with that of the Bolshevik in particular.

This tendency is by no means universal in Poland. It is not shared for example by Pilsudski or by other farseeing Poles, but it certainly exists and is, so far as I could judge, especially noticeable amongst a good many Polish officers. It can only cause Poland harm unless it is checked for two obvious reasons: - 1) It will help the Bolsheviks to rally Russian national support against the Poles, 2) It will alienate all sympathy in Western Europe.

On returning from Minsk I had an interview with Pilsudski with whom I discussed these very points as well as the wider aspects of the struggle against Bolshevism. I told him my impressions and ventured to express my personal view that in a struggle against Russia as apart from Bolshevism Poland could never hope to obtain British support or sympathy. Pilsudski warmly denied that he was fighting Russia and maintained that Polish policy was not directed against Russia. He fully appreciated the danger of Russian national support being given to the Bolsheviks and was doing his best to prevent it. He said he would willingly co-operate with anti-Bolshevik Russian forces if he could find any such forces on whom he could rely. He had always felt convinced that Denikin's administration would break down and was not yet convinced that Wrangel would fare much better, though he had noticed certain good signs in that direction. He was not prepared, however, to co-operate with him at the moment. If he could find other Russians with whom it was possible to co-operate, he would not necessarily refuse.

With regard to the question of peace with the Bolsheviks he urged that the Polish difficulties were not rightly appreciated in England. It was absurd to accuse him of fighting Socialism. Socialism he understood and could sympathise with, but Bolshevism was mere savagery. It was not easy to come to terms with savagery. Moreover, once he had come to terms he had no guarantee that the terms would be observed by the Bolsheviks. As far as Poland was concerned the Bolsheviks had a sufficient guarantee, as Poland had a Parliament elected by universal suffrage, but Poland had no guarantee from the vote of a self-constituted body such as that of the Soviets which did not represent and was not elected by the Russian people.

But apart from this there were other difficulties. He did not believe that the Bolsheviks sincerely desired peace with Poland, though he recognised that there were certain elements amongst them who did want peace. On the whole, however, he did not believe that the Bolsheviks were sincere. He agreed that one of the reasons why the Bolsheviks feared peace with Poland and would obstruct it when it came to the point was that they did not want to demobilise their army. If they were to keep an army in being the best excuse was that they had to use it against Poland on the ground that Poland was imperialist. Peace with the Baltic States and Western Europe was a very different matter. There the Bolsheviks were really striving to secure peace as they were desperately anxious to secure supplies.

Pilsudski repeatedly expressed his desire that England should understand the Polish point of view better. It is clear that he, like nearly every other Pole, pays infinitely more attention to British than to French opinion. Pilsudski's general attitude was, so far as I could gather, that in dealing with the Bolsheviks force and determination were the decisive factors, that these were the only weapons they understood and appreciated and that he still considered his Ukrainian experiment had been worth while. He could not, however, continue indefinitely if British sympathy were withheld from him and he viewed with the greatest alarm the negotiations taking place at present with Krassin. Though his personal opinion was that nothing much could come from them they were meanwhile giving the impression in Poland that British help was being given to the Bolsheviks rather than to the Poles. He was anxious to know the real intentions of the British Government in this matter and how long it would take British public opinion to be disillusioned about Russian Bolshevism. If the British Government would break off negotiations with the Bolsheviks and turn their attention to Poland the situation would at once become much easier. In that case co-operation with anti-Bolshevik Russia would not be impossible provided Great Britain pointed the way.

b) *The Czech View.*

When I was in Prague on June 23 I spoke with President Masaryk about the same question. As I had often discussed Russian questions with him before when he was living in London we were

on familiar ground. I began by explaining to him the Polish point of view in general and that of Pilsudski in particular. Masaryk made no secret of the fact that he did not trust the Poles, though he admitted that the stability of the new Polish State was of vital importance. He considered that in his Ukrainian policy Pilsudski had gambled and that the world was never sympathetic towards an unsuccessful gambler. His impression was that Poland was in a very bad way and had as yet made no attempt to settle her internal questions. In many ways he thought that Poland was faced with the same internal problems which had brought Bolshevism in Russia and he felt very uncertain about her future.

With regard to Russia he said he still felt uncertain as to the real forces in the country. He was in sympathy with the Russians generally and was on their side, but he had no belief in them and did not think that any Russian forces would succeed in organising an effective force against the Bolsheviks. He had himself often before believed in the speedy disappearance of the Bolsheviks, but apparently they had grown stronger rather than weaker. He was not prepared therefore to gamble on the defeat of the Bolsheviks by military means. He preferred to follow a policy of peace and commercial intercourse, hoping that the presence of Englishmen especially would make an impression on the Russians and help to make them understand the situation better. He hoped that this would not strengthen the Bolsheviks, but admitted that this policy also was in the nature of a gamble, though not so dangerous a gamble as the military gamble advocated by Pilsudski.

In talking about Russia the President laid emphasis on the fact that it was only one part of general European policy and that the one thing needed was a strong lead on the part of Great Britain. British policy should lead Europe and, if necessary, dictate to Europe. The latter would readily follow any lead; indeed in his opinion half the trouble now existing in Europe was due to the absence of a strong lead on the part of the British Government. The latter should have a strong German policy and a strong Russian policy, but half measures in either case would be fatal. Especially in the case of Russia any policy towards the Bolsheviks must be firm and consistent. A peace policy towards the Bolsheviks must be followed just as firmly as a war policy. What caused him anxiety was the uncertainty which he detected in British policy at a moment when it could and should lead Europe.

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On the basis of the above interviews with Marshal Pilsudski and President Masaryk and many other conversations in Poland I venture to suggest that the Czech and Polish points of view can only be reconciled by direct action on the part of the British Government. Czecho-Slovakia is prepared to follow any lead given by the British Government on the question of Russian policy. Poland, on the other hand, being more directly concerned, will think first of her own security and will, if necessary, pursue an independent course. At the same time under certain conditions I believe she would be quite amenable to a lead from us on the general question of her present and future relations with Russia. Much however depends on the way she is handled. It is not enough to adopt a purely correct attitude, leaving Poland to settle her quarrel with the Bolsheviks and at the same time coming to our own arrangements with the Soviet Government. So far this policy has been misunderstood in Poland, where it is regarded as directly hostile to her and due to Jewish influence in British politics. However unreasonable this may appear to us it is a fact to be reckoned with and is tending to weaken a country which, whatever may be said against it, remains the only effective barrier between Bolshevism and Western civilisation. The downfall of Poland would be a disaster to Europe and would probably destroy the whole peace settlement which we are attempting to bring about.

To remedy this situation and to exert our full influence in Poland a change in our general attitude would be necessary. In the first place Poland expects us to choose definitely between her and Bolshevik Russia. While she is engaged in a life and death struggle with Bolshevism she does not understand the attitude of any ally who negotiates separately with her most dangerous enemy. If, however, we broke off relations with the Soviet Government and made it clear that we understood Poland's very real difficulties in her relations with Russia, we should at once win a position of enormous influence in Poland and could mould her general policy towards Russia along the lines which we thought best. Provided we gave her our moral support and that measure of patience

and understanding which is so necessary in dealing with a Slav people we could almost certainly correct many of the mistakes which the Poles are now making in their attitude towards Russia and the Russians. If we encouraged her to co-operate with Russians against the Bolsheviks and to make it unmistakably clear that the war was not against Russia, she would willingly follow our lead and in so doing she could rapidly destroy the bad feeling which has been steadily growing amongst all classes of Russians and could take the sting out of the Bolshevik offensive. Polish problems are already so inextricably mixed with Russian that the only way to avoid future difficulties is to approach the Russian question through Poland and link her up as a willing partner in our solution rather than approach Bolshevik Russia directly while leaving Poland to make the best of an almost intolerable situation. The difficulties of the Russo-Polish questions are very real, but the danger in ignoring Poland and leaving her to her fate is so great that it may be considered better to undertake our responsibilities now rather than allow the present sores to fester and destroy all possibility of an understanding in the future.

(28.6.20).

R. A. Leeper [handwritten]

Minutes

Mr. Leeper has just returned from a month's leave which he has spent in Poland and Bohemia. His conclusions are contained in the annexed paper and are well worth consideration.

I share his view that we should deal with Russia in cooperation with the surrounding countries. [V. L. ?] 28/6

The solution proposed by Mr. Leeper would entail a complete reversal of the policy now being pursued of endeavouring to make terms with the Bolsheviks while having the Poles to stew in their own juice and to endure the results of their own folly in undertaking an offensive against the Soviet Govt. in opposition to the advice given to Mr. Patek here.

I do not propose to criticise the policy so far adopted, as it would be a waste of time, but it is quite obvious that the Allied Powers cannot allow the Poles to stew in their own juice if the Bolsheviks should reject them, invade Poland & capture Warsaw. This would be the destruction of the treaty of Versailles, and would necessarily modify the attitude of the Allies toward Germany who would then be exposed to the full blast of Bolshevik propaganda on her frontiers. There is nothing immediate to be done unless it be possible to exercise restraint upon the Bolsheviks through Krassin & to compel the Poles to make peace, but it is as well even now not to lose sight of possible complications on Germany's eastern frontier in the event of the continuation of Russo-Polish military operations. H. [Hardinge, no date]

I took Mr. Leeper's paper- with me to Spa. And events have moved so quickly that it was almost immediately out of date and no policy remained but that which we and the allies decided to attempt - with what degree of success that remains to be seen. C. [Curzon] 16/7/20