

Siberian Intervention

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Between 1917 and 1922 approximately 125,000 soldiers belonging to armies from ten states deployed to Siberia and the Russian Far East, part of the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War. Aimed at replacing V. I. Lenin's Bolshevik government with a White Russian administration more sympathetic to Allied interests, the operation failed. This reflected domestic opposition in Allied capitals, divisions among the Allies and the White Russians, and a robust *partizan* guerilla insurgency. The Siberian Intervention, like Allied operations in other Russian theaters, revealed the hot origins of the Cold War, demonstrating tensions between Soviet Russia and the West that shaped the course of twentieth-century world history.

ORIGINS

The Siberian Intervention originated in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of November 7, 1917. Leon Trotsky, the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, proposed an immediate ceasefire to all belligerent states fighting in Europe. Germany was the only country to respond, in part because none of the Allies recognized the Bolsheviks. The result was the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, which removed Russia from the war, allowing Germany to redirect forces from the Eastern to the Western Front and making Russia a *de facto* enemy of the Allies – though war was never officially declared.

Russia's departure from the war cast doubt on the fate of 700,000 tons of war matériel stockpiled on the wharves and railway sidings at the Far Eastern port of Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan – ammunition, artillery, submarines, and railroad

rolling stock the Allies had shipped prior to the revolutions of 1917 to aid the tsar's flagging armies. The matériel had been financed with 13 billion rubles in war credits from British and French banks, which the Bolsheviks repudiated. Allied leaders feared the matériel would fall into German or Bolshevik hands.

Across Russia, anti-Bolshevik military units took shape around former tsarist generals and Cossacks, emerging first on the Don River in European Russia and later across Siberia and the Russian Far East – the White Russian movement. United against the “Red” Bolsheviks and their unorthodox model of economic and political power – which included the nationalization of land, industry, and private wealth – the Whites favored diverse political goals, ranging from the restoration of autocratic tsarism to constitutional monarchy to parliamentary democracy. This lack of political unity would prove to be a major factor in the unraveling of the Siberian Intervention.

In December 1917 the first foreign forces intervened in Russia's emerging civil war, when Chinese troops entered the Chinese Eastern Railway Zone, a corridor through Manchuria that Russia leased from China, connecting Siberia to Vladivostok via the city of Harbin. They disarmed pro-Bolshevik troops and propped up the Harbin-based administration of White Russian General Dmitri Horvat, a former confidante of the tsar and manager of the railroad.

The Siberian Intervention was undermined from the outset by rivalry between Britain, the United States, and Japan, which had joined the Allies in 1914 and was in the best position to land forces at Vladivostok – untouched by the slaughter on the Western Front and a short distance by sea from the Russian Far East. Spurning overtures from Britain for joint action, Japan deployed two warships, the *Iwami* and *Asahi*, to Vladivostok in early January,

while the British sent HMS *Suffolk* from Hong Kong. In February, the American cruiser USS *Brooklyn* reached Golden Horn Bay, lying at anchor in the harbor while a local Soviet administration governed the city around the harbor. Establishing a chain of command that would prevail for the duration of the Siberian Intervention, the ranking officer of the inter-Allied force was Japanese. In April 1918, marines landed from the Japanese and British warships, ostensibly to protect the property of foreign nationals and guard the local consulates, which had been vacated by diplomats the previous month.

Large-scale foreign intervention suddenly appeared feasible following the revolt of the Czecho-Slovak Legion in May 1918, turning the attention of Allied politicians and generals toward Siberia. This “army without a country” consisted of 30,000–50,000 former Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war who had been marooned in Russia by the revolution before gaining recognition as an official Allied army. Originally destined for service in France, the Czechs became embroiled in a local dispute at the town of Chelyabinsk that escalated into them seizing control of a 7,000km stretch of the Trans-Siberian Railroad from the Volga River to Vladivostok. They began dispatching troop trains east, with 15,000 Czechs reaching Vladivostok by June.

THE ALLIES INTERVENE

On June 29, 1918, the Czechs, assisted by Japanese, British, and American marines as well as Chinese troops from Manchuria, toppled the Vladivostok Soviet. About fifty longshore workers were killed defending the Soviet headquarters, as Allied officials placed the city under their “temporary protection” and political, judicial, and administrative power passed to General

Horvat. Vladivostok was suddenly an Allied beachhead on Russia’s Far Eastern flank.

In Allied capitals, politicians and generals responded rapidly in July 1918, pledging national contingents for a coalition force in Siberia and other fronts encircling the Lenin regime. Japan deployed 77,000 troops to Vladivostok, led by General Otani Kikuzo, the Allies’ commander in chief in eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. American president Woodrow Wilson pledged 8,000 troops for Siberia in early July, with the first units reaching Vladivostok in August from the Philippines. Representatives of the British Empire, meeting as the Imperial War Cabinet throughout July, pledged forces including 1,500 British troops (who reached Vladivostok from Hong Kong in August) and 4,200 Canadians who sailed from British Columbia in late 1918. They were joined by smaller units of Italians, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, and French troops, including Annamites from Indochina. When combined with the Czech-Slovak Legion and about 150,000 White Russian troops, the total Allied–White troop strength in Siberia approached 300,000.

The Allies – Japanese, British, Americans, and Czechs – joined General Kalmykov’s Cossack forces in bloody combat to push irregular Bolshevik units north along the Ussuri River and Ussuri Railroad in August 1918, breaking through the enemy line near Khabarovsk. “The enemy were entirely demoralized, and never made another stand east of Lake Baikal,” recalled British colonel John Ward (1920: 52). The Allies then fanned westward across Siberia, reinforcing scattered Czech units and the Special Manchurian Detachment of Ataman Grigori Semyonov, based in Chita and accused of 30,000 executions.

In the Siberian interior, rival White regimes at Tomsk and Omsk vied for authority, as local Bolsheviks executed the



Plate 78 Allied soldiers deployed to the town of Shkotovo, north of Vladivostok, to repel a *partizan* advance, April 1919. Sidney Rodger Collection, Beamsville, Canada (private collection). Courtesy of Sidney J. Rodger.

former tsar and his family at Ekaterinburg and fighting raged between Red and White forces in the Ural mountains, which divided Asia from Europe. Between August and October 1918, the remnant of the tsar's Imperial Russian Gold Reserve was transported across the Urals to Omsk. By November 1918, as Germany and Austria–Hungary capitulated in Europe, ending the carnage on the Western Front, the Whites saw a change in leadership. On November 18, 1918, the former admiral of the tsar's Black Sea fleet, Aleksandr Kolchak, seized power at Omsk, western Siberia's most important city, arresting ministers of the (White Russian) Omsk Directory and proclaiming himself "Supreme Ruler" of an "All-Russian Government." An array of White generals pledged loyalty to Kolchak, who worked closely with British officials and began receiving military assistance from the Allies.

French general Maurice Janin, head of the French Military Mission, proceeded to Omsk to assume command of Allied operations in western Siberia, but within days refused to work with Kolchak.

TURNING POINT: SPRING 1919

In the early months of 1919, Kolchak's armies scored important victories, pushing the Reds westward from the Urals, but the tide had turned by the summer of 1919. While Allied troop strength peaked during this six-month period, they offered meager tangible support to Kolchak and they lost control of their sole line of communication, as pro-Bolshevik *partizan* units sabotaged the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The Allies pursued a confused and inconsistent policy in Siberia, hampered by serious internal rivalries as well as growing domestic

opposition to interference in Russia's internal affairs, particularly after the signing of the Armistice in Europe. Japan and the United States announced a reduction in their troop totals in December 1918, the same month that Canadian troops mutinied in Victoria, British Columbia while deploying for Vladivostok. In Siberia, mutinous sentiments began to emerge among the Czechs, who were increasingly unwilling to delay their return to their new homeland, foreshadowing general unrest later in 1919.

Competing national interests inhibited coordinated action in Siberia. While Japan sought to carve out a sphere of influence in the Russian Far East, as a source of natural resources independent of the United States, the Americans were determined to prevent this from happening. Japan refused to deploy forces west of Lake Baikal, and collaborated with General Semynov to the detriment of Kolchak's authority. There were incidents of Japanese troops detaining Americans and British soldiers and withholding railroad rolling stock in their district of the railroad, inhibiting the movement of troops and cargo. In the face of a feared popular insurrection in Vladivostok in March 1919, provoked by persecution of political dissidents, Canadian general James Elmsley warned: "There is no unity of policy or command amongst the Allies in regard to any uprisings and disorders... The chief danger of an uprising will be that the Allies, acting independently, will come into armed conflict with each other" (Isitt 2010: 130–131).

In this context, the *partizan* movement emerged. Composed of farmers who objected to Kolchak's Conscription Law (which the admiral passed shortly after seizing power with the aim of establishing a New Siberian Army), the guerilla movement formed in response to acts of torture by Kolchak's troops. These recruitment

methods had the opposite effect, driving Siberian villagers to take up arms against the Whites and Allies, to plant explosives along railroad bridges, and to fire on trains. Dozens of acts of sabotage in the "Yenisei Edge" near Taishet station and the Suchan region near Vladivostok had the effect of paralyzing the Trans-Siberian Railroad and subsidiary lines. A trip from "Vladi" to Omsk, which took about ten days under optimal conditions, stretched to nearly a month by the spring of 1919. As the civil war developed, the *partizans* shifted from irregular and autonomous bands to seasoned military units fighting in concert with the Bolshevik underground and, later, the Red Army.

Faced with the instability of the sole link between the Pacific and the Urals, many of the Allied troops never left Vladivostok. Those already in the interior were increasingly repulsed by Kolchak's autocratic ways. French, American, Polish, and Czech commanders refused to deploy their forces on his behalf, confining their activity largely to garrison duty along the railroad in eastern Siberia, far removed from the active fighting against the Red Army in the Urals. One by one, the Allies evacuated Siberia and the Russian Far East.

COLLAPSE OF WHITE SIBERIA AND THE ALLIED INTERVENTION

The Red Army triumphed over Kolchak's forces in key battles in the late spring and summer of 1919, notably at Ufa in early June and Chelyabinsk in July, breaking through the Urals and marching east across Siberia. Omsk fell in November 1919, days after being evacuated by Kolchak and the British. In January 1920 the former Supreme Ruler of White Russia was surrendered by General Janin and the Czech units

to the pro-Bolshevik Political Center at Irkutsk, then tried and executed in February 1920. In Vladivostok, *partizans* had toppled Kolchak's regional military governor the previous month, inaugurating a two-year power struggle between Reds and Whites in the city, while the Far Eastern Republic was formed as a "buffer state" between the remnant of Japanese power and Soviet Russia.

The last Allied units evacuated Vladivostok on October 25, 1922, as the pro-Bolshevik Far Eastern Army approached the city limits and the Japanese commander hastily boarded ship and sailed out of Golden Horn Bay. Soviet authority extended from the Baltic to the Pacific – marking the end of the Russian Civil War and the Siberian Intervention. While Japan lingered on Sakhalin Island until 1925, the fight was lost. The triumphant Moscow regime held power for the next seven decades, as hot and cold wars shaped global politics until the closing decade of the twentieth century.

SEE ALSO: Cold War; Russian Civil War (1917–1920); Russo-Polish War (1919–1920); Wilson, Woodrow (1856–1924); World War I: Afro-Asian theaters.

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