

Wilsonian Ideology and Revolution: U.S. Foreign Policy and Intervention in Bolshevik Russia

Martin Ruhaak

Historians have long debated the role of internationalism and liberal ideology in the foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson. Undoubtedly an academic committed to liberalism, Wilson abolished American isolationism with the United States entry into World War I. Wilson hoped to redesign the world based on the fundamental principles of democracy, self-determination, and capitalism. With the guidance of the United States, Wilson argued, world politics and economics would be governed under a new, liberalized international legal system. The first test of Wilson's postwar agenda came after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. The socialist revolution threatened to destroy Wilson's postwar world and challenged his commitment to liberal ideology. This paper investigates U.S. policy formation toward the Bolshevik government. According to several primary sources, the policy-making process was inconsistent, but driven by an aggressive, anti-communist State Department. Secretary of State Robert Lansing and other anti-Bolsheviks assumed the lead in designing the policy and suppressed opposing lobbies. Despite his abhorrence of non-democratic institutions and his dedication to the new global order, Wilson frequently deferred on the Russian question. Due to Wilson's weaknesses and the State Department's pursuit of an anti-Bolshevik policy, the United States decided against recognition of the Bolshevik government. Furthermore, the conflicted and incoherent policy formation contributed considerably to military intervention in July 1918.

Wilson, Bolshevism, and Ideology

Initially, the State Department (State) and White House agreed on the proper procedure to follow concerning the coup in Russia. On November 7, 1917, Bolshevik revolutionaries entered Petrograd and forced the Kerensky government out of power.

Seven months earlier, the United States officially recognized the Russian Provisional Government as a democracy and wartime ally.¹ Immediately, U.S. Ambassador to Russia David Francis and Secretary of State Robert Lansing agreed that the United States would make no recognition of the Bolshevik government. State was concerned with Lenin's rhetoric promoting Russia's exit from the war. Reports from Russia warned that a Russian-German armistice was imminent. Maddin Summers, the American Consul General in Moscow reported to Lansing on November 17, 1917, "There is strong feeling amongst the working class...if the movement is not put down immediately peace may be made with Germany."²

State and Wilson also concurred that Russian departure from the war represented a violation of the alliance, thus putting the two in agreement over the issue of recognition.³ Reports from State indicated that the Bolsheviks held only a minority of the political power in Russia, and therefore had no authority to pull troops from the Eastern front.⁴ In 1917 and 1918, the main priority of the United States was to keep Russia in the war. It was diplomatically impossible for the United States to recognize a revolutionary government unwilling to maintain the alliance during wartime.

Both Wilson and Lansing had a similar objective of persuading Russia to maintain the war effort. Wilson saw Russian participation on the Eastern front as essential to Allied victory. Without Russia, the Allies would lose the initiative against Germany, and Wilson feared that American war aims could be compromised. Wilson believed in international peace, but also thought that the peace could only be achieved through the design

¹ Robert Lansing to David Francis, March 20, 1917, Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 12.

² Maddin Summers to Francis, November 17, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 235.

³ N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 67.

⁴ *Ibid.* Initially, this sentiment was true, but within weeks, the Bolsheviks controlled metropolitan areas like Petrograd and Moscow, while anti-Bolshevik forces were scattered across western Russia and parts of Siberia. These nuclei of political power, coupled with Lenin's message of "peace, land, and bread," resulted in enough Russian public support to consider the Bolsheviks a prominent political power.

of a liberal democratic world order. Ideally, Wilson planned to design the postwar world around the ideas of capitalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-revolution.⁵ Without a decisive Allied victory, Wilson's worldview could never come to fruition. Over time, he grew wary of revolution, and specifically retained a deep aversion to non-democratic revolution. Wilson viewed radical sentiments as a threat to democracy, order, and the international community.⁶ According to Wilson and most others in his administration, the Bolshevik revolution was inherently non-democratic and held characteristics that conflicted with American ideals of morality and order. Wilson once commented, "That sort of revolution [Bolshevik] means government by terror, government by force, not government by vote. It is the negation of everything that is American."⁷

Despite his harsh words, Wilson remained divided over the Russian question. Although he decided against recognition, Wilson wanted to keep a line of communication open with the Bolsheviks in order to keep Russia in the war. In his own words, Wilson sought to portray American interests in Russia as a "disinterested friendship," meaning that the United States would assist Russia in the war effort without imperial aspirations.⁸ Of all policy makers in his administration, Wilson seemed to have the most accurate perception of the reasons for the Bolshevik exit from the war. Wilson recognized and valued the anti-imperialist nature of communism. Although he did not fully grasp the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, part of him empathized with the Bolshevik plea for peace. Like Lenin, Wilson desired an end to hostilities in Europe and saw the Bolshevik coup as a result of the tragedies of war.⁹ David Foglesong, a revisionist historian, notes that Wilson nearly endorsed socialism in 1906, because of its close connection with the principles of Christianity. Wilson found it difficult to

⁵ Levin, *Woodrow Willson and World Politics*, 52.

⁶ David Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25

⁸ Woodrow Wilson to Edgar Grant Sisson, October 24, 1917. Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol.44 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 436.

⁹ Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 70.

disagree with allocating resources so that no one would be in material need. "Wilson's concern about the rising tension...led him to the verge of endorsing socialism before he pulled back from the brink," claims Foglesong.¹⁰

Most importantly, Wilson's ideologies and ideas concerning international politics and economics did not naturally dispose him towards intervention in Russia. Wilson preached the principle of liberal internationalism, characterized by self-determination, national sovereignty, and democratic governments. In accordance with these principles, Wilson disliked any sign of instability or revolution. Despite this, he strongly believed in adhering to a policy of self-determination, meaning that he allowed states to sort out their own internal affairs. In the case of the Mexican revolution, Wilson encouraged American neutrality and Mexican self-government during the initial years of the conflict. "The peace, prosperity, and contentment of Mexico...mean an enlargement on the field of self-government and the realization of the hopes and rights of a nation whose best aspirations, so long suppressed and disappointed, we deeply sympathize."¹¹ Wilson expressed the same sympathy for Russian self-determination in an address to the 4th Congress of Soviets in March 1918:

I beg to assure the people of Russia through the Congress that it will avail itself of every opportunity that may offer to secure for Russia once more complete sovereignty and independence in her own affairs and full restoration to her great role in the life of Europe and the modern world. The whole heart of the people of the United States is with the people of Russia in the attempt to free themselves forever from the autocratic government and become the masters of their own life.¹²

Vigorous idealism infused Wilson and helped to inspire his sympathy for countries mired in turmoil and revolution. His anti-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ An Address to a Joint Session of Congress. Ray Stannard and William E. Dodd, ed., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 1, *The New Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1926), 45.

¹² Woodrow Wilson to 4th Congress of Soviets, March 11, 1918, Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 46 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 598.

imperialist tendencies also prohibited Wilson from making swift and aggressive decisions to intervene in troubled states.

Competing with his anti-imperialist principles, however, were Wilson's images of American superiority and moral righteousness. Despite his insistence that countries possessed national sovereignty, Wilson ardently contended that American superiority burdened the United States with the responsibility of actively assisting chaotic nations. Wilson dedicated most of his presidency to spreading the influence of American principles abroad, so as to increase international peace and prosperity. In many of his orations, Wilson encouraged the American public to assist the advancement of others abroad. In a speech at the Naval Academy in 1914, Wilson declared, "So that I hope that wherever you go you will have a generous, comprehending love of the people you come in contact with...always having in mind that you are champions of what is right and fair all 'round for the public welfare, no matter where you are."¹³ Strong U.S. influence abroad, Wilson believed, would achieve two important advances. The first was altruistic. Wilson held an undeterrable faith in the righteousness of democracy and believed that democracy was an instant formula for success. To bring democracy to other nations meant providing those nations with prosperity. Realism offered the premise for the second gain. The Wilson administration held the notion that democratic governments were not only less likely to enter into war, but would be more cooperative with the United States.¹⁴ So in this sense, Bolshevism and communism represented a threat to the U.S. and Wilson's interest.

In the long run, it seems that Wilson hoped that his directives for the postwar world would cure Russian instability and disable the power of the Bolshevik party. In his "Fourteen Points Address," Wilson articulated his postwar plans for Russia. Wilson called for:

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

¹³ Address to the Graduating Class of the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, June 5, 1914. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* vol. 1, 128.

¹⁴ Tony Smith, "Making the World Safe for Democracy in the American Century," *Diplomatic History* 23, (1999): 178.

an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy.¹⁵

Despite its lofty goals, the White House underestimated the strength and popularity of communism in Russia. Most in the Wilson administration, including Wilson himself, considered Bolshevism as a transient ideology that would pass with time.¹⁶ Moreover, Wilson did not perceive communist Russia as an imminent threat to the United States.¹⁷ The main concern for Wilson and U.S. policy makers was to persuade Russia to maintain the Eastern front, in hopes of occupying German forces.

When the Russian-German peace talks began at Brest-Litovsk in December, the U.S. war strategy faced a major setback. After learning of the initiation of peace talks by Trotsky, Wilson referred to the Bolsheviks as "that military and imperialistic minority which has so far dominated their [Russia's] whole policy"¹⁸ Lenin's decision to sue Germany for peace intensified an already sensitive relationship with the United States. Now, Wilson and his administration had to decide if Bolshevism presented an obstacle to Allied wartime plans and postwar plans for international security. At this point, Wilson encountered an ideological paradox: Did his principles of self-determination and liberal internationalism prevent the United States from intervening in Russian internal affairs? Was American intervention acceptable if it was performed under the auspices of restoring European stability and the Eastern front?¹⁹ These questions haunted Wilson and until the end of his presidency and distorted his Russian policy. Wilson struggled to find a delicate balance between his idealism and realist world politics.²⁰ Wilson often deferred on the

¹⁵ An Address to a Joint Session of Congress, January 8, 1918. Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 537.

¹⁶ Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Wilson Address to a Joint Session of Congress, January 8, 1918, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45, 534.

¹⁹ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Wilson and Revolutions, 1913-1921*, ed. Harold M. Hyman (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1976), 42.

²⁰ Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, 55.

Russian question because of his deep uncertainties, often leaving the decisions to Lansing and the State Department.

The State Department, Anti-Bolshevism, and the Case for Intervention

From the outset, State delved into the Russian question and provided the impetus for anti-Bolshevism in the Wilson administration. When the Bolshevik coup actually took place, it came to the surprise of few U.S. officials in Russia. In May 1917, Wilson and Lansing dispatched a small American commission to Russia, led by former U.S. Secretary of State Elihu Root. Dubbed the “Root mission,” the primary objective of the commission was to “convey to the Russian Government the friendship and good will of this nation and to express the confident hope that the Russian people...will join the free people of American in resisting...the ambitious designs of the German Government”²¹ The Root Mission issued democratic and American propaganda to boost Russian morale and help the weary Russians sustain the war effort. Along the way, however, Root and his companions became familiar with the socialist underground movement, especially that of the Bolshevik revolutionaries. In one letter, Root stated, “We subsequently ascertained that a considerable number of Russian refugees of the extreme socialist type returning from America a few days before had endeavored to induce the soldiers and citizens in Vladivostok to prevent the [Root] mission from proceeding to Petrograd.”²² Needless to say, the U.S. government was well aware of the Bolshevik threat to the Provisional Government.

From the beginning, nearly all State officials stationed in Russia lobbied against recognition. David Francis, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, cabled Lansing that he had been in contact with Kerensky after the coup. Kerensky urged Francis to deny recognition to Lenin.²³ Lansing consulted with both Wilson and the Allied governments about the issue of recognition. The Allies

²¹ Lansing to Francis, May 1, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol.1, 108.

²² Frank Polk to Francis: Report of the Special Diplomatic Mission to Russia to the Secretary of State, July 18, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol.1, 131.

²³ Francis to Lansing, November 10, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 224.

quickly denounced any form of recognition, as did Wilson. Wilson initially denied recognition in hopes that the Provisional Government could reassume control.²⁴ Instead, the United States maintained official relations with Boris Bakhmeteff, the Provisional Government’s ambassador to the U.S.²⁵ On November 22, Trotsky cabled Francis in Petrograd asking him to accept a Russian plea for armistice and an eventual exit from the war. Trotsky wrote, “I have the honor to beg you...for an armistice without delay on all the fronts and for the opening without delay of negotiations for peace.”²⁶ Promptly, Lansing issued the policy of non-recognition: “In reply to an inquiry as to whether we would join with the Allies in agreement not to recognize independently any new Russian Government, the [State] Department has informed the French Ambassador that we would be glad to exchange views with the Allies at any time on the subject.”²⁷ Eventually, the “views” exchanged between Allies centered on intervention in Russia.

Not all Wilson administration officials were so quick to announce their disdain for the Bolshevik government. Some military attachés assigned to Russia espoused more cautious measures to deal with the Bolsheviks. Brigadier General William Judson was sent to Petrograd in December to investigate the situation on behalf of the War Department. During his trip, Judson personally encountered Trotsky in unofficial negotiations and seemed to have made some progress with the Russian Foreign Commissariat. Judson wrote:

I had a long interview with Trotsky this morning on military features of Lenin-Trotsky program, especially relating to armistice negotiations beginning tomorrow...Trotsky was very responsive. He implied that his principles and desire for peace leave him wide latitude in armistice negotiations and stated

²⁴ Foglesong, *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 5. Until Lenin and Trotsky declared the official armistice with Germany, the U.S. and Allied governments were not as concerned with Russia leaving the war as much as they were troubled over the nature of the revolution.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Francis to Lansing, November 22, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 244.

²⁷ Lansing to Francis, November 24, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 248.

that...in negotiations he would observe and endeavor to protect the interests of Russia's allies.²⁸

Judson's supposed progress contradicted the policy set forth by State. First of all, Lansing and Wilson did not want American officials to make any sort of contact—official or unofficial—with the Bolsheviks.²⁹ Such action could be represented as a sort of de facto recognition. Furthermore, Lansing did not appreciate any intrusion on State Department power, especially from a weaker agency like the War Department. Nevertheless, Judson reported his thoughts on the Russian question and provided a counter-argument against the anti-Bolshevik element. In a speculative vein, it seems that the United States missed an opportunity to resolve the Russian dilemma, or at least open discourse with the Bolsheviks through a relative moderate like Trotsky. Throughout the policy formulation, more missed opportunities arose. Judson's conversation with Trotsky exemplified a potential turning point in U.S.-Bolshevik relations that Lansing eschewed. The intentions of the Bolsheviks in discussions such as these remain unclear, but it is difficult to dismiss such conversations as insignificant.

Simultaneously, President Wilson began to develop his own policies concerning Russia. In line with his hope for a worldwide liberal and democratic agenda, Wilson sought to send messages of friendship and sympathy to the Russian people.³⁰ Wilson held firm to his non-recognition policy and even authorized an embargo against Bolshevik Russia.³¹ Even so, Wilson saw a window of opportunity to bring Russia back into the war. He remained mostly silent on Russian domestic politics and averted comment on the revolution. It seems evident that most of Wilson's actions at the time came from the advice of his closest advisor, Edward House. When it came to revolution, House stood as one of the

²⁸ General William Judson to the War Department, December 1, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol.1, 279.

²⁹ Lansing to Francis, December 6, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol.1, 289.

³⁰ Samuel Flag Bemis, ed., *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomatics*, vol. 10 (New York: Pageant Book Company, 1958), 109.

³¹ Judson to the War Department: Copy of a letter sent to the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Petrograd, November 25, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 266.

most moderate voices in the Wilson administration. House knew that Wilson and Lansing might attempt to crush the Russian Revolution for the sake of international democracy, but advised against such action.³² House was not a staunch ideologue like Wilson. Foglesong writes, "His [House's] views of Soviet Russia would be driven by practical political and strategic considerations rather than moral principles and ideology."³³

House outlined the Wilson administration's early strategy to extend a sympathetic message to Russia and the Bolsheviks. While Lansing and State were denouncing the November revolutionaries as non-democratic anarchists, House lobbied to reunite Russia and the Allies for the war effort.³⁴ House clearly focused on the short-term, looking to prevent German infiltration of Russia and, more importantly, the collapse of the Eastern front. By no means was House a socialist or radical; like Wilson, he believed in a postwar liberal-capitalist order. In order to establish the postwar order, House thought it essential that the U.S. and other Allies make it clearly known that they had no postwar imperial aims. To do so may keep Russia in the war. In a letter to Lansing, House wrote, "The Russian Ambassador at Paris believes it of great importance that you send a message to Russia through Francis or otherwise letting them know of the disinterested motives of the United States."³⁵ House went to great lengths to preserve the façade of a friendly U.S. disposition toward Russia. Lansing agreed with this sentiment simply because of its implications for the war's future prosecution. On most other Russian issues, Lansing and House could not be further apart. The two diplomats, in essence, represented the two conflicting sides of Wilson. Although both subscribed to anti-imperialist notions, House represented the moderate and compassionate side of Wilson seeking to create a worldwide liberal agenda. Lansing, on the other hand, represented the side of Wilson obsessed with order, law, and morality. He abhorred revolution and saw it as a threat to democracy.

³² Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, 64.

³⁵ Edward House to Lansing, December 2, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 255.

Wilson acknowledged House's proposals of the "disinterested friendship" policy even as Trotsky and the Russian Foreign Ministry negotiated a separate peace with Germany. At the same time, Lansing's case for intervention grew stronger. For some time, Lansing pushed Wilson to assist anti-Bolshevik forces in the Russian civil war that began shortly after the revolution.³⁶ According to Lansing, financial and military assistance to counter revolutionary forces could undermine the Bolshevik government and possibly return Russia to the Eastern front. In December, Wilson agreed to send financial aid to the Cossack rebels in the Caucasus region.³⁷ Wilson approved the transactions based on one major condition. The U.S. would launder the money through Britain and France so not to overtly agitate the Bolsheviks and not to make a de facto recognition of the Cossack army.³⁸ In reality, the U.S. transferred no money, but Wilson's concession signaled a significant shift from the policy of disinterested friendship.

By March 1918, the Supreme Allied War Council began to seriously investigate the option of intervening in Russia. After the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty on March 3, 1918, Allied officials feared that Russia would fall into the hands of Germany. With German dominance of Russia, both Europe and the Far East could be destabilized.³⁹ Japan, concerned over German dominance, volunteered to lead the intervention into Siberia. Siberia represented a vital area for the Allies. Caches of weapons located in Siberia needed protection from possible German seizure. More importantly, a Czech legion of troops stationed in Siberia won several decisive battles against Bolshevik forces.⁴⁰ The Allies hoped to transport the Czech legion to the Western front and mount a counteroffensive against the Bolsheviks at the same time. The British and Japanese governments estimated a need for 600,000 Japanese troops.⁴¹ Both Lansing and Wilson

³⁶ Gardner, *Wilson and Revolutions*, 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ George F. Kennan, *Soviet American Relations, 1917-1920* vol. 1, *Russia Leaves the War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 275.

⁴⁰ Victor M. Fic, *The Collapse of American Policy in Russia and Siberia in 1918: Wilson's Decision Not to Intervene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

feared a massive Japanese intervention. Japanese intervention could force Russia to ally with Germany.⁴² House agreed and further added that Japanese occupation of Russia paralleled the benefit of German occupation.⁴³ Wilson also grew wary of Japan's true aims in Siberia. He feared that any imperial movements by the Japanese could destroy already tense relations between the Bolsheviks and Allies. To solve the problem, Lansing suggested that the U.S. land in Siberia with the Japanese, so to prevent any infringements on Russian sovereignty.⁴⁴

Wilson deferred on the issue of Japanese intervention for quite some time. Heavy pressure to intervene came from the Allied War Council. Lansing stressed to Wilson that Japanese intervention in Russia seemed "unwise."⁴⁵ Instead, Lansing pressed Wilson to send an American expeditionary force to supervise the Japanese. Lansing knew that Wilson would not qualify or consider a small American force assisting the Japanese in moving Czech forces out of Siberia as an intervention. Wilson defined intervention as an occupation force taking control of a country and redesigning its political, economic, and social structure.⁴⁶

By July, Wilson yielded to the interventionists at home and at the Allied War Council. Instead of allowing Japanese entry into Siberia alone and risk driving the Russians into German hands, Wilson lobbied the Allied War Council for a different plan. According to the plan, both the U.S. and Japan sent small expeditionary forces of 7,000 each to assist the Czech transportation.⁴⁷ On July 6, U.S. forces landed at Vladivostok and soon met with the Japanese force.⁴⁸ To be clear, Wilson's only intent was to transport the Czechs to France. Yet, the Allied War Council held different ideas about the objectives of the intervention. The French Ambassador to Russia stated, "The Allies may be obliged to intervene in order to meet this threat

⁴² Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 147.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ George F. Kennan, *Soviet American Relations, 1917-1920* vol. 2, *The Decision to Intervene* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 93.

⁴⁶ Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 21.

⁴⁷ Fic, *The Collapse of American Foreign Policy in Russia and Siberia*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

directed both against the Russian people and against them [the Allies].⁴⁹ This and other turns of events, intensified Wilson's resolve to protest the actual Russian intervention. But at this point, his objections became moot. The commitment of U.S. troops made it hard to effectively protest the intervention and remove the U.S. forces. Wilson's deference on the Russian question left State in control of Russian policy and resulted in interventionist actions in direct conflict with Wilsonian idealism.

The American Lobby Effort and the Division over Bolshevism

While the debate over Russia raged inside the Wilson administration, coordinated lobby efforts among the American public took shape. Proponents of Wilsonian self-determination advocated the acceptance and recognition of the Bolshevik government. Others, more concerned with the outcome of the war, denounced the Bolsheviks as traitors to the Allied cause. A number of other anti-Bolsheviks fundamentally opposed Bolshevism from an ideological standpoint. Those who subscribed to this school of thought perceived the Bolshevik party as the manifestation of the socialist ideal that would one day revolt against international capitalism.⁵⁰

One of the primary lobby efforts came from Raymond Robins, a Bolshevik sympathizer and director of the Red Cross mission to Russia in 1917 and 1918. A Chicago native, Robins was a progressive liberal who hoped to engage in unofficial negotiations with the Bolshevik vanguard.⁵¹ The Red Cross mission began before the Bolshevik revolution in the summer of 1917. Wilson appointed Robins as the director of the mission and placed its members under the supervision of the U.S. military.⁵² Funding for

⁴⁹ Summers to Lansing, April 29, 1918, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 509. This statement was released before the U.S. landing in Siberia, but during the British and French landings at Murmansk and Archangel.

⁵⁰ Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, Philip Taft and John Sessions, eds. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1957), 225.

⁵¹ David R. Francis, *Russia From the American Embassy* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970), 211.

⁵² Kennan, *Soviet American Relations, 1917-1920*, vol.1, 54. The members of the Red Cross mission had no actual affiliation with the Red Cross and performed no medical functions. Most likely, the mission performed under the

the mission, approximately one million dollars, derived from U.S. copper magnate and corporate tycoon William Boyce Thompson.⁵³ The objective of the mission was broad. "These activities were primarily of a political and informational nature, and had as their object the support of the Provisional Government and the stimulation of its war effort," noted George Kennan.⁵⁴ Similar to the Root mission, the Red Cross mission gathered vital information concerning the status of Russian military and civilian morale, as well as the strength of radical factions. Moreover, Robins provided the Wilson administration with an unofficial diplomat to the Bolshevik government. Historians can only speculate that negotiations between the Bolsheviks and State officials, notably Ambassador Francis, complicated the U.S. policy of non-recognition. In fact, discourse between the Bolsheviks and Francis could have been interpreted as recognition of Lenin's government. To Wilson, Robins served as a conduit of information for the U.S. and did not compromise U.S. interests.

From the outset, Thompson expanded the role of the mission by aggressively seeking out Russian factions that could limit the growing influence of the Bolsheviks. Thompson used personal connections with major corporations to fund anti-Bolshevik parties, notably the Social Revolutionary Party.⁵⁵ On one occasion, Thompson solicited one million dollars from J.P. Morgan to fund a Social Revolutionary Party effort to issue pro-war and anti-Bolshevik propaganda among Russian soldiers.⁵⁶ These efforts helped to criticize radical Russian groups, but did little to improve the image of Kerensky and the Provisional Government. Thompson often received similar types of funding, which upset Robins and the Wilson administration. Both Robins and Wilson perceived Thompson's actions as detrimental to U.S. interests in Russia, in that his actions preemptively announced the

guise of the Red Cross to project a sense of neutrality and non-aggression to opponents of Kerensky.

⁵³ Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 108.

⁵⁴ Kennan, *Soviet American Relations, 1917-1920*, vol. 1, 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Kennan brings attention to the irony of socialist political factions benefiting from Wall Street capitalist institutions to preserve a non-capitalist government.

U.S. policy towards a potential Bolshevik government.⁵⁷ Soon after, Robins instructed Thompson to leave the mission.⁵⁸

With Thompson gone, Robins held all control over the mission and its personnel. Soon, however, Robins' role changed as the Bolsheviks deposed Kerensky and the Provisional Government. Despite Wilson's insistence that the mission members refrain from contact with the Bolsheviks, Robins seems to have initiated contact with Trotsky as early as December.⁵⁹ For several months, Robins met with both Trotsky and Lenin on a weekly basis, discussing political and economic issues regarding recognition and trade.⁶⁰ Robins established fairly friendly relations with the Soviet government and actually mediated small agreements between the Bolsheviks and the United States. Robins helped to prevent the nationalization of American trans-national corporations located in Russia and brokered agreements to prevent Russian war supplies from falling into German hands.⁶¹

Simultaneously, Robins reported the context of the meetings to Ambassador Francis on a daily basis. In meetings with Francis, Robins vehemently advocated U.S. recognition of the Bolsheviks. Robins explained to Francis that the growing strength and popularity of the Bolsheviks made it nearly impossible to sustain the policy of non-recognition. In a letter to Lansing, Francis wrote, "Robins, Sisson claim Soviet government stronger daily, but not fully prepared to concur."⁶² Francis denied any prospect of recognition to Robins. In fact, Francis felt that U.S. recognition would only hasten Lenin's effort for a separate peace. In February, 1918, Francis wrote, "Still think that Soviet recognition would be mistake for if separate peace concluded it would be much less binding upon Russian people and much less satisfactory

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁹ Francis to Lansing, December 12, 1917, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol. 1, 301. Wilson ordered that no Americans in Russia engage the Bolsheviks, but Robins attained special permission to speak with them.

⁶⁰ David W. McFadden, "Hiram Johnson, Raymond Robins, and the Struggle for an Alternative American Policy Toward Bolshevik Russia," *Peace and Change* 18, (January 1993): 53.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Francis to Lansing, January 23, 1918, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1918*, vol.1, 357.

to Germany without our previous recognition."⁶³ Clearly, Francis did not view recognition within the scope of Robins' mission. Rather, Francis thought that the main objective of Robins' discussions with Bolshevik leaders should focus on the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and preventing the separate peace.

In the weeks prior to the Brest-Litovsk treaty, Robins held to his impression that Lenin and his modified form of Marxism might allow for cordial relations with the United States.⁶⁴ Most meetings between Trotsky and Robins focused on the establishment of trade and the availability of American aid. Apparently, Robins thought that an economic alliance could prevent the separate peace with Germany, as well as an American intervention. Those in the Wilson administration also pondered the benefits an economic alliance. Bolshevik sympathizers, like Robins, viewed economics and trade as an opportunity for cooperation with Russia.⁶⁵ On the other hand, anti-Bolsheviks sought to use economics against the Bolsheviks and topple the government.⁶⁶ Robins insisted that he could coerce Trotsky to end the Brest-Litovsk negotiations if he could promise American aid to defend against Germany.⁶⁷ Francis and State dismissed the request. Again, it seems that the U.S. missed out on another opportunity to establish relations with the Bolsheviks and re-open the Eastern front. On the other hand, no one is absolutely sure of Lenin's sincerity to re-enter the war. Lloyd Gardner and other historians argue that Lenin made the offer with the hope that the U.S. would reject it. Therefore, he could exploit the capitalists and portray the U.S. as an enemy of the Russian people.⁶⁸ Regardless of his motives, the U.S. dismissed Lenin's offer and Russia signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty in March.

The importance of Robins' meetings with the Bolsheviks diminished after the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Despite this, he maintained his effort to establish a U.S.-Bolshevik economic

⁶³ Francis to Lansing, February 8, 1918, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia 1918*, vol.1, 370.

⁶⁴ Gardner, *Wilson and Revolutions*, 37.

⁶⁵ McFadden, "Hiram Johnson, Raymond Robins, and the Struggle for an Alternative American Policy Toward Bolshevik Russia," 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gardner, *Wilson and Revolutions*, 36.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 37.

connection. In May, Robins and Lenin created a proposal for economic cooperation. For the most part, the proposal focused on the exchange of U.S. capital goods for Russian natural resources and raw materials.⁶⁹ Robins hailed the proposal as a segue to official relations with the Russians, but no response came from Washington.⁷⁰ On June 1, the Red Cross recalled Robins to America, most likely under advisement of State.⁷¹ Despite his efforts, the U.S. made no mention of an economic relationship. On the contrary, anti-Bolshevik and interventionist sentiments in the Wilson administration grew stronger after Brest-Litovsk.

While Robins made pleas to open relations with Russia, relatively conservative organizations supported the U.S. policies of non-recognition and intervention. One of the primary anti-Bolshevik efforts came from Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Similar to Wilson, Gompers believed in American isolationism and pacifism prior to World War I.⁷² At the opening of World War I, however, Gompers underwent an ideological transformation and began to recognize the importance of international democracy and self-determination. Gompers supported Wilson's decision to enter World War I with an AFL resolution:

RESOLVED, That after sober, serious minded consideration of the industrial problems arising as a result of our country's participation in the war for human rights and the perpetuation of democratic institutions we pledge to him our undivided support in carrying the war to a successful conclusion, in supporting him in his efforts to apply the principles of democracy to the solution of the problems which arise in industry.⁷³

Gompers' newfound internationalist perspective also applied to the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik government. Similar to the Wilson administration, Gompers favored the Provisional

⁶⁹ McFadden, "Hiram Johnson, Raymond Robins, and the Struggle for an Alternative American Policy Toward Bolshevik Russia," 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Francis to Lansing, June 1, 1918, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918, Russia*, vol. 1, 549.

⁷² Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 41.

⁷³ Samuel Gompers to Woodrow Wilson, December 14, 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45, 298.

Government and denounced the exiled czarist government. Gompers wrote, "The whole world had rejoiced in the overthrow of czarism. In our country where there had long been sympathy with Russian revolutionary movements the news brought a feeling of great uplift."⁷⁴ Clearly, Gompers' international ideologies harmonized with those of Wilson. Moreover, the AFL showed strong support for Wilson during the 1912 and 1916 elections, thus giving Gompers and the AFL a great deal of political influence relative to Robins and the Red Cross. Coupled with his high profile and political influence, Gompers' ideologies placed him in a unique position close to Wilson.

Gompers utilized his ideological proximity to Wilson in order to suppress any form of U.S.-Bolshevik cooperation. According to Gompers, the inherent class conflict characteristic of Marxism-Leninism would destabilize the political and economic structures of capitalist countries. To illustrate his belief, Gompers often compared the potential danger of the Bolsheviks to the radical activities of the International Workers of the World and other groups that advocated class warfare.⁷⁵ Gompers astutely noted that the Bolsheviks intended to begin an eventual war against international capitalism based upon class conflict. Moreover, Gompers advised Wilson that Lenin increased the appeal of socialism because he insisted on removing Russia from the war.⁷⁶ Russia, being demoralized by the war, gravitated towards anti-war activists in Russia despite their political affiliations. Gompers noted that Marxism-Leninism inherently opposed capitalist warfare, and Lenin's promise to leave the war grabbed the attention and support of many Russians. Furthermore, Gompers confided in Wilson and Lansing that the "war weary" countries may gravitate towards socialism and leave the war. To prevent such occurrences, Gompers concluded that recognition could not be extended to the Bolsheviks.⁷⁷ In terms of diplomatic recognition, these sentiments concurred with those of Wilson and especially Lansing.

Although Wilson and most of his administration sided with Gompers, it should be noted that Gompers probably had little

⁷⁴ Gompers, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 283.

⁷⁵ Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism*, 36.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

effect in constructing the U.S. policies of non-recognition and intervention. Unlike Robins, Gompers had no tangible role in the Wilson government, thus he had no mechanism for policy advisement. Most likely, Wilson and Lansing probably treated Gompers as a measure of American public opinion against Bolshevism. Furthermore, Gompers' was able to gauge the strength and threat of the American socialists inside the AFL, and assured the President that the socialist threat did not extend to the United States. Most importantly, however, Gompers had almost unlimited access to Wilson due to his political influence and status as the President of the most influential non-governmental organization in America. Robins, on the other hand, spoke directly to Wilson or Lansing very few times. Evidence shows almost no letters or correspondence between Robins and the White House. On the other hand, Gompers and Wilson wrote each other frequently on a variety of topics, including Russia. Throughout *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, one finds several discussions between the President and Gompers. Nowhere is there a discussion between Robins and Lansing, let alone Wilson.

Some historians suggest that Robins' limited access to Wilson was intentional. Lansing, who vehemently believed in the role of State as the primary foreign policy agency, disliked Robins' bold suggestions to recognize the Bolsheviks. Lansing would not allow anyone to circumvent State and make foreign policy.⁷⁸ David McFadden argues that Lansing and other anti-Bolsheviks conspired to link Robins to, "advocates of the Soviet government in the United States, thus discrediting him."⁷⁹ Evidently, Robins' views and his aggressive attempts to change U.S. policy prevented him from meeting with Wilson. In that same vein, Gompers managed to meet with Wilson because of his similar views and aspirations for Russia. In all, Gompers' information may have reinforced Wilson's tendency to yield to Lansing. Had Wilson known more of Robins' information, however, he might have asserted himself earlier in the policy-making process.

⁷⁸ McFadden, "Hiram Johnson, Raymond Robins, and the Struggle for an Alternative American Policy Toward Bolshevik Russia," 62.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Conclusion

The role of Woodrow Wilson in the initial policy-making stages remains weak at best. Arguably, issues surrounding the World War and the upcoming Paris Peace Conference overwhelmed Wilson and may have impaired his judgment concerning Russia. More likely, it seems that Wilson deferred to State on the Russian policy. Wilson possessed no affinity for Bolshevism and opted not to recognize the Russian government. To Wilson, Lenin chose to abandon the Allies and remove the troops from the Eastern front, thus the U.S. could not establish a diplomatic relationship. It is possible to speculate that Wilson may have been willing to open negotiations for recognition under different circumstances. Furthermore, it is difficult to argue that Wilson would have allowed U.S. policy makers to consider intervention in Russia had the United States not been involved in the World War. Instead, Wilson shows signs of realism in advocating the policy for non-recognition and allowing the possibility for intervention. This assessment corresponds with Arthur Link's opinion that Wilson held realist tendencies—using recognition and American economic power to shape diplomacy.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Lansing and the State Department undoubtedly dominated the discussions concerning intervention. Gradually, Lansing capitulated to Allied requests to persuade Wilson to intervene. Lansing silenced opposing views, notably Robins, which threatened the anti-Bolshevik consensus in the Wilson administration. Furthermore, Lansing used pro-war anti-Bolsheviks, such as Gompers and the AFL, as the measure of American public opinion against Bolshevism. Wilson made small attempts to diminish the American influence in the intervention, but failed to keep the U.S. out of Russia. Wilson soon reassumed authority over the foreign policy-making process, but it appeared to be too late. Wilson's deference resulted in a misconceived policy that intensified the breach with Russia and served as a precursor to Cold War foreign policies, such as containment.

⁸⁰ Arthur S. Link, "The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson," *Journal of Presbyterian History* XLI (March 1963): 3.