

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR:

I would like to comment on Rex Wade's review of my book *Revolution & Intervention: The French Government and the Russian Civil War, 1917–1919* (*Slavic Review*, 44, no. 1 [Spring 1985]: 120–21).

Wade is critical of the overly narrow focus of the book, which he finds too concentrated on the negotiations and policies of the French government. French public opinion, France's allies, and the anti-Bolshevik Russians and Ukrainians receive short shrift, according to Wade. Finally, he states that the book really does not much broaden our understanding of the role of the French government in the civil war period.

I am somewhat taken aback by these criticisms, since in the past it has always been the French government which has received short shrift in writings on the foreign intervention in Russia. George Kennan and Richard Ullman, for example, leave the French as "shadowy" figures, and George Brinkley looks at the French through the eyes of the anti-Bolsheviks and the polemical "Orange Book" of the Volunteer Army, apparently even using a transliteration of a Russian spelling of the name of an important French officer in Odessa. Admittedly, these writers did not have access to French sources. Nevertheless, my own efforts have been directed at removing the shadows from around the French role in the intervention. Moreover, if France's allies "appear only as objects of French mistrust," it is because the French government profoundly mistrusted its allies, in fact much in the same way as Lenin described the relationship among the Allies. But a more recent analyst of French and Allied relationships, David Stevenson in his book on French war aims against Germany, has similarly emphasized the deep French mistrust of its allies. Besides, I believe sufficient attention is given to British and U.S. policies to distinguish them from the French. Indeed, I stress on many occasions that military and economic exhaustion in the war against Germany forced the French government into reliance on Britain and the United States, severely limiting its ability to act independently in Russia. I note the failure of French efforts to commit American and British power to objectives which the French government could no longer achieve on its own. Again, Stevenson also observes this characteristic of French policy with regard to German war aims.

As for the anti-Bolshevik Russians and Ukrainians, if they appear as "passive objects," it is because they were, in the French mind, when not the focus of hatred and contempt, scarcely more than a nuisance to be got around as best as possible. These French attitudes were pervasive throughout the period of the civil war and support my contention—with which Wade agrees—that the French government carried a nineteenth-century colonialist world view into its struggle against the Russian Revolution.

Aleksandr Kolchak receives little attention because he receives little attention from the French government. In fact, though I did not say it in the book, French diplomats and agents considered Kolchak to be an unstable, suspected morphine addict and *pis aller* in the struggle against the Bolsheviks. In any event, by the time he came to power in November 1918, the French government had lost much of its interest in the Siberian theater of operations and had turned its attention to the Ukraine and Crimea. Since my book concentrates on French policy and not on Russian events, it follows French interests and not the various turns of the civil war.

I also take exception to Wade's assessment that "our broad interpretation and understanding is (sic) not changed all that much." If they have not been changed, they certainly should be. The traditional view of Allied policy toward Russia, which has long allowed that foreign intervention was the inadvertent outcome of efforts to reestablish an Eastern front, still has wide currency but is questioned by my book. To be sure, I first published these views in 1976 (*Journal of Modern History*, Sept. 1976), so they are not new in the present study. Nevertheless, they challenge an interpretation which appears to be dying hard in spite of revisionist work by myself and other authors. Furthermore, how well do

historians of the foreign intervention deal with the questions of Allied government relationships with big business or finance and of Allied economic objectives in Russia? Really not very well—although some American scholars scoff at such avenues of research pursued, however dogmatically, by historians in the Soviet Union.

And what of the idea that Russia in the civil war period was becoming a field for Allied economic and political rivalries and that, had it not been for the Bolsheviks, it might have become another China wracked by endless civil wars exacerbated by competitive Western and Japanese imperialism? Why should the military intervention in Soviet Russia be considered an aberration or accident caused by the circumstances of the World War? Why not view it as a natural evolution from what is now referred to as the imperialism of the nineteenth century? Many of the characteristics of this imperialism are evident in the intervention period: the search for markets and resources, the competition and jostling for position and advantages, the disdain for the “native” population, the determination to dominate and control. I quite regret not having further developed these ideas.

Wade also states that I ignore French public opinion even though I acknowledge “that it seriously restricted the options open to the [French] government.” Yet, in the preface I note that domestic considerations only rarely affected government policy. In the instances where such considerations did influence French policy, I raise them, for example, when the government made concessions to the holders of Russian bonds or when the Quai d’Orsay preferred to avoid or limit parliamentary debates on the Russian question. I also point out, however, that other considerations carried greater weight in restraining French policy. They included British and American opposition to large-scale intervention, the absence of significant Russian or Ukrainian popular support for intervention, and most importantly the war-weariness and rebelliousness of French troops. Domestic considerations hampered French policy, but only to the extent that inadequate military means forced the French government into make-shift policies and into dependence on Britain and the United States, which obviously had no interest in helping to secure competitive French objectives in Russia.

Wade ends his review by noting that Britain, the United States, and Japan all played greater roles in the civil war. I note this point as well and stress on several occasions the fundamental contradiction between the French government’s wish to act alone in Russia and its need to depend on its allies to act there at all. Indeed, the ignominious French occupation in southern Russia was the result of such contradictions. Nevertheless, the French government strained its own war-exhausted resources to put down the Bolsheviks and thus protect its interests in Russia. When it could not do so, it made important commitments to Poland and Czechoslovakia. These efforts were not meager from a French perspective nor even when compared to the efforts of the other Allies, even though, to be sure, French commitments took on a different focus (for instance, in Eastern Europe).

Finally, there is the implication in Wade’s review that the French or foreign intervention in the Russian civil war must be studied from a principally Russian point of view concentrating on “the major developments or final outcome” of this struggle and the interests and objectives of its participants. My work studies French government policy: its development, its shortcomings, and the reasons for its failure in Russia. These objectives seem to me to be a legitimate and not overly limited approach to the study of a complex and still controversial subject.

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