

Cold War Origins: When Did the Cold War Really Begin?

By Sheldon M. Stern

It has often been argued that the ideological and geopolitical conflict between the former Soviet Union and the United States began not in 1945, but in 1917-18. Ostensibly, Washington's congenital antipathy to the Bolshevik revolution—as evinced by an “American invasion” (or “intervention”) that targeted the new regime in Russia—planted the seeds of the cold war by generating a Soviet anger and distrust of the United States that was wholly justified. From this perspective, the US decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan in 1945 was not even the opening salvo in the cold war because US responsibility for the conflict was already manifest during the waning months of World War I.

This general argument can be found in the work of academic historians like William Appleman Williams and has been popularized in the writings of Noam Chomsky.^[1] It has also become casually accepted fare in some state high school US history standards, as I discovered while conducting a survey several years ago.^[2] A leading college-level textbook as well, published by a prominent historian in 1995, noted that before the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, President Woodrow Wilson had already “ordered the landing of American troops in the Soviet Union.” These forces “soon became involved, both directly and indirectly, in assisting the White Russians (the anti-Bolsheviks) in their fight against the new regime.” Lenin “survived these challenges, but Wilson refused to recognize his new government, nevertheless. Diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were not restored until 1933.”^[3]

But do such accounts adequately convey important aspects of US-Soviet relations from 1918 to 1933?

For one, the military intervention in Russia was not exclusively or even primarily American. Britain, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Romania, and Serbia also put troops in Russia in 1918. Indeed, Poland (12,000), Greece (24,000), Czechoslovakia (50,000), and Japan (72,000) inserted far larger forces than the United States (9,000).^[4] The Bolsheviks, it must be remembered, had made a separate peace with the Kaiser's government in March 1918 and had withdrawn from the war. A month later, a German division landed in Finland and was within striking distance of the port of Murmansk as

well as the strategic Petrograd-Murmansk railway. The Western allies shared a justifiable concern that the Germans would seize substantial arms depots and strategic port cities in Russia. Britain, in particular, put pressure on President Wilson to send US troops with the aim of halting, or at least slowing, the potentially decisive transfer of German forces to the Western front. So in July, Wilson dispatched 9,000 troops to the Archangel-Murmansk area. The president did not regard US intervention in Russia to be an act of war, but rather an effort to help the Russians extricate themselves from German domination.

To be sure, it wasn't the first US move in opposition to the new revolutionary regime in Moscow. Wilson had already sanctioned covert aid to anti-Bolshevik forces in Russia before the US troops were sent, and for the same strategic reason, to keep Germany fighting on two fronts. Because of Wilson's public support for national self-determination, these secret commitments, as historian David Foglesong concluded,

evaded public scrutiny and avoided the need for Congressional appropriations. ... Trying to avoid actions that would blatantly contradict liberal democratic ideals, Wilson and other U.S. officials did everything they felt was practicable to accelerate the demise of Bolshevism.... [Nevertheless] the small U.S. expedition and the many shipments of supplies to anti-Bolshevik forces were enough to provoke dissent at home and resentment in Soviet Russia, but not sufficient to secure the goal of a reunited democratic Russia.^[5]

Wilson also persisted in measures that could be termed anti-revolutionary. He opposed seating Soviet Russia at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and supported the plan by Herbert Hoover, director of the American Relief Administration, to send food to anti-Bolshevik forces in the Baltic region. Yet, these half-measures failed to bring down Bolshevism and only exacerbated "the fears of hostile encirclement and foreign subversion that buttressed the Soviet government for seven decades."^[6] Still, neither Soviet leaders at the time nor anyone else characterized the eleven-nation 1918 intervention as an "American invasion"—at least not yet.

Ironically, an exclusively American intervention in Russia did begin soon after the withdrawal of US troops in 1920. The Bolshevik policy of forcibly seizing food from often rebellious and starving peasants, combined with drought and pestilence, resulted in a massive famine by 1921, one that ultimately cost 5 million lives and threatened the survival of Lenin's government. Soviet authorities reluctantly permitted the internationally-renowned writer Maxim Gorky to issue a public plea for food and medicine. The United States, fortunately,

had ready for action an extraordinarily efficient volunteer relief organization, designed for just such emergencies and possessed of equipment, experienced personnel, and some funds for current operations

in Europe. The American Relief Administration [ARA], under Herbert Hoover, was world famous for its work in Belgium and twenty-two other countries. Hoover, although he took a very dim view of communism, promptly answered with an offer to bring food, clothing, and medicine to a million Russian children.[\[7\]](#)

Hoover even persuaded Congress, barely a year after the Red Scare, to appropriate \$20 million for Russian famine relief—an astonishing achievement given that the United States did not even have diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia. By 1923, the ARA had distributed more than half a million tons of food which reached over 10 million people a day. In addition, eight million Russians were inoculated against deadly diseases, and scores of hospitals were restocked with 1,300 sets of surgical instruments and tons of medicines and medical supplies which saved the lives of millions of Russians.[\[8\]](#)

There was a politico-economic edge to ARA's altruism. Hoover undoubtedly hoped that the ARA's work would persuade the Russian people to abandon communism for a democratic/capitalist system. "It was only natural," he believed, that ARA relief would, "by spreading goodwill, serve to promote US economic interests." Yet he had also recognized that Soviet officialdom was already suspicious and could easily turn obstructionist. Consequently, Hoover had instructed ARA representatives not only to avoid political activities, but to abstain from even discussing politics.[\[9\]](#)

On July 10, 1923, the Soviet Council of People's Commissars (at that time the official name of the Soviet government) honored Hoover with an elaborately hand-decorated parchment scroll in recognition of his leadership in organizing ARA famine relief. The text read, in part,

Thanks to prodigious and entirely magnanimous efforts of ARA millions of people of all ages were miraculously saved from death and entire settlements and even cities were spared from the menace of terrible catastrophe. The grand work of ARA completely accomplished the present cessation of famine. The Council of People's Commissars in the name of preserved millions and all of the working people of Soviet Russia, before the face of all the world express to the chief of the organization, Herbert Hoover, their deeply felt thankfulness and declare that the peoples of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics can never forget the aid provided by the American people . . . which is perceived as a pledge of future friendship of both nations.[\[10\]](#)



Решение Совета Народных Комиссаров

В ТЯЖЕЛЮ ГОДИНУ огромного стихийного бедствия американский народ в лице АРА откликнулся на просьбы измученного итервенцией и блокадой населения пораженных голодом областей России и Союзных Республик и принял самоотверженно ему на помощь, организовав в широком масштабе сбор и распределение продуктов и других предметов первой необходимости. Благодаря громадным, совершенно бескорыстным усилиям АРА миллионы людей всех возрастов были спасены от смерти и целые селения и даже города уцелели от грозившей им страшной катастрофы. В настоящее время, когда с прекращением голода грандиозная работа АРА пришла к концу, Совнарком от имени спасенных миллионов и всего трудящегося народа Советской России и Союзных Республик считает своим долгом перед лицом всего мира выразить в той организации, ее главе Роберту Губеру, представителю в России полковнику Хаскелю и всем ее сотрудникам свою глубочайшую благодарность и заявить, что народы населяющие Союз Советских Социалистических Республик, никогда не забудут оказанной им американским народом через АРА помощи, усматривая в ней залог будущей дружбы обоих народов.

Зав. председателем Совета Народных Комиссаров
 Управляющий делами Совета Народных Комиссаров
 Секретарь Совета Народных Комиссаров

Москва 20 июля 1921 г.



1921 СССР 1923

Why then, given this extraordinary Soviet document, would Russians (and subsequently, historians) stress the partial American role in the multi-national intervention of 1918, and discount, if not entirely forget, the massive and entirely American humanitarian effort three years later?

It was Soviet-controlled newspapers, books, and schools that first began to characterize the events of 1918-20 as an “American invasion,” while simultaneously minimizing or erasing the work of the ARA from historical memory. After Lenin’s death in 1924, the American role became a wedge issue in the power struggle that followed, a brutal affair that culminated in the totalitarian rule of Josef Stalin by 1929. As early as 1926, the official Soviet Encyclopedia was claiming that the total cost of American relief had been only \$1.4 million (it actually exceeded \$60 million—\$25 million of which came from private American contributions); that only a few hundred thousand people were saved from death by starvation and disease (rather than “millions of people of all ages”); and that the real purpose of the ARA had been to spy on and sabotage the revolution. Ultimately, these charges “would become the Communist Party [Stalinist] line on the American relief mission: the ARA had used the cover of philanthropy to engage in the business of espionage.”[\[11\]](#)

Hoover was outraged over Soviet charges of spying. It was ridiculous, he asserted, “when one considered that his relief workers had enjoyed unrestricted access to every nook and cranny of Soviet Russia.”[\[12\]](#) But this Stalinist air-brushing of history, which appealed to deep-seated Russian nativism, triumphed easily at home. Later, Stalin would claim to the world that the Americans had never provided aid to Soviet Russia. He even reportedly sent a representative to the United States in the late 1940s to try to have the historically inconvenient 1923 scroll returned to Moscow. Hoover refused.[\[13\]](#)

A telling example of how casually the Stalinist rewrite of history was tossed out occurred in 1959, when Soviet first deputy premier Frol Kozlov met with President Eisenhower during a visit to Washington. Kozlov declared that the United States “had long failed to treat the Soviet Union with due respect, [and] recalled the famine of 1921 and the shameless behavior of the ARA, which had insisted that the Soviet government pay in gold for American relief.” At a later reception, Secretary of State Christian A. Herter, who had been Hoover’s personal assistant during the ARA’s 1921-1923 relief effort in Russia, “lay in wait for the deputy premier. ‘I wanted to straighten you out on one matter,’” Herter insisted, “politely but firmly.” The food had been a gift and no payment of any kind was ever suggested, requested, or demanded. Kozlov immediately backed down: “The question is not one to be discussed. It is not disputed.”[\[14\]](#)

US participation in the multi-national 1918 intervention was outweighed by the far more consequential, incontrovertibly documented, and exclusively American famine relief operation.[\[15\]](#) Any effort to back-date the cold war to an “American

invasion” unthinkingly accepts an argument advanced during the post-Lenin power struggle, for reasons far removed from historical truth.

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[1] William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell, 1972); Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War: Essays on the Current Crisis and How We Got There* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

[2] Sheldon M. Stern, *Effective State Standards for US History: A 2003 Report Card*, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003.

[3] Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey*, Volume II (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 640.

[4] Most of the Czechs had been Russian prisoners of war and deserters from the Austro-Hungarian army and later fought against the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war. Japan’s forces, seeking to coerce territorial concessions from the Soviet government, suffered more casualties than all the other foreign troops combined.

[5] David S. Foglesong, *America’s Secret War against Bolshevism: US Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 5, 9, 187.

[6] *Ibid.*, 189-190, 199, 231-232, 298.

[7] E.M. Halliday, “Bread Upon the Waters,” *American Heritage*, August 1960, 67-68.

[8] *Ibid.*, 68.

[9] Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 638; Benjamin M. Weissman, “The After-effects of the American Relief Mission to Soviet Russia,” *Russian Review*, October 1970, 411-412.

[10] Translation provided by the Herbert C. Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa (including a correction by Mark Kramer of Harvard University).

[11] Patenaude, *Big Show in Bololand*, 729.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Halliday, "Bread Upon the Waters," 68-69; Timothy Walch, director of the Herbert C. Hoover Library, e-mail to Stern, 5 May 2008.

[14] Patenaude, *Big Show in Bololand*, 741-742.

[15] Patenaude, *Big Show in Bololand*, 501-519; see also Harold H. Fisher, *The Famine Relief Effort in Soviet Russia: The Operations of the American Relief Administration, 1919-1923* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1927), and Benjamin M. Weissman, *Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief to Soviet Russia, 1921-23* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1974).