

Review - When the United States Invaded Russia

Written by Christian Dennys

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CHRISTIAN DENNYS, AUG 1 2014

When the United States invaded Russia: Woodrow Wilson's Siberian Disaster
by: Carl J. Richard
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

This engaging short book explores a little known, or well-understood, international deployment of military forces in to Siberia at the close of World War I from 1918 to 1920. The book focuses on the policy and strategic issues surrounding the 8,500 troops from the United States who operated alongside several smaller contingents from allied countries, including Britain, France and China, and much larger deployments of the Japanese army and the Czech legion. Whilst the promotional material, and conclusion to the book, sells it as having relevance to Afghanistan and Iraq this is a missed opportunity – the analysis in the book has much better and broader applications than that.

The book focuses on the foreign policy decisions and implications of the US deployment on the progress of the Bolsheviks in eastern Russia (rather than focusing on the military aspects of the campaign and the book also does not cover a British-led deployment which included US forces in Murmansk). There are other books on related subjects which provide a broader or alternate analysis of the historical account e.g., Richard Pipes' *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*; *White Against Red: The Life of General Anton Denikin* or; *Stillborn Crusade: The Tragic Failure of Western Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920*.

This review will focus, not on the efficacy of the analysis of the invasion, but instead on its application to modern interventions. Whilst the book claims to have most relevance to the US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan it is arguable that there are other better comparators. This is particularly because both the US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq were country-wide, involved much larger US and Coalition deployments which also had broadly the same ambitions, and were backing a national government which the Coalition had helped to install. For these campaigns the primary lesson from this volume is that that interventions have unintended consequences – which is hardly revelatory.

Further the US campaign in Siberia was not, as billed, either a classic or modern insurgency. In fact the US could have been characterised by the Soviet central authority as the insurgents in this re-telling of history, but in reality they were simply supporting one side (the Kolchak government) against the Soviet government. The US decision to support one side in an ongoing civil war is not unique but the nature of the campaign and its proscribed political intentions mean that Afghanistan and Iraq are not the real targets of this book.

Instead, the cautionary tales from the analysis of the US intervention apply to countries such as Haiti, Somalia or Libya where the US military intervention is small, not meant to be directly involved in combat and is complemented by extensive financial aid to a state entity which the US is supporting. In these contexts US deployments, or indeed many other multi-national deployments mandated by the United Nations, have been comparatively smaller with more contrived and less ambitious goals. In these contexts the relevance of the analysis in Richard's book is pertinent in three ways a) political direction; b) mission creep; and c) the unintended effects of limited interventions.

Political direction

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The opening chapter outlines several theories for why Woodrow Wilson decided to despatch an expeditionary force to Vladivostok in the autumn of 1918. These include the perceived risks, threats or incentives arising from Japanese, German, Communist Russian, French, and British interests. Whilst Richard carefully sets up his argument to select one of two related drivers for the decision the primary lesson that should be derived is not the identification of a precise reason why the US invaded but the reality that in most situations there are likely to be a range of factors all pressing on an administration. Cumulatively those factors lead to a decision to intervene. There are very few Pearl Harbours and 9/11's (thankfully) which led to immediate military responses. More often there is normally a slow increase in pressures which leads to a limited deployment of military forces.

This incremental process to decision making is often inevitable, but it means two important things for the actual military deployment; firstly, political direction and objectives identified prior to a deployment may be obsolete as the deployment arrives because the deployment itself then becomes part of the context and part of the incremental pressures which weigh on an administration, its allies and opposing forces. Richard's acknowledges that this occurred in the context of the Siberian deployment but this is in many respects an inevitable part of any limited military deployment. Secondly, the changing context will inevitably require reinterpretation of direction by commanders on the ground – which is exactly what happened in the case of Major General Graves – when they deployed in to Vladivostok in 1918.

Mission creep

In a beguiling episode recounted in Richard's book, Major General Graves, the commander of US forces being despatched to Siberia, met the Secretary of War in a railroad station in Kansas City. Graves was given specific direction about the nature of the US intervention which included not interfering in internal Russian affairs – a direction which may seem incongruous with the deployment of 8,500 troops to a foreign country. Graves deployed in early September to join the 27th and 31st Infantry Regiments that had reached Vladivostok two weeks earlier. Upon his arrival it was clear that the direction he had been given was inadequate and he sought to re-interpret it in his own way.

Graves was faced with a notionally allied Japanese force which was several times larger than he had been led to believe and was pursuing a policy that was actively hostile to the US deployment. US forces had been deployed, at least notionally, to support the large Czech legion in opening up the Eastern front which became defunct with the end of WWI shortly after Graves' arrival. Finally, the fortunes of the Russian government that the US was supporting, which was ultimately led by Admiral Kolchak, against the Bolsheviks, deteriorated during the campaign. Whilst the environment changed and the political direction had become obsolete (given the end of WWI) Major General Graves sought to avoid US forces getting entangled in internal Russian affairs too significantly. Again, whilst Richard does make this point at several times during his book, we should acknowledge that this is a very common feature of military deployments. The challenge is to identify during a deployment when incremental decisions over time change the nature and objectives of a campaign which can have long term consequences.

The unintended effects of limited interventions

The exposition of the US invasion of Siberia also highlights the fact that limited interventions allow very limited control of wider events. This does not mean that large scale deployments are naturally able to address all issues (for example the use by Afghan insurgent groups of Pakistan's border region was never sufficiently addressed by either the Soviet or US-led interventions). However, small scale interventions are by their very nature more susceptible to suffering interference emanating from within the area of operations or indeed from the broader context.

Analytically the Richard's book contributes to this narrative well – indeed it is worth re-quoting in full an anecdote from the book from General William S. Graves, Commander of the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia (p.169):

There isn't a nation on earth that would not resent foreigners sending troops into their country for the purpose of putting this or that faction in charge of their Governmental machinery. The result is not only an injury to the prestige of the foreigners intervening, but is a great handicap to the faction the foreigner is trying to assist. The moment that the

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United States took sides in the Russian conflict, which was at variance with the solemn assurance made to the Russian people by President Wilson, her reputation for honesty of purpose and fair dealing was discredited

However, whilst Richard's argument is that the limited intervention had the effect of undermining the Kolchak administration against the Bolsheviks, who were the primary concern for the US President once US forces had deployed, this is not extrapolated to other contexts beyond a nod to the promotion of democratic governance in Afghanistan and Iraq. Behind this preference for supporting democracy there are assumptions made at the end of Richard's books that the elections held in both Afghanistan and Iraq meant that electoral politics, conducted in the context of an external military deployment would be more conducive to long term political stability than other models. Whilst the efficacy of externally promoted democratic processes is not entirely clear given the evidence and reality of international politics (and we must think beyond Afghanistan and Iraq to the other missions identified earlier) what is abundantly clear is that without crystal clear political direction and objectives that are sustained over time – there will be a plethora of unintended consequences.

Lessons for contemporary campaigns?

In the broader context the US campaign was set in the context of a world weary of war, seeking rapid conclusions to military operations in several areas. These overtones are not dissimilar to today as particularly Western militaries seek to re-balance themselves after 10 years of campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Smaller interventions across the world are being re-evaluated, just as the geo-political, economic and security mosaics shift again with the end of the NATO campaign in Afghanistan and the continuing fallout from the failure of the Arab Spring and the threat that two very different insurgencies present to the Iraqi and Syrian states.

Overall, Richard's book is a welcome addition to understanding this period, and a timely reminder of the requirement for clear political direction, the dangers of mission creep and the unintended consequences of the use of military force. It is a worthwhile read though its application is not to our understanding of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in the many other countries where military force is used by the international community.

About the author:

Christian Dennys has a PhD from Cranfield University, his book based on his thesis has recently been published by Routledge; *Military Intervention, Stabilisation and Peace: The search for stability*. He will be giving talks and seminars at universities in the autumn on his research in to stabilisation. He is also currently working at the UK's Stabilisation Unit.