

Unfulfilled Ambition: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919–1920

Artur Lipian

This essay will demonstrate that the Polish-Soviet War, although not well known or acknowledged in the annals of history, was a decisive conflict which profoundly affected the shape of Europe until the outbreak of World War II. Fought between two fledgling states yearning to assert themselves and expand territorially, it was also a conflict between diametrically opposed ideologies: according to Norman Davies, the Soviets were ‘atheists committed to the abolition of religion, private enterprise, social class and bourgeois sovereignty, while the Polish republic was a parliamentary democracy... run by men for whom the Church, private property, class interests, and patriotism were the pillars of society.’¹ Before this war, the Bolsheviks had maintained that the revolution must expand into Europe in order to initiate international communism. Therefore, when provided with an opportunity to cross that bridge into the West, they took it, in what was to be their largest concerted effort to export communism by force. It was only after the failure of this attempt, signified by their defeat in and retreat from Poland, that Lenin and the Soviets adopted isolationist policies and developed theories of ‘socialism in one country.’ Had they succeeded, they would have been much closer to realizing their dreams of a socialist Europe, but would have also forced the West into taking the growing menace in the East seriously, perhaps enough to provoke another massive continental war. Communism may have continued its westward advance or else been crushed in its infancy by the retaliation from Britain or France, and thus also deprived of the opportunity to consolidate and develop as it did even in Russia. Either or, history would have been dramatically different, and because few decades of the previous century held as much significance as the ones between the World Wars, the Polish-Soviet War was deeply consequential because it laid the foundation of the European political landscape for that crucial period.

After coming to power, the Bolsheviks believed that a peaceful conclusion to World War I could only come about between socialist states. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, through which Russia withdrew from the war, was considered a temporary measure to be invalidated by the pending European revolution. Concerns about the territorial concessions made in it to the Central Powers were alleviated by Leon Trotsky, who explained that “what we cede now will come back

¹ Norman Davies, *White Eagle Red Star* (London: Pimlico, 1972), 31.

to us, because Soviet Russia gives in to the imperialists only temporarily.”² But because the prospect of the treaty’s permanency was introduced with the end of the Great War, the Bolsheviks hastily declared it null and void two days after the Western armistice. The repudiation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk also meant the denial of sovereignty to the new Eastern European states: regarding these, Trotsky made the claim on October 30, 1918 that “they were no longer to be a wedge but a connecting link between Soviet Russia and the future Soviet Germany and Austro-Hungary... Here is the beginning of a federation, of a European Communist federation.”³ Communist ideology had theoretically supported national self-determination, meaning the right of a nation to determine its own destiny without foreign interference, but now it appeared only on the condition that once liberated from German imperialism, the Eastern European states would enter into an alliance with Russia. In other words, the Soviets took it for granted that the majority of people in Eastern Europe stood with them and would overthrow the capitalists and implement socialism at the slightest chance. However, their invasions of Ukraine and Lithuania, after these countries chose independence rather than communism following World War I, indicate that the right to national self-determination was to be observed by Lenin and his comrades only when it served their interests.

Because the success of socialist revolutions abroad required active participation on their part, the Bolsheviks began to take an active approach in their international policy, stating in a resolution adopted by the Party Council in February 1919 that “an invasion of Eastern European states would be the realization of the solidarity of the international proletariat.”⁴ The Red Army was often followed and supported by communist agitators, which facilitated the rapid fermentation of socialist parties wherever it made an incursion. The same month as the resolution was proclaimed, the cities of Kiev and Wilno fell to the Red forces, leading to the installation of Soviet governments in Ukraine and Lithuania.⁵ Lenin had hoped that these examples would inspire faith in all of Europe’s proletarians, and optimistically believed that the self-determination and discontent of the working class in Poland was sufficiently advanced for the

² Piotr S. Wandycz, *Soviet-Polish Relations, 1917–1921*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 102.

³ Wandycz, 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵ Davies, 21.

country to undergo its own Red October.⁶ But, as it turned out, the Soviet westward expansion by this time had reached its limit. Capturing Warsaw would require a substantial amount of concentration and effort, more so than in Kiev or Wilno, and far more than the Red Army could spare while concurrently fighting a civil war. Although many Poles were receptive to socialist ideas, especially amongst the working class, Poland was able to escape her neighbours' fates and check the Soviet advance into Eastern Europe.

While the reborn Polish state's western borders had been defined by the Entente, Poland's chief of state, Jozef Pilsudski, and Lenin knew that its eastern boundaries would be determined on the ground. Red Army detachments bearing Polish town names were part of a larger reconnaissance operation code named "Target Vistula," so it is not surprising that Pilsudski and the Warsaw government believed they had confirmation of Soviet malevolence.⁷ But neither side needed much of a pretense to move into the void created by the evacuating Germans, nor could the mutual suspicion be alleviated, largely because diplomatic relations between the two had as yet not been established.⁸ According to M. K. Dziewanowski, in 1919, the consolidation of the communist hold over the Baltic countries and the creation of the conjoined Socialist Republic of Litbel⁹ convinced Pilsudski that "nothing short of resolute physical resistance, combined with imaginative political action, would halt the Soviet westward push."¹⁰ Furthermore, despite Lenin's continued promises that "We shall never cross the line on which our troops are now stationed," by 1920 it was not difficult to discern his true intentions, as the Red Army was assembling on the western front in ever greater numbers.¹¹ Once negotiations inevitably failed, Pilsudski realized that he would have to act quickly to prevent Russia's consolidation in a theatre where Poland held the advantage only for the time being. Although notable Soviet regiments, such as its fearsome cavalry, the Konarmiya, were engaged in the various theatres of the Russian civil war, mere weeks were all the Red Army needed to concentrate its forces and attain indomitable superiority. Therefore Pilsudski decided to strike

⁶ Wandycz, 112.

⁷ Davies, 27.

⁸ Wandycz, 87.

⁹ Now roughly contiguous with modern Lithuania and Belarus.

¹⁰ M.K. Dziewanowski, *Joseph Pilsudski: A European Federalist 1918-1922* (California: Stanford University Press, 1969), 71.

¹¹ Pierro Melograni. *Lenin and the Myth of World Revolution: Ideology and Reasons of State, 1917-1920*. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1989), 98.

pre-emptively: he signed a military agreement on April 24th with Ukraine's leader, Symon Petlura, and, supplemented with his neighbour's vast human resources, launched his offensive the following day from a position of strength.¹² Either due to the superior fighting prowess of the Poles and the Ukrainians or simply because the Russians were pre-occupied and happened to be caught off-guard, by early May Pilsudski's forces occupied Kiev and had momentarily wrested Ukraine from the communists' grasp.

Despite their early successes, the Poles halted in Ukraine not having accomplished key objectives such as the destruction of the Soviet Twelfth Army, which withdrew rather than face the full brunt of Pilsudski's unexpected onslaught, or the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state. This plan had failed because much of the populace perceived Petlura simply as Pilsudski's lackey and the Polish Army as yet another in a series of foreign occupiers rather than as liberators; without the requisite support of his own people, Petlura's Ukrainian People's Republic foundered from the very beginning.¹³ The situation grew dire in the second week of May with the arrival of nearly 16,000 men comprising the Konarmiya, "ready to saddle and march to any point on the continent where the Revolution was in danger."¹⁴ After being summoned from the Caucasus to the Polish front, this formidable force, commanded by Semyon Budyonny, had spent nearly thirty days marching and covered 750 miles before reaching Kiev. A Soviet counter-offensive was put into action and on June 5th the Polish front was at last breached in several places. Norman Davies writes that "for the next thirty years, this date was to remain one of the Red Army's annual festivals: a celebration of the first victory of the Soviet military art over European arms."¹⁵ Nonetheless, the Konarmiya did not exactly find itself in a favourable position. It had no infantry backing it, no reserves, and minimal contact with other Soviet units and with central command once it found itself behind enemy lines. During a lull between June 7th and 11th, Pilsudski's army regrouped while Budyonny busied himself with raiding the city of Zhitomir, where he released 5,000 Soviet POWs and burned down a Polish hospital.¹⁶ Three days later, the Polish and Ukrainian forces began an orderly retreat west, having resigned

¹² Davies, 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

themselves to the loss of the previous month's gains. The Soviet offensive started by the Konarmiya would continue for ten weeks until the war reached its climax in front of Warsaw.

Budyonny's smash through Polish lines in Ukraine was followed in early July by the northern advance of five armies led by the young commander Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Now, rather than sitting on a position of strength, Poland faced a two pronged invasion. As the Soviets approached Warsaw it was clear that a final confrontation was imminent, and after the repeated failure of defensive tactics, Pilsudski made plans to retry an offensive strategy. His forces showed enthusiasm: as many volunteers came forward in the six weeks preceding the Battle of Warsaw as in the previous six months and the Polish Home Defense Army grew in size until it roughly equaled the two Soviet fronts in number. Pilsudski issued orders on August 6th for a complex reorganization of the army, and although the Poles were considered by western observers to be militarily incompetent, they managed to pull off this extremely difficult task.¹⁷ The counter-attack launched on August 16th defeated the Red Army and has been called "the eighteenth decisive battle of the world" by those who have truly appreciated its ramifications.¹⁸ During his advance, the overconfident Tukhachevsky stretched his army too thinly over hundreds of miles, which led to it being outflanked and trapped.¹⁹ According to Norman Davies, "of the five armies which set out for the west on July 4th, one had ceased to exist, two were decimated, and two were severely mutilated."²⁰ After ordering a general retreat, Tukhachevsky barely managed to escape with his truncated forces by marching fifteen miles a day. Those Bolsheviks unable to withdraw to Russia, if they were lucky enough to break out of the Polish encirclement, had no choice but cross the western frontier as the pathetic "avant-garde of the Revolution in Germany; they were the only part of the Red Army to reach their destination."²¹ The result of the "Miracle on the Vistula" in human terms for the Soviets was 100,000 soldiers taken prisoner or killed and a further 40,000 driven into East Prussia.²² Military failure coupled with unrealistic hopes for a Polish insurrection had spelt disaster for the international communist cause.

¹⁷ Davies, 199.

¹⁸ Wandycz, 240.

¹⁹ Davies, 208.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²² Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland Volume II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 295.

The Bolsheviks' position worsened with the reversal of policy in favour of Poland by the British, who until now had been vacillating on the issue, and the protraction of the Russian civil war with the resurgence of the White Army under Pyotr Wrangel in the Crimea. On August 19th, in a gesture symbolizing their resignation in the West, the Party Council recognized the Crimean front as the main priority for the Red Army.²³ However, intermittent conflict with Poland continued throughout the summer: after losing the Battle of Komarow on August 31st, an exasperated Lenin surrendered large areas of territory on the condition that all fighting with the Poles cease within ten days. This was only reluctantly accepted by Pilsudski, who was guided by the whims of his war-weary nation and who disdainfully called the peace "an act of cowardice."²⁴ He had been willing to fulfill his plans and continue the war, which was again taking a positive turn, and until mid-September his troops advanced toward the east, but in the end it was a pyrrhic victory. The toll in human life was enormous for a seemingly minor conflict and Poland was threatened with bankruptcy and on the verge of economic collapse. Though all of the nation's successes were of Pilsudski's initiative, by this point he had no choice but to acquiesce to domestic factors and acknowledge that his countrymen's ardor had been replaced with a loss of enthusiasm and a longing for peace.

In Russia, the armistice initiated a period of uncertainty and change because it directly implied the aborting of international communism. Policies of seclusion and introversion soon gained prominence, increasingly under the auspices of inwardly minded individuals like Joseph Stalin, for whom the Polish-Soviet War was integral in the creation of concepts such as 'permanent revolution' and 'socialism in one country.'²⁵ Even Trotsky conceded that any state, including a communist one, must mix its economy with other states, and hesitatingly admitted that "the international revolution had not come as soon as we desired it... it is difficult to say when the world revolution will come."²⁶ He had realized the hopelessness of capturing Warsaw when the Polish insurrection so counted upon failed to materialize, and perhaps then truly began to believe that the Polish Army "was on a higher level than that of Kolchak or Denikin".²⁷ Lenin

²³ Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*, 248.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, *White Eagle, Red Star*, 260.

²⁵ Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*, 275.

²⁶ Leon Trotsky, "On the End of the Wars" *Documents of Soviet History*. Compiled by Rex A. Wade (USA: Academic International Press, 1993), 146.

²⁷ Wandycz, 241.

made a similar rationalization by claiming that the Red Army had been exhausted and therefore unable to capture Warsaw, whose defenders were reinforced by the misguided patriotism sweeping through Poland.²⁸ The defeat stifled his desire to provoke a western revolution and from then on, according to R.G. Suny, “caution rather than heroic gestures characterized Lenin’s foreign policy.”²⁹ He gradually embraced the idea that socialism confined to an isolated Russia was indeed feasible and forbade the use of the Red Army in future foreign conflicts. Having gambled against Polish nationalism to achieve revolution in the West, Lenin now had to settle for a peace that cut the Soviets off from their ultimate goal.

The British diplomat Lord D’Abernon, who had been present at the Battle of Warsaw and recorded the events in his diary, compared it to the victory of Christianity over Islam at the Battle of Tours. He later published this personal account in which he asserted, “There can be little room for doubt; had the Soviet forces overcome Polish resistance... Bolshevism would have penetrated throughout Central Europe and might well have penetrated the whole continent.”³⁰ It is quite possible that if socialism took hold in Poland in the 1920’s, it would have eventually inundated Germany as well. The receptivity of the Germans to communism during those turbulent years was demonstrated by their celebratory mood as the downfall of Poland seemed near, as well as the “large scale plans made in industrialized German towns to proclaim a Soviet regime a few days after Warsaw had fallen.”³¹ But as events transpired, Poland stopped the Soviet westward advance, excluded Russia from international politics, and secured its independence from a volatile neighbour. The Polish-Soviet War was crucial in halting the progress of communism into Europe, and while it is sometimes seen simply as one of several smaller conflicts fought in Eastern Europe after World War I, it influenced Soviet development to an extent out of proportion with its seemingly minor intrinsic importance. The Bolsheviks lost their biggest opportunity to provoke a European revolution and, as cogently put by Norman Davis, “the end of the Polish War was the specific occasion on which Soviet Russia’s western frontier was firmly closed. It was the specific event which perpetuated her isolation from

²⁸ Y. Ambartsumov *How Socialism Began* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 31.

²⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny *The Soviet Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121.

³⁰ Davies *White Eagle, Red Star*, 265.

³¹ Dziewanowski, 305.

Germany and the rest of Europe.”³² Although, admittedly, it would have made a greater impact and received wider recognition if history unfolded differently in the subsequent decades, Pilsudski’s victory had, for the time being at least, saved Poland and arguably all of Europe from the spectre of communism.

³² Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*, 273.

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