H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences


**Carl J. Richard.** *When the United States Invaded Russia: Woodrow Wilson's Siberian Disaster.* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012. xiii + 195 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4422-1989-2.

**Reviewed by** Tony Demchak

**Published on** H-War (October, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The American intervention in Siberia after the October Revolution of 1917 is among the most poorly understood aspects of American involvement during World War I. A significant number of American soldiers, approximately ten thousand, were sent in July 1918 to try to stiffen the resolve of the Whites under Admiral Alexander Kolchak and the Czech Legion and to topple the Bolshevik regime and therefore bring Russia back into World War I, which it singularly failed to do. As Carl J. Richard says in his introduction, "Indeed, Allied support for the corrupt, autocratic, and oppressive regime of Alexander Kolchak backfired completely, causing many Russians who were not previously Bolshevik to rally around the red banner" (p. xi). Overall, Richard argues that the failed intervention in Siberia is a useful case study in American foreign policy. He draws comparisons to Vietnam and underscores the importance of gaining acceptance by natives of any region in which one wishes to conduct counterinsurgencies. He goes so far as to say that interventions, as a whole, are "generally inadvisable" (p. xi).

The meat of Richard's book is contained in two chapters. The second chapter focuses on American historians' theories delineating why President Woodrow Wilson chose to intervene in Siberia. These six theories range from insisting that German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war (POWs) were helping the Bolsheviks secure Siberia (and thus hasten their exit from World War I) to maintaining that the British and French pressured the United States to simply overthrow the Bolshevik regime and reestablish the eastern front. Richard discounts all but the last, examining documentary evidence to show why the other five theories are entirely wrong or simply incomplete. These two chapters are similar as they systematically analyze alternatives to two pressing questions--why the Americans intervened against the Soviets and why no plan was developed after World War I to address Russia. The fourth chapter supplements the second by examining why the Americans remained in Siberia after the November 1918 armistice with Germany.

The third and sixth chapters detail the actual experiences of General William S. Graves, the American commander of the troops in Siberia, both before and after the 1918 armistice. The unfortunate Graves found himself faced with stiff and consistent resistance from not only Bolsheviks, but also from the Czech Legion (which was rapidly disintegrating and bothered by the minimal Allied reinforcement); Admiral Kolchak (who was angry that Graves would not openly support his regime, which often committed atrocities against suspected Bolsheviks); the British and the French (for the same reason); the State Department (which considered Graves an incompetent who had no real value); and the Japanese (who had their own agenda in Siberia).

Although Richard includes no Russian-language sources, the research he does is excellent and entirely appropriate for his subject matter. That does not mean his book is without flaws. The Russian Civil War, as a whole, is completely absent from his book. The bigger picture is much more complex than simply Kolchak against a Russian uprising. Kolchak's primary concern was not Siberian partisans--it was the Red Army. This lack of context is damaging to his larger argument. It is unclear what connection or commonalities, if any, the American experience in Siberia has with Vietnam or any similar counterinsurgency. Graves's actual job--which Richard admits--was "to help guard the Suchan coal mines" (p. 60). It is only in attempting to guard those mines that he encountered partisans at all.

Richard never clearly spells out what lessons readers are to draw about counterinsurgency from this book, apart from trying to avoid counterinsurgencies. Only at the very end does he offer some sort of indication of his position: "Furthermore, in the last decade, the United States seems to have finally learned at least part of the historical lesson offered by events in Russia and Vietnam--not the part about avoiding interventions altogether, but the part about at least attempting to form governments in the nation in question that enjoy some popular support" (p. 180). There are two problems with this statement. First, he never conclusively proves that interventions ought to be avoided; he simply states his point once in the introduction and once in the conclusion. It is a matter of his personal political opinion, not an argument that he proves. Second, how would the United States have formed a government with popular support in Russia? The Red Army would certainly have objected, and so would have Kolchak. Again, treating the Siberian intervention like an isolated counterinsurgency instead of part of a greater civil war leads to frankly ridiculous conclusions.

In conclusion, Richard's book is a very well-written, narrowly focused treatise that only fails when it tries to reach beyond that. If I were going to assign this book to students, I would strongly encourage them to avoid the introduction and conclusion; they clearly belong in a different book.

10,000

,

ing

,

in

why 

have theorized that 

ing

ing 

E

F

Both of t

that

was so minimal

,

,

,

who

is 

There is a

here

is

is

that 

in common 

himself 

, exactly,

:

f

has 

d

has 

d

which

has 

n

"

"

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

**Citation:** Tony Demchak. Review of Richard, Carl J. *When the United States Invaded Russia: Woodrow Wilson's Siberian Disaster.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39180