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Ziven K. Chinburg

Illinois Wesleyan University, zchinbur@iwu.edu

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Abstract

This paper is principally concerned with explaining the causes, course, and outcome of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1921. It provides a background of the reasoning behind both camps' geo-political motivations leading up to the conflict. Although the background of the conflict is largely explored by this paper, some basic understanding of the situation is assumed. The paper goes on to describe the major events of the conflict and its results, with a strong emphasis on the Battle of Warsaw. Finally, the paper provides a narrative as to how the conflict influenced the foreign policies of both nations during the interwar era.

Keywords

Polish-Soviet War, Poland, Soviet Union, Pilsudski, Lenin, Ukraine

In 1920, Eastern Europe was in a state of disarray. The three great powers that had controlled and dominated Poland since the Third Partition in 1795 had fallen. Imperial Russia officially collapsed in October 1917, though it had lost control of Poland to the Germans over a year earlier. With the end of World War One came the end of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. This left a power vacuum of massive proportions. Despite French and British attempts at diplomatic control and manipulation,¹ Eastern Europe descended into a period of warfare and haphazard nation-building. From this turbulent situation came two new nations: Poland and the Soviet Union. The conflict between these two powers was to have far reaching implications for not just the countries involved and the surrounding area, but also the whole of Europe.

To understand the conflict between these two nascent powers, one must understand the background of the situation. When German hegemony over Eastern Europe ended, the Germans loosened their grip only grudgingly. Even after the official armistice of November 11th, 1918, German troops continued to have a presence in many of the countries that they had occupied during the war. Finland and the Baltic states had active German paramilitary forces in them, supporting anti-communist forces.² In addition to conflicts in formerly controlled areas, Germany faced a revolution brewing at home and withdrew as a functioning power in Eastern Europe shortly after the end of World War One.³

Defeated, but not conquered, Russia was in an interesting position come the end of World War One. Once the Bolsheviks attained a basic, de facto control in what had been Imperial Russia, they moved to make peace with Germany. Lenin did not want to inherit a losing international war; he wanted to secure his own domain first and foremost. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Soviet Union and Germany was signed in February 1918, before World War One ended, and left Eastern Europe to the machinations of the Germans.⁴ Suppressing the White movement at home was a higher priority for Lenin than fighting a revolutionary war against the Central Powers. It is important to note that, despite the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, Lenin was never really an isolationist⁵ – designs on a world revolution came with his idealist, revolutionary background. The idea of permanent Marxist revolution dated to 1850 and was strongly

¹ Thomas Fiddick, *Russia's Retreat from Poland, 1920: From Permanent Revolution to Peaceful Coexistence* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990), 4.

² Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-20 and 'the Miracle on the Vistula'* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 24.

³ Davies, 24-24.

⁴ Fiddick, 3.

⁵ Davies, 68.

supported by Trotsky.⁶ The fundamental Soviet position was that the revolution was an inevitability of history and that all nations would come under its banner eventually. The date when Lenin turned his eyes abroad, however, came sooner than expected.

Onto this stage, the Soviets started to expand. Starting in late 1918, the Soviets attempted to recapture territories formerly held by Imperial Russia in the Baltic, the Caucasus, and the Ukraine.⁷ The westward prong of this wave of Soviet expansionism was the result of two motivations. It is important to note that the Soviets had not, at this time, stamped out the Whites. To some in Soviet leadership, this push westwards was simply part of the Civil War, reclaiming rightful territory. To others, it was part of an international game with the intervention-oriented West.⁸ The two lines of Soviet thinking revolved around somewhat competing narratives: one being the recapture of territory which was previously controlled by the Russian Empire, the destruction of the White Movement, and the strengthening of the economy.⁹ The other narrative emphasized the importance of world revolution.

The position supporting world revolution was candidly articulated by General Budyonny at the Second Comintern Congress -- which convened shortly before the Battle of Warsaw. In a statement to the Congress, he said, "We will be happy on the day when, together with the proletariat of the West, we will enter into a decisive battle with the world bourgeoisie, when our army will receive its operational orders from Red Paris, Berlin, or London."¹⁰ During the early days of the Soviet state, there was an influential belief that Marxist ideology should be spread throughout the world and capitalism everywhere should be eradicated. This was the doctrine of permanent revolution.¹¹ The Soviets were hungry at the notion of expansion. Further enticing the Soviets to act at this time was the fact that Germany and Hungary experienced failed communist revolutions in the aftermath of World War One.¹² In the Soviet mindset, there were proletarians willing and wanting to be liberated in Germany and Hungary. Thomas Fiddick writes that Lenin was, "highly optimistic about the possibilities of exporting revolution into Germany during the spring of 1920."¹³ Marx did predict that the

⁶ Fiddick, 75.

⁷ Adam Zamoyski, *Warsaw 1920: Lenin's Failed Conquest of Europe* (London: Harper Press, 2008), 7.

⁸ Fiddick, 5.

⁹ Fiddick, 21.

¹⁰ Fiddick, 290.

¹¹ Fiddick, 75.

¹² Fiddick, 6.

¹³ Fiddick, 30.

Revolution would come in an industrialized nation, after all.¹⁴ The only question was how to link up with these revolutions. Poland stood in the way and for that, it needed to be crushed. The tide of world revolution was to move on to an ostensibly ripe Germany.

As the successor state to the Russian Empire, the Soviets felt, to some degree, to have claim to the former territory of the Empire. This included Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, the Ukraine, and Moldova. With the exception of Finland, Soviet foreign policy towards these nations was directly predatory at this time. From the creation of the Soviet Union to the collapse of it, these nations were seen as part of an ironic imperial destiny. To the Soviets, it was natural that these people and their territory be a part of the “motherland.” Their right to national determination was not recognized as being legitimate. Poland, being formerly part of the Russian Empire, was not immune to these thoughts.

The Poles, however, wanted no part of these grandiose Soviet designs and pronouncements of coming utopia. They saw national enemies, not class brothers amongst the Soviets. The Poles, their foreign policy largely dictated by Chief of State Pilsudski, wanted to create a buffer between themselves and Soviet power. Germany and Russia, for the last 125 years, had occupied Poland and denied its people their nationhood. As such, it is understandable that the primary concern of Polish foreign policy would be to secure a strong defensive position, so as to avoid any future Partitions. Pilsudski wanted to create a confederation of states in Eastern Europe ranging from Finland to the Black Sea, with Poland leading. This federation would serve as a buffer to the expansionist Soviets – defeated Germany was less of a concern. Pilsudski, in effect, wanted to recreate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This coalition would be guided by Poland, but still be a federal state.¹⁵ A key component of this plan was Ukraine. Western Ukraine had a large number of ethnic Poles living in it and was historically part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Also, detaching the Ukraine from the Soviet Union would deal the Soviets a heavy loss of population and territory – their “breadbasket” would be cut out.

It was for these reasons that Polish forces advanced into independent Ukraine in late 1918.¹⁶ The Ukrainian independence/nationalist movement was standing in the way of Pilsudski’s grand rebirth of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Pilsudski and the Poles were more than willing to take their chunk of western Ukraine by force. The war went well for Poland. Though the

¹⁴ Zamoyski, 7.

¹⁵ Davies, 30.

¹⁶ Davies, 58.

Poles did not occupy the whole of the Ukraine, they did take the western section of it. The Soviets pounced on the eastern half of Ukraine along a similar timeframe. By February 1919, the independence of Ukraine was over and war was inevitable between the Soviets and Poles.

Polish forces initially achieved stunning success. When they advanced on the Red Army in the summer of 1920, Soviet resistance was light. The Red Army was still dealing with White forces in Crimea and had notable desertion problems.¹⁷ The Red Army was pushed back beyond Kiev. In classic Russian fashion, they traded space for time and allowed the invaders to become overextended. Kiev was as far as the Polish invasion got. Nationalist fervor increased¹⁸ and the Red Army managed to stabilize and reorganize itself. One million A.W.O.L. soldiers returned,¹⁹ in addition to a large number of formerly White officers.²⁰ Because of this, the tide turned and the Poles were chased back beyond the prewar borders.

Advancing rapidly, Soviet forces made straight for the Polish capital of Warsaw. While a number of Soviet forces under Stalin were preoccupied with taking Lviv,²¹ the main thrust of the Soviet counteroffensive centered on a two-pronged pincer to the north and south of Warsaw. In this, Marshal Pilsudski saw an opportunity. He attacked unexpectedly on the southern front with rejuvenated forces. Nationalism and open Western support bolstered Polish morale. Around Nasielsk, General Sikorski broke the back of the Soviet northern army; the southern one was dispersed shortly after.²² Not even Marshal Budyonny's celebrated 1st Cavalry could stem the tide; it was defeated in the Battle of Komarow.²³ Soviet forces were in serious disarray after the battle, their communication had broken down and they were routing. The Poles had won a great victory. Considering how on-their-heels the Poles had been and how complete a victory it was, the battle was christened the "Miracle at the Vistula."

There are several reasons for the Polish victory. The Poles had excellent cryptography, which allowed them to decode Soviet communications.²⁴ This information helped in Polish planning. Though the level of their contribution to the Polish victory are disputed, French military advisors, along with other

¹⁷ Fiddick, 23.

¹⁸ Fiddick, 125.

¹⁹ Fiddick, 82.

²⁰ Józef Piłsudski and M.N. Tuchachevskii. *Year 1920 and Its Climax: Battle of Warsaw during the Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920* (London: Piłsudski Institute of London, 1972), 137.

²¹ Zamoyski, 81.

²² Fiddick, 17.

²³ Zamoyski, 123.

²⁴ Zamoyski, 28.

Western troops helped the Polish cause.²⁵ Also contributing to the Polish victory was simple nationalism. It was clear that if the Red Army took Warsaw, the entire Polish state would be in jeopardy of being overrun. Pilsudski successfully gathered his forces around the most patriotic narrative imaginable, the last stand around one's capital. The Red Army, by contrast, was extended beyond its normal area of operations and did not enjoy the same kind of localized numerical superiority that it had become accustomed to. Additionally, the Soviet commanders Tukhachevsky and Budyonny did not cooperate or coordinate their commands.²⁶ A lack of mutual support between the Soviet forces hampered them to a severe degree.

The Polish-Soviet War defined the borders and relationships between the countries of Eastern Europe for a generation. The failure of the Soviets to spread their revolution beyond the Russian-speaking world led to roughly twenty years of tempered internationalism. Lenin began to focus his efforts on the New Economic Policy. The Soviets were quiet, preferring to develop their economy than to expand abroad. Victorious Poland, on the other hand, did not take all of the territory that it could have during the negotiations for the Peace of Riga. For Poland, the decision after the great victory of Warsaw to create a state out of mostly ethnic lines was monumental. Though Pilsudski wanted to craft a unitary, multicultural state, he was forced to temper his demands due to internal politics and the reality that he could not afford to fight a prolonged war against the Soviets. He did get a significantly larger area than what the Western Allies had defined as being Polish initially following World War One, but not enough to make his unitary state happen.²⁷ Poland was not to develop a second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Poland allowed itself to become a small nation-state; the Soviets spent the next twenty years in relative isolation. Had Poland taken more territory from the Soviets, it may not have fallen to the Nazis in 1939; had Poland fallen to the Soviets in 1920, the history of not only Europe, but the world, would have been profoundly different.

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²⁵ Zamoyski, 18.

²⁶ Fiddick, 28.

²⁷ Fiddick, 268.

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