

Great Britain and Russia's Civil War: "The Necessity for a Definite and Coherent Policy"

Howard Fuller

University of Wolverhampton

Of all the Allied Powers at the close of the First World War, Great Britain had the most interests at stake in the outcome of the Russian Civil War. No one bordered the former Russian Empire, so all talk of intervention began and ended with how Allied and Russian White forces might be supplied by seas controlled primarily by the Royal Navy. Any economic pressure upon the Bolshevik regime in the form of naval blockade was also contingent upon British policy. 'Success', wrote Richard H. Ullman, in his definitive study *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917–21: Britain and the Russian Civil War, November 1918–February 1920* (1968), 'was almost invariably assumed to comprise the destruction and total displacement of the Soviet regime'¹. But if the Russian Revolution was to be somehow overturned by Allied support of the Whites, if not outright military and naval intervention against the Reds, then the role of British sea power was crucial. Thus, when Ullman conclude that the final lunge for Petrograd by White forces under General Nikolai Yudenich in October 1919 failed due to 'superior Soviet forces' that, thanks to Trotsky's personal intervention, finally managed to rally at the gates of the city and push back Yudenich in a decisive counter-offensive, he ignored the pivotal role of British naval forces in the region under the command of Rear- Admiral Walter Cowan. After all, even if Petrograd had been taken by White forces, it could not have been held if the Russian fortress island and naval base of Kronstadt, commanding the entrance to the Neva in the Gulf of Finland, remained in Bolshevik hands. Yudenich's largely spent force would have quickly run out of supplies and food, not to mention the fate of the citizens in the occupied capital. No one could seriously entertain the thought of capturing Kronstadt without first clearing the minefields surrounding it — and these were protected in turn by the formidable 12-inch guns of Fort Krasnaya Gorka ('Red Hill') on the southern shore. The Red Fleet, including two battleships, anchored in Kronstadt, remained a formidable threat.

So the causal chain needed for a White victory in the Russian Civil War, at least on the Northern and Baltic fronts, arguably began with the need to overcome a Russian coastal fort, and only the Royal Navy possessed the firepower to do it. The British cabinet first made the decision to dispatch a light naval force of cruisers, destroyers, and minesweepers to the Baltic Provinces in November 1918, under the command of Rear-Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair. 'The general object is to show the British flag and support British policy in the Baltic', the Admiralty informed him. 'A subsidiary object may be supply of arms to Estonia'. But he was not to attack Kronstadt nor seek and destroy any Bolshevik warships².

When he was relieved in December by Cowan, British interests in the region were defined as follows: 'To prevent the destruction of the Estonian and Livonian provinces by external aggression; supporting them by sea but strictly avoiding "military operations"'. Soviet men-of-war, however, were to be assumed operating 'with hostile intent and should be treated accordingly'³. Cowan's 6th Light Cruiser

¹ R. H. Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917–21: Britain and the Russian Civil War, November 1918–February 1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968) p. 349.

² See W. A. Fletcher, 'The British Navy in the Baltic, 1918–1920: Its Contribution to the Independence of the Baltic Nations', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 7(2) (1976) pp. 134–44.

³ (Telegram) 'Instructions to Admiral Cowan', 29 November 1918, TNA/ADM 116-1864.

squadron could only accomplish so much, and whenever his ships strayed close to Kronstadt, they were soon under distant but deadly fire from Krasnaya Gorka, warding them away.

British frustration on the scene and in Whitehall mounted throughout the remaining winter and early spring of 1919. 'Protecting the Baltic States' was one thing, but this did not equate to a defeat of Bolshevism at its source. This meant that the conflict could spiral on indefinitely, sapping British resources when Lloyd George's government was beset with shortages and strikes, for example. It also gave the strategic initiative to the Soviets, who might lunge from behind their fortified naval base at any time and overwhelm the British fleet piecemeal. A memo by the C-in-C of the Atlantic Fleet predicted that German and Soviet naval forces might even combine against Allied warships if the Paris peace talks faltered⁴. Earlier 'Notes on Bombarding Operations' recommended a long-range barrage of Krasnaya Gorka by six heavy monitors backed by four battleships and three aircraft carriers, followed by special monitors armed with enormous 18-inch caliber guns to bombard Kronstadt harbor itself from nearly 20 miles away.

However, the Board of Admiralty refused to sanction this sort of risky, all-out assault and the War Cabinet prohibited overt strikes⁵. This angered the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle, who wrote of the 'necessity for the formation of a policy with respect to the Baltic Provinces'. Already a newly completed, expensive light cruiser (HMS Cassandra) had struck a mine and sank off the coast of Estonia. 'If operations take place in May in the Gulf of Petrograd', he warned,

we must be prepared for losses, both of ships and men. These losses would be incurred against an enemy with whom we are not even formally at war ... in pursuit of no definite British interest, and in defence of a cause which is not even being supported by the resources of the State, other than the Naval forces⁶.

By May 1919, although British forces were still engaged in a fighting withdrawal from Archangel and Murmansk in the far north, on the White Sea, the Whites were advancing under Supreme Leader Admiral Alexander Kolchak in the east, General Anton Denikin in the south, and Yudenich in the northwest, off the Baltic. Now the Admiralty informed Cowan that the Cabinet had authorized reinforcements in the form of submarines and coastal motor torpedo boats ('CMBs'). Yet his fleet was only to 'menace' the Bolshevik forces based in Kronstadt, engage them if they sortied out to bombard the Estonian coastline, and protect Reval as a forward base. By 4 July it was stressed it was 'not (repeat not) intended to attempt the destruction of the fortress of Kronstadt, but only of enemy naval forces', yet two days later the Admiralty cleared Cowan for carrying out coastal bombardments of his own (against Krasnaya Gorka), 'as long as ships can operate in waters which are believed free of mines'⁷. This was enough for Cowan, who established an airfield on the Finnish coast and began bombing raids on Kronstadt. On 18 August, as the defenders were sufficiently distracted in an anti-aircraft posture, he unleashed a well-timed, coordinated strike right into Kronstadt harbour with seven fast CMBs. These managed to damage one Soviet battleship with a torpedo hit, while only four

⁴ 11 October 1919 memo by Admiral Sir Charles Madden, with Admiralty response minutes dated 16 October and formal reply dated 30 October; TNA/ADM 137-1667.

⁵ 8 March 1919, 'Notes on Bombarding Operations — Kronstadt', TNA/ADM 137-1678.

⁶ 10 March 1919, Fremantle memo, *op. cit.*, ADM 116-1864.

⁷ *Ibid*, dated 12 May 1919.

managed to escape under a hail of Russian fire. The Bolsheviks retaliated two weeks later when one of their submarines sank a British destroyer, and three days after this a Russian mine claimed another, HMS Verulam. But the Kronstadt raid succeeded in giving the British and their allies a sense of strategic initiative.

Lenin now contemplated not only the probable loss of Petrograd, even if the Red Army reorganizing under Trotsky could save Moscow, but the need for disarming the stated *raison d'être* of British intervention by assuring the Baltic States recognition of their independence from Russia (something which the Whites refused to do.)⁸ When Estonian leaders asked London to confirm its policy on the Baltic Question, Lord Curzon, the Acting Foreign Secretary, informed them on 25 September 1919 that they were indeed free to choose for themselves whatever they wished, including negotiating a peace with Soviet Russia⁹.

By then, Lloyd George had also openly questioned the expediency of reuniting Russia under the old regime — since this was tantamount to rebuilding the Russian Empire. At the Lord Mayor's Banquet at the Guildhall, on 8 November, the Prime Minister declared that no more aid was to be sent to the Whites, thus sealing their fate, and on the 17th he paraphrased to the House of Commons his 19th-century predecessor Benjamin Disraeli, 'who regarded a great, gigantic, colossal, growing Russia rolling onwards like a glacier towards Persia and the borders of Afghanistan and India as the greatest menace the British Empire could be confronted with'¹⁰. Hence, while the 'freedom of the Baltic States' (as well as Finland, the Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Belarus, and Crimea¹¹) was the stated aim of British foreign policy, it was ultimately in Britain's best interests better to have a divided Russia, whether Red or White — and at the height of the Civil War only Lenin proved willing to accept these stark terms.

Yudenich's subsequent campaign to capture Petrograd in October 1919, ostensibly with Estonian and British military and naval support, was therefore a tragic farce. The Admiralty despatched only one 15-inch gunned monitor, HMS Erebus, to Cowan. She arrived too late to support the Estonian First Division, which predictably advanced beyond the range of Cowan's cruisers only to be mauled by Krasnaya Gorka's landward defenses manned by a full garrison¹². The long-awaited, classic duel between the heavy British warship and Russian fort then proved anticlimactic. Krasnaya Gorka's

⁸ See, for example, Richard K. Debo, *Survival and Consolidation: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1918–1921* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1992) pp. 101–02.

⁹ See K. Brüggemann, 'Defending National Sovereignty Against Two Russias: Estonia in the Russian Civil War 1918–1920', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34(1) (2003) pp. 22–51.

¹⁰ Hansard, 17 November 1919, 'Government Policy', 723. A 16 July 1918 memo by Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour to Lloyd George had already made his judgment plain: 'The fact is that an autocratic system is not only repulsive to Englishmen of all shades of opinion, but that the re-establishment of the Russian autocracy would, so far as I can judge, be a misfortune for the British Empire [A reunited Russia] would inevitably be a danger to her neighbours; and to none of her neighbours so much as ourselves ... a restored Czarism would be more dangerous to British interests than the Czarism which has just vanished; for it would almost certainly be dependent upon Germany ...', D. L. George, *War Memoirs*, 6 vols (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson 1936) 2, p. 3190.

¹¹ Aims identified by Sir Halford Mackinder, as British High Commissioner to Russia in January 1920; see B. W. Blouet, 'Sir Halford Mackinder as British High Commissioner to South Russia, 1919–1920', *The Geographical Journal* 142(2) (1976) pp. 228–36.

¹² For this the Estonian First Division, some 2,000-strong, lost 'nearly one third of their forces', according to Cowan; copy of Cowan's parting report as C-in-C of the Baltic fleet, dated 9 February 1920, in Cowan Papers, Caird Library, National Maritime Museum (Greenwich), COW/15-16.

gunnery was much more accurate than the British expected, aided by an observation balloon, obliging the Erebus to shift positions 'dangerously at the edge of the minefield'. British aerial spotters, forced into low cloud cover by Russian anti-aircraft fire, meanwhile could not aid the monitor's accuracy at long range¹³. Cowan's fleet withdrew out of range, along with the bloodied Estonians, exposing Yudenich's left flank. Soon, the entire White offensive was rolled back by avenging Reds and the 'Northwestern Army' disintegrated; its survivors interred in Estonia at Moscow's request.

Cowan then set to work writing the history as one of Russian incompetence on the battlefield and stubbornness politically to accept the Baltic States as permanent buffer zones. '[General Yudenich] and all his Commanders,' he complained to the Admiralty,

have relied on the Tanks with their British Personnel achieving the impossible on every sector of the front, in the same spirit that they have often inferred that my Force of Light Cruisers and Destroyers should steam through the Mines, past the Forts at point blank range, and up to Kronstadt and its Forts, then to capture but not injure the Warships there and hoist the Russian Flag for them¹⁴.

Yudenich in turn protested that he was never made aware of Cowan and the Estonian's intentions against Krasnaya Gorka — and compelling Kronstadt to surrender. Was it not agreed that his forces were 'liberating Russia from oppressors' and to secure a communist-free government 'under which Russia could rapidly revive'? Cowan could only affirm that the Estonian Army, with the backing of the Royal Navy, had been 'acting in the interests of your cause, and the cause of Humanity, with an aim common to yours; namely the liberation of Petrograd and Kronstadt and the surrounding country from Bolshevic [sic] rule'.¹⁵

But defeating a common enemy was clearly not the same thing as being allies. The British Cabinet had by then already admitted 'it could not be said that the Navy had been used to its fullest extent to assist in the advance of General Yudenich'¹⁶. As for the Soviets, this half-hearted, one-handed, double-faced show of force on the part of the British 'imperialists' in the Russian Civil War was a major propaganda coup. As Trotsky later reported to the Central Executive Committee in Moscow, 'They thought our sailors would not stand up to a bombardment by 15-inch guns, but our sailors held firm, and Krasnaya Gorka and Kronstadt are now more firmly in our hands than ever'. British firepower was no match for the valor of the Russian proletariat¹⁷. Stalin capitalized on this defiance of Allied sea power even more a generation later, when *The Unforgettable Year 1919*, an expensive biopic directed by Mikheil

¹³ See V. F. Tkachenko, *Fort Krasnaya Gorka/'Red Hill'* (Ostrov 2016) pp. 73–74.

¹⁴ 31 October 1919, Cowan to Admiralty, TNA/ADM 137-1667.

¹⁵ Undated, presumably 11–12 November and 12 November 1919, Cowan to Yudenich; in TNA/ADM 137-1668.

¹⁶ 4 November 1919, Cabinet Minutes, from M. Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume IV: Part 2 July 1919–March 1921* (London: Heinemann 1977) pp. 945–48.

¹⁷ 7 November 1919, 'Report to the All-Russia Central Executive Committee', from *The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky, Volume 2: '1919: How the Revolution Armed'*; see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/military-pdf/Military-Writings-Trotsky-v2.pdf>. See also M. McCauley (ed.), *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State 1917–1921: Documents* (London: Cox & Wyman 1975) p. 157.

Chiaureli in 1951, depicted him personally directing the return-fire of stalwart Russian gunners of Krasnaya Gorka against a vast British armada¹⁸.

After one hundred years, British naval intervention in the Baltic in 1919 remains a complicated area of study, with many actors in play with overlapping, competing agendas — which themselves shifted almost on a weekly basis in response to events as they unfolded, from one end of Russia to another. The stock historical narrative from a British perspective is that of altruistic national liberation thanks to naval supremacy, as epitomized by Geoffrey Bennett's *Cowan's War*, originally published during the height of the Cold War, in 1961, and reprinted in today's climate of anti-Putin hysteria as *Freeing the Baltic 1918–1920* (Pen & Sword, 2017).

But a close reading of the historical record fails to sustain this: The Baltic States all but freed themselves; Cowan was not able to sink the Red Fleet nor capture Krasnaya Gorka, the 'key' to Kronstadt, which also unlocked the gates to Petrograd. Both the British rear-admiral and Admiralty attempted to blame the War Cabinet — British politicians attempting to have their Russian cake and eat it too. 'Supposing a French Army landed at Dover to help us subjugate Ireland?', mused former First Sea Lord 'Jackie' Fisher. 'I guess we should all forget whether we were Tories or Carsons or Smillies, and unite to get this French army out of our Archangel'¹⁹. Yet senior naval professionals also routinely acquiesced in the pretension of sea power's 'moral effect'. As dangerous and perhaps irresponsible as exposing light cruisers and destroyers was in the face of superior Russian naval units and coastal defenses, the stated belief was that local allies would be encouraged enough by the sheer sight of a British man of war to help tip the scales in the contest over Russian hearts and minds.

Likewise, the sight of the Union Jack at their doorstep should terrify the cowardly Bolsheviks. Cowan was buoyant enough to assert on 21 October 1919 that 'a few shots now from a Long Range Monitor would, I think, end the matter' against Krasnaya Gorka. He had also fully expected his enemy to destroy his own warships, lay down his arms, and walk away from his capital city on the threat of naval blockade and starvation by British forces. More than that, Cowan thought this result 'infinitely preferable than to ultimately allow the [White] Russians to regain possession of them ...'²⁰. It was almost as if the entire Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaign had never happened four years before. And while the Edwardian British may have been successful in playing their own allies off against one another, in the name of geopolitical interests, in the free-for-all, mapchanging aftermath of the First World War, they failed to either 'strangle Bolshevism in its cradle' or win the hearts and minds of their former, fellow imperial Entente partner. "Betrayal" was now the word most often associated with Allied intervention whenever the subject came to be discussed in memoirs or the émigré press', notes one historian. But *The Times* of 10 November 1919 was blunter, asking,

Can this practice of blowing hot and cold, not merely alternately, but simultaneously, have any other effect than to cause the British name to stink in the nostrils of all patriotic Russians, and to neutralize in

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dI4PkV6RpX8>. Stalin was ordered by Lenin to Petrograd to help assist the defense of the city against Yudenich's forces in May 1919, but his chief contribution was in recapturing Krasnaya Gorka after most of its garrison mutinied on 13 June; see I. Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983) p. 198.

¹⁹ Lord Fisher, *Memories* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1919) p. 47.

²⁰ 21 and 7 October 1919, Cowan to Admiralty, TNA/137-1667.

advance the sacrifices in money and material which the Government, on behalf of the country, have made?²¹

²¹ A. Shmelev, 'The Allies in Russia, 1917–20: Intervention as Seen by the Whites', *Revolutionary Russia* 16(1) (2003) pp. 87–107; *The Times*, 10 November 1919.