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The Bolsheviks and Britain during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–24 **by Evgeny Sergeev (review)**

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*The Bolsheviks and Britain during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–24* by Evgeny Sergeev (review)

Murray Frame

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Sergeev, Evgeny. *The Bolsheviks and Britain during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917–24*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, New York and Dublin, 2022. xxi + 270 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Select chronology. Notes. Select bibliography. Index. £85.00.

THIS interesting book by Evgeny Sergeev — Chief Research Fellow at the Institute of General History, Russian Academy of Sciences, and Professor of International and British History at the Russian State University for the Humanities — explores a brief but turbulent period in British-Russian relations, 1917–24, charting the transformation from wartime cooperation to open hostility and economic blockade, followed by gradual resumption of trade and diplomatic recognition of the USSR by Britain. Compared to many earlier studies of the topic, the book is notable for the author's extensive use of archives in both Russia and Britain, including previously inaccessible material such as recently declassified intelligence reports. Sergeev therefore adds much detail to a relatively familiar story, and in a manner which carefully balances primary material and perspectives from both sides of the relationship.

The questions which Sergeev sets out to answer are clearly stated at the beginning: 'How did the revolutionary events of 1917 affect the military alliance between Petrograd and London? What were the origins of a dramatic transition from friendly cooperation to outright animosity in the later years? Why did the British armed intervention fail, and what are the reasons for the recognition of the Bolshevik dictatorship by the UK government?' (p. 2). Although the main conclusions will not surprise historians of the period — the revolution sundered the military alliance; the outright animosity stemmed from 'competing geopolitical interests' (p. 167); Britain formally recognized the USSR because there was growing appetite for stable relations and resumption of trade — they are grounded in considerable detail, and readers will admire the author's encyclopaedic knowledge of this complex and multi-layered subject.

Sergeev succeeds in conveying a tangible sense of the international uncertainties of the period and how they divided officials in both London

and Petrograd/Moscow. On the British side, for example, George Lansbury, Alfred Milner and Lloyd-George — whose assistants, we learn, nicknamed him the ‘Kerensky of the West’ (p. 12) — favoured early diplomatic recognition of Bolshevik Russia, but most government officials did not, concerned that the Bolsheviks would sign a separate peace with the Central Powers and then seek to undermine the British empire. During 1917–18, this question dominated political deliberations about Russia, especially after the Russian-German armistice in December 1917, and it partly lay behind Robert Bruce Lockhart’s well-known mission to Moscow in 1918. On the Russian side, Lenin was anxious about the fate of the revolution as the Germans advanced again in February 1918, and so he remained open to Allied support if necessary, at least until the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was signed in the face of opposition from many within the Soviet leadership. The ‘Lockhart Plot’ — or ‘complot of ambassadors’ — to overthrow the Bolsheviks ended any prospect of collaboration between Britain and Russia for the next two years. Steps towards coexistence were possible only after the cessation of the Allied intervention, the main purpose of which — to protect the eastern front, support the White counter-revolutionaries, or prevent revolutionary contagion — never seemed consistent.

A strength of Sergeev’s book is that he gives considerable attention to British-Russian relations in the Middle East, often side-lined at the expense of a Eurocentric focus. While Britain sought to contain Bolshevik expansion — and to counter German moves towards Transcaucasia and beyond — the Soviets deployed a variety of diplomatic and political tools aimed at forestalling British encroachments on surrounding territories, such as signing agreements with Persia and Afghanistan in 1921. Sergeev emphasizes that the landmark agreements of the period failed to improve relations quickly. Following the Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement of 1921, mutual suspicion remained. British officials remained concerned by Soviet efforts to spread revolutionary propaganda across the empire, while the Soviets objected to British funding of White Russians in neighbouring countries. Yet the economic imperative for cooperation was strong: by late 1921, 33.4 per cent of Soviet imports came from Britain, and 44.2 per cent of Soviet exports went there (p. 127). And while many supported the formal recognition of the USSR by the Labour government in 1924 — the British Trades Union Congress, for example, had called for recognition in 1923 — there was no consensus about this within British political circles. Many still advocated international isolation of the Soviet Union, especially after the drama surrounding the ‘Zinoviev letter’ later that year.

It must be said that the text would have benefited from more careful editing. There are quite a few slips, making the book more laborious to read than it might have been. To cite a few examples: ‘reproachment’ is often used when ‘rapprochement’ is meant (e.g., pp. 2, 5, 153); in reference to the many helpful

illustrations, 'placates' is surely meant to be 'plates' (p. 2); 'whatever puzzling' should presumably be 'however puzzling' (p. 7); 'Morton Price, a correspondent to the *Manchester Guardian*' (p. 24) is surely Morgan Philips Price; and 'father-founders' is more conventionally rendered as 'founding fathers' (p. 168). This frustration aside, Sergeev's book is to be very much welcomed for its well-researched and carefully rounded treatment of a complex subject.

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