CHAPTER 5: JAPAN AND WORLD WAR I

3. PERSPECTIVES ON THE SIBERIAN EXPEDITION

An exercise in futility?

In 1917, while World War I was still raging, the most momentous event of the 20th century — the Russian Revolution — began. The revolution provided fertile ground for communism's rise to real political power, with which the majority of subsequent wars, political conflicts, and tragedies were deeply entwined. Communism also insinuated itself into and complicated disputes between Japan and the US over China.

During the chaotic years that followed the Russian Revolution came the Siberian Intervention, in which Japan participated along with the other Allies. Japan's contribution to that venture was perceived as having depleted the national treasury, needlessly wasted soldiers' lives, and earned the enmity of the Russian people. Moreover, it was soundly castigated as a military action from which nothing was gained, and disparaged by historians. It earned the reputation of an exercise in futility, as history books often described it. One account in a history textbook intended for Japanese high school students reads as follows:

> Fearing the aftereffects of the Russian Revolution, Japan, the US, Britain, and France launched the Siberian Intervention in 1918, under the pretext of rescuing the Czech Corps. All nations involved, except for Japan, withdrew their troops in 1920. But the Japanese, intent on strengthening their presence in eastern Siberia, continued to send and reinforce troops there until 1922. However, they encountered resistance from revolutionaries and local residents. In the end, they had nothing to show for their efforts except 3,000 dead, 20,000 wounded, and ¥1,000 million in war expenditures.[1]

Accounts in other textbooks are quite similar. However, by dismissing the entire Siberian Intervention, the authors deprive students of the opportunity to learn about the problems that plagued the various expeditions and about their historical significance. The Siberian Intervention was an undertaking which, in terms of gaining an understanding of the Allies' perception of and response to communism, and the events that followed it, provides much food for thought.

When we contemplate international politics of that time, and the events that followed, i.e., the flow of history up to this very day, especially the spread of communism and political crimes, we must conclude that Japan's Siberian Expedition, regardless of its consequences or effectiveness, did have historical value. I will now submit a summary of the expedition, tracing its progress and indicating the problems that arose.

[1] *Kaitei Nihonshi* (Japanese history: revised edition) (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 1989).

Appeal for Japanese participation

In March 1917 what is now called the February Revolution broke out in Russia, and Alexander Kerensky established an interim government; Romanov rule had come to an end. In November of the same year, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, overthrew Kerensky's government in what came to be called the October Revolution. Communist Russia had taken its first steps. These revolutions threw all of Russia into chaos; Siberia and northern Manchuria were no exceptions. Moreover, the Soviet government, having won over the populace with its "peace, land, and bread" slogan, extricated Russia from the war with Germany.

On January 1, 1918 Britain appealed to Japan to lead an expedition to Siberia, whose purpose would be to prevent the Germans from taking possession of more than 600,000 tons of munitions that had accumulated in Vladivostok. Yet another request to send troops! Britain's request for Japan to act as the Allies' consignee in Siberia was supported by France. A consultation with the US revealed that Woodrow Wilson was vehemently opposed to a Japanese expedition, especially an independent one, even as a consignee of the Allies.

The proposal from Britain and France for a joint expedition gave rise to a debate. The Japanese government found itself pitted against military authorities. The doves worried about US opposition, and were convinced that interfering militarily in Siberia without American approval would be a dangerous diplomatic choice. On March 19 the Japanese government responded as follows: "Japan is prepared to support the joint Allied objective. However, our participation would depend on the support of *all* the Allies. We shall refrain from taking any action whatsoever until we have reached an understanding with the US and all other Allied nations."

However, in mid-May, the situation in Russia changed abruptly. On May 14 at Chelyabinsk Station in the Urals there was a clash between the Czech Corps heading east and a unit of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war being repatriated. This incident escalated and turned into an encounter between the Czechoslovaks and Bolsheviks. Soon the conflict spread to the entire Trans-Siberian Railway.

At this point I would like to provide some background information: The Czech Corps[2] consisted of Czech[3] immigrants who had been in Russia since the imperial days, and Austro-Hungarian deserters. Their numbers were sufficient to form approximately two divisions. In 1917 the provisional Russian government permitted them to join the Russian forces in the Eastern theatre. The Czech Corps believed that the Allied victory would mean independence for Czechoslovakia or, at the very least, autonomy; they were vehemently anti-Habsburg, and delighted to be fighting on the side of the Russians. When German troops began penetrating Ukraine at the end of February 1918, the Czech Corps was forced to evacuate to avoid being encircled and captured by German troops. The Czech Corps officially became affiliated with the Allies, and now answered to the French Supreme Command. The French government and Czechoslovak Military Headquarters wanted to dispatch the Corps to the western front to fight the Germans. As there was no other

[2] More accurately, the Czechoslovak Corps.

[3] Czech and Slovak.

reasonable way to exit Russia at the time, the Corps retreated from Vladivostok via Siberia. By the end of March the first party had departed for the Urals and Siberia. By the middle of May, 15,000 of them had reached Vladivostok. The remainder were in the midst of a 3,000-mile journey by rail, from the west side of the Volga River in Central Russia to Irkutsk. Nearly 40,000 men were involved.

Anti-Bolshevik Russians supported the Czech Corps, hoping they would overthrow the communists. Within a few days after the revolution began, the Czech Corps occupied the 3,000-mile-long Trans-Siberian Railway from the Volga to the vicinity of Irkutsk without much difficulty, and together with the White Army, took control of the vast surrounding area. In other words, the Czech Corps' uprising overthrew the Soviet government in the Urals and most of western Siberia.

Here is American diplomat and historian George F. Kennan's perspective:

> Soviet propagandists have never ceased to charge the Allies with having instigated the Czech uprising. The charge is in fact false, but its political implications are not far short of the mark.[4]

On June 7, in accordance with a resolution passed by the Allied Supreme War Council, Britain requested that Japan dispatch troops to Siberia. In response, the Japanese responded that the Imperial government "attach great importance to the positive support of the [American Government] in considering any action of intervention in Siberia. … Accordingly, a reply has been sent in the sense that the Japanese Government, while deeply appreciating the proposal, could not feel at liberty to express their decision before a complete and satisfactory understanding on the question was reached between the three Powers and the United States."[5]

The Allied Supreme War Council appealed to Wilson to sanction a joint expedition, as it was indispensable to an Allied victory, and could not be done properly without Japanese participation, but Japan could not take effective action without the support of the US. The US Supreme War Council resolved to dispatch approximately 7,000 troops each from Japan and the US to Vladivostok, and to announce that the objective of the expedition would be to assist the Czech Corps in its actions against German and Austrian prisoners of war. On August 2 Japan announced it would be participating in a joint expedition to Siberia; the US issued a similar announcement on August 3.

Japan dispatched the 12th Division, commanded by Ōi Shigemoto, to Maritime province (Primorskaya). He and his men commenced their landing on August 12. The US sent a regiment from the Philippines, Britain sent one battalion from Hong Kong, and France sent one and a half battalions from Indochina; all of those units departed for Vladivostok in early August. Even China and Italy volunteered, the former sending two infantry battalions to Nikolsk-Ussuriysky at the end of August, and the latter formed a battalion from troops who had been stationed in Beijing; those units arrived in Siberia in late November. The joint Allied expedition was now ready to take action.

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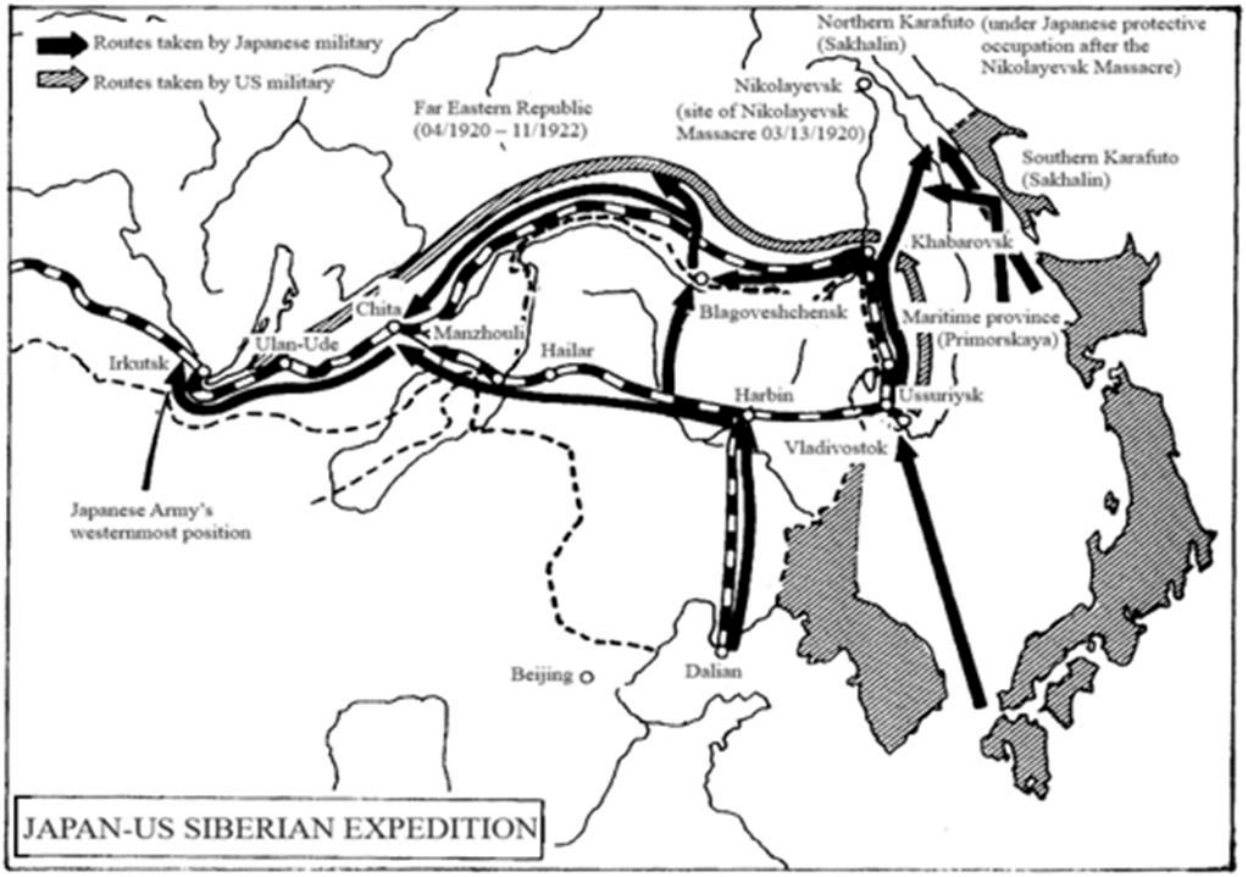
[4] Kennan, George F., *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston; Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 98-99.

[5] *Foreign Relations*, *The Lansing Papers, 1914-1920*, Vol. II, p. 365.

Suspicious of Japan but accepting of communism

Today the cooperative effort between Japan and the US is referred to as the Japan-US joint expedition. However, Griswold, the American historian, does not see it quite that way.

> The background of this extraordinary venture was partly European, partly Far Eastern. … Since the announced purpose of both expeditions was the same, these discrepancies are enough to show that the American motives for taking part in each were different. In European Russia the United States was at first genuinely concerned with the protection of Allied military supplies and assisting the Russian elements that gave any evidence of wishing to fight Germany to do so. In the Far East its purpose first and last was to resist the Japanese penetration of northern Manchuria and Siberia.[6]



[6] Griswold, *op. cit.*, 226-27.

As Griswold writes, the US military were suspicious of Japan's reasons for joining the expedition. They did not aid the Japanese military in their battles with the Bolsheviks. In fact, they seemed favorably disposed toward the Bolsheviks. Some even characterized the joint intervention as a collaborative expedition with no collaboration.

Why were the Japanese and Americans so antagonistic to each other in Siberia? The answer may lie in the two nations' differing stances on Bolshevism (communism).

While the Japanese advancing into Siberia were certain that Russian communism was a dangerous ideology and believed the Bolsheviks were evil, the Americans did not share that view.

After all, the Bolsheviks had toppled a despotic government, and on that point they seemed to be kindred spirits of Europeans and Americans — advocates of democracy. It even seemed to the Americans as though by participating in the expedition to Siberia, the Japanese would be violating the Open Door Policy. Yes, at that time, the American Open Door Policy extended even to Siberia. The US had schemed to isolate the Japanese in front of world public opinion. In January 1920 the US expeditionary force suddenly withdrew without so much as a notification from the US government.

To use the words of Roland S. Morris, US ambassador to Japan, "If General Graves has interpreted his orders [to leave Siberia in January 1920] correctly, our sudden action, without any previous notice to the Japanese Government, is a stunning blow to Japanese pride as well as to all Liberal and pro-American influence here and will have, I fear, far-reaching effects.[7]"

The communization of far eastern Russia was of great concern to Japan, as it represented an immense threat to Manchuria and Korea. But to the Americans, situated far, far away across the Pacific, the thought hardly registered, if at all.

Payson Treat wrote the following about this perception gap:

> It goes without saying that there were many conflicting views as to what should be done in Siberia. Americans might have an academic interest in what went on there, for Bolsheviki control would not endanger any American territory. But for the Japanese it was a very vital problem, and the presence of a Red Government at Vladivostok, so near to Korea where discontent was rife, could not be considered without alarm. For these reasons, Japan sent in more troops than had been anticipated … we must sympathize with her for being like the man in the Chinese proverb who tried to ride a tiger — it was easy to get on, but extremely difficult to get off.[8]

[7] Hosoya Chihiro, Roshia kakumei to Nihon (The Russian Revolution and Japan) (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1972); *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 861.00/6113: Telegram from the Ambassador in Japan (Morris) to the Secretary of State, 11 January 1920.

[8] Treat, *op. cit.*, 228-29.

Not all US government officials were blind to the danger posed by communism to the Far East. In fact, on November 30, 1919, Secretary Lansing wrote the following in his diary:

> I cannot see how the Japanese Government can adopt any other policy in view of the very real peril to Japan if the Bolsheviks should gain a foothold in Manchuria and co-operate with the Korean revolutionists. Certainly, in the circumstances we ought not to raise any objection to Japan sending a sufficient force to check the Bolshevik advance, for the spread of Bolshevism in the Far East would be a dreadful menace to civilization.[9]

Lansing clearly appreciated Japan's efforts to prevent the spread of communism. It is truly unfortunate for Asia — for the entire world, for that matter — that discerning supporters of Japan like Lansing were few and far between.

[9] Tansill, *op. cit.*, 56.