Japanese Imperialism in Siberia

By WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

ON April 6, 1918, Russian newspapers carried first page headlines announcing the occupation of Vladivostok by a Japanese landing party. Two years later to a day, on April 6, 1920, American newspapers carried first page headlines reporting the seizure of Vladivostok by Japanese troops after a battle with the Russian forces in the city. These two events mark definite stages in the progress of Japanese imperialism in Siberia. The Japanese took possession of Vladivostok in 1918—alone. Now, after the departure of the Americans, they remain in possession of it—alone.

The Russian policy of America and the western Allies has been a series of blundering improvisations, dictated principally by fear of bolshevism and not based upon any adequate knowledge of Russian political, social, and geographical conditions. The Japanese policy, on the other hand, was ably characterized by Voznesensky, a Far Eastern expert in the service of the Soviet Government, as “systematic, logical, and merciless.” The Japanese never cherished the dream that the Russian people would rise up to welcome armies of foreign deliverers. They never took the crusade against bolshevism very seriously. They never, even for a moment, thought of committing themselves to the enormous expenditure of blood and money which would have been necessary to destroy the Soviet Government. Instead they confined themselves to certain concrete and well defined territorial and economic objectives; and they pursued these objectives with consistent skill and tenacity.

The Japanese hunger for expansion in Siberia preceded the Bolshevist upheaval. The Japanese Government was quick to appreciate and to take advantage of the internal disorganization which followed the March Revolution. In June, 1917, according to a report to the provisional government, the Japanese were sending gendarmes secretly into Khabarovsk. In July, Viscount Motono, the Japanese Foreign Minister, complained to the Russian Ambassador in Tokio about a rumor that American capitalists had been granted concessions in the Siberian coastal region and in the island of Sakhalin. Motono intimated, in a distinctly truculent manner, that Japanese capital was entitled to prior consideration in this matter. In October, General Rozanov, the military commander of the Vladivostok district, reported to Foreign Minister Tereschenko that the Japanese were planning to provoke an uprising in the city in order to possess an excuse for intervention.

Shortly afterwards the Kerensky Government fell, and Soviet rule was established in Siberia. Under the pretext of combating bolshevism the Japanese were able to pursue their aggressive designs more openly. Their chief agent at this time was General Semenov, a Cossack brigand who carried on intermittent raids along the Russo-Chinese frontier. The following characteristic piece of Japanese propaganda in behalf of Semenov appeared in the Peking and Tientsin Times, the Japanese official journal in the English language in China:

It must be admitted that at this particular time there is great danger if the Allies intervene in Siberia, since the Russian population will surely resist foreign interference. But this course is not at all necessary, since there is a good way to attain the same results through help given to that great Russian patriot, General Semenov, whose only aim is to free Russia from anarchy.

This was followed by suggestions that all the ammunition stored in Vladivostok be turned over to Semenov, and that his operations be financed by an inter-Allied loan. Notwithstanding all the moral and material aid which he received from Japan, Semenov was unable to make head even against the weak and poorly organized Siberian Soviet forces, and was driven back over the Chinese frontier with discouraging regularity. The Japanese soon realized that they would have to intervene more actively. They commenced to negotiate secretly but vigorously for a mandate from the Allies to enter Siberia. France and England were inclined to favor the project, but President Wilson stood out against it. The President’s position is admirably stated in the following sentence from a memorandum presented to the Japanese Government early in 1919, but only made public in The Nation for February 21:

The Central Powers could and would make it appear that Japan was doing in the East exactly what Germany is doing in the West, and so seek to counter the condemnation which all the world must pronounce against Germany’s invasions of Russia, which she attempts to justify on the pretext of restoring order.

The Japanese statesmen, however, were not particularly impressed by arguments based upon international morality; and they were quite indifferent to the effect of intervention upon the sentiment of the Russian people towards the Allies. They were determined not to miss the excellent opportunity to fish in troubled waters afforded by the disorganized condition of Russia. On April 4 two Japanese were killed in a local riot in Vladivostok. Without giving the authorities any time to discover or capture the criminals the Japanese Admiral Kato landed a detachment of marines in the city on the following day. This action did not secure the cooperation of the Allies; and Ambassador Francis attempted to discount it as an unimportant affair of police jurisdiction. But it marked the beginning of Japanese rule in eastern Siberia. The forces which were landed on April 5 were never withdrawn.

Four months later, on August 3, the United States Government reversed its policy and agreed to participate with Japan in a Siberian expedition. In the light of subsequent events the statements issued on this occasion by the American and Japanese governments are both interesting and ironical. The American statement could scarcely stand the test of searching logical analysis. It flatly repudiates the principle of intervention in the following words:

In the judgment of the Government of the United States—a judgment arrived at after repeated and very searching consideration of the whole situation—military intervention in Russia would be more likely to add to the present sad confusion than to cure it, and would injure Russia, rather than help her out of her distress.

Then the statement goes on to envisage intervention on a fairly extensive scale in this famous passage:

The Government of the United States has therefore proposed to the Government of Japan that each of the two governments send a force of a few thousand men to Vladivostok, with the
purpose of cooperating as a single force in the occupation of Vladivostok and in safeguarding, as far as it may be, the country to the rear of the westward moving Czecho-Slovaks, and the Japanese Government has consented.

The Japanese statement, which follows the American very closely in general outline, is even more effusive in its protestations of goodwill. The harsh fact of military invasion of Russian soil is decorously covered with the following phrases:

In adopting this course the Japanese Government remain constant in their desire to promote relations of enduring friendship and they reaffirm their avowed policy of respecting the territorial integrity of Russia and of abstaining from all interference in her internal politics. They further declare that, upon the realization of the objects above indicated, they will withdraw all Japanese troops from Russia, and will leave wholly unimpaired the sovereignty of Russia in all its phases, whether political or military.

The Czechs, for whose welfare these statements profess so much solicitude, were not directly benefited at all by the intervention. They were encouraged to continue their “westward movement” against the Soviet forces, while the American and Japanese troops remained in eastern Siberia. The Americans announced and maintained an attitude of strict neutrality in all local quarrels, and confined themselves to guarding the Trans-Siberian Railroad against the attacks of guerrilla bands.

The Japanese pursued a much more sinister and aggressive policy. They cooperated with the Kolchak officials and with the more or less independent bandits, Kalmikov and Semenov, in repressing every movement of popular discontent. Together with their allies they often acted with the utmost ferocity. Siberian papers published during 1919 report the frequent destruction of whole villages by Japanese artillery and the habitual taking and shooting of hostages, including women, in reprisal for the conduct of the insurgent peasants. The Japanese also flooded the country with commodities of their own manufacture, for which they charged exorbitant prices, and speculated profitably in the fluctuating ruble exchange.

Japan’s attitude toward the Omsk Government was somewhat ambiguous. Kolchak’s partisans in this country insist that Japanese intrigues materially hampered him; and it is certainly true that Japan was hostile to the idea of a strong united Russia under any form of government. On the other hand Kolchak accepted, if he did not invite, Japanese aid against the insurgents of eastern Siberia; and Japan took advantage of the weakness of his position to exact a number of commercial concessions. Recognition of these concessions was one of the demands presented by the Japanese Government in its recent negotiations.

With the end of the war the excuse of protecting the Czecho-Slovaks lost what little plausibility it originally possessed. In fact these troops, tired of being sacrificed in a Russian internal quarrel, refused to fight for Kolchak and insistently demanded repatriation. Japan commenced to change her diplomatic phraseology. She now discovered “special interests” in Siberia, which must be protected at the cost of everything, including her promise to evacuate Russian territory as soon as the specified objects of her intervention were achieved. The Tokio Kokuman Shumbun of February 12, 1919, contains the following suggestion for turning the League of Nations to practical account:

We sincerely hope that our Government will propose a plan of international control over Russia, at the Conference of Versailles, which shall consist in giving America control over European Russia up to the Urals, while over Siberia the control shall be in our hands.

The Versailles Conference has decided to turn the control over the former German colonies to the League of Nations, and give the actual control over them to the members of the League. Why not have an identical control over Russia?

Deprived of the support of the Czecho-Slovaks and left to its own resources by the Allies, Admiral Kolchak’s Government went to pieces very speedily during the summer and fall of 1919. The Red army occupied Siberia up to Irkutsk. After the downfall of Kolchak, soviets were set up in the cities of eastern Siberia. At this time, very opportunely from the Japanese standpoint, the American troops were entirely withdrawn from Vladivostok. Japan was now free to deal with the situation with regard for possible international complications. Her imperialistic policy demanded speedy and drastic action. Her former tools, Horvath, Semenov, and Kalmikov, had fallen beyond any hope of restoration. The Japanese struck hard and quickly, before local defense could be organized and before help could arrive from Moscow.

The Japanese soon captured the triangle of important railroad towns, Vladivostok, Khabarovsky, and Nikola. There have been reports of sporadic activity on the part of Semenov’s forces in the Trans-Baikal region. There is nothing to show, however, that the Japanese are trying to establish a military frontier against Soviet Russia as far west as Lake Baikal. On the contrary, the creation of an autonomous state of eastern Siberia is announced; and communications are received from its Foreign Minister, Mr. Krasnoschokhov, who was president of the Far Eastern Soviet before the Allied intervention. Indications are that this state, like Esthonia, may serve as a buffer between Bolshevik Russia and the outside world. Its form of government will certainly be radically democratic; but it may be respectable enough to receive immediate foreign recognition. It seems, unlikely, however, that this state will be able to regain control of its port, Vladivostok. This city, “the gateway of the East,” is now practically a part of Japan’s steadily growing Asiatic Empire.

This final expression of Japanese imperialism in Siberia should prove somewhat disconcerting to those Americans who believed that Japanese intervention would help to win the war and promote international law and order. It has always been easy to persuade Japan to enter a profitable field of exploitation; to induce her to leave is a different matter. The Japanese occupation of Vladivostok may not cause immediate friction with America. But serious difficulties are almost certain to develop in the future, when American business men discover that they have been completely shut out of the rich Siberian market by the Japanese possession of the port. Then a situation may be created which will baffle the powers of conciliation even of that august body, the League of Nations.

Reports of
The Republican Convention
by Oswald Garrison Villard
The A. F. of L. Convention
by Arthur Gleason
will appear in The Nation of June 19th
Underground Ireland
By WILLIAM MACDONALD

Dublin, May 13

A

n English friend was kind enough to assure me before I came to Ireland that unless I made my peace with Dublin Castle I would not be allowed to travel far or to see much; while if by chance I were to wander far from Dublin, or to express outside of Ulster, opinions unfavorable to Sinn Fein, I was quite likely to be shot. Of neither fate, so far as I am aware, was I at any moment in the slightest danger. No special permission of any kind is necessary to visit Ireland, and opposition to Sinn Fein may be voiced as safely in Connaught as in Ulster. Of British rule in Ireland I shall have something to say presently. Thanks to letters of introduction from America, and in no small measure to the reputation of The Nation as the staunch friend of Irish freedom, it proved easy to make the acquaintance of Sinn Fein; at the same time, in doing so, I had an interesting object-lesson in the methods of that organization and in the life which some of its members are compelled to lead.

One of my letters was addressed to Mr. Arthur Griffith, M.P., one of the principal founders of Sinn Fein, now second in authority to Mr. De Valera, and editor of Young Ireland, the only Sinn Fein paper which is allowed to be published. Rightly fearing that the letter, if sent by post or even by unvouched-for messenger, would find its way to Dublin Castle, I hired a cab and set out to deliver it in person. The building to which it was addressed was closed, and the door evidenced recent encounters with an axe. A small boy suggested that I call at the Sinn Fein Bank, around the corner. The “bank” turned out to be a tumble-down building with the legend “Sinn Fein Bank” daubed roughly on the broken door, and its sole occupant an old woman who “swore to God” that she had lived there only a week and had never heard of Mr. Griffith. As I came out, wondering how next to proceed, a young man with a bicycle suggested that I call at the Sinn Fein Bank, around the corner. The “bank” turned out to be a tumble-down building with the legend “Sinn Fein Bank” daubed roughly on the broken door, and its sole occupant an old woman who “swore to God” that she had lived there only a week and had never heard of Mr. Griffith. As I came out, wondering how next to proceed, a young man with a bicycle accosted me, asked my errand, and offered to deliver the letter. I hesitated, and looked inquiringly at the cab driver. “It’s all right,” said the cabby, “he’s a true liberal, he is.” Without further questioning I turned over the letter, and the young man disappeared. I spent the next hour speculating as to whether or not I had made the worst possible blunder, and “queered” my inquiry for good and all. But at the hotel I found a note from Mr. Griffith placing himself at my disposal, and presently received a call from one of the most important officials of Sinn Fein, who had himself brought the note. Thereafter the doors of Sinn Fein, in Dublin and throughout Ireland, were open. Incidentally, I had tested the workings of the secret system of communication which Sinn Fein has developed, and which the authorities at Dublin Castle, with all their efforts, seem hopelessly unable to circumvent.

Yet the official in question was himself at the moment “on the run,” as the Sinn Feliners say. He had served a term of imprisonment, during which he had gone on hunger strike; and he was now sleeping each night at a different place and was liable at any moment to be arrested and jailed. That he, and Mr. Griffith, and Professor MacNeill, and certain other Sinn Fein leaders who are officially “wanted” are nevertheless at large is due, apparently, in part to the indisposition of the Government to arrest them just at the moment when hunger strikes in England and Ireland are exciting public opinion in both countries, and when semi-official intimations of a change of policy toward Ireland are being given out, and in part to the reluctance of the police to make arrests unless a considerable force is at hand for the purpose. We had walked under the nose of a policeman that very evening, and nothing had happened. Yet the moral strength of the Sinn Fein movement, the firm hold which it has upon the conscience and the will of its followers, are not to be appreciated until one realizes the daily annoyance and distress which must be endured by those whose homes are broken up, whose husbands, brothers, or friends are in hiding or “on the run,” and who must meet and work in secret or by subterfuge.

Secrecy and evasion, however, are the accompaniments of political revolution everywhere. What gives them special significance in Ireland is the perfection of their organization and the wide popular cooperation which they receive. There is not a daily Sinn Fein newspaper published in Ireland. All over the country, however, are to be found newspapers whose attitude toward Great Britain could not be more hostile, or whose chronicles of Sinn Fein doings could hardly be fuller, if they were actually Sinn Fein organs. No printer would dare print openly for Sinn Fein, yet Sinn Fein has no great difficulty in obtaining all the printing it needs for its political propaganda. Sinn Fein meetings of all sorts are under the ban, and scores of officers of the organization are in jail; yet the work goes steadily forward. Seventy-three Sinn Fein members of Parliament won in the last election, and the arrest of an official merely finds another ready to take his place, and still another waiting. Numerous municipal governments are in Sinn Fein hands, and on May 3 I heard the Dublin Corporation vote its recognition of the Irish Republic as the lawful government of Ireland. No member of Sinn Fein thinks of using either the telegraph, or the telephone, or the post for Sinn Fein business; yet a secret system of communication enables the organization to keep in close touch not only with all Ireland, but with England, France, and the United States. I was assured that the most secret arrest would be known in Dublin, along with the exact place of detention, within an hour either day or night. Throughout Sinn Fein Ireland, any person who is pursued or shadowed by the police may safely take refuge in almost any house or shop, with assurance that the occupants, whether members of Sinn Fein or not, will instantly and without question do anything in their power to shelter him or help him to escape. The movement has caught the children as well as their parents, and the boy or girl in the street is almost as dependable a guide as the average man or woman.

How numerous a body is Sinn Fein? What classes of persons support it? To what extent is it responsible for the violence whose record makes up for the larger part of the daily Irish news? Does it actually rule even though it does not govern? I have been asking these questions industriously of all kinds of people in all parts of Ireland. None of the Sinn Fein leaders with whom I have talked has cared to venture more than an estimate of the number of persons who may properly be denominated Sinn Feiners. The Sinn