Allied Anxiety and the Daily Dispatch

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the changes in attitude toward Russians during World War I, both before and after the Bolshevik revolutions. Using mainly the London Times and the New York Times as primary sources, what was the change in the portrayal of Allied relations with Russia? The withdrawal of Russia was highly criticized by the Allies, as they were left to fight the war on their own, and this laid the foundation for animosity towards communists in later crisis.

What did the modern democratic individual think of the events in Europe during World War I? The view of European affairs, and the conduct of the war, came to this individual via periodicals of the time. Many of these articles, which were highly biased, provided one with nuggets of truth as well as deception. The Western view was always to be manipulated to the benefit of the Allied states. This paper will address the events that shaped the emergence of a communist Russia and how they were viewed in Western media.

Our story commences at the beginning of 1916 and ends with Bolshevik rule in Russia, in early 1918. The changes which occurred during this period had an effect on both the British and French warriors, and the American isolationists alike. It would change the face of political development, and the view of the nation-state along with its place in the New World Order.

At the start of 1916, Allied powers (consisting of Great Britain, France and Imperial Russia) were embroiled in a bitter land and sea conflict with the Central Powers (consisting of Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire). The United States was considered to be neutral, although her neutrality was heavily weighted to the assistance of the Allied Powers. The formidable naval forces the British Empire was able to dispatch to control the sea-lanes meant that any goods shipments from the United States would only be available to the Allies. This would ultimately lead to direct involvement of the United States in the conflict, but as of 1916, it only meant increased industrial prosperity to America.

The story of Russia that an Englishman or American was likely to read about was a story of a strong Russia. Russia, as depicted by the media, was a country under civil control, conducting a successful war campaign on the Eastern Front. The papers told the story of great Russian victories and bountiful harvests. The London Times of 1916 wrote many articles providing a very positive view of the state of the Russian war effort. Stories of the success of agriculture was typified by “[the grain bearing] Ukraine will enable Russia to continue the war indefinitely and that the Russian industries are thriving as agriculture prospers” (“Recuperative Power of Russia”).

In the area of military competence, the picture was often very enthusiastic. When there was talk of battles, the casualties of the Central powers are often cited, but rarely were the Russian losses put forth. When speaking of Russians, the media spoke mainly of Russian success as in, “[the Germans] retired under ceaseless fire from the Russian troops, which wrought frightful havoc” (“The Russian Onset in Galicia”). When speaking of the Russians as individuals, terms such as “the experienced eye of the Russian commander”, or “tremendous energy”, “unerring precision”, and “efficiency” (“Russians Across the Dniester”) were most likely to be emphasized. These terms were specifically utilized to reassure the citizens of the Allied Powers of the ability of the Russians to prosecute the war, and maintain an Allied balance of power.

As if the implied faithfulness of the commitment of the Russians to assist the Allies was not enough, it was stated plainly that “the wonderful spirit of the Russian troops leaves no doubt of our ultimate victory in this theatre” (“Russians Across the Dniester”), and that “the [Russian] government is determined to continue the struggle in close cooperation with the allies until a decisive victory is secured” (“Tsars Visit to the Duma”). Such stories continued throughout the late winter and early spring of 1916. The heavy-handed reassurance of the Allied powers betrayed the political turmoil with which the Russian government had to cope.

The ineffectiveness of the relatively young Duma, which was the representational portion of the government, to control events within Russia was dealt with by the Western press as a minor detail in the overall scope of governance. It was portrayed in a greatly diminished fashion, almost as if it was only a phase that would soon pass. In fact, based on the portrayal in the newspapers, it was merely the transition
of power to the people, and a continuation of the 1905 revolution (Riansanovsky 457). The Imperial monarchy, of which the Czar was the head, was losing absolute power to a more democratic form of government. There was speculation in editorial columns that the Dumas disorganization and ineffective action would pass as the responsibilities were more clearly defined between The Czar and The Duma (Mazour 541). The virtually continuous changes in the government were met by the press as gossip, and not as serious political developments. It would not be until later that these changes were seen as a serious potential shift in the Russians foreign policy. In a correspondents article from the London Times dated 12 Feb. 1916, the political situation was regarded as "no acute distress the gossip in Petrograd and other large cities mainly concerns the recent changes in government and the possibility of a German offensive on the Baltic frontier" ("The Temper of Russia"). The author further voice that "not the slightest unrest prevails in the villages [and they] are tranquil and prosperous."

There were quite a few discussions on the shifting makeup of the Duma. The rapid changes in the majority, and lack of effective leadership left this body somewhat ineffective at governing, though they professed to "emphasize the necessity for the union of the Government and the public organization, and the Duma, and express earnest desire to work harmoniously" ("Parties in the Duma").

The speeches released from the Czars visit to the Duma on 22 Feb. 1916, and recorded in the London Times on 24 Feb. 1916, gave the solid impression of a unified Russia determined to continue the war along with the other Allies. The Czar retained some of his political power, and attempted to reassure the western allies of his role within the State. He professed that: "the direct communion between the Czar and his people would fill the hearts of all in Russia with joy and would inspire the glorious and valiant defenders of the country with fresh courage."

The political changes which were forming at the time were referred to as "an evolution of political thought," and that "the Government could count on the continued loyalty of the population." The most prominent problem addressed by the meeting was the "parochial reform to meet the religious and social needs of the people" ("Tsars Visit to the Duma"). The military was deemed to be at full strength, inspired, and confident of victory, with inexhaustable reinforcements. Though this painted an optimistic picture of the Russian situation, it only served to conceal from the West the real problems facing Russia. The real crisis was yet to be faced.

Throughout the rest of 1916 the political situation continued to become even more unstable, with the rulers apparently remaining oblivious to it or unable to affect any significant degree of stability (Suny 32). Though the supply problems which had plagued the Russian army at the start of the war were abated, these problems were solved at the expense of the comfort of the peasant and the proletariat worker. The supply problems, which were mainly caused by corruption of government officials, were not dealt with as sternly as they should have been (Walsh 365). The corruption of the royal regime would continue to plague the country beyond the Czars loss of power. Even under the guise of the "revolution" Russian corruption would continue to be prolific (Walsh 418-420). The corrupters and their ideologies would change, but the effect would be the same. These events laid the foundation for more radical changes in the Russian social and political landscape. But while the efforts of the Imperial Russian Army and Navy were directed at the German forces, the British and French were more than happy to maintain a positive attitude towards Russia. As long as American products were being consumed by Russia, American big business (and collaterally the American populace) was more than happy to keep the Russian Empire in a favorable light as well.

Repeated government assurances as to the continuation of the war along with the Allies helped to ensure favorable press in the United Kingdom and France, but the plight of the factory workers and farmers was overlooked. Even as problems stewed, the Imperial Government made plans along with the Allies for a post war division of the Germanic empire. In an article dated 18 June 1916 in the London Times, the task of Russia was to provide a strong hand in the formation of states in the post-German central Europe. "These states must have a definite orientation, in which Russia should play a leading role" ("Russian War Plans"). The proposed continuation of Imperial policy was presented as a positive outcome after the conflict ended, but as one can see, when the Imperial system failed its failure could also be seen as a positive result for the Allied powers. It would be viewed positively as long as events could be portrayed to the advantage of the Allied powers. Allied perception of events would always tend towards the direction of the one most advantageous to themselves. Belief in a strong Russia attacking the Central Powers on the Eastern Front was certainly to be advantageous to Allied morale, as it would restrict the number of forces which the Central Powers would be able to bring to bear on the Western Front.

The end of 1916 saw Russia with a reasonably entrenched monarchy and a somewhat inefficient Duma. Things appeared to be going well and the people were reported as being prosperous and happy. In an article published in the New York Times dated 15 Oct. 1916, it is stated that, based on a correspondent's observation:

The peasants have more money than ever before, and in wages they are getting from three to four times as much as before.
the war the soldiers have plenty of ammunition, are better clothed and fed, and all seem happy ("Russian Peasants").

The correspondent also states, "The Russian appears to be very confident these days. It is significant that never have diamond and fur merchants done such a volume of business as at present". The American optimism was not necessarily about the action of the war, but the financial and market opportunities which would potentially open up after the Allies won the war. There was a decidedly positive feeling between the United States, a major producer of war materials, and Russia, a major consumer of those materials. As long as Russia appeared to have citizens capable of purchasing American goods, the United States would likely maintain a positive outlook.

These strictly positive reports were about to become a bit more realistic as the Russians could no longer neither hide, nor the Allies ignore the many potentially problematic changes taking place in Russian society and government. The beginning of the end of this great love affair with Russia was in November of 1916.

The Russian Duma held secret debates in Petrograd on 17 November 1916. Portions of the debates, with lengthy omissions, annotated by blank blocks where text should have been, were released to the Western press. Though the debates mainly focused on the faults of the ailing monarchy, these secret debates did little to comfort the Allies (Mazour 551). In fact they did everything to ferment anxiety by means of the gossip and rumors, that began to spread. These rumors, whether founded on some semblance of truth or not, were met with harsh criticism in the Duma. They were categorically denied by the Russian authorities, but still gained a great deal of coverage by the media.

Specifically, the Allies relied on the pressure that Russia was placing on the Central Powers within their sphere of influence. It mattered little to them as to the overall success of the Russian campaign, but rather that the German forces were occupied somewhere other than the Western front. The most damaging rumor that came out of the secret Duma debates was the suggestion that Russia was negotiating a separate peace with Germany. The Allies met this rumor with open hostility. The question of a separate peace would continue to surface throughout the remainder of Russian involvement in the war. The Russian Embassy was quick to publish a reply stating that "alleged secret negotiations with Germany with the object of concluding a separate peace are absolutely untrue" ("False Rumors Exposed"). On 20 Nov. 1916, in the New York Times, the Russian government stated that "only the extreme reactionaries have opposed the war with Germany as a menace for the perpetuity of the holy autocracy" ("Hints of Grave Crisis in Russian Duma"). This was intended to calm the media (and subsequently the Allied populace), but it failed to completely diffuse the tension that now existed. Rumors of Russian negotiations with Germany continued to surface on occasion throughout the remainder of Russian involvement in the war.

The reality of the secret speeches was that there were to be rapid changes that would soon occur with regard to the balance of power between the Duma and the Czar. By 26 November, the New York Times had published the effects, and the continuing political struggle, which were going on within Russia. The reporting which had been so benevolent in the past had not only become more unbiased, but also more informative. The main topic covered by the article was the growing democracy within Russia. The Americans saw this as the natural evolution for constitutional monarchy. The New York Times printed some of the underlying causes of the changes which had been, previous to this time, glossed over. Such things as the food crisis, which had been ongoing, the frequent cabinet changes, and the uneasiness and unrest within the Slavic Empire as rumors of a separate peace flourished ("New Russian Head of Foreign Ministry").

The famine which plagued the Russian countryside was not the result of a natural occurrence. If it had been due to a natural act, it would have been much easier to understand by the peasantry, and subsequently better dealt with. The fact was that citizens were starving because of ineffective government officials and speculators were holding back the stores in hopes of a better price (Walsh 370-371). Needless to say, this did not endear the government to the workers and peasants who had nothing to eat. These abuses and overall mismanagement of the government put the masses in a fairly anxious mood of existence, a condition in which now anything had become possible (Figes 301).

Various factions within the Duma expressed much the same sentiment with regard to abuses. They agreed that a government change was necessary to get out of the crisis. These changes, though their exact nature was only alluded to, would prove to be the downfall of the Czar as a political force. The Sturmer government, on which most of the blame fell, was removed from power and harshly criticized for corruption and abuses of the power they had held (Pipes 251-53). This, along with continued efforts by the Duma, alleviated some pressure. By mid-March 1917, however, things had heated up again. The food shortage in the Russian capital had become critical. Food riots become a regular event, and troops were authorized to use arms or any other means necessary to preserve the order in Petrograd (Figes 312-13). In the past, the population had been willing to absorb some of the hardship for the sake of the war. They knew that there were increasing requirements from the military on the rail system to transport war materials to the front rather than to move food within
the country (Pipes 206). But when the Duma seemed indisposed to devote too much time to the matter, attributing it all to mismanagement of an inexhaustible food supply, the people of Petrograd made a peaceful demonstration of protest. Some violence broke out as a result of these demonstrations, but it was hoped that in the future serious conflict would be avoided. The New York Times correspondent in Petrograd reported on 12 March 1917 "The general character of the excitement is vague" ("Hunger Causes Pertograd Riots").

While it was likely that the British were made anxious, and somewhat nervous, by the news of the current revolution, American bankers were pleased by the developments in Russia. In the New York Times dated 16 March 1917, the general opinion was, "it is predicted that the Russian finances would be handled more efficiently under the sole direction of the Duma than before", and "the ascendency of the Duma — that is the people — over the bureaucracy means that the other Allies are to receive more effective support from Russia" ("London Bails Revolution").

It is during this period that the radical socialist Bolsheviks started to appear in the media. In the same issue of the New York Times, there is an article about the views of Leo Trotsky, who was a prominent, and popular, socialist. He was quoted as saying, "The cause of the revolution was the unrest of the mass of the people who were tired of war", but he was also quick to assure that "the revolutionists, even if they had it in their power, would not make a separate peace with Germany" ("London Bails Revolution").

By 18 March, the New York Times reported the abdication of the Czar. It was understood that if the Czar abdicated, and refrained from adopting an aggressive attitude toward the revolution, his life would be spared. It was apparent from the article that he did not go voluntarily, even though his mismanagement had been a hindrance to the State. Russia could only hope to fare better without his leadership. The New York Times reported, and, because of this it was assumed that all insurgency was limited to within the city of Petrograd ("Was Betrayed, Says Czar").

The overthrow of the Czar in Russia gave some hope to the Allies with respect to Germany. A popular view in America was the hope that the German citizens would see what had happened to the Imperial establishment in Russia and throw off the yolk of their autocratic Kaiser. Americans supposed that the German citizens were equally tired of the war and that they too desired democratic freedoms. Though this proved to be unfounded in the near future, it was still a real possibility in the minds of the west. If such radical changes could occur in such an apparently stable state such as Russia, why not in the supposedly war devastated Germany?

By 20 March, the new government released reports of the abuses and negligence of the past autocratic regime. These accusations included slowly removing the rights that the people had won through the 1905 revolution, administrative arbitrariness on the part of the Czar and his representatives, and illegal and disastrous acts of governors. At the same time the military was commended for "the heroic efforts crushed under the cruel weight of internal disorganization." It was critical to the success of the new government that they keep the military happy, for without the support of the military a revolution would never had been possible. Blame of the mismanagement quickly fell to the ex-Czar. It was widely thought that, had the Czar been competent and had better foresight, he would have been able to retain the throne, and bring his country out of crisis ("Summons Russia to Renewed War Under Freedom").

On 22 March, the ex-Czar found himself, and his Czarina, under arrest. Along with many of the imperial officials and supporters they were arrested by order of the Duma. Their treatment was reported to be scrupulous at best. Communication between the Czar and his family with the outside world was strictly limited, and they were under constant watch to prevent any of them from committing suicide ("Czar and Czarina Under Arrest"). These arrests marked the shattering of the illusion of royal providence in Russia. The members of the Russian royal family were regular citizens. Along with these arrests came the announcement that there was trouble within the ranks of the armed forces. The Duma wished to address this matter in a timely manner as the Minister of War stated:

The people will be able to carry through successfully the reorganization of life at home, provided they are well defended against the enemy outside. The government is certain that the army, mindful of this fact, will maintain its
power, solidarity, and discipline intact and will do its utmost to bring the war to a victorious end. ("Czar and Czarina Under Arrest")

Along with the proclamation of the royal arrests came the offer of general political amnesty. This would ultimately open the door for extremist revolutionaries to return to Russia, though it is unlikely that this could have been fully foreseen.

During this period, many of the Allies recognized that Russia was lacking any real central authority. It was widely suspected that the Germans would take this opportunity to launch an offensive on the disorganized Russian army. There was a general call to both the populace and the military to maintain discipline. The dispatches from Petrograd had the Church exhorting the people to be loyal to the new government, and further found that the radical Socialists of Russia "are but an insignificant fraction of the population, and that the land-owning class and the tillers of the soil are the real heart and soul of Russia" ("America First to Recognize Russia"). Though the government in Berlin portrayed the Russian governments status as being in total anarchy, the Russians were quick to point out the stability and continued smooth operation of the various government branches. Further support of the overthrow of the Czar was given in the 24 March 1917 issue of the New York Times:

The Czar's abdication was received with joy among the officers and soldiers. He [the Czar] did not meet with one supporter of the old regime. The general feeling was that a dead weight had been removed, and that the army would fight with new energy. ("Czar Arrested for His Safety")

Calls for the downfall of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs to follow the path of the House of Romanoff were vigorously pursued by the American press. However the British, with their own monarchy, were unusually quiet on the subject. It could easily be deduced that they would favor the Kaisers monarchy system following that of the Czar's, even though they themselves wished to keep their own unique form of royal rule intact.

By late April of the same year, the newfound freedoms in Russia were being hailed as a great advance. Russia was being seen as a stronger, more politically stable country, and was more resolved than before to continue the war along with the Allies. But the rebuilding mentality in the minds of the westerners would not last. For in that same month, Vladimir Lenin, a socialist extremist, was to return to Russia. He preached a radical "Russianized" socialism based on the ideas of "peace and bread". He had adopted Marxism and wished to apply the concepts to Russia in a way not wholly intended by Karl Marx (Walsh 383). His ideas were met with open hostility by the west, as he was an open proponent for a separate peace with Germany to allow the re-building of a Great Russian New Order. In the New York Times dated 20 April 1917, it was commented that Lenin had been "coldly received," and that he was left absolutely without supporters" ("Lenin Coldly Received"). For a man so devoid of supporters, the media provided substantial coverage of his plight in the days preceding the Bolshevik revolution, and his subsequent rise to power. Lenins form of socialism was seen as a great threat, and the mere fact there was such coverage of his activities betrayed the true influence that the Allied Powers believed he possessed among the masses.

Throughout the remainder of the summer of 1917, as riots increased, Lenins socialism received more support and the reassurances of the Dumas government became stronger to the Allies in the West. This political and social chaos in Russia led to, most likely, the most unflattering reporting of events since the beginning of the war. Strikes escalated, war factories and artillery became silent, and socialist ideas began to take root in the sufficing of the masses of workers and, to a limited degree, the peasants. The West was sure that Lenin was a direct agent of the Central powers, and feared the exit of Russia from the conflict. The main basis for this assumption came from the fact that the German government gave Lenin safe passage through Germany to allow him to return to Russia ("Assail Lenine As German Agent"). By November of 1917, the fears of the Allied powers had become a reality as the Bolsheviks gained power in Russia ("Extremists Attempt to Demostrate at Petrograd Embassy").

The rise to power of the Bolsheviks provided an even greater level of chaos than that which had already been seen. The political situation changed rapidly, and through a combination of political skill and luck, Lenin was able to secure a very tenuous control of the government. The changes that were rapidly being applied to the administration and policy of the government, which occurred during this period, lacked enough clear focus for a consolidated Western portrayal of the events. Suffice it to say, the West was not happy with the course of events, yet they believed that the rule of the Bolsheviks would be short lived, as it seemed to them that the revolutionary governments had a propensity for early failure, and an evolution into a more stable and democratic government would ensue.

Early 1918 saw the Bolsheviks still in power in Russia, and the Western media doing everything within its power to portray them as not much more than common criminals. The West did not recognize the Bolsheviks as the legitimate government of Russia, and wondered how long they could depend upon them for military support. The image of the Russian
Bolshevik as that of a criminal continued to be reinforced in most reports of Russia that appeared in Western papers. In an article in the London Times dated 2 February 1918, the Red Guards were "ma­rauding imitators, and seizing food wherever they can find it" ("The Hunt for Food in Petrograd"). They were anti-church, and allowed the front line fortifications to be abandoned. During this time many of the nationalistic sections of Russia began to separate from the former Empire and form, or attempt to form, independent countries. These splinter countries helped lay the foundation for the ensuing civil war that would occupy so much of the Russians resources and time for the next few years.

The Bolshevik political process was viewed as almost a comical display of governmental operation. In the London Times dated 7 February 1918, a portrayal of the Bolshevik congress at work was one of inefficiency, unrealistic expectations, and comical ceremony. The description of the events was one of reckless passage of legislation, with "not more than 12 minutes devoted to the fundamental laws which are intended to open up a new epoch in the world's history. Resolutions were hastily passed, and then passed again for the benefit of latecomers for the greater glorification of the new order of things" ("Legislation with Music"). Arrests by the Red Guards had become rampant in the new regime, and none were saved from the fear of incarceration. Brigades of Red Guards were often portrayed as gangs with little semblance to military or paramilitary forces besides their ready use of force. They were often to be found in general thievery, searches, and other seizures of property. An observers comment on the state of the Red Guards was that "it was difficult to distinguish between genuine Red Guards without uniforms and ordinary robbers" ("Legislation with Music").

The last chance for Bolshevik acceptance from the West faded away on 20 February 1918, when the Russian surrender to German forces was announced. This effectively cut off Russia from the rest of Europe and America, and ensured her role as an adversary in the eyes of the Allied powers.

The path from companion to foe for Russia was an indirect route at best. It was certain the Allies wished to keep Russia on positive terms, and utilized their media to that end. From the numerous human interest stories on Russian life, to the prowess of their military forces engaged in the Great War, the opinion of the American or Englishman towards the Russian was improved early on. But this must be taken with a grain of salt, for as well as benevolent depictions, so can antagonistic positions be elicited for the common man. Stories of Bolsheviks destroying churches and randomly redistributing land, with no regard for the sanctity of personal property, did not do much to endear them to the West. The lesson that must be taken from a study of the media within this period is twofold. First it must be said that the media in and of itself is often biased. This bias might be on the level of a specific and local concern, or on a national policy level, yet every story has a spin towards one view, or quite an opposite view. Secondly, the actions which are chosen to describe an event often do not provide sufficient information (at least information from public media sources) to provide an accurate prediction of possible outcomes. The very fact that Russian military competence and the happiness of the population were so wildly distorted hid the instability of the Czars regime, and a subsequently similar policy of the revolutionary Duma, led to the destabilization of the governments they sought to protect. The leaders lack of acknowledgement of these failures, and the demands of the war effort fermented animosity within both the military ranks and the peasant population. Without the support of those classes the government was sure to fail.

The media that reported the events largely dictated the Allied view of the Russian participation in the war. While they had some freedom to print as they wished, their patriotism, nonetheless, put their loyalty ahead of the complete truth. The path that the Russian leaders chose played a critical role in the gain or loss of Western confidence in Russia. Confidence was often high when the situation was most bleak. In this, the media was able to aid the war effort and maintain support within their own countries while even their own prospects were limited.

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