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Review of "Churchill's Secret War with Lenin: British and Commonwealth Military Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1918-20" by Damien Wright

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Damien Wright. *Churchill's Secret War with Lenin: British and Commonwealth Military Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1918-20*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2017. Pp. 576.

Among the cemeteries managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is the Archangel Allied Cemetery in Archangel, Russia. Though it is the final resting place of British and Commonwealth servicemen who died during both the First and Second World Wars, the overwhelming majority of the graves located there are those of men who perished fighting the forces of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. Its "forlorn and overgrown" condition today (in author Damien Wright's words) serves as a sadly appropriate metaphor for the popular awareness of the role British and Commonwealth forces played in that conflict (p. 298). Before the war between the Soviet Union and the West went cold, they served as part of a multinational effort to support the anti-Bolshevik Whites in their failed attempt to topple the Soviet regime in Moscow. Yet today their efforts often go unremembered in the West in the story of Russia's relations with the outside world.

According to Wright, this was by design. As he sees it, "[t]he British government attempted to cover up its military involvement in Russia, 1918-20 by classifying official documents relating to the campaign under the '50 year rule'"(p. 298). This statement may come as a surprise to some readers, considering that the fifty-year rule was applied to nearly all internal state documents in Britain at that time, not just those relating to the intervention in the Russian Civil War. Like the cemetery in Archangel containing the graves of men who died fighting in it, the popular ignorance of the intervention has more to do with benign neglect than any official effort to erase it from the public imagination. Nevertheless, this attitude is key to understanding Wright's goal of chronicling the service of the military personnel of the British Commonwealth who were stationed in Russia between 1918 and 1921. His book is very much a ground-level account of the men in uniform, as Wright focuses on the activities of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen engaged in the various campaigns against the Soviet regime. Given the considerable geographical scope of the war, he divides his coverage of the operations by each of the theatres where the men were deployed; though an understandable way of addressing the often quite separate efforts of the forces involved, it comes at the dual cost of a degree of repetition and the lack of any consideration for the interaction between events on the various fronts.

As Wright explains, Britain effectively stumbled into its intervention in Russia's internecine conflict. The first troops were sent to Russia's ports in 1918 to fight Germans rather than Bolsheviks, with the first British forces even landing in Murmansk at the invitation of the local *soviet*. With the collapse of the Imperial German war effort, however, the focus quickly shifted to aiding the Whites in their efforts to challenge Bolshevik control. Even before the peace treaty had been signed in Versailles, companies of men were mustered in Britain specifically for service in Russia, with demobilised veterans of the trenches enlisting for the pay and bonuses offered. Soon after their arrival, these recruits found themselves engaged in small-unit actions against Bolshevik forces, often in challenging political and environmental conditions.

One of the merits of Wright's book is his emphasis on the role that Commonwealth forces, such as the Canadian Malamute Company, played in the intervention. With their involvement typically noted only in passing in most British-centric accounts of the intervention, this has the effect of underscoring not just the multinational composition of Britain's effort, but the challenge Britain faced in cobbling together a force of sufficient size. This ultimately limited the role that British and Commonwealth units could play in the war. While the soldiers fought well and scored several victories against Red Army and Navy units, theirs was always intended to primarily be a holding action while the Whites organised and trained their own forces to defeat the Bolsheviks. Yet Wright's narrative makes clear the doomed nature of these hopes. Russian recruits for the White forces were often in poor physical condition and ill-prepared for the rigors of military service. Even more problematic, though, was the questionable loyalty of the men. This was true for both sides, as Wright notes the intelligence supplied by turncoats in the Bolshevik ranks on several occasions as well as the sometimes egregious inaccuracy of Bolshevik shells and bombs. Yet such efforts did not prevent the Red Army from maintaining a military effort, while the British soon discovered that Whites in Murmansk, Archangel, Siberia, and southern Russia often could not muster a coherent force in response. By the end of the war, the British and Commonwealth forces were forced to scuttle donated vessels and crush planes under the treads of tanks (before driving the tanks themselves into the sea) prior to their evacuation in order to deny the equipment to advancing Red Army units.

Such an ignominious end provides a tragic tint to the heroism Wright details in his book. As a testament to their sacrifices, it

is an unqualified success as he describes sympathetically but not uncritically their struggles both on and off the battlefield. But even with chapters detailing intelligence activities and the experiences of British and Commonwealth prisoners-of-war held captive by the Bolsheviks, his book still falls short as a study of the military intervention overall. While Wright makes effective use of archival records, private materials, and the secondary literature relating to his subject, his sources are all from the British and Commonwealth side. This influences his narrative, as British and Commonwealth officers and men are identified by name and even provided with service histories while their opposite numbers are simply faceless Bolsheviks. While the barrier of language may explain this omission, less excusable is his lack of any examination of the British policymaking behind the intervention which could have been provided easily enough by drawing upon the ample scholarly work that has been done about the politics and diplomacy of the conflict over the past century.¹ In this respect, the title of Wright's book does a disservice to his subject; readers who pick it up expecting an account of Winston Churchill's confrontation with Vladimir Lenin will be disappointed as Churchill himself is mentioned little more than a dozen times in the text and Lenin even fewer than that. More importantly, the absence of such coverage deprives the operations the author describes of any context, which artificially constrains his explanation of the outcome. It places an unfortunate limitation on Wright's achievement; while his book serves well as an account of British military activities in the Russian Civil War, in the end it provides only one piece of the incredibly complicated puzzle of Britain's involvement in it.

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¹ See, for example, W.P. and Z.K. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1945); Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Study in the Politics of Diplomacy, 1920-1924* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to War and Revolution, 1913-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); David Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Michael Graham Fry, *And Fortune Fleed: David Lloyd George, the First Democratic Statesman, 1916-1922* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); and the relevant volumes in the *Documents in British Foreign Policy* series. Wright does list Richard Ullman's three-volume *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961-72) in his bibliography, but his use of it in his text is minimal at best.