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## The Role of the American Press in Covering the Crisis of the Omsk Government of Admiral Kolchak in Summer 1919

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### Abstract

The research provides an overview of some key issues related to Civil War and foreign intervention in Russia, which were reflected in the American press. The author notes the high awareness of the foreign press and its interest in the coverage of Russian 1918-1920 events, shows the specific perception of information by foreign correspondents. An attempt is made to trace the role of the press in shaping public opinion in the West countries, primarily in the United States, concerning the support of the intervention. The author pays special attention to the role of the American periodical press in covering the crisis of the Omsk Government of Admiral Kolchak in summer 1919.

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*Keywords:* Siberia, Kolchak, American press, intervention, Civil War

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### 1. Introduction

The Russian Civil War and foreign intervention that followed the Revolution of 1917 in Russia are the important chapter in the Russian history of XX century. The interest to the theme of Civil War and intervention in Russia continues to be unabated, despite the fact that these events took place almost 90 years ago. The appearance of a number of foreign studies about Civil War and Allied intervention, written by American, British and Canadian authors (Willett, 2003; Hudson, 2004; Isitt, 2010; Irvin, 2013), is the evidence of this fact. They were based only on

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archival and published sources. In this paper the author attempts to put into circulation some of the American newspapers (such as “The New York Times”) which earlier have not been subjected to source analysis.

Of course, newspaper articles cannot cardinaly change the overall picture of the history of foreign intervention and Civil war in Russia, but they allow to make it clear how the mass media can shape the public opinion in Western countries regarding the events in Russia and Siberia, especially in the United States, help to present the «American» point of view.

American press paid attention to the preparing of the intervention in Russia, to the debates in government circles in the US, Western Europe and Japan on this issue. The intervention itself, relationships between White governments and foreign invaders, the reasons for the collapse of counter-revolution and foreign intervention and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory of Siberia and the Far East had been discussed in the American press as well. The author revealed more than 1,500 articles and short notes on this problem on the pages of American newspapers.

The press was to create in the eyes of a reader a positive image of the forces opposing the Bolsheviks, to form an opinion about the noble mission of US troops, which were sent by the government for thousand miles from their country.

American newspapers paid much attention to various anti-Soviet government formations in Eastern Russia. The Government of Admiral Kolchak, who came to power after the coup on the night of November 18, 1918, his struggle against the Bolsheviks and his relationship with the Allies, were among the central topics for discussion (Glushchenko & Fominykh, 2012).

The theme “Kolchak and the Allies” certainly was in the focus of the American press. It was repeatedly appealed by Carl W. Ackerman, the correspondent of “The New York Times”, who knew the Russian language, traveled through Siberia and had a conversation with Admiral A.V. Kolchak. He published a series of articles about the situation in Siberia that became a basis for his book “Trailing the Bolsheviks”, published in the United States in 1919.

The greatest number of publications devoted to the Russian events in general and in Siberia especially appeared in American newspapers during the successful offensive of Kolchak's troops in the spring of 1919 in the direction of Moscow (Omsk Government, 1919; Red armies, 1919; Allied gunboats, 1919; Kolchak plans move, 1919). This attack raised hopes that Kolchak soon overthrow the Soviet regime and liberate Russia from the Bolsheviks. Therefore the Paris Peace Conference has discussed the issue of recognition Kolchak’s regime as the All-Russian Government.

The newspaper articles also attract attention because it was very important on what page the publication was located, which articles were located near them, so we can understand the importance and relevance of information provided for the reader. As for the publications on the topic of intervention and Civil War in Russia, they were usually placed on the front or first pages. It is, of course, the evidence of the close attention of the press to the events in Russia.

## **2. Objectives and methodology of the research**

The main purpose of the research is to reveal the place and role of the American periodical press in covering the crisis of the Omsk Government of Admiral A.V. Kolchak in the summer 1919.

The basic scientific principles that the study is based on are principle of historicism, objectivity and systemacity. The principle of objectivity assumes comprehensive and integrated approach to the materials published in newspapers, to the interpretation of the events of the Civil War and intervention in Siberia and the Far East, as well as critical attitude toward them.

The main research method is comparative historical one. Having studied the American periodicals of the above mentioned period the author made an attempt to compare this source with the information from the other ones such as American diplomatic correspondence, published documents, memoirs of participants of the events, Siberian press. The aim was to obtain the fullest idea of the place of the US newspapers in coverage of the events of the Civil War and intervention in Siberia and the Far East, especially during the summer 1919. Comparative genetic method enabled to retrace changes of the role and functions of the US periodicals during the whole period of the American participation in the Civil War and intervention in Siberia and the Far East. Chronological and problem method

enabled to reveal how during the Civil War and intervention the accents of interests in US press concerning the events under consideration had been changing.

During research the author also used some elements of the content-analysis method. The most useful was the method of “selection of models”, i.e. selection of typical articles, issues etc. (Alexeyev, 1969). It consists in formation of groups of periodicals, similar in terms of any essential sign allowing to extrapolate findings and conclusions based on the materials of one issue to the whole group. The use of this method enabled to reveal what subjects of the events of the summer 1919 were of interest for the US media, how many times one subject or another was mentioned on the newspapers. Each of the articles was taken for count. In case of mixed content of the article, it was put into any theme depending on prevailing subject.

### 3. Results of the research

By the summer of 1919 the Red Army reached the number of 1,5 million. Despite the spring Kolchak’s advances in the fight against the Bolsheviks, his army gradually began to retreat to the East. The American press in this situation was to strengthen the Allied Governments, to show the urgent need of Allied aid and recognition for the Omsk government, and to smooth over Admiral’s Army failures as well as possible.

Summer publications in the American press showed that the coverage of events in Siberia and the Far East, as well as the problem of recognition of the Kolchak’s Government was the most active for the entire period. In July and August 1919 “The New York Times” newspaper published from 25 to 40 articles per month. At the same time, the vast majority of those publications were devoted to calls for the need for the quickest recognition of the Omsk Government.

On June 7 the American press with reference to the French one reported about receiving by the Paris Press a “satisfactory acceptance” of Admiral Kolchak on the allied proposals on the conditions of his recognition (Kolchak’s answer received in Paris, 1919). However, it was noted that “Admiral Kolchak’s reply... makes reservations, concerning a Constituent Assembly, and also in respect to dealings with new States formed from Old Russia”. With reference to Paris, in the Siberian newspapers on June 13 it was noted: “Foreseeing that soon will be the recognition of the Omsk Government, [western – N.G.] newspaper paid a lot of interest to the resumption of trade with regions of Russia, liberated from the Bolsheviks” (Government bulletin, 1919; Siberian life, 1919).

Not all the foreign representatives spoke positively about the prospects of the anti-Bolshevik movement in Siberia. Thus, the British High Commissioner of Great Britain in Omsk Charles Eliot on June 12 informed his superiors: “... Both General Knox and General Janin believe that Kolchak's troops can do little this summer if the progress on other fronts or uprisings against the Bolshevik Government do not help them. The morale of the troops is low, the recruits are mostly come from the middle class, peasants are opposed the mobilization. Soldiers have little faith and enthusiasm, food and salaries are given irregularly, desertion reached enormous proportions” (Kolchak and the intervention, 1995).

According to the US Consul General at Irkutsk Harris, the expansion of US aid to Kolchak would be the most effective way to save Omsk regime. That is why he sent a telegram to the State Department, which advocated the provision of Kolchak Government loan of \$325 million (Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations, 1937). Few days later Harris reported to State Department disappointing news: “Situation on both Ufa and Perm fronts extremely serious. Russians hope that signing of peace [with Germany – N.G.] will now enable Allies to render Russia all possible assistance” (Ibid). Similar types of messages were received by the State Department from the military representatives of the United States. On 10 July, General Graves sent a report to the State Department, prepared by Major H.H. Slaughter about the situation at the front (Ibid). In that report he also brought disappointing information that “from Tiumen west all disorder and panic, no one in charge”. “Actual strength army at the front, – he reported, – unknown to any one”. The report contained details about abandonment Perm and Kungur by the Whites. In his memoirs G.K. Guins (1921) spoke about this retreat: “General Diterikhs decided to protect this [Third South – N.G.] army and gather all the forces at Tobol to stop the advance [of Reds – N.G.]. General Lebedev was still chief of staff and wanted to use the army to immediately strike the enemy ... I cannot judge which of the two generals was right. But the blow that Lebedev wanted to cause Reds near Chelyabinsk, ended with failure”.

The failure of Kolchak's offensive and subsequent hasty retreat deep into Siberia caused a lively discussion in the American press. The tone of publications became more pessimistic. On August 2, 1919 "The New York Times" newspaper reported the readers about the preparation of Admiral Kolchak's Government to move from Omsk to Irkutsk and about the collapse of Kolchak's army. The publication noted that "the Czechoslovak troops... have shared the general demoralization, and most of them insist on returning to their newly-established country, refusing to fight further in Russia".

A number of summer 1919 publications were dedicated to the crisis of Omsk Government and were associated with coverage of the United States Ambassador to Japan R. Morris's trip to Omsk in July and August. That trip was undertaken on the personal instructions of President Wilson who was concerned about events in Siberia. The meeting in Omsk also was attended by the generals Janin, Knox and Graves. This meeting, discussion of which began in the summer of 1919 and continued in the fall, became the most popular topic of American newspapers issues during that period. "The New York Times" newspaper devoted about 15 publications to the results of the meeting in which the recommendations of R. Morris concerning the recognition of the Omsk Government were transmitted.

Siberian press began to stir up the situation around the problem of recognition of Kolchak's Government yet before the arrival of R. Morris. Thus in one of the issues of "Siberian life" referring to the information from Washington it was reported that "published in Paris correspondence between Council of Four and Admiral Kolchak is recognized by all American newspapers de facto the recognition of the Government of Admiral Kolchak. All newspapers expressed pleasure about the establishment of this policy towards Russia. The decision to recognize the government of Admiral Kolchak meets the sympathy of society, which believes that recognition will accelerate the death of Bolshevism and its destruction in the United States" (Siberian life, 1919).

On July 13, 1919 "New York Tribune" published an article "This Is Kolchak" by John A. Embry. According to the author this was "the first American study of the strong man of Russia". The author considered Kolchak as "one man and only... with the task of organizing a new government and creating a new army". Recounting the events preceding the accession to power of Admiral Kolchak, Embry gave a detailed account of the activity of the Russian Provisional Government that was founded during the Ufa state conference in the mid-September 1918. He noted that in the Russian Provisional government there were two groups. The first one "wished to compromise with the Bolsheviki", but the other one had members who "no longer entertained any illusion concerning the illegal and criminal character of the Bolshevik Government". Among the supporters of the agreement with Bolsheviks American diplomat ranked the leaders of SR party V.M. Zenzinov and N.D. Avksentiev, who according to him "were rapidly approaching union with the Bolsheviki". The author supposed that it was them who "blocked any constructive efforts on the part of the government toward forming an army in Siberia to oppose Bolshevism", and that the activity of the Russian Provisional Government was doomed to failure. Describing the Kolchak's Government John Embry wrote that "Siberia at the present moment is enjoying the best government it has ever had in all its history".

After several weeks publications in "The New York Times" devoted to the Morris's visit acquired a slightly different tone. Thus on July 31, 1919 the article informed about ambassador's reports that he was sending to Washington every day. On those reports, as the author of the article wrote, he informed about the situation on the territory between Vladivostok and Omsk and he especially focused attention on the necessity of extension of economic support through the railway mission. The article also informed, that even though at that moment ambassador Morris just started studying political situation, his report were already filled with optimism. "He [Morris – N.G.] has brought out the fact, – the author wrote, – that the various branches of the Government have been coordinated. Admiral Kolchak and his ministers are actuated by the highest motives... and are devoting all their energies to the firm establishment of civil government".

About the results of meetings in Omsk and Morris's recommendations concerning the recognition of the Kolchak Government by the United States we can learn from his telegrams to the State Department between 8 and 11 August, 1919 (Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations, 1937). The essence of his proposals was to provide economic assistance to Kolchak with supplies, loans and introduction into circulation of banknotes (about 20 billion rubles), printed in the United States, as well as the assignment of 40,000 Allied troops to replace the Czechs. His telegram dated August 11 Morris ended with such words: "I emphasize again what appear to me in the limited field of my observation the three absolutely essential requirements: the formal recognition of the Kolchak Government, the grant

of credits and the dispatch of at least 25,000 American troops to assist in guarding the railway. Unless our policy includes all of these three measures we can do little if anything to help Russia by way of Siberia..." (Ibid). Morris noted that in his opinion "if recognition had been accorded three month ago the Kolchak Government would probably by this time be firmly entrenched and that the dangers which have more recently threatened it would not exist" (Envoy Morris, 1919).

Since the end of the summer, both the US and Siberian press began to link the recognition of the Omsk Government with its real power. On August 28, 1919 "Siberian Life" published the Russian Telegraph Agency representative's interview with the Japan Minister of Foreign Affairs. During the interview the Minister said: "The Japanese Government was the first to initiate the discussion about the recognition of the Omsk All-Russian Government. The Government of Japan also provided all possible economic assistance. It helped Siberia with military supplies. Recognition of the All-Russian Government depends on its real strength".

On 24 August, 1919 "The New York Times" published an article which with reference to the Ambassador R. Morris reported that the next 30 days would show Kolchak's Government strength. "Bolsheviki, – the authors wrote, – are making their last desperate effort against the Kolchak troops, and if they fail this time the Soviet Government in Russia will collapse". The optimism of the authors was supported by the fact that due to the official information "the Bolsheviki have not enough men or munitions to handle the situation on more than one front at a time". In the next issue of "The New York Times" the authors of the one article noted that "this looks uncomfortably like agreeing to give him [Kolchak – N.G.] our support if he can prove that he does not need it" (A report on Siberia, 1919).

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus the American press has sufficient information basis and analytical content, which allow to use it as a source for studying the history of the Civil War and intervention in Russia. The press could play an important role in figuring out how public opinion in Western countries was shaping to justify the participation in the intervention, to send troops to Russia, to support Omsk Government of Admiral Kolchak.

Publications of the summer 1919 indicate the growth of interest of the US newspapers toward the problem of recognition of the Government of Admiral A.V. Kolchak by the allied countries. Consul Morris's visit to Omsk caused a lively discussion in press. This visit that took place against the background of the first failures of Kolchak armies was used by the US press as a mean for strengthening of the authority of Omsk Government in the European countries' eyes, as well as for demonstration of the necessity of its official recognition. Almost every day publishing on their pages appeals "to keep given to Russian nation promises" the newspapers thereby played a particular role in delaying the USA participation in intervention. The important thing is that the newspapers often published different or even antipodal points of view. This indicates that the editorial board of the newspapers tended to publish only verified and impartial information, giving to the readers a chance to form their own opinion.

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