

### "A New Brest" or partial stabilisation? Review of the book: Anatoliy Smolin "New Brest" - The Treaty of Tartu (Soviet Russia - Finland), 1920

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# BOOK REVIEW

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## "A NEW BREST" OR PARTIAL STABILISATION? REVIEW OF THE BOOK: ANATOLIY SMOLIN "NEW BREST". THE TREATY OF TARTU (SOVIET RUSSIA – FINLAND), 1920.

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World War I, the revolutions in Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, and the fall and disintegration of the three empires led to the emergence of new states in Europe. The treaties signed at the Paris Peace Conference confirmed the outcome of the war but could not solve all the problems. New independent states found themselves in a tight place. Striving for international recognition, they had to both manoeuvre between great powers and settle disputes amongst themselves. The factors of instability included the civil war in Russia, the foreign intervention, and the Bolsheviks' vision of the world revolution. Several years had passed before the world achieved some stability. It was during that time that new treaties were signed. The agreements concluded by the RSFSR with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, and Finland in 1920 had particular significance in those conditions. They did not mean the abandonment of the idea of world revolution. Rather, they signalled a change in the agenda. Signed 100 years ago, these treaties still spark off fierce public and academic debate. Russian researchers do not pay equal attention to all the agreements. Several publications explore the treaty with Finland, whilst very few analyse the agreements with the Baltic States. The treaty with Georgia is not mentioned even in textbooks on the history of international relations. Despite the considerable attention paid to the relations between the RSFSR and Finland, there is a definite need for a serious investigation and summarising. This is exactly at what the book under review attempts — and does so very effectively.

When reviewing Anatoly Smolin's book, one cannot but note its impressive list of references. The author is well acquainted with the materials of the Russian State Archive of the Navy, documents, periodicals, and memoirs. Some of the

archive documents are presented in a scholarly work for the very first time. The Baltic Fleet had a pivotal role in the events of 1917–1920 in Russia's North-West, and the archive documents offer a perspective on the Soviet-Finnish relations of the time that is entirely different from that provided by foreign policy materials. The annexes contain an interesting selection of documents, which are published for the first time. They cast light on the position of the Russian maritime command on ceding Pechenga to Finland (Socialist Finland at the time), as well as on some other border disputes. The materials demonstrate what tough and much-debated discussions these were. Yet, the book would paint a more comprehensive picture if the author had included publications from Finnish periodicals.

The first chapter, 'The Baltic Fleet after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Finland', is the richest in archive materials. It concentrates on specific issues such as a demarcation line in the Gulf of Finland. The author stresses the difficulty of the negotiation, parties to which were not only the Soviet government and Finland but also Germany. The influence of the latter states increased substantially in the Baltic Sea region after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the intervention in Finland. The highlight of the chapter is the description of the Soviet-German negotiation on the Baltic Sea issues, including the demarcation of the Gulf of Finland. The talks took place in January 1918 in Riga and autumn 1918 in Libava. The Russian Navy did everything it could to secure the interests of the country in the Baltic Sea. The literature has not examined this negotiation before. Moreover, it is very rarely mentioned.

The second chapter, 'The confrontation', focuses primarily on the Soviet policy on the Finnish civil war. Whilst there is research on the demarcation of the Soviet-Finnish border, the relations between the two socialist countries — Soviet Russia and the Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic — are still poorly understood. Smolin explores some aspects of these strained relations. Naturally, Soviet Russia was setting an example to socialist Finland, which was interested in supporting Russia but had a completely independent position on some issues. This aspect deserves more detailed examination, as does the Bolsheviks' frustration over the defeat of socialist Finland.

The following three chapters focus on the key stages and course of the negotiation, which led to the Treaty of Tartu (1920).

Although the book has many virtues — it tackles its subject in a logical and well-reasoned manner, — it is not free of controversial elements.

One of them is the setting of the problem, namely, the way it is formulated in the title. Smolin determinedly draws a similarity between the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and the 1920 Treaty of Tartu, stressing that in both cases Soviet Russia temporarily ceded its territories to win more time, consolidate Bolshevik rule, and finally take back what had been lost. This comparison seems to be a considerable simplification. In 1918, the Bolsheviks had little doubt

about the forthcoming victory of the German revolution. The only thing left to discuss was whether it would happen in several weeks or months. In December 1920, the Bolsheviks' attitudes changed. Many of them felt dismayed when the Polish proletariat refused to support the Red Army, which was suffering a bitter defeat at Warsaw (Smolin mentions this fact). The notion of 'temporary and partial stabilisation' was coined later, but it was already evident that the old policy had to change to accommodate the new reality. Thus, the issue of border demarcation was off the agenda for many years to come.

Smolin aptly observes that the connection between the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and the Comintern is not yet fully clear. Moreover, the relationship between them seems to be more complex than it has been assumed so far. The problem is correctly formulated. Soviet politics pursued two goals — forging intergovernmental relations with other countries and advancing the world revolution (later, it will be referred to as the 'world revolutionary process'). Sometimes one would take precedence over the other. Of course, relations between the Comintern and national communist parties were not always cordial, especially, in the early years of the communist movement. The Communist Party of Finland was no exception. Unfortunately, the book pays little attention to the Comintern. Since many documents from the Comintern and the Communist Party of Finland have made public, the relations between the two institutions might have been considered in greater detail. Although the documents rarely mention the Treaty of Tartu, they could have given a more comprehensive idea of the atmosphere in which the Soviet leadership had to act and their perspective on the processes taking place in Finland.

One of the most intriguing questions pertaining to the subject of the book is whether the treaties concluded by Soviet Russia and its western neighbours in 1920—1921 meant that the country had joined the Versailles-Washington system. There is no consensus on this point. I believe that Soviet Russia deemed struggle against the new international order its primary foreign policy goal. Signing agreements with the Baltic States, Finland, and even Poland did not change anything. A slight shift occurred in 1934 when the USSR joined the League of Nations. Smolin's position on this subject remains unclear.

Nor does the book explain to what degree the parties adhered to the treaty. Probably, the situation was more complex than it might seem, and the agreement was violated by both the RSFSR and Finland. Further research is needed to establish whether Finland fulfilled its obligations to suppress the White Guard on its territory. Another possible area of research is the appraisal of the funding of the Communist Party of Finland by the Soviet government through the Comintern while most Finnish communists lived in the RSFSR as émigrés and planned to overthrow the government in their country. Russian and international scholars have very different opinions on these subjects, and, regrettably, Smolin does not consider them in his book. The direct connection between the treaty of 1920 and

the wars of 1939 and 1941 – 1944 seems unfounded. The two wars were inalienable parts of World War II and had their own logic and dynamics, which often had little to do with the Soviet-Finnish relations of the 1920s-1930s.

What might be subject to criticism is the unfortunate use of the language of the 1920s-1930s propaganda. It is not entirely appropriate for a text written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to call the legitimate government of Finland *byelofinny* (White Finns). There are other statements about Finnish policy borrowed from those decades without due revision.

Despite some debatable aspects and deficiencies, the book by Anatoly Smolin is an important step forward in exploring the complex problems of post-World War I international relations.

### **The author**

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