Winston Churchill and the Rise of Bolshevism 1917–1927

The period 1917 to 1927 was one of significant social and political upheaval and revolution across the world, but nowhere so much as in Russia, when on 7 November 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution took place. Power was transferred to the soviets across the country, ousting the Provisional Government which had ruled since the overthrow of the Tsar during the February Revolution earlier in the year. The newly formed Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic declared a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ posing a dramatic new challenge to international relations.

As G. H. Bennett succinctly summarises, Soviet Russia was ‘viewed with such concern because it existed in a variety of potential forms: internal subversion within Britain or the Empire; a victorious advance by the Red Army across Europe; hostile action against Britain’s Asian Empire; the undermining of established conventions of international behaviour with the repudiation of Russia’s debts and nationalisation of foreign investments; and the danger that the economic and social collapse of Russia would spread to other countries.’¹

The fear induced by the October Revolution amongst British policymakers will be explored throughout this paper, with a focus on Winston S. Churchill’s attitude and policies towards various significant events which took place during this period, in an attempt to understand the psyche of the upper-class during this period of instability. Born

in 1874, Churchill was, in David Cannadine’s words, ‘by birth and by connection, a
member of Britain’s charmed “inner circle”’. Churchill became probably the most
significant British politician of the first half of the 20th century, best known for leading
Britain in the Second World War and later for his ‘Iron Curtain’ speech. But during the
Lloyd George Coalition Government of 1918-1922, he came to be ‘widely regarded as a
reactionary’—seemingly a departure from his prior reputation as a ‘radical’ in favour of
social progress—and made a name for himself as the foremost anti-Bolshevik and anti-
socialist in Government.\textsuperscript{3}

Anti-communism in the interwar period is a relatively neglected topic, overshadowed by
the ‘Red Scare’ after 1945. Many who have explored this area conclude that Churchill’s
hostility toward the nascent Bolshevik state was strategic, and focused on British national
interests.\textsuperscript{4} Yet, while strategic considerations of course played a significant role, there were
fundamental ideological reasons for Churchill’s attitude and policies at this time. Though
some have referred to this period as a ‘small cold war’,\textsuperscript{5} this paper will support the less
popular view that the Cold War truly began when the Bolsheviks came to power, and that
this is vindicated by Churchill’s position during this period.

\textsuperscript{3} Cannadine, D. ‘Churchill and the Pitfalls of Family Piety’, in Blake, R. and Louis, W. R. (eds.) Churchill: A

\textsuperscript{4} Carlton, D. ‘Churchill and the Two Evil Empires’, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 11 (Dec
2001) 331.

\textsuperscript{5} Yergin, D. Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State (Boston: Houghton
This paper will argue that Churchill, as a representative of the ruling capitalist class, embodied a militant expression of British ruling class fears of, and reaction to, the Bolshevik Revolution and the prospect of communism spreading throughout Europe and Britain. Churchill’s attitude and policies during this time convey how ideologically polarised politics had become in Britain and Europe—due in large part to the effects of the Russian Revolution—and reveal the some of the seeds that sowed the growth of fascism throughout Europe.

The October Revolution and the Great War

The Bolshevik Revolution presented more than simply a military or diplomatic challenge to the western liberal democracies. It took place at a moment in history when social order was extremely fragile across all countries that had fought in the Great War, and presented a radical ideological challenge to the capitalist world system. As G. H. Bennett writes, ‘the execution of Czar Nicholas II, the nationalising of property, and the anti-capitalist and international revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik state’ caused deep anxiety amongst not only the British ruling classes, but, indeed, amongst the rest of the ruling class across Europe.

Churchill epitomised this attitude. He had a ‘primal hatred of the Bolshevik revolution’, and ‘his emotions overcame him’ when he spoke of the Bolsheviks, employing his most

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7 Bennett, British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period, 62.
venomous rhetoric against them.\textsuperscript{8} He considered the Bolsheviks ‘the enemies of the human race and must be put down at any cost’.\textsuperscript{9} Lloyd George remarked at the time how, as an aristocrat, Churchill’s ‘ducal blood ran cold’ at the fate of the Russian nobility.\textsuperscript{10}

The immediate strategic challenge faced by the allies after the October Revolution was that Russia had withdrawn from the war against Germany, taking effect from 3 March 1918 with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This caused great anxiety in diplomatic circles in Britain, and meant that the allied powers had to despatch troops across Russia ‘in a frantic effort to reconstitute an eastern front.’\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, Russia was engaged in a civil war between the Bolshevik-led Red Army and the anti-Bolshevik White Army, whom the allied troops began to assist.

Yet when the Central Powers collapsed at the end of 1918, ending the Great War, doubt was cast over the necessity of allied intervention in Russia because, of course, the revival of the Eastern front against Germany was no longer necessary.\textsuperscript{12} As Sharman Kadish explains, this gave way to ‘a purely ideological struggle against Bolshevism’, and ‘as a logical extension of this policy, the Allies wooed the new nation states which were emerging in Eastern Europe—especially Poland—to act as a bulwark against both the

\textsuperscript{8} Addison, P. \textit{Churchill on the Home Front, 1900-1955} (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 211.
\textsuperscript{10} Lloyd George, D. cited in Addison, \textit{Churchill on the Home Front}, 211.
\textsuperscript{11} Addison, \textit{Churchill on the Home Front}, 211.
spread of Bolshevism and German revival.’\textsuperscript{13} Churchill, aspiring to be ‘the grand strategist of allied intervention’, would become the leading advocate of full-scale, collective military action in Russia to bring down the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{The World Crisis, 1911–1918}, Churchill recalls how, on 11 November 1918, he proposed the creation of great European army—an ‘armistice dream’—which would include the defeated Germans, with the purpose of ‘liberating’ Russia and rebuilding Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{15}

Churchill was Minister of Munitions when the Great War came to an end, but upon becoming Secretary of State for War in January 1919, he gained direct responsibility for the British troops remaining in Russia and threw ‘the whole of his dynamic energy and genius into organising an armed intervention’ against what he called the ‘nameless beast’ of Bolshevism.\textsuperscript{16} He would reveal his readiness for full-scale war against the Bolsheviks later in a speech in April 1919, where he remarked that ‘of all the tyrannies in history, the Bolshevist tyranny is the worst, the most destructive, and the most degrading. It is sheer humbug to pretend that it is not far worse than German militarism’.\textsuperscript{17} Supported by colleagues Lord Curzon and Alfred Milner, Churchill urged Lloyd George to launch a full-scale military intervention in Russia to replace what he saw as the half-hearted effort which the Allied leaders hoped would be sufficient to overthrow a Bolshevik regime.

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which had repudiated its debts and promoted ‘permanent’ world-wide revolution.\textsuperscript{18} Prime Minister David Lloyd George remarked at the time that this was ‘a purely mad’ policy developed ‘out of hatred of Bolshevik principles’.\textsuperscript{19}

Propaganda was dispersed across Britain in an attempt to mobilise public support for intervention against the Bolsheviks. The anti-Bolshevik press ‘focused less on [Bolshevism’s] political implications than on graphic accounts of alleged … terror and ferocity’, as citizens were called upon to rally ‘in defence of Western civilization.’\textsuperscript{20} Churchill contributed with his own articles in which he would berate the Bolsheviks as ‘failures’, ‘criminals’ and ‘deranged’.\textsuperscript{21} As Gisela Lebzelter highlights, ‘as proof for the Bolsheviks’ “mad desire for a return to the primitive” it was frequently adduced that they communalized women.’ This was, of course, recognised to be entirely false, though the idea ‘was fully exploited in a special pamphlet addressed to female British voters’—to whom the vote had recently been given to those aged over 28—‘in which they were encouraged to use their newly acquired democratic rights in the support of civilisation against barbarism’. It was alleged that the ‘Bolsheviks allowed no proper education, … they banished religion and forced all women between the age of seventeen and thirty-two to register with local authorities to be at the disposal of any citizen who applied for them’.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18} Bennett, \textit{British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period}, 60.


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{ibid.}, 17.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{ibid.}, 17 - 18.
Churchill’s grand efforts for war would be in vain, however, as he ultimately failed to recruit enough support from the Government. ‘I have found your mind so obsessed by Russia,’ Lloyd George wrote to Churchill. Lloyd George felt that all remaining British forces of intervention must be retired, and ‘the White Russians were not worth lavish military or financial assistance’ due to their reactionary nature—representing ‘the propertied classes whose attitude had been the spur to revolution in 1917’. Furthermore, it would be difficult to win over the British public’s support for further deployment of troops after such a long and bloody world war.

Churchill’s aim, as Paul Addison explains, was to overthrow the communist regime and establish a liberal constitution. This would have been the desirable outcome for all British policymakers involved in the debate, but the main objection of Lloyd George and others in government ‘was not that a liberal Russia was undesirable, but that it was impossible’, and ‘Britain did not possess the financial or military means to bring about a counter-revolution’. Furthermore, Lloyd George insisted that there was ‘no surer way of establishing the power of Bolshevism in Russia … [than] to attempt to suppress it with foreign troops’.

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23 Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 211.

24 Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, 135.

25 Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 211.

Churchill’s crusade for intervention didn’t end there, however. In 1919, he would write that there could be ‘no peace in Europe until Russia is restored’, and the policy was considered once again by the War Cabinet during the Paris Peace Conference at his personal request. He stressed that the Bolsheviks ‘were getting stronger every day’ and ‘foresaw the menace of an eventual alliance between Germany, Japan and a Bolshevik Russia’. In a speech at the Aldwych Club on 11 April, Churchill ‘reminded the new German authorities that the Kaiser’s Government had triggered the Bolshevik revolution by sending Lenin back to Russia in a sealed train’ and proposed that fighting against Bolshevism could be their route to redemption. ‘By combating Bolshevism, by being the bulwark against it, Germany may take the first step towards ultimate reunion with the civilised world’, he trumpeted. And, in an attempt to bring around the support of the French for his proposals, Churchill played on France’s anxieties of a resurgent Germany, appealing to their Minister of Munitions, Louis Loucheur:

Understand, my friend, that I am not thinking of any immediate danger, but only of the dangers of five or ten years hence. I fear more than I can express the re-union of Russia and Germany, both determined to get back to what they have lost in the war, the one through being our ally, the other through being our foe, and both convinced that acting together they will be irresistible.

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28 Northedge and Wells, Britain and Soviet Communism, 29.
30 ‘Supplies For Germany.’ The Times, 12 Apr. 1919.
Churchill was not directly involved in the Paris Peace Conference negotiations, though he was outspoken throughout, making various attempts to influence its outcome. He did, however, make an appearance at the Conference in the absence of Lloyd George, of which he took full advantage as he tried to persuade the peacemakers into pursuing his ‘armistice dream’ of a ‘great European army’ including the Germans to combat the Bolsheviks. Lloyd George was deeply concerned that Churchill was ‘planning a war against the Bolsheviks’ and sent a message imploring him ‘not to commit this country to what would be a purely mad enterprise out of hatred of Bolshevik principles’. Plans for intervention were abandoned; the Russian Civil War took its course, and Churchill was yet again unsuccessful in fulfilling his dream.

The British government had already by 31 March 1919 given a total of £45.5m to the White Army forces in Russia. As 1919 drew to a close all remaining British forces had been withdrawn from Russian territory, and by February 1920 the Russian civil war was effectively over after the execution of the key White leader General Kolchak. The Bolsheviks emerged victorious and ‘the intervention and White counter-revolt had ended in ignominious and expensive failure.’ Churchill, quoted in 1929, believed that ‘had the Great War been prolonged into 1919, intervention, which was gathering momentum every

32 Northedge and Wells Britain and Soviet Communism, 29.
33 Keeble, Britain and the Soviet Union, 53.
35 Morgan, Consensus and Disunity, 135.
36 Bennett, British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period, 60-1.
week, must have been militarily successful. ... The armistice thus destroyed at a stroke the principle motivation of the Western Governments—and their peoples—for intervening in the Russia Civil War in any really determined fashion.'

Consolidating Europe

Churchill’s urge for intensified Allied intervention in Russia was not just a matter of destroying Bolshevism in Russia alone. He was greatly fearful of the threat it posed to governments across Europe. As Addison summarises, ‘British policy-makers looked out upon a world disordered by the Great War. Germany was on the brink of chaos and the whole of Europe lay under the shadow of the Bolshevik revolution. The triumph of Sinn Fein had resulted in the collapse of British authority over most of Ireland. Britain itself was swept by a tide of industrial unrest and the Government feared the declaration of a general strike.’ Churchill strongly believed that ‘every effort must be made to repair these grievous blows to the European order.’

The Communist International—the ‘Comintern’—was set up by the Bolsheviks in 1919 to spread the October Revolution throughout the world. As Inbal Rose writes, the expansionist and subversive nature of Bolshevism ‘exposed post-war Europe to the threat of “combined invasion and revolution”’. If not repulsed, it would be nearly impossible ‘for Europe as a whole to get back to something like normal conditions’. Thus, the British

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38 Ibid., 5.


government had to shape its Allied policy for Europe within the context of the growing appeal of Bolshevism.\footnote{Rose, I. *Conservatism and Foreign Policy During the Lloyd George Coalition 1918-1922* (London: Frank Cass, 1999) 204.}

This fear of Bolshevist expansionism was highlighted in many speeches and letters written by Churchill during this time. For example, in a speech given on the 3rd of January 1920 at Sunderland, he warned of the threat that Bolshevism posed to Europe and the British Empire.\footnote{‘World Problems.’ *The Times* [London, England] 5 Jan. 1920: 7. The Times Digital Archive. [Date Accessed: 15 Dec 2014]}

Twelve days later, a British War Office communiqué, drawing on Churchill’s speech, warned that if Bolshevism was not restrained, it could ‘join hands with the rising nationalism of Islam in the East and with the desperate nationalism of a defeated Germany in the West’.\footnote{Thompson, J. M. *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966) 361.}

Churchill also recognised that to allow the suffering that the German people faced in the aftermath of the war could exacerbate the problem of Bolshevism. On the 10th of November 1918—the eve of the armistice with Germany—he remarked that ‘it was important to get Germany on its legs again for fear of the spread of bolshevism’. This was not popular with Prime Minister Lloyd George, as there was an election coming up at the time, and he was at the head of a coalition government which had promised ‘to squeeze Germany until the pips squeaked’.\footnote{Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union*, 5.} Nevertheless, Churchill would continue to argue his
case at a speech in Dundee on the 27th of November. While Germany ‘would be made to pay to the utmost limits of their capacity for the damage that they have done’, he added that ‘we must be careful about this matter, for if Germany collapsed into absolute Bolshevism there would be nothing to be got out of her.’

Churchill’s fears appeared to be coming true. Germany experienced huge political and social turmoil as the Great War drew to an end and the country descended into economic ruin. ‘On November 3rd 1918,’ Anthony Read narrates, ‘sailors of the German High Seas Fleet based at Kiel staged a full-scale mutiny. Local workers’ unions declare a general strike in support, and by evening red flags were flying over the whole city. The mutinies and strikes spread swiftly to Germany’s other northern ports, then to major cities, where soldiers’ and workers’ councils, modelled on the Russian soviets, took control.’ This would lead to the abdication of the Kaiser by 9 November, resulting in several months of revolutionary turmoil lasting into 1919, similar to what Russia had experienced throughout 1917. On hearing of the upheaval in Germany, Churchill implored Lloyd George to ‘rush a dozen great ships crammed with provisions into Hamburg’. In January 1919 the Spartacist uprising took place in Germany as ‘the ultimate horror of a German-Russian Communist front presented itself’ to the world. Churchill was certain that a


'Bolshevist or Spartacist Government would try to spread a civil or social war throughout the entire world'.

While Churchill attempted to realise his ‘armistice dream’ at the Paris Peace Conference, he also pushed for a ‘generous peace’ with Germany. He was against ‘any threat to renewed war if the Germans refused to sign the Treaty,’ and insisted to the War Cabinet that Germany be ‘treated humanely and adequately fed, and her industries restarted’. On 3 January, he remarked in a speech that the Allies must be ‘very careful’ that they don’t press Germany ‘to a point where she breaks under … pressure.’ Two months later, when the Conference had concluded, he would comment to Lloyd George that, though Russia may have ‘gone into ruin … Germany may perhaps still be saved’. He continued:

You ought to tell France that we will make a defensive alliance with her against Germany if and only if she entirely alters her treatment of Germany & loyally accepts a British policy of help & friendship towards Germany. Next you shd [sic] send a great man to Berlin to help consolidate the anti-Spartacist anti-Ludendorff elements into a strong left centre block. For this task you have to have two levers I. Food and credit, wh [sic] must be generously accorded in spite of our own difficulties (wh [sic] otherwise will worsen) 2ndly Early revision of the Peace Treaty by a Conference to wh [sic] New Germany shall be

49 ibid.

50 Gilbert, Churchill’s Political Philosophy, 65.


invited as an equal partner in the rebuilding of Europe. Using these levers it
ought to be possible to rally all that is good & stable in the German nation.53

Churchill’s ‘succinct recipe’ for a British policy to counter these issues was ‘Kill the
Bolshie, Kiss the Hun’, and ‘Feed Germany; fight Bolshevism; make Germany fight
Bolshevism’.54 Churchill’s attempts to influence and revise the Peace Conference were
shaped considerably by his fears of the ‘Bolshevik virus’ penetrating German soil. Nearly
‘every speech he made about Germany in these post-war years included references to
Russia’.55 A weak Germany would surely be a more vulnerable Germany, and if
Bolshevism took root there, it would surely spark revolution throughout the rest of
Europe.

Indeed, the idea that Bolshevism could become a global phenomenon was not far removed
from reality. Even without the question of Germany, post-war Europe was subject to a
wave of strikes, mutinies and rebellions which had serious potential to follow the
revolutionary example of Russia. This was seen in Austria, Hungary, France,
Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in Europe.56 Italy, for example, experienced what is now
referred to as the ‘Biennio Rosso’—the Red Two Years—from 1919 to 1920. Italy saw ‘wave
after wave of strikes, land occupations, demonstrations, steer actions, [and] conflict’ across
the country. A total 1,267,953 workers would strike in 1920, losing 16,398,227 working

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54 Ramsden, ‘Churchill and the Germans’, 130.
55 *ibid*.
And, by September that year, half a million metalworkers had occupied their
factories throughout Italy.’ Plants were occupied by factory councils defended by ‘Red
Guards’. Trade union membership swelled, and membership of the socialist union
federation, known as the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (General Confederation of
Labor) reached two million, a huge increase from the mere 250,000 members it had at the
end of war. In a letter to the Italian Socialist Party in August 1920, Lenin, Bukharin and
Zinoviev wrote that Italy at this point possessed ‘all the most important conditions for a
genuinely popular, great proletarian revolution’ and that ‘Italy will be Soviet’.

Social Upheaval in Britain and the Empire

Britain too faced social division and upheaval in the months following the armistice. In
fact, Chanie Rosenberg has claimed that ‘Britain came closer to a workers’ revolution than
ever before or since’, as Britons faced increasing food and housing shortages,
unemployment and slow demobilisation of the army, whilst war profiteers enjoyed
‘conspicuous luxury’. Throughout January 1919 there were a series of mutinies and
strikes by soldiers, both at home and abroad. At one point, ‘in the Calais area, 20,000 men
and large numbers of women auxiliaries and nurses set up strike committees in every
camp, coordinated by an elected council of twenty to thirty soldiers and sailors that met in

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60 Rosenberg, 1919, 1.
cafés and issued daily orders and even permits.’\footnote{Read, ‘Reds Under the Bed’, 51.} As Anthony Read writes, this was ‘looking dangerously like a soviet-style insurrection’. At home, a total of thirty-eight coalminers’ strikes had materialised by the end of January, by which point they had brought Belfast and Glasgow ‘to a standstill’. The Secretary of State for Scotland reported to the cabinet that, in Glasgow, ‘this is not a strike but a Bolshevist rising’. Ten thousand troops were sent in to restore order as a result.\footnote{ibid.}

Later, on 26 February, there was a ‘full-scale British mutiny at Archangel’ in Russia, in which the Yorkshire regiment ‘refused to relieve American troops on the Dvina river front.’ French troops also followed suit.\footnote{Kettle, Churchill and the Archangel Fiasco, 178.} In September, the railway workers’ union called a strike of its 600,000 members in an attempt to save their wages, which were threatened to be cut. The government treated the strike as ‘a national emergency’, claiming that men were ‘being used by extremists for sinister purposes’.\footnote{Read, ‘Reds Under the Bed’, 51.} After nine days, the strikers would be successful, maintaining their wages and ending the strike. The British government would reveal the extent of its concern over the threat of Bolshevism at home when it ordered its intelligence agency ‘to submit fortnightly reports on “revolutionary organisations in the United Kingdom”, covering amongst others the activities of workers’ organizations, the Independent Labour Party and the suffragettes’.\footnote{Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism in England, 16.}
Churchill recognised the class polarisation emerging in British society after the armistice, and stressed in a speech in Dundee on 26 November 1918 that, in the postwar era, Britain needed to continue the national effort free from class conflict:

> Five years of concerted effort by all classes, like what we have given in the war, but without its tragedies, would create an abundance and prosperity in this land, aye, throughout the worlds, such as has never yet been dreamt of. Five years of faction, of bickering, of class jealousies and Party froth, will not merely not give us prosperity, it will land us in utter and universal privation.\(^{66}\)

Just over a year and a half later, in July 1920, he would write in the *Evening News*:

> The Bolshevik aim of world revolution can be pursued equally in peace or war. In fact, a Bolshevist peace is only another form of war. If they do not for the moment overwhelm with armies, they can undermine with propaganda. … The peasants are roused against the landlords, the workmen against their employers, the railways and public services are induced to strike, the soldiers are incited to mutiny and kill their officers, the mob are raised against the middle classes to murder them, to plunder their houses, to steal their belongings, to debauch their wives and carry off their children; an elaborate network of secret societies entangles honest political action; the Press is bought wherever possible.\(^{67}\)

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\(^{66}\) Churchill, W. S. (26 Nov 1918), cited in Gilbert, *Churchill’s Political Philosophy*, 68.

In fact, the class polarisation which was emerging in Britain in the years after the war was such that there began to be speculation over ‘the death of the middle class … and the vast political dangers that would ensue if it were not revived’.  

Churchill’s concerns about Bolshevism were not confined merely to Britain and Europe. He was an ardent defender of the British Empire, and was acutely aware of the potential influence that the Russian Revolution and the Comintern could have in colonies and dependencies. He would recall in 1938 how, during the period in question, he ‘strove with all his energy against Communism ‘because at that time I considered Communism, with its idea of world revolution, the greatest danger to the British Empire’. This was a time of great social unrest across the Empire, particularly in Egypt and India, as their respective independence movements were challenging the authority of the British. Churchill would speak of the ‘disturbing’ of Afghanistan and Persia by Bolshevism, and the ‘great agitation and unrest’ they had provoked in ‘hundreds of millions’ in India, who had supposedly ‘hitherto dealt in peace and tranquility under British rule’, in a speech in January 1920.

He continued:

A new force of a turbulent warlike character has come into being in the highlands of Asia Minor, who reach out with one hand to the advancing Bolshevist armies from the north, and with the other to the offended Arabs in the south. A conjunction of forces between Russian Bolshevism and

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68 Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, 299 - 301.


70 Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 199.

Turkish Mahommedanism would be an event full of danger to many States, but to no State in the world would it be more full of danger than to the British Empire, the greatest of all Mohammedan States.\textsuperscript{72}

Later that year, he would suggest a fundamental link of Bolshevism between the turmoil in Egypt, India and Ireland:

The danger at the present time does not exist only, or even mainly, in these islands. What of India, Egypt, Ireland? Do you not think it possible that there is some connexion between all the revolutionary and subversive elements by which we are now being assailed? When they saw all these movements from so many different quarters springing up simultaneously, did it not look as though there was a dead set being made against the British Empire? Why, for instance, should the Egyptian extremists give money to the \textit{Daily Herald}? Why does Lenin send them money, too? Why does he also send money to Sinn Fein? We know that intense efforts are being made to cause a great breakdown of trade and industry at home in the hopes of creating unemployment and consequently suffering and discontent … In fact there is developing a world-wide conspiracy against our country, designed to deprive us of our place in the world and to rob us of the fruits of victory. … Whether it were the Irish murder gang or the Egyptian vengeance society, or the seditious extremists in India, or the arch-traitors we had at home, they will feel the weight of the British arm.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{72} ‘World Problems.’ \textit{The Times}, 5 Jan. 1920.

In February 1921, Churchill took up a position in the Colonial Office, leaving the War Office. This meant that he was no longer directly responsible for dealing with Soviet Russia. Yet, Churchill being Churchill, this loss of direct influence on policy-making did not mark an end to his obsession with ‘everything connected with Bolshevism’, as he continued to loudly voice his views ‘both in private and in public – sometimes at considerable apparent risk to his chances of political advancement’. Indeed, his role as the new Secretary of State for the Colonies meant that he could draw further attention to the threat that the ‘world-wide Bolshevik conspiracy’ posed to the British Empire and its informal influences in Asia and the Middle East.

**Trade and Recognition of the Soviet Regime**

As Leon Trotsky described in a speech in September 1921, ‘If, in such a devastated country as Russia, a country exhausted and shaken to the depths, a famine which has gripped tens of millions of people has not reduced the Soviet apparatus to a state of complete helplessness; … if the apparatus continues to work non-stop under these extremely arduous conditions – this proves to the bourgeoisie … that the Soviet power is not a passing or a temporary phenomenon, but a factor to be reckoned with for a certain number of years to come.’

The British government now faced the dilemma of forming a new policy towards a power against which it had waged undeclared war only a few years before. Indeed, with the


demobilisation of British troops, intervention was firmly off the cards, and would have been a policy much resented by the public too. The problem of Bolshevik Russia was not one that was going to go away; there were few reasonable options other than ‘to accept the fact that they would have to coexist’, and so Lloyd George took the steps to open up trade.\textsuperscript{76}

Yet trade with Soviet Russia was certainly not without its advantages for Britain. There had been a severe rupture in government-labour relations and massive unemployment took hold in Britain from the summer of 1920; by Christmas 1921, 18 per cent of the working population would be unemployed. Kenneth O. Morgan highlights that, ‘in every major staple industry … the active labour force fell to an unprecedentedly low level. … the Cabinet recognized from the summer of 1920 onwards that a massive trade slump was coming and that it would be on a prolonged, world-wide scale hitherto unknown’.\textsuperscript{77} In Cabinet on 17 November, former Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour lamented: ‘There are no orders coming in. Customers won’t buy. We may have the worst period of unemployment any of us have ever known.’\textsuperscript{78} Trotsky too, was aware of this situation. In the same speech of September 1921, he explained that ‘Europe urgently needs this [trade agreement], for it is now paying the price for the war, in the form of a terrible economic crisis’.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Bennett, \textit{British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period}, 61.
\textsuperscript{77} Morgan, \textit{Consensus and Disunity}, 281.
\textsuperscript{78} Bennett, \textit{British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period}, 68-9.
\textsuperscript{79} Trotsky, \textit{The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky}, 329.
As Stanley Baldwin observed at the time, the Members of Parliament that had been elected in 1918 were known as ‘a lot of hard-faced men who looked as if they had done well out of the war … a rather successful looking business kind’.  

Meanwhile, Lord Davidson (later 1st Viscount Davidson) noted that ‘the old- fashioned country gentlemen, are scarcely represented at all.’

Around two hundred and sixty business men had been elected to the Commons, and a further two hundred and seventy-seven were in the House of Lords.

Lloyd George’s supporters in parliament ‘represented capital to an average value to fifty-one million pounds to a head.’ However, there was a split in the interests of the propertied classes in parliament. Those who had had property in Russia nationalised, and so had great claims against the Soviet government, supported an uncompromising attitude towards Russia.

However, at the same time, other MPs encouraged trade precisely due to the dire economic circumstances, and saw trade in Russia as a way to help aid recovery and thus expand their business.

‘Grudgingly,’ G. H. Bennett writes, Cabinet had accepted that ‘if Britain lacked the men and money to secure the overthrow of the Bolshevik government, then they must try and live with the new regime.’

On 18 November, the day after Balfour’s cabinet speech, a

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82 White, Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution, 235.

83 ibid., 236.

84 ibid., 238.

85 Bennett, British Foreign Policy During the Curzon Period, 74.
trade agreement was concluded with Russia. Having made a point of warning manufacturers of the risk of trading with Russia, Churchill put himself at the head of the irreconcilable faction of British business alongside Lord Curzon. He voted against the decision, infuriated that an agreement with the Bolsheviks had ever even been considered. Churchill was an obstacle to any government that wished to establish peaceful relations with the Soviets, and he appeared ‘ready, indeed eager, to resign over the Russian policy of the Coalition government.’

Churchill’s attitude towards the agreement would cool off by December 1921, ‘though he continued to regard [the Soviet regime] as “the tyrannic Government of these Jew Commissars”’. However he would quickly swing back to ‘unambiguous hostility’ and was ready again to resign in March 1922 as Lloyd George moved to establish general European de jure recognition of the Bolshevik government, on the condition that the Soviets agreed not to spread Bolshevik propaganda in Europe. This agreement would never materialise, however, as the Genoa Conference where this would be discussed broke down due to France’s lack of cooperation. Churchill remained in his position, but threatened to resign once again when Lloyd George attempted to reopen negotiations for Soviet recognition in July 1922, though again this would come to nothing as Churchill’s aggression was enough to make Lloyd George back down.

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87 Ibid., 74.

88 Ibid., 70.

89 Carlton, Churchill and the Soviet Union, 30.
Churchill’s behaviour throughout this episode was not completely down to a raw hatred for Bolshevism; it was also opportunistic. As David Carlton highlights, by 1922 the Coalition Government led by Lloyd George was regarded to be on the brink of collapse, ‘and Churchill, as the most prominent of Lloyd George’s Liberal followers, cannot have been unaware that the most likely outcome would be a general election that would produce a new House of Commons polarised between Conservative and Labour – with Liberals like himself badly squeezed’. Thus, his hardline anti-Bolshevik stance at this time may have also been convenient in strengthening his appeal to Conservatives in case he might wish to abandon the Liberals. The coalition was ended by the Conservatives in October 1922.

The Labour Movement and Anti-Semitism

As Paul Addison highlights, Churchill’s political shift to the right was not an isolated affair, but rather a symptom of the increasingly polarised nature of British politics during the early interwar period. ‘The disintegration of the Liberal Party, the rise of Labour, the syndicalist challenge, and the fear of Bolshevik subversion brought out in him the latent conservatism of the Edwardian era.’ Those on the right increasingly ‘failed to make the distinction between one type of socialist and another’ and “Bolshie” was popularly used as a term of abuse for those of leftist politics. To make things worse for the right, a

\[\text{Refer to Addison, ‘Churchill and Social Reform’, in Blake and Louis (eds.) Churchill, 66.}\]

\[\text{Refer to Kadish, ‘Bolsheviks and British Jews’, 250.}\]
minority Labour Government was formed in January 1924, under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald.

This anti-communist paranoia reached its peak with the publication of the Zinoviev Letter in October 1924. This was a document allegedly ‘urging British Communists to engage in subversive acts’, supposedly signed by Grigory Zinoviev of the Comintern, based in Moscow. It was picked up and leaked by the *Daily Mail*, and taken ‘as proof that Moscow was trying to engineer chaos in Western Europe by fomenting class struggle and industrial militancy’. The letter was ‘unscrupulously used by opponents as a means of implying that the Labour Party was somehow linked to Moscow’s plans.’ Of course, Churchill led this Red Scare; at one point, berating MacDonald for his supposed ‘comradeship with these foul, filthy butchers of Moscow’. The letter is now widely regarded to have been a forgery, and certainly not sent by Zinoviev, but this association of Labour with the ‘Bolshevik threat’ severely damaged their prospects for the Election, and they would ultimately be defeated by the Conservatives, who had gained votes from the Liberals partly thanks to this red-baiting.

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94 Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union*, 34.


96 Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union*, 34.

97 Churchill, W. S. cited in *ibid*.


To Churchill, Bolshevism and socialism were distinctly ‘un-British’, and this was closely tied to a strand of ‘anti-alienism’ in British society. Sharman Kadish has highlighted how many conservatives ‘regarded Bolshevism in Russia as a “foreign import”,’ and so ‘regarded socialism at home in the same light’. This helps to explain the anti-semitism that was tied up with anti-Bolshevism in Britain. Since the 1880s ‘large-scale Jewish immigration had been accompanied by anti-immigrant hostility … the term “Alien” was widely regarded as synonymous with the word “Jew”’. Social unrest and subversion was explicitly and implicitly linked to the ‘alien’; often Irish Sinn Feiners ‘but principally upon Russian Jews’.

As Kadish puts it, ‘fear of the “Boches” gave way to fear of the “Bolshies” and the “Jewish Bogey” … became, for some, synonymous with the latter.’ It was noted by Churchill in 1920:

This movement among the Jews is not new. From the days of Spartacus-Weishaupt [a reference to the 18th century Jewish philosopher Adam Weishaupt] to those of Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxembourg (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on

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100 Kadish, ‘Bolsheviks and British Jew’, 242.

101 ibid., 243.

102 ibid.

103 ibid., 242.
the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing.\textsuperscript{104}

The role played by these ‘international and for the most atheistical Jews’ in the Bolshevik revolution was certainly ‘a very great one’, and ‘probably outweighs all others’, claimed Churchill.\textsuperscript{105} At a speech in Sunderland on 3 January 1920, he attacked the English socialists who, he said, ‘believe in the international Soviet of Russian and Polish Jews’.\textsuperscript{106}

Weeks later he would reinforce these views when challenged by his colleague H. A. L. Fisher, reaffirming in a letter that ‘it is my firm belief that the Jews in this country would be well to admit the facts more openly than they do and to rally the support of those forces in Russia which give some prospect of setting up a strong and impartial government’.\textsuperscript{107}

He had also remarked to Lloyd George around the same time that Jews were ‘the main instigators of the ruin of the Empire’.\textsuperscript{108}

This Jewish conspiracy theory was, as Lebzelter argued, ‘a convenient subject for the conservative right which was confronted with political developments that did not suit its views – in particular the consolidation of the Bolshevik regime in Russia, and the progress


\textsuperscript{107} “Letter from [WSC] to Herbert Fisher reaffirming the view expressed in his speech in Sunderland that the Jews are predominant in the Bolshevik movement. Typescript copy.” \textit{The Churchill Papers} (CHAR 2/110/3), Churchill Archives Centre (Cambridge), Churchill Archive [Date Accessed: 7 Nov 2014]

of the Labour Party in Britain’. Though it may have been true that many Bolsheviks were Jews, ‘one could not justly deduce that Jewry as such was the instigator of the downfall of the Russian Empire’. In fact, as Lebzelter explained, the Russian Jewry, as with Jewish communities elsewhere, ‘was politically split from left to right’. There was little to no attempt made to analyse why many Jews may have been attracted to radical ideas. ‘Intuitively, this was attributed not to their long-lasting oppression in Russia, but to inherent inclinations rooted in Jewish character and religion.’

The 1926 General Strike

The General Strike of 1926 would reignite Churchill’s fear of social and political revolution. Industrial unrest and the potential for a general strike had been greatly increasing since 1925. A mining industry already suffering from the post-war drop in demand for coal was hit with further decline due to the crisis caused by the reintroduction of the Gold Standard by none other than Churchill, who had been made Chancellor of the Exchequer under the new Conservative Government in November 1924. ‘Both the owners and miners’ union rejected rationalisation of the industry through the closure of inefficient pits; the union wanted nationalisation and the owners wanted longer hours, wage cuts and the end of national bargaining as the way of reducing costs—a solution that ensured that all the costs of improving the industry’s position fell on the workers.’ Wage cuts of between 10 and 25 percent were announced in June 1925, and miners made preparations to strike. Other unions, ‘acting partly out of sympathy and partly out of the conviction that other

109 Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism in England, 16.

110 ibid., 19.

industrialists would attempt later to follow the example of the mineowners, offered their help.’

In July 1925, Churchill had agreed with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to a nine-month subsidy to maintain existing wages and hours for miners, while a Royal Commission undertook an investigation into the mining industry. However, Carlton writes that ‘the suspicion must be that Churchill, at least, was only engaged in a tactical manoeuvre in order that adequate preparations could be made for a later showdown with the entire domestic Labour Movement which, despite the timidity on most matters that had been revealed by the Labour Government, he continued to believe had been dangerously infected with the Bolshevik virus’. Indeed, he proclaimed in a speech at Battersea on 11 December, that there is no country at which the Bolsheviks, ‘this band of Cosmopolitan conspirators’ strike as much as Britain. Apparently Baldwin ultimately wished to avoid a strike altogether, ‘but by May 1926, when £23 million had been spent on the subsidy to the industry, his hard-line colleagues including Winston Churchill, Austen Chamberlain, Joynson-Hicks and Lord Birkenhead, rejected any further concessions’.

The Minister of Health at the time, Neville Chamberlain, commented that in the days leading up to the strike, Churchill was ‘getting frantic with excitement and eagerness to

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113 Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union*, 35.


begin the battle’. Baldwin would remark that he was ‘terrified of what Winston is going to be like’, and assigned to him the editorship of the British Gazette, in order to ‘keep him busy, stop him doing worse things’. The Gazette was a short-lived newspaper set up ‘to win the propaganda war against the strikers’ and ‘whipped up a revolutionary frenzy’ with headlines such as: ‘A Challenge to Ordered Government’; ‘Hold-up of the Nation’; ‘The Constitution or a Soviet’.

The ‘showdown’ would eventually materialise on 4 May 1926, and Britain’s economy was brought to a standstill for just over a week, as ‘over three million workers in printing, transport, iron and steel, gas, electricity, building, engineering and shipbuilding as well as coal’ went on strike to defend miners from huge wage cuts and extended working hours. It was, as Melvin C. Shefftz describes it, ‘the greatest strike ever to take place in Western Europe and it evoked much class bitterness’.

Martin Pugh writes how the General Strike ‘caused anger and consternation’ in right-wing circles, with many believing that Bolshevism might finally be materialising in Britain. Somewhat ironically, it was the British government and ‘the forces of conservatism, led by

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116 Baldwin, S. cited in ibid.
118 Cowden, M. H. ‘Soviet and Comintern Policies toward the British General Strike of 1926’ World Politics, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 503 - 529 (July 1953) 511.
121 Pugh, ‘The General Strike’, 42.
Churchill and his *British Gazette,* who were most convinced that revolution was on the
cards; no Soviet or Comintern writers considered the General Strike to be ‘an attempt to
transfer power to the trade unions.’\(^\text{123}\) The Soviet Union welcomed the General Strike, and
British Intelligence indicated that both the Communist Party of Great Britain and the
strikers were receiving funds from the Soviets, which ‘appeared to confirm the widely-
held notion that Britain was the target of an international Jewish-German-Bolshevik
conspiracy.’\(^\text{124}\) But, as Carlton explains, it is ‘unlikely that the Bolsheviks played a
significant role in ‘any phase of British interwar industrial relations. … And, above all, few
if any of the TUC General Council members during the interwar years were Leninists or
even Marxists.’\(^\text{125}\) Yet this fear of revolution was not simply the paranoia of a few
‘marginal fanatics’, Pugh argues, but that of ‘many in the mainstream including Cabinet
ministers,’\(^\text{126}\)

Churchill was regarded as the ‘villain’ of the 1926 General Strike,\(^\text{127}\) pursuing heavy-
handed action against the strikers. Clive Ponting describes how he was happy to back ‘any
firm action by the authorities, legal or otherwise’,\(^\text{128}\) and supported issuing the armed
forces with an indemnity so that they were able to take, in Churchill’s words, ‘any action

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\(^{123}\) Cowden, ‘Soviet and Comintern Policies toward the British General Strike of 1926’, 528.

\(^{124}\) Pugh, ‘The General Strike’, 42.

\(^{125}\) Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union*, 36.

\(^{126}\) Pugh, ‘The General Strike’, 42.


\(^{128}\) Ponting, *Churchill*, 306.
which they may find it necessary to take in an honest endeavour to aid the Civil Power’.\textsuperscript{129} He warned that ‘if we start arguing about petty details, we will have a tired-out police force, a dissipated army and bloody revolution.’\textsuperscript{130} But the idea of handing ‘a blank cheque’ to the armed forces did not sit well with his colleagues, and even the King wrote to the Prime Minister to protest against Churchill’s views.\textsuperscript{131}

After nine days of action, the general strike was called off on 13 May, as the ‘moderate anti-Bolshevik leaders of the TUC … had grasped the constitutional implications’, and so the miners were left to face their defeat.\textsuperscript{132} However, Churchill would continue to assert that ‘sinister pro-Soviet forces had been seriously involved’,\textsuperscript{133} and he would help shape the 1927 Trades Disputes Act, which ‘made sympathetic strikes illegal, banned civil servants from joining unions, and substituted a system of contracting in to pay the political levy for one of contracting out’.\textsuperscript{134}

\textbf{Aftermath of the General Strike}

The General Strike had inflated anti-labour sentiment in Britain, as well as the prevalent fear of the so-called red menace,\textsuperscript{135} so Churchill’s role in the successful defeat of the strike

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{129} Churchill, (7 May 1926) cited in \textit{ibid.}
\bibitem{130} \textit{ibid.}, 308.
\bibitem{131} Ponting, \textit{Churchill}, 308.
\bibitem{132} Carlton, \textit{Churchill and the Soviet Union}, 36.
\bibitem{133} \textit{ibid.}
\bibitem{134} Pugh, ‘The General Strike’, 46.
\end{thebibliography}
would serve him well in his attempt to build up support for his outlook. On 15 October 1926, he would participate in a rally held at the Albert Hall, one of a handful of ‘Clear out the Reds’ demonstrations intended to protest against Soviet and Communist subversion in Britain. These had been organised by Oliver Locker-Lampson, Conservative MP for the Birmingham Wandsworth constituency at the time, who was increasingly associating with fascists. Indeed, these ‘Clear out the Reds’ demonstrations attracted hundred of supporters of fascism, and in the particular one which Churchill attended in October, no fewer than 1,500 fascists took part.

As part of his attempt to internationalise his anti-Bolshevism, Churchill would infamously give a speech in Rome in January 1927, in which he heaped ‘extraordinary praise’ on Benito Mussolini and his brand of Italian fascism, which had crushed the revolutionary movement in Italy:

If I had been an Italian I am sure that I should have been wholeheartedly with you from start to finish in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism. But in England we have not had to fight this danger in the same deadly form. We have our way of doing things. But that we shall succeed in grappling with Communism and choking the life out of it—of that I am absolutely sure.

136 Carlton, Churchill and the Soviet Union, 37.

137 Knüsel, ‘British Conservatives, the Red Menace and Antiforeign agitation in China’, 75; Pugh, M. Hurrah for the Blackshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005) 61.

138 Carlton, Churchill and the Soviet Union, 37.
I will, however, say a word on an international aspect of Fascismo. Externally your movement has rendered a service to the whole world. … Italy has shown that there is a way of fighting the subversive forces which can rally the mass of the people, properly led, to value and wish to defend the honour and stability of civilized society. She has provided a necessary antidote to the Russian poison.¹³⁹

Churchill concluded in his Rome speech that ‘no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means of protectional against cancerous growths, and every responsible labour leader in every country ought to feel his feet more firmly placed in resisted levelling and reckless doctrines’.¹⁴⁰ Although the Conservative government had successfully defeated the General Strike in Britain, Churchill was not convinced that the same conclusion would have been reached under a Labour government. As Pugh argues, his concluding remarks in his Rome speech suggest that Churchill ‘had evidently concluded that fascist methods for countering Communism would remain a valid option, even in Britain, if the challenge posed by the left were to reappear in a second, and better organised, general strike’.¹⁴¹

Conclusion

Churchill was not a lone reactionary pushing against the tide. Anti-Bolshevism was widespread and encouraged in Britain, and no policymaker in Government would have been displeased to have seen the end of Soviet Russia. As Lloyd George recalled in *The Times* [London, England] 21 Jan. 1927/ 14. The Times Digital Archive.


¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

Truth about the Peace Treaties, there was ‘throughout the Allied countries, especially amongst the propertied classes, an implacable hatred, born of a real fear, of Bolshevism’.\textsuperscript{142}

Churchill was certainly at the forefront of this early Red Scare, however, and by 1927 he had revealed the unpleasant extent he would be willing to go to defeat communism. This was spurred on in part by his egotism, and his obsession ‘with the glory of doing something spectacular which should erect monuments to him’, as Neville Chamberlain once remarked.\textsuperscript{143} Churchill exploited the polarising politics of the 1920s to achieve his own political interests, and as Paul Addison notes, in calling for the creation of a permanent anti-socialist bloc, he was trying to resolve the problem of his own political identity.\textsuperscript{144}

Fundamentally, Churchill was a representative of his class—the ruling, propertied class—and his uncompromising hostility towards Bolshevism and the policies he pursued against it were a reflection of the general fears of the British upper classes. In Trotsky’s words, Churchill’s was an archetype of ‘the extreme, rabid wing of the British imperialists’.\textsuperscript{145} The Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik government was the materialisation of his ideological antithesis, and though he had played a key role in a war against German militarism, Bolshevism ignited his hatred far more intensely. It was this visceral opposition

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\item \textsuperscript{142} Lloyd George, D. cited in Keeble, \textit{Britain and the Soviet Union}, 50.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Chamberlain, N. (26 November 1924) cited in Ponting, \textit{Churchill}, 303.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Addison, ‘Churchill and Social Reform’, in Blake and Louis (eds.) \textit{Churchill}, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Trotsky, L. From a report to the 16th Moscow Provincial Conference of the Russian Communist Party, 25th March 1920 (The Party Faced with New Economic Tasks), Marxist Internet Archive, URL:\texttt{http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/v1/ch02e.htm} [Date Accessed: 18 Apr 2015]
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to Marxism and Bolshevism that would define his political character in the aftermath of the First World War.
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