

## Book Review

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Wheeler-Bennett, John W. The Forgotten Peace: Brest-Litovsk.  
March 1918. New York: William Morrow, 1939. 478 pp.

Wheeler-Bennett has written in this book that he considers the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk "one of the most important milestones in modern history." (p. xi) His account chronicles the story of the negotiations, the participants' motives, and the enduring impact of that treaty on Europe between the wars. In his Introduction the author briefly notes the importance of the peace negotiations between Soviets and Germans which took place in an occupied Polish town through the winter of 1917-18. First, the Treaty signified the complete, ~~at the time,~~ victory of Germany in the East, revealed to the allies the true military nature of the German regime, and provided the entente with the "unity of purpose" (p. xi) to face another year of war united in their aim ~~of~~ the unconditional defeat of Germany. Second, the negotiations were an important stimulus in provoking President Woodrow Wilson to promulgate his "Fourteen Points" in January 1918 with the hope of preventing Russia from concluding a separate peace and leaving the war. Third, the negotiations and subsequently the Treaty itself provided the Bolsheviks with the classically defined "breathing space" with which to consolidate their power. Finally, Brest-Litovsk revealed to the Western world, for the first time, the unique dualistic character of Soviet diplomacy, as Lenin himself

What does that mean?

stated: ("the Party does not sign the treaty, and for the Party the Government is not responsible.") (p. xii)

Reviewing quickly the foreign policy of the Provisional Government in 1917, the author very importantly notes that the Petrograd Soviet already was carrying on its own dualistic foreign policy and points out that "herein lies the germ of all ensuing Soviet foreign policy," the "close relation...between policy and propaganda." (p. 29) On the one hand, the Soviet urged the Provisional Government to negotiate a general democratic peace between all belligerent governments, while at the same time it appealed "over the heads of the governments directly to the people." (pp. 28-29)

After the seizure of power in November 1917 the Bolsheviks were immediately confronted with the problem of concluding peace. The "Decree on Peace" of 8 November revealed the naivety of the Bolsheviks' belief in the imminence of communist revolutions in Europe, especially after fragmentary news of the Kiel mutiny reached Petrograd. <sup>The</sup> Bolshevik leaders believed that "only the declaration of the principles of a general peace was needed for the people to rise and compel the governments to enter into the necessary negotiations." (p. 66)

Wheeler-Bennett's study of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations are filled with many interesting highlights. One key point was the problem of troop fraternizations and propaganda. Already a policy of troop fraternizations had been initiated on all fronts by a decree of Nikolai Krylenko, Commissar for War, on 21 November. (p. 71) The Bolsheviks also started a propaganda

newspaper in German, Die Fackel (The Torch), to be distributed amongst German troops. Furthermore, the Armistice that was signed 15 December legalized troop fraternizations at certain points along the lines, but limited to a maximum of twenty-five soldiers at a time, a stipulation that was ignored by the Bolsheviks. These propaganda activities along with the advance of the German army into the Ukraine, which further exposed German troops to Bolshevik influence, eventually sowed the seeds of demoralization to such an extent that the German High Command refused to transfer troops from the East during the summer of 1918 when they were badly needed on the Western front because of the dangers of Bolshevik contamination.

Leon Trotskii formally applied to the German High Command for an armistice on 26 November. An important part of the negotiations which then followed was the continuing refusal of *the* Allied governments to adopt a realistic attitude towards the Bolshevik regime, often despite the advice of their official and unofficial representatives in Russia. The Bolsheviks repeatedly adjourned the discussions to ask the Allied governments if they wished to take part and to inquire of the allies what immediate aid would be forthcoming if Russia refused to accede to German demands. Besides the Russian proposal for a general democratic peace without annexations or reparations, it is interesting that one of the main points *of that*

~~the proposals carried to Brest Litovsk by the first Soviet delegation,~~ which included Adolf Ioffe, Leo Kamenev, Leo Karakhan, and Gregorii Sokolnikov, ~~and a proposal which was~~

*Put elsewhere. Makes the sentence too complex.*

repeatedly insisted on ~~by~~ the Soviets, was the prohibition of troop transfers from the Eastern to the Western front. This provision was included in the Armistice of 15 December and, even though the Germans were able to circumvent this condition, it might have served as a symbolic olive branch to the allies.

The Treaty was finally signed Sunday, 3 March 1918, one year after the abdication of Tsar Nicolas II. By its provisions Russia lost approximately one-third of its population, one-half of its industry, and almost ninety percent of its coal supplies. It was a "Tilsit Peace" that was not easily accepted both within the Bolshevik party and in Russia, as the battles between Lenin, Trotskii, and Bukharin over this issue proved. Eventually, the Treaty was annulled <sup>on</sup> 9 November, 1918 by the Congress of Soviets, but the impact of the Treaty continued to linger. Above all, it was the first real contact of the Western world with the Bolsheviks and their style of diplomacy; and it was even more ironic that ~~the~~ <sup>their</sup> initial contact took place between the most reactionary military regime in Europe and the most revolutionary ~~one~~. The B.-L. negotiations were

Wheeler-Bennett, when he wrote this book, had consulted the officially published documents, (some of which are included in the appendices) <sup>several</sup> memoirs, and other sources, which are conveniently noted in a five page bibliography. More importantly, the author personally discussed the peace negotiations with the leading figures who were still alive in the 1930s, including Trotskii, Karl Radek, and Baron von Kuehlmann. The account moves swiftly and easily through the

changing scenarios of the peace negotiations and deserves a place on the bookshelf of any scholar of Soviet diplomacy. Sir John Wheeler-Bennett (1902-1975) was a prolific writer and a respected authority on the history of the inter-war years. Among his many works are Wooden Titan: Hindenburg (1936) and Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (1948).

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