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The Black Legends, Russia

Personal Experience

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ALEXIS WRANGEL

Interviewed

by

Randall J. Dicks

on

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The Black Legends, Russia

INTERVIEWEE: ALEXIS WRANGEL

INTERVIEWER: Randall J. Dicks

SUBJECT: the black legends, misconceptions, Imperial
Russia

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D: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, on July 26, 1974, with Baron Alexis Wrangel, interviewed by Randall Dicks.

W: How and what would you like me to say? I think it's a very opportune and a very timely moment to write a book or a thesis that could be called any title, but I suppose as appropriate as any would be The Black Legends of the Russian Imperial Army. As a matter of fact, the other day, in one of the chain stores, in A & P, I picked up a thing called Encyclopedia of World History. It is something that is sold for 25¢ a copy and is for children to read. In it was a little thing on the chapter on World War I and under it was the discussion of the Russian Army, saying that it was led by totally corrupt and incompetent officers, and that the Army suffered one defeat after another and was a liability, rather than an asset, to the Allies. Finally they crashed down in the Revolution. I wouldn't vouch for the exact words, but it was this in a sense. This is obviously false information, totally distorted, completely devoid of any kind of truth, and the proof of it is that the Russian Army, between the beginning of World War I and the Revolution, took communitively more prisoners and trophies, and by trophies I mean guns, than the British, French, American, and Italian armies combined, six times as many. The biggest in all the world, I don't have the text for this memo that I wrote that Prince Galitzen saw, but it is all in the book which gives us statistics of how many prisoners were

taken by the British Army, by the Americans, French, Italians, and so forth, how many were taken by the Russians, how many guns were taken, and so on. The amount, the load carried by the Russian Army was infinitely greater than that carried by all the Allies put together. You refer to Winston Churchill's book, The Unknown War, and you have the complete history of the Battle of the Buldge, which was really won by Russia with complete disregard of her own safety. The throwing away, literally, of troops into East Prussia against the original Russian strategic plan. The original Russian strategic plan called for the development against Germany and the annihilation of the Austrian-Hungarians. In order to comply with the absolutely frantic appeals of the French at the beginning of the war, Russia changed in the course of the first weeks of the war and had to change her strategic plan and throw, with absolute disregard for the most elementary proportions, because it was a question of doing it quickly or not at all. Second string reserve divisions that were not supposed to be committed to combat immediately were committed three, four, six weeks or two months later in to a headlong march into East Prussia to try and save the French. This resulted in the withdrawal of two Army Corps from the line and was instrumental in weakening the right flank of the German Army.

This is only one thing. In 1916 the Russian offensives designed to help the French where it caused extremely heavy casualties in the Russian Army and caused a great number of German troops to be tied up which otherwise would have been taken off the eastern front to help the Germans in their effort. Where Russia fell down was that it has never been an industrial country. It was already developing very fast, but not fast enough. When the shortages occurred in 1915, they occurred just as much with the Germans, French, British, as they did with the Russians. But Germany, France, and Britain being much more industrialized could put their war-production effort on a footing that met the eventualities they had faced. Russia, with its enormous front that it was holding from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Turkish front stretching across the gulf, simply could not get its production to meet the demands. Consequently, in 1915 Russia was totally without equipment. It had used it up in 1914 just the same way as the French, British, and Germans had used up their things.

The Germans were able to recoup quickly, we were not able to recoup quickly. As a result, and in order to stabilize the front, Russia suffered completely disproportionate casualties in 1915. They literally had to plug in holes through use of mass troops without adequate logistic support. As a result of that, the Karblers of the Russian Army were annihilated in 1915. It wasn't so much 1914 because in 1914 the battle of Cammenberg was a major German victory. Undoubtedly they took something like 90,000 prisoners.

In the meantime, in the south, on the Austrian front the Russians virtually destroyed the Austrian-Hungarian Army. The Austrian-Hungarians had simply been beaten all the way across with an enormous amount of prisoners; 234, 000 prisoners taken. The prospect for Austria was withdrawal beyond the Carpathian Mountains, which would have been the heart of the Austrian empire. At that time, the Germans won Cammenberg. It was 1915, the Russians were pooped out as far as logistics support. The enormous victory, called the greatest victory of World War I by anybody against the Austrians virtually came to nil.

During 1915 the Russians were shot to pieces, particularly in the infantry. The cavalry less so, but the infantry was literally shot to pieces. Regiments stand over eight, nine times their whole company.

By 1917, when the Revolution occurred, you really had very little of the original Russian Army left. What was there were young people called out in 1914, 1915, and 1916, and the corresponding officer corps drawn up from reserves of civilian life: people who went through four months of military training and no more, or six months of officer school and so on. By 1917 the Russian Army had been used up because the effort that the Russian Army carried stretched from the Baltic Sea all the way clear across to the Caucus Mountains, in other words, something like, in terms of miles I don't know a mathematical ratio, compared to the western front.

The Western front was a very short front, stretching from the North Sea to Switzerland. Magnify that by some forty or fifty times and you'll have the Russian front. It isn't just wishful thinking, but if you read the memoirs of the German generals who were active on the Russian front during the war, you will see that they thought that the war effort on the eastern front was a heavier burden than on the western front, at all times.

This has been unfortunately through a willful distortion of facts which was engendered by the Russian Revolution, and by the Soviets who created this black legend because it was in their interest to show that everything prior to 1917 was a disaster and that Russia started to exist after 1917 through the courtesy of Mr. Trotsky and Mr. Lenon. This black legend has been fed artificially into to educational channels of western Europe. If you ask the average college professor in the United States he will give you the exact picture as presented by the Soviets not as presented by history. That is in essence what I want to bring across and encourage you to do something about, writing a thesis or a book in that direction. The facts are there if you look for them.

D: Do you think that the black legend has been advanced not only by the Soviets, but also somewhat by the British and French?

W: No. I wouldn't say so. The French and the British, I don't think, would have willfully announced anything on that thing because after World War I there was a great deal of literature written on the war. The British were busy with their own memoirs, the French with their own, and they just didn't have any time to write about Russia. Winston Churchill did, but he was an exception. I don't think that they had anything to do with willfully distorting facts, or willfully disavowing. No, I think it was entirely done by the communists and by the sort of left-wing intellectual favorable to the communist. We're always delighted to pick up any story that has a pro-communist blessing to it.

D: Might not the British or French have wanted to excuse or explain?

W: No, I don't think so because if you read the French speeches by different military and political figures they are always in the 1920's. I'm not talking about now, but in the 1920's they always acknowledged the great sacrifice of Russia and the great effort made by Russia, and the fact that Russia was instrumental in saving France and so on and so forth. The French did, the British I don't think made any big reference in that direction, but the French did. The French were correct.

D: What about the Civil War, how has an incorrect impression been given there? /

W: The civil war is an entirely different thing. You must

never join one with the other. One was a world war in the full sense of a world war and the other one was a civil war which like all civil wars had a beginning that was, let's say from scratch, and then developed into a climax in 1919 and then gradually fizzed out as the different white-Russian, or anti-communist movements here, there, or everywhere else collapsed. I think that a direct connection doesn't exist between the two. The Russian Civil War came as a direct result of the World War I, the Russian Army having been completely bled white and all that. I don't think that in examining the Civil War, that one should necessarily bring World War I into it. Yes. To a certain extent, yes, because the Russian Army, as I said to you a few minutes ago, was bled white so that you couldn't talk about Russian Officer Corps or Russian Officer Cavlaries and so on because by 1917 they had ceased to exist. The Russian Civil War was fought on the white side by young kids who had been promoted to officer in 1915, 1916, or 1917. There were very few key people left. At the commanding level, yes, but when you figure that my father, who was a commander-in-chief of the White Army was thirty-seven years old at that time, you can pretty well take your cue for the rest of the people. A lot of the generals were twenty-five, twenty-seven. The higher corps of the general staff and everything else had ceased to exist.

D: What was the situation after the inauguration? How was the World War and the Civil War presented in Britain, France, and the United States at first?

W: In what way, in the press?

The Americans and the French were very favorable to the White Army. The press in France was very favorable to my father's efforts in the Crimea and so on, but books and such as you said yourself were mostly written in Russian. There has been very little written in French and in English or in German. There is very little available to someone who doesn't speak Russian. I can give you a list as long as this room of books, memoirs, memorandums, regimental history, you name it, all written in Russian. In English, there is a book, The White Generals, which is an honest try, but full of errors and pretty much the opinion of the men who wrote the book. It's not a serious historical study. That's about it. Winston Churchill wrote a very good book called The Unknown War, but that's World War I. There is nothing about the Civil War in there. On the Civil War there is very little if anything at all written in the American press and very little in the French.

D: Which is why there is a program called the Forgotten War.

W: Yes. It was a miserable program. It was completely based on Soviet misinformation, deliberately planted and swallowed hook, line, and sinker by the idiots who were running the program. I think that if you wrote a thesis and wrote a book on that thing just operating on straight facts without any interpretation, you don't have to interpret, the facts speak for themselves; how many prisoners taken, how many divisions involved, the losses, the amount of prisoners taken by the Russians as compared by the Allies, the amount of trophies taken, the amount of losses in the Officers Corps, and so on that you can come up with a very glaring document. Nobody bothered to do that, but if one did it I think it would be irrefutable because there is nothing that you can do to statistics, to black and white solid statistics which are there. I hope I have been able to give you a picture of what you are interested in.

D: Do you think that research on the black legends should be confined to the First World War?

W: No. I think it would be a task of some magnitude to do both. I do think that both can be done. I don't necessarily envision them as one book, I'd rather see it as two different things, as a volume one, volume two sort of thing. They both definitely have to be done and are there to be done. The old archives of the White Army are here in America in the Hoover War library. You can go there and they are all there including my father's personal correspondence. It's available with permission of the library to use that material and of course it's in Russian, needless to say. It's there, correspondence with the chiefs of state, with the Americans, with the French, with the British. It's all there, all you have to do is go there and dig.

D: You said the work could probably be done even without the knowledge of Russian?

W: No. I think I made an overambitious statement there because I think if you went looking to archives, and into the archives of the White Army, for example, which is entirely in Russian, then you have to know it. If you don't know the Russian language you should have somebody do it for you who could pick out things. You could still do it, but it would be a more involved operation. You would have to rely on Mr. X, Mr. Y, or

Mr. Z who spoke Russian, knew what you were looking for and who would make you the necessary excerpts and necessary photostats and necessary xeroxes and what have you, on what you were interested in.

D: After your father left Russia, did he have activities in this area?

W: My father died a short time after that in 1928. By the time the Army was relocated and welfare was arranged and people got jobs, and seeked out an existence and so it was already a very major operation. My father died in 1928 and politically, it was not the time to do anything nor could anyone do anything at that time. What could one do? It's not like nowadays when you start a civil war by having an immense amount of help from a country, it's immoral. Our efforts in Cuba or Vietnam would have been successful. It would have been successful through a massive, a completely massive program of troops, aid, arms, money, political warfare, propaganda, you name it, the whole works pushed in massive doses. That didn't exist and there was certainly no way of fighting a war out of exile in those days. The Army had come out, incidentally the greatest sea movement of troops prior to D-day in Normandy was the evacuation of my father's army out of the Crimea, surpassed only on D-day 1944.

D: In The White Generals the author mentions that the Bolsheviks decided on a policy of concentrating their efforts on your father, did they continue that after he left Russia?

W: Well, there are many rumors that he was forced, my father. None of them, needless to say, substantiated, because in those days it was much more difficult to substantiate things like that than it is now. I can't tell you much more about that.

D: Where would you suggest would be the best place to begin the research or story?

W: I told you somebody like Carl Sagan, who has an enormous amount of facts, tell him that you would like to write this and ask him what sources he has accumulated on the subject. That would be number one. My father's memoirs have been published in English, you can read them. Thereafter you would already have the guidelines to go on, the Civil War, I'm talking about the Civil War. About World War I, I think a great deal would have to be just fishing for facts on interviews, talking to people,

because you won't find in the English language much written about World War I, yet in Russian there is; in works of General Golavein, the works of Kosnovsky who wrote the history of the Russian Imperial Army, General Golavein who wrote the battles of Galatia, of East Prussia, and who was a recognized authority both by the Americans and the French. He gave lectures at West Point and so on. That pretty well sums up what I can tell you without repeating myself.

D: I think it would be a worthwhile project.

W: I think so, very much. It's one that should be done because it's virgin territory.

D: Thank you very much.

W: You are welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW