From Novorossiisk to Alexandria: British involvement in the evacuation of White Russian refugees, 1920

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ABSTRACT

Events during Russia's Civil War (1918-20) produced a serious refugee crisis focused on the port of Novorossiisk in south Russia towards the end of 1919 and the opening months of 1920. Lloyd George's Coalition Government was persuaded to support a rescue mission of selected refugees with most to fear from a Bolshevik victory. The decision was taken against Admiralty advice and against Treasury unwillingness to meet expected high resettlement costs. Thousands of White Russians were rescued and, without wishing or planning the end, the British Government found itself saddled with distracting refugee responsibilities in the politically unstable Protectorate of Egypt.

KEYWORDS

Russian refugees; Russian Civil War; British government; Mackinder; Egypt; Novorossiisk; Alexandria

Introduction

On 27th and 29th January,1920, in London, a special Cabinet meeting of the Lloyd George Coalition government convened to decide upon a response to a growing humanitarian crisis focused on the port of Novorossiisk situated on the east coast of

the Black Sea.[1] In peacetime a pleasant town of 60,000 inhabitants, it had been transformed into a significant base for receiving and distributing British military aid for anti-Bolshevik forces in the region. These activities, as well as various advisory functions, were supervised by the staff of the British Military Mission in south Russia.

Cabinet concern with the issue arose as one of the concluding events of the Russian Civil War in south Russia. Anti-Bolshevik forces, following earlier successes, were being pressured by revolutionary Red armies into hasty, disorderly, retreats. The aim of the retreating Whites was to reach the port of Novorossiisk, 'a magnet which acted powerfully on an army which had lost all hope except that of escape'.[2] There, it was expected, ships would arrive to transport military units to the Crimea where they could regroup and continue their opposition to the Bolshevik take-over of power

It was not only military personnel who saw Novorossiisk as offering hope of escape. The port was crammed with thousands of civilians - individuals, families, even village groups, supporters of the White, anti-Bolshevik, cause in one way or another.[3] Many had made their way to the port in packed railway carriages and goods wagons; some from distant St. Petersburg. Others had struggled along unmade roads, or arrived by sea from other Black Sea ports. They found a city where even money and influence could not secure shelter from the inclement winter weather. Desperate for some form of protection hundreds of refugees were using the local cement factory, huddled on straw and sharing blankets for warmth. The unheated city theatre was overflowing with bodies and belongings. Even toilets were used as living, sleeping and eating quarters. Railway freight wagons, stranded in the city train station sidings and areas outside the city for lack of coal, were packed with individuals grateful for some kind

of shelter. A British naval observer noted that 'I found great distress and congestion among the Russian refugees at Novorossisk. People living in trains and open trucks up the line were in deplorable condition. Deaths from typhus, starvation and exposure very numerous'.[4] The Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, the Tsar's youngest sister, was one of many forced to shelter in a stationary railway van near the port. She was fortunate to be recognised and brought to safety by representatives of the American Red Cross.[5]

Civil authorities had lost control of the situation. They lacked the means to maintain public order. White Russian troops milling around the town were undisciplined and insubordinate. Officers found it difficult to restrain the excesses of their men. The situation worsened as more and more demoralised units arrived at the port to wait for expected evacuation. Medical and sanitary regulations were unenforceable. Typhus was rampant, cholera a constant fear, food was scarce, as was fuel, locally available currency worthless. Within a few weeks the pressures of war had transformed Novorossiisk into 'a hellhole of disease, insurrection, chaos and confusion'.[6]

For soldiers and civilians alike only evacuation by sea offered the prospect of escape from deteriorating conditions in the port and from the feared retribution of advancing revolutionary forces. The White military command, with British and French assistance, was gathering shipping to extricate their forces. However, it was not this military operation that was on the British Cabinet's agenda in January, 1920. It was the fate of non-combatants trapped in Novorossiisk that was under discussion. As matters stood there was no plan for getting them away other than reliance on the haphazard arrival of rescue ships with owners intent on profit. Berths on these ships

had to be paid for. Rates were extortionate - gold, silver, marketable valuables, non-Russian currencies were insisted on.[7] It was a situation where sharp practices, venality, bad faith and outright criminality were commonplace as fearful individuals sought to strike deals that would secure them berths to safety.

Why were these distant events of concern to the British Government? National and government attention was intently focused on the great issues of peace following the end of the Great War. There was no driving public clamour over the safety of anti-Bolshevik refugees. It could be argued in justification that however heart-rending the situation of refugees in the port it was a direct consequence of internal acts of war. The Civil War pitted Russians against Russians. It was a domestic issue that demanded a domestic solution.

If Britain had been a disinterested observer of Russian affairs such a 'hands-off' response might have been justifiable. This was not Britain's position. At the outbreak of the Russian Civil War in 1918 Britain had chosen sides. The Government was concerned at the prospect of an established revolutionary Bolshevik regime in Russia possessing the means and the will to infect the working classes of Western Europe with their own ardour for radical communism. In consequence Britain, France, the United States and other countries had adopted interventionist policies aimed at supporting and strengthening anti-Bolshevik forces as they struggled to regain power lost to a minority communist coup during October, 1917.

This support encompassed technical services, supplies of equipment and clothing, financial aid, protective military forces as well as the provision of military advisors.

Officially, all measures short of war, although in north Russia around the areas of Murmansk and Archangel aggressive military actions were fought by British troops.[8] In south Russia, too, it was not unknown for elements of the army, navy and air force to engage in front line activities.

The policy of intervention was controversial from the outset. Within the country substantial elements of the working classes were disposed to support the ideology of social revolution. Neither was there unanimity within the government. For example, Lloyd George's view of intervention as a form of limited support was opposed by Winston Churchill's bellicose arguments for open, active, military intervention.[9] The rights and wrongs of all forms of intervention were matters of public, parliamentary and governmental debates. However, at the time of intervention, no thought was given to the inevitable sufferings of non-combatants on the losing side.

Now, in January, 1920, with total defeat of the White cause imminent and the failure of interventionist activities plain for all to see, why was it necessary to spend government time on considering the fate of previously overlooked groups of Russian non-combatants?

The answer is not to be found in realms of high policy, or in any articulated political programme of principled humanitarian concern for the fate of refugees. The Cabinet was meeting because a representative of the British government while on a futile political mission in south Russia had promised General Denikin, head of the White Russian forces in the region, that in the event of defeat British authorities would evacuate the families of White officers to a place of safety. Crucially, this generous

promise, or guarantee as it came to be known, was made without prior London approval. It represented personal initiatives reflecting a highly sympathetic assessment of the tragic situation confronting the dispossessed, displaced, families of those the British Mission was intent upon assisting. The Cabinet had now to decide upon an official response to an unauthorised individual initiative that involved Britain not only in previously unconsidered policy issues but also in the prospect of burdensome financial costs..

Mackinder

The representative who had caused this flurry of Governmental concern was Halford Mackinder, Unionist Member of Parliament for the Glasgow Camlachie constituency since 1910. He was a prominent advocate of an expansive Imperial cause, and influential in the development of geopolitical studies as an academic at Oxford and the London School of Economics. In 1919 he was appointed British High Commissioner in South Russia.[10]

The reason for the appointment lay in Paris. There the Allied Council, grappling with problems of peace, had accorded *de facto* recognition of the nationalist aspirations of Georgia. Armenia and Azerbaijan - all previously part of the Imperial Russian Empire. The dislocations and confusion of the Civil War had provided these countries with an opportunity to declare their independence of Russian rule. Allied politicians in Paris approved this development believing in the need for independent, non-Russian aligned, buffer states to assist in the containment of revolutionary Russian influence in Europe. On taking up his post the newly created High Commissioner was told that he was to give Denikin 'moral support and advice', but no promises of further

aid and with the firm understanding that 'It is with national aspirations of the [border states] that H.M. Government is largely concerned'.[11]

Mackinder arrived in Novorossiisk on 1st January, 1920. By the 10th he was at General Denikin's command headquarters at Tikhoretsk. He had a ticklish task ahead of him. As far as Denikin was concerned the three Transcaucasian states had been wrested illegally from Russia. He was committed to maintaining Russian boundaries at their pre-war extent. 'Russia, one and indivisible' was, for Denikin, a matter of faith.[12] Initially, he resisted recognising the newly independent states, but the rapidly deteriorating military situation compelled him too to 'concede *de facto* independence of the border governments who are carrying on the struggle against Bolshevism'.[13] The recantation was wrung out of Denikin by Mackinder and General Holman, head of the British Military Mission also present at the meeting. In the event this was a totally meaningless concession. By this time the White Russian leader did not have either military or administrative authority to devise or implement any meaningful political policy.

However reluctantly, agreement had been reached on the main reason for Mackinder's mission. Attention then turned to the gloomy military outlook. Concern was expressed by General Holman at the low morale of the White forces. Possibly in return for Denikin's grudging acceptance of a repugnant policy Mackinder agreed 'at the urgent instance of General Holman' to a proposal intended to stiffen military resolve in Denikin's command.[14] It took the form of a promise that, if it became necessary, the British would ensure the safety of wives and children of White Army officers. In addition personnel of the Military Mission would form a protective rearguard should

the need for evacuation arise. Mackinder gave this promise 'without referring home', ostensibly because the telegraph lines had been cut.[15]

Mackinder had to justify his unauthorised action to London. This was done in a lengthy report, classified as secret, to the Foreign Office. It was academic in style and content treating political, personal, social, military and economic and policy matters. Mackinder had not had all the time he wished to prepare the report 'but the time is critical, and I think that His Majesty's Government will desire to have my views at once ... since it is obvious that a policy should be adopted and decisions taken with as little delay as possible'.[16] In truth, time and events had already rendered most of the report a dead-letter. The report was sent while still on board the H.M.S. Centaur off Marseilles. The main report came with eight appendices. One of the shortest, Appendix E, introduced the only significant practical outcome from Mackinder's mission. In it Mackinder outlined the 'guarantee' he had given General Denikin. He explained that Denikin's troops were losing their fighting effectiveness due, in part, to low morale. Many officers were convinced that Britain was ready to abandon them and their cause. Anti-interventionist speeches by British politicians, quickly reported in White Russian military circles, gave support to this view. Another factor affecting performance was the increasing number of officers worried about the fate of their families stranded in the path of advancing Bolshevik forces. Officers were absenting themselves to escort their families to safety. Others had simply lost their capacity for action, weighed down with worry. This analysis of the military situation reflected the views of General Holman. He was of the opinion that a promise to protect families of officers would improve military effectiveness. However, General Holman 'did not

consider that the necessity [of evacuation] will arise if all Russian officers rise to the great occasion which confronts them'.[17]

In expressing such a view Holman was guilty of a serious misreading of the developing military situation. Like many British officers, he had identified closely with the Whites. He subscribed to the view that 'they were fighting for a cause which is just, and for objects which are sound and possible of attainment'. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks 'will lose' because of their lying and brutality and because their leaders were 'alien' and their driving instincts were destructive, not constructive. As he put it - 'they will be found out'.[18] These sentiments were not unusual at the time, but General Holman had developed a closer emotional attachment to his Russian allies than was common among British officers. He was unusual in that he spoke Russian; he had qualified as a first-class interpreter in 1895. In later years he attained the same standard in French and German. In 1905 he was attached to Russian forces during the Russo-Japanese war in Manchuria and as a consequence was invested with the Order of St. Stanislaus and awarded a Russian war medal. His background gave him an understanding of and a deep sympathy for the Russians. For him there was no doubt that the Mackinder guarantee, assuming responsibility for the safety of civilians, was an unavoidable moral obligation - 'it seemed unthinkable that we could leave these women and children to be murdered in view of the encouragement we have given them'.[19]

British Cabinet response

Mackinder's secret communication regarding his discussions with General Denikin was to be considered by an ill-prepared group of individuals. In the circumstances

they could have repudiated Mackinder's unauthorised 'guarantee'. Advice to that effect was on offer. General Sir George Milne at GHQ Constantinople had grave doubts regarding the practicality of the scheme.[20] Admiral Sir John Michael de Robeck, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet and British High Commissioner in Constantinople was blunt - 'the scheme of evacuation, of transport and subsequent maintenance of refugees will be a heavy charge on the Allies for an indefinite time'. He was of the opinion that more active military support would be 'best and cheapest in the long run'.[21] The outright opposition of the Admiralty to Mackinder's proposal was set out clearly in the briefing memorandum prepared for the Cabinet. After stressing difficulties and problems involved in the evacuation and resettlement of refugees the authors of the memorandum concluded 'with regret that the responsibilities involved in Mr. Mackinder's guarantees are too heavy to be met in their entirety'. The conclusion was inevitable - 'Half measures have invariably proved to do more harm than good ... [In view of the] 'more moderate policy of the Soviet Government the Board consider that the time has come to reconsider whether ... any attempt as regards evacuation is justified'.[22]

Despite grave warnings about the likely scale, practicality and costs of Mackinder's commitment the Cabinet concluded his promise to Denikin had to be honoured. However, the dire warnings had shaped attitudes. The 'guarantee' was accepted, but on terms which reduced the costs and changed the nature of what Mackinder had proposed. The first step was to interpret the proposal as a transfer from Novorossiisk to another part of Russia. In practical terms this meant a transfer of refugees to the Crimea, still in White Russian hands. The merit of this proposal was evident - once ashore, since the refugees were back in their own country, British authorities would

incur no further costs. In support of this decision it was argued that transportation to other countries could not be considered 'because of the likely incidence of typhus and other diseases' associated with ships arriving from south Russia. There were grounds for such concern. The Cabinet earlier had been informed that the s.s. Panama had arrived in Malta from south Russia with sick and wounded and with 35 cases of typhus. Enough to overwhelm local medical facilities, prevent disembarkation and to have the ship itself declared an isolation unit.[23] However, there was another even more compelling reason for concluding that the Crimea was an appropriate refugee destination. The British Treasury had made it clear that no money was available to settle and maintain large numbers of refugees outside Russia. [24] No other Government department had the authority to resist Treasury intransigence on this issue.

The Cabinet's adoption of Mackinder's 'guarantee', even in its modified form, was an intriguing decision. Another proposal for evacuation was on the committee's agenda that same day. John Lowdon, the British Acting Consul-General at Odessa, had informed the Foreign Office that he was 'assuring the Russians that in case of necessity British will provide transport to take away all who were compromised with the Bolsheviks'.[25] His assurances were given in an attempt to quell rising panic in the port at the approach of Red forces. In practical terms he was assuming responsibility for the evacuation of 30,000 refugees, more or less on the same lines as later proposed by Mackinder. The response to Lowdon's initiative was a blunt refusal to engage in further humanitarian interventions. He was informed that 'it is impossible to evacuate refugees from Odessa or any other Russian port for on sanitary grounds no country will receive them. In these circumstances the only policy is for the population to

organise itself for a vigorous defence'.[26] A bleak outlook, with even a transfer to the Crimea ruled out.

What explains these different outcomes? Why was Novorossiisk treated as a special case? Mackinder's proposal was accepted because the agreement with Denikin was viewed as a formal political contract. An agreement so public in its nature that its repudiation would have led to recriminations and further loss of trust on the White side. Lowdon's bold individual initiative was not seen in this light and so was easier to disavow. Additionally, national rivalries had come into play. Odessa fell within the sphere of responsibility of the French. It was up to them to assume responsibility for 'their' refugees. When this eventuality did arise before the loss of the port to the Reds in February, 1920, the chaotic arrangements for evacuation led to a great loss of civilian lives.

Having in mind only the transfer of refugees from Novorossiisk to the Crimea or other Russian ports Cabinet approval of the 'guarantee' was telegraphed to the regional authorities. The evacuation of refugees had received official sanction.

Local initiatives

While politicians in London shaped their preferred solution to the refugee problem events in south Russia had acquired a direction and momentum of their own. The London policy formulation reached Admiral de Robeck on 30th January,1920. He was not pleased with the contents of the message. Although he had earlier advised against accepting the 'guarantee' he now took issue with the instruction to evacuate refugees to the Crimea. 'The decision means that H.M. Government are willing to

transfer sick and wounded and others in danger from an area which is safe for at least a month to an area which may be enemy territory in a fortnight. This is therefore no sort of observance of the guarantee given by Mackinder in the name of H.M. Government which implied the wives and families of Officers would be placed in safety if and when the necessity arose ... I have already removed 2000 refugees from Novorossisk and about 1200 wounded, and from the Crimea 1000 wounded. Arrangements for these have already been made at Constantinople, Salonika and Varna'.[27] None of these destinations had featured in the British Cabinet's plan for refugee settlement. There was an all too obvious disconnection between the expressed intentions of central government and decisions taken by their official representatives 'in the field'. In addition, even before the Cabinet had formulated a refugee policy, on 25th January, 1920, the first shipload of Mackinder refugees had left for Prinkipo, one of the Turkish Princes' Islands in the Sea of Marmara.

Rethinking the issue

It was evident that Admiral de Robeck was pursuing a humanitarian evacuation policy of his own devising regardless of contrary orders from London. On 3 February, 1920, he ordered two naval transports, the Rio Negro and Rio Pardo, to embark refugees from threatened Odessa, not directly a British responsibility. On 6 February the Rio Pardo left the port with over 1400 refugees. The Rio Negro cast off with the same number. In normal circumstances both ships had a carrying capacity of 750. The Rio Prado sailed for Constantinople, while the Rio Negro was finally routed to Salonika where healthy refugees boarded trains for Serbia on 14/15 February. As the captain of the Rio Negro put it -'noble little Serbia took them from us'.[28] A neat extempore operation that gave no hint of what was to follow. It was equally evident that

Mackinder's guarantee was already being executed in a manner contrary to Cabinet intentions. A new basis for officially sanctioned actions was required urgently.

This was the task of a conference in Whitehall arranged for 19 and 20 February, 1920. The participants at this gathering were asked to 'Consider the Question of Evacuating Refugees from South Russia'. In attendance were representatives of the Admiralty, War Office, Treasury, Foreign Office, Colonial Office and the Ministry of Shipping. The issue was to receive serious attention.

The first step was to review the Mackinder guarantee in the light of the shaping military realities in south Russia. It was agreed that the Crimea was not a safe haven for refugees; further, it should never have been considered to be so. A conference majority believed the original Crimea proposal was not 'strictly in accordance with the guarantee'. It was never Mackinder's intention to transfer refugees from one place of danger only to decant them in a similarly threatened locality. This revisionist interpretation did not impress Admiralty representatives. Obdurate, as before, they maintained that 'the practical difficulties render help on any sufficient scale impossible. The Crimea should be regarded as the asylum for refugees and held by General Denikin'.[29] A view based either on a hopelessly sanguine interpretation of events; or on a hard-headed analysis indicating that the high, unknown, costs involved did not justify the uncertain practical results. In both cases alleviation of human suffering was not a consideration of over-riding importance. Forceful though it was this view did not carry the day.

Mackinder had left the problem of where the refugees were to be settled for others to solve. Outside Russia, certainly, but where? British transported refugees already had been landed at Salonika and Prinkipo as part of locally arranged emergency measures. Now an agreed general policy had to be formulated to cope with expected greater numbers to follow. The conference participants lacked detailed knowledge of operational circumstances, but concluded that Salonika and Romania would provide needed safe havens. Neither Greece or Romania had been consulted on the issue. This decision, the product of flabby, loose, thinking, in no way contributed to the solution of grave practical problems facing Britain's representatives in south Russia. More useful was the understanding that costs of transporting refugees to settlement destinations should be borne by Britain.

There was perfect clarity, however, about the aim of British support. Asylum abroad was to be offered only to wives and families of Russian officers. In the event of a general military collapse in south Russia defeated troops would have to find shelter in the Crimea which was expected to be defended by General Denikin. It was acknowledged that this decision would not be popular with the Whites - 'the odium of leaving the Civil population and Volunteer Army in the Crimea to their fate, will inevitably fall on the British Government'.[30]

Four weeks or so before the final evacuation of military and civilians from Novorossiisk a revised refugee policy had been formulated. This time the refugee issue was placed within the broader context of Britain's interests in the region. It was made clear that Britain's military commitment was to end; no further military aid was to be offered the Whites other than assistance in military transfers to the Crimea. It

was confirmed that Mackinder approved refugees would be evacuated; other civilians would have to fend for themselves.

One crucial aspect of the refugee issue remained unresolved. As before the Treasury agreed that funding transportation was a legitimate Mackinder cost. The costs of resettlement were not so regarded. Obviously funding would have to be found by someone from somewhere to ensure the survival of refugees wherever they were put ashore. The solution proposed was firm and confident -'The Allies (including America) to supply funds for their further support.' [31] It is not clear how conference members, experienced specialist administrators came to believe in the willingness of other countries to accept financial burdens that Britain herself was reluctant to underwrite. In the event, not a single country offered to share the likely financial burden. The financial consequences of support for refugees remained a problem waiting to be solved.

Evacuation

Denikin, Mackinder and Holman had met on 10th January, 1920. Mackinder was on his way home by the 16th. By the 19th a British office had been opened in Novorossiisk with orders 'to evacuate everybody who can trace relationship with Naval or Military officers, no one else'.[32] By 25 January, only 15 days after Mackinder's discussions with Denikin, and before London had formulated any kind of directing policy, 1,600 refugees had been processed to sail on the s.s.Hannover for the safety of Prinkipo. A remarkable exercise of urgency and organisation in deteriorating military and administration circumstances.

This rapidity of response was associated with locally taken decisions owing little to Cabinet rulings or, even, to Mackinder's proposals. The initial governing principle was the rescue of wives and families of White Russian officers. However, during the preparatory stages of the evacuation process it was decided 'to authorise the evacuation of not only the wives and families of officers, but also of officials of the various departments connected with the Administration, both military and civil' of the Don and Volunteer armies.[33] Almost as an afterthought, it was realised that such personnel were immediate candidates for execution when captured. This widening of the eligibility for rescue offered new hope for many individuals stranded in Novorossiisk without resources to purchase a berth on commercial rescue ships. The British ships came with the offer of free passages. Inevitably the British vetting office was overwhelmed with refugees frantic to secure berths on British ships.

This vetting process was crucial. Without official documents issued by the British there was no way out on Mackinder ships. All refugees had to convince British authorities of their White Russian credentials before being considered for evacuation. First they had to present themselves at a Russian Bureau where their personal details were checked and recorded. Then, armed with a talon, or certificate, they were required to present themselves at the desks of British interviewers where 'closer scrutiny of the merits of individual cases was gone into'.[34] Refugees had to convince British examining officers that their family, military and political connections were such as to place them in danger if captured by the Reds. Success at this stage was followed by a medical examination. This was an important hurdle. The authorities were trying to contain the spread of typhus and cholera. Those already infected, or showing early signs of these conditions were refused exit visas.

For British officers given the task of offering or denying individuals and families the means of escape the process was harrowing and emotionally draining. One account of the time reveals officers relying on humanitarian instincts and personal assessments rather than official directions when making their assessments - 'I was examining people of our own class who did not appear to possess any relatives in the services, to these I allotted passages on the grounds of having an uncle in the Crimean War, a fact that I could not by any means trace'.[35] As a result of such individual judgments and a liberal interpretation of family connections to include distant relatives, close friends and useful dependants, individuals of widely varying social and professional backgrounds received boarding passes.

When 'all the average person seemed to be thinking about was how to get away to Constantinople under the Mackinder evacuation scheme' it was inevitable that ineligible individuals tried to circumvent the vetting system. The weakness of the selection process was that it was not always possible for either Russian or British officials to distinguish between authentic and fraudulent claimants. In the prevailing chaotic circumstances there was neither the means nor time to investigate individual personal backgrounds. This was especially the case once eligibility for evacuation had been broadened beyond officers' families. For one observer of the confused scene 'it soon became obvious that a large number of the applicants were neither members of officers' families, nor sick, wounded or incapacitated officers, who were the people we had undertaken to get away... The result of all this confusion, for which the Russians were not wholly to blame, was that all sorts of people were taken off who

might quite well have been left behind, while others, whose position was much more perilous in the event of the Bolshevists coming, had no chance to get away'.[36]

Call for ships

The British desire to maintain the momentum of evacuation was not matched with similar urgency by the refugee community. During February, 1920, only two further ships, His Majesty's Transport Kapurthala (189) and s.s. Hapsburg (806), carrying fewer than 1,000 refugees between them, and sailing with empty berths, left the port. Many more had registered for evacuation, but had simply not turned up at the dockside. This no-show behaviour was not to the liking of naval authorities charged with implementing the Mackinder guarantee. If the difficulty in persuading refugees to embark continued then 'it would become necessary to issue a notice that the evacuation by us is looked upon as completed. We cannot keep ships waiting about forever'.[37] The irritation of hard-pressed embarkation staff engaged in an emergency humanitarian operation is understandable. Why, now, with rescue ships moving into place were intended recipients of British assistance reluctant to take up the offer? The explanation was simple enough. Living on unfounded rumours and baseless hope refugees had persuaded themselves that Bolshevik advances had been stemmed and that White victories would transform the situation. Such wishful thinking allowed individuals to believe that there would be no need to take the radically life-changing decision to abandon Russia.

Around this time of uncertainty among refugees General Holman signalled London that 'the moment of extreme danger for families of officers contemplated by Mackinder and myself had arrived'. He pleaded for all available commercial and naval

ships to be sent at once to aid the refugees.[38] Six further ships, additional to the three that had sailed during January and February arrived to assist in the rescue operation that lasted until 23 March, 1920.[39] With the knowledge that the British Mission was to transfer to the Crimea with the military forces, refugees were compelled to confront the harsh, unchangeable, reality of their situation. Previous indecision gave way to panic. Novorossiisk became a 'sick, desperate, terrified city with mobs of people surging to every point where they thought there might be hope of safety, or evacuation'.[40] Years later, in melancholic reflection, General Denikin recalled that 'a fierce struggle was going on for places on board - a struggle for life. Many were the human tragedies enacted in the town during those terrible days. Many bestial instincts were brought to light at this moment of supreme danger, when the voice of conscience was stifled and man became an enemy of his fellow man'.[41]

All available shipping, for troops as well as for refugees, left the port in states of gross overcrowding. Yet, even in the chaotic day and night preceding the final military evacuation the plight of civilians was not forgotten. Arrangements had been made 'on the quayside for the reception of refugees who might decide at the last minute to leave the town, but very few came.'[42] The British Mission withdrew to Feodosia in the Crimea where General Milne reported that the 'Mackinder guarantee had been fulfilled'.[43] Official British involvement in the evacuation of refugees from south Russia was over.

At the War Office there was satisfaction at the way the civilian evacuation had been handled. It was 'a fine piece of work, and shews (sic) up in agreeable contrast to the French performance at Odessa'.[44] It was noted also that 'the conduct of the British was

in marked contrast to that of the representatives of certain other countries who charged exorbitant sums for carrying refugees across the Black Sea'.[45] In this case official satisfaction was not out of place. There were good reasons for self-congratulation. A guarantee, given without higher approval and without detailed consideration of costs or consequences, had been redeemed as a matter of national honour, and from the Army's point of view a sense of obligation, in perilous circumstances. The result of the Mackinder inspired operation, in human terms, was the rescue of around 10,000 refugees.[46] This figure was in addition to around 3000 patients carried on hospital ships and the 5000 or so refugees rescued as a result of Admiral De Robeck's individual initiatives.

The early evacuations were conducted in reasonable order. Arranging suitable destinations for following consignments of refugees became more challenging tasks. Official guidance from London offered no help in deciding upon settlement destinations. Practical decisions had to be taken by those in charge of the immediate evacuation - naval and army authorities. Much was being attempted in a short time. Haste and confusion attending the general evacuation of the port meant that destinations of some ships were 'quite unknown even to the Embarking Staff of the Military Landing Officer who superintended the embarkation' '.[47] During this phase events were running ahead of planning and organisation. There was no time, or even inclination, to have regard for likely future problems. The aim of the military and naval authorities was to get as many Mackinder registered refugees as possible out of Novorossiisk. Consequential issues would have to be sorted out by others.

Where to?

The problem of settlement destinations was not easily solvable. Chosen sites had to be reasonably accessible and to have sufficient accommodation for hundreds of refugees, with already laid on provision for water, lighting, sewage, medical facilities as well as sustainable local food supplies. The scale and speed of the exodus as well as the fact that the refugees were in the care of the Army, meant that the British were forced to think of emergency accommodation in terms of unused army and old prisoner-of-war camps. Such places lacked civilian facilities and comforts but they provided shelter and came with basic utility services already installed. At this point these were the pressing priorities.

As earlier noted, the first of the Mackinder ships, the s.s. Hannover, carried 1600 refugees to Prinkipo, a holiday resort not too distant from Constantinople. This destination, as early as 1919, had large numbers of Russian refugees living mostly in penury and now 'grateful for a cake of soap or a packet of cigarettes'.[48] The landing of the first Mackinder consignment simply worsened an already dire situation. Other settlement destinations had to be found. With Constantinople already teeming with refugees and Prinkipo obviously unable to take further shiploads of displaced humanity settlement decisions came to embrace a wide spread of initial landings. In addition to Constantinople and Prinkipo refugees were disembarked at Lemnos, Cyprus, Tuzla and Salonika.

In this list of asylum destinations there was a notable absence - Egypt. At the time this was a British Protectorate possessing a substantial availability of redundant military type accommodation and hospital facilities. All reminders of Britain's

military campaigns in the Middle East during the First World War. So why was Egypt not considered for refugee settlement? During the first meeting to review refugee issues in January, 1920, Admiralty representatives expressed the view 'that Egypt in its present state of unrest appears to be a most unsuitable destination for these refugees who, it should be observed in parenthesis, are invariably the focus of political disturbances'.[49] There was no dissent from this view.

From the British government's perspective there were political and military problems enough in Egypt without importing refugees and their inevitable political baggage. Nationalist aspirations, increasingly expressed through violent demonstrations and actions were testing and stretching British control on the country. In addition, with the state of Constantinople, over-run with destitute refugees, known to all in the region, Egyptian authorities were not expected to welcome a British initiative that came with the prospect of food scarcities, disorder and diseases in their cities.

In short there were substantial, valid, reasons for excluding Egypt from the list of possible refugee destinations. However, by February, 1920, the scale of the refugee exodus prompted General Holman to propose that Egypt be 'forced' to accept shipments of White Russians.[50] He argued that the refugees were a British responsibility; Egypt was a British Protectorate, accessible and with readily available unused military and prisoner-of-war camps and hospitals. Holman had a strong case. However, it found no favour in London. Egypt still remained an unsuitable refugee destination.

This desire to protect Egypt from the adverse consequences of refugee contamination ignored an important factor. Egypt was already infected with the refugee virus. Military hospitals were caring for White Russian war casualties in substantial numbers. For example, on 15 February, 1920, the hospital ship s.s. Empire docked in Alexandria to begin discharging over 600 military patients. On the same day, from Sebastopol, the Gloucester Castle disembarked close to 500 sick and wounded. During March two trips of the Glengorm Castle brought a further 1200 casualties for Egypt's military hospitals.[51] Russians filling British hospital beds were not technically refugees. They were there to be nursed to health and returned as quickly as possible to active service. These were not people who had decided to leave Russia. The coming problem for the British was that Bolshevik military successes made it increasingly difficult for the return process to be implemented. Whether they wished it or not thousands of healthy soldiers would find themselves marooned in Egypt; a White Russian problem awaiting a solution by the British and the Egyptians.

Whatever the thinking in London British authorities in Constantinople were being forced to confront practical issues directly. On 6 March, 1920, Reuters News Agency was reporting that preparations for evacuation were in hand and that it was proposed to 'divert' 5,000 refugees to Egypt.(*The Barrier Miner*, 8 March 1920: 1) Not a decision that London had in mind, but events were dictating an unwanted solution. The scale of the problem with its resulting pressures on all available landing points left the regional British authorities with no practical option other than to allow refugees into Egypt in numbers. The first major, rather stumbling, step in this direction was centred upon one Mackinder ship - the s.s. Saratov. This was a requisitioned Russian ship, in earlier life a passenger ship working the ports of New

York, Singapore and Shanghai, now a White Russian hospital ship and mail carrier. For refugee work the Saratov was to be crewed by British sailors.

S.S. Saratov

On March 7, 1920 the Saratov, with a normal passenger capacity of 800, slipped her moorings and sailed away from Novorossiisk with over 1400 refugees. The sound of distant gunfire was clear. There was relief on board as the ship cast off. There had been 'persistent rumours that the evacuees would be put ashore as the ship had been requisitioned to take soldiers to the Crimea'.[52] The diverse collection of individuals and families aboard, not quite the homogeneous social composition envisaged by Mackinder, was comforted by the firm belief that their British hosts had accorded them special status. They well understood that in the chaos that was Novorossiisk the British had expended considerable time and much effort in selecting and transporting them to safety. Initially, without any sense of irony, the refugees acknowledged and appreciated the idea of being 'guests of the British Crown'.[53] This state of relief and gratitude was to be seriously tested in the coming weeks.

The Saratov was not well suited to its role as carrier of refugees, although it had been pressed into similar service during the evacuation of Odessa. There was cabin accommodation and a communal saloon for the exclusive use of a small number of the highest of the social elite. Most had to settle themselves in cargo holds, only some of which had been primitively adapted for hospital cases with tiered wooden bunks. The unadapted holds 'had no bunks, mattresses, bedding - nothing ... In these great enormous spaces people were put, women, men, children all together, sick and well, old and young - clothing could not be changed as men and women were together. It

was impossible to wash'.[54] All cabins and holds were crammed with people and their possessions but, still, the open deck was crowded with refugees facing the elements with only the flimsiest of shelter. Among the latter were 300 last minute boarders - boys of 16 and 17 years of age from the elite Emperor Alexander 111 Don Cossack Cadet School in Novocherkassk. They marched 150 miles to the nearest railhead to make their way to Novorossiisk having come under the protection of General Holman who secured their passage. [55]

The ship was grossly overcrowded. Inevitably there were 'queues for hot water, for bread, for lunch, at the wash-stand basins, at the toilets'. Inevitably, too, there were 'people who grumbled, who were displeased with everything' but, despite the conditions being endured most passengers counted themselves fortunate to be sailing away from Novorossiisk.[56]

As the voyage progressed the refugees maintained morale with organized activities - chess tournaments, choral and classical music concerts, literary lectures, Orthodox services helped to fill their days but, however they busied themselves there was no lessening of worry about their final destination. They were ignorant of what was to happen to them. The lack of firm information persuaded some refugees to accuse the British of 'stubbornly concealing' their eventual settlement destination. The knowledge was vitally important for family groups and individuals expecting, at some later stage, to be reunited with family members and relatives still warring with the Bolsheviks. The further they travelled from Russia the more difficult would it become to reconnect. Speculation regarding their settlement destination had begun even before the Saratov had left port. Constantinople, Tuzla, Salonika and Cyprus had all received refugees in

recent months. Most expected the Saratov to follow to one or other of such places. On the Saratov, however, there was still uncertainty.

The first stop on the voyage was Constantinople. This was known not to be the final destination. Nonetheless those who wished to disembark were allowed to do so. It was not an easy decision to make. There was already a serious refugee problem in the city. There were food scarcities, a critical shortage of accommodation and tensions between Moslems and the thousands of Orthodox Russians now crowding their streets looking for ways of earning a living. For those choosing to disembark such issues, all well known to those on the Saratov, mattered for less than the calculation that their relatives would come first to Constantinople to look for them. Not all who wished to leave the ship could do so, however. In the haste and confusion of departure from Novorossiisk the baggage that the refugees had brought with them was simply dumped in the cavernous holds 'without weighing, without writing, without receipts, without order' as one passenger expressed it.[57] As a result many of those intending to disembark were unable to discover and retrieve their personal items of luggage from the mountains of baggage that had to be searched. For these the only practical choice was to remain on the ship with their baggage.[58]

When the Saratov sailed away from Constantinople it was known that Cyprus was to be the final settlement destination. The Saratov docked in Famagusta on 18 March, 1920. There the holds were emptied of their baggage and stacked on the dockside. The refugees were given orders to prepare for disembarkation. At this point of high expectation there was a sudden halt in what had seemed orderly proceedings. The refugees were told they would not now be leaving the ship and the unloaded luggage

was returned to the holds. The reason was simple but not allowed for by the route directors of the refugee ships. The local reception services had been overwhelmed by earlier shiploads of refugees. Only 10 days earlier, on 8 March, the s.s. Kherson had arrived from Novorossiisk with almost a thousand sick passengers. The local authorities were in no position to cope with a larger number off the Saratov.

The problem now was - if not Cyprus, where? It took five days to decide the issue. On 23 March, 1920, the Saratov sailed for Egypt arriving in Alexandria on 25 March. The British Government may have had good reasons for excluding Egypt as a settlement destination, but the needs of the moment over-rode all political considerations. There was no practical or available alternative solution.

Final destination

The refugees had arrived in a country unready for their arrival. Reception facilities had been prepared in hurried fashion. After a period of quarantine they were to be dispersed and housed in unused army and prisoner-of-war camps. These camps were intended as a short-term solution; a convenient form of holding exercise while the British Government urgently sought to find countries willing to accept homeless refugees they themselves had no wish to retain in their care. The plan to rapidly divest Britain of refugee responsibilities was to prove difficult of attainment. Britain's intervention in the Russian Civil War cast a long shadow. Mackinder and General Holman, with military and moral reasoning, had forced a decidedly reluctant government to confront the refugee problem. In the end the unavoidable deployment of refugees in Egypt was to embroil the British Government, despite its earnest desire to be rid of refugee issues, in lengthy frustrating international transfer negotiations, mounting financial costs and

unwanted political issues while the White Russians remained their responsibility in Egypt. Yet, and the qualification is important, despite an obvious lack of purposeful conviction, the British had presided over the rescue of thousands of refugees who otherwise would have suffered much harsher fates.

Notes

1. CAB 23/20; 29/1/20.
2. WO 33/371; 1920.
3. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, 288; Kenez, *Civil War South Russia*, 251.
4. Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet*, 153.
5. Beliaev, "Ot Novorossiiska do Zaichar", 159-257; Roodkowsky, "Flight from the Bolsheviks", 368.
6. Brinkley, *The Volunteer Army*, 244.
7. Williamson, *Farewell to the Don*, 277.
8. Army, *Evacuation of north Russia*, 1920; Kopisto, "The British intervention", 13*;* Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* provides an authoritative, balanced, account of this period including a chapter devoted to aspects of the intervention (Chapter 4).
9. Ullman, *Britain and Russian Civil War*, 294-304; Debo, "Lloyd George", 429-441; Kinvig, *Churchill's crusade*, 91.
10. Blouet, " Sir Halford Mackinder", 228-236.
11. CAB 24/94/26; 1919.
12. Kenez, "A. I. Denikin"

, 139-152.

13. CAB 24/97/17, 1920. Appendix B.

14. CAB 24/97/17, 1920.

15. WO 106/1194, 13/1/20

16. CAB 24/97/20

17. See note 15 above.

18. CAB 24/94/20, 8/10/19

19. CAB 24/97/17, 21/1/20

20. WO 106/1194, 16/1/20

21. ADM 137/1749, 28/1/20

22. CAB 24/97, 28/1/20

23. CAB 23/20, 29/1/20

24. Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet relations,* 61

25. Lowdon. Lowdon to Earl Curzon: Doc. 625.

26. CAB 23/20, 29/1/20

27. Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet,* 163

28. Cameron, *Goodbye Russia*, 71

29. CAB 24/99, 21/2/20

30. Ibid

31. Ibid

32. Cameron, *Goodbye Russia*, 85

33. WO 106/1210, 27/3/20

34. Ibid

35. See note 32 above.

36. Roberts, *In Denikin's Russia*: 204

37. Halpern, *The Mediterranean Fleet*: 170

38. CAB 24/99, 24/2/20

39. WO 106/1210, 27/3/20

40. Williamson, *Farewell to the Don*:,277

41. Denikine, *The White Army*, 353

42. WO 106/1210, 27/3/20; WO 32/5718, 12/5/20

43. WO 106/1194, 27/5/20

44. WO 32/5718, 12/5/20

45. Ibid

46. WO 106/1210, 23/3/20

47. WO 106/1210, 27/3/20

48. Bridges, *Alarms and excursions,* 275

49. CAB 24/97, 28/1/20

50. CAB 24/99, 24/2/20

51. AVPRI, fond 317, opis' 820/3, delo 210, 6-16.

52. Roodkowsky, "Flight from the Bolsheviks", 370

53. Iablonovskii, "Iz bezhenskikh skitanii", 79-110.

54. Ibid

55. WO 106/1210; 1920

56. Rubinskaia,, "Proshlo - ne zabyto", 2.

57 See note 53 above.

58. One such reluctant onward voyager was my grandmother, Elena Nikodimovna, travelling with her 10 year old son Dimitri - my father to be.

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