

The Genesis of the Polish-Soviet War, 1919-20

Norman Davies

There are few major events in the history of twentieth-century Europe where scholarship is more concerned with the establishment of the facts than with their interpretation. One of the few is the Polish-Soviet War, the facts concerning which have been held no more sacred than the opinions freely expressed about them. Here, in the first instance, the historian's task is most concerned with the formulation of a reliable narrative. Although the Polish-Soviet War has inspired a number of studies in the countries principally concerned, few scholars have taken the trouble to examine the manifest contradictions which persist, or to write a coherent synthesis.¹

'*The outbreak of the Polish-Soviet War in April 1920*' is a commonplace phrase in the history books of the period. It is frequently accompanied by a discussion of 'the peace negotiations' between Poland and Soviet Russia which took place between 22 December 1919 and 20 April 1920, thereby implying a doubtful situation in which peace negotiations took place before the War had broken out. It has recently been revived by Dr Antony Polonsky, whose uncharacteristic but important lapse has many distinguished precedents, including statements by E. H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher, A. J. P. Taylor and many others.² It shows that a revision of accepted facts, about the date at which the Polish-Soviet War started as well as about the events of April 1920, is extremely urgent.

Similar confusion reigns over the name of the War. 'The Russo-Polish War', as preferred by the '*Encyclopaedia Britannica*', is commonly adopted, although a recent reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* succeeded in using 'The

Russo-Polish War', 'The Soviet-Polish War', and 'The Polish-Soviet War' all in the space of one small article.³ 'The Polish-Bolshevik War' can also be found, especially in pre-war works. Polish émigré writers still use the term 'Wojna polsko-bolszewicka' or sometimes 'Wojna polsko-sowieka' — 'sowiety' being a Russianism which, for them, has a pejorative context. Historians in Poland prefer 'Wojna polsko-radziecka' — 'radziecki' being the accepted adjectival translation of 'soviet'. Historians from the USSR usually talk of 'Война с белополяками' (the War with the White Poles), or more recently, 'Война с буржуазно-помещичьей Польшей' (War with Bourgeois-Landlord Poland), or in school textbooks, 'Война с польскими панами' (War with the Polish Lords), employing political euphemisms which seek to hide the indecency of an event where the Red Army was defeated by the united efforts of virtually the whole Polish nation. The '*Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*' whose later editions include an article on 'Советско-польская Война, 1920' (the Soviet-Polish War of 1920) presents an isolated case where the straightforward title is preferred to a political slogan.⁴

The problem of nomenclature could obviously be solved if it could be decided who it was that Poland was fighting. It may thus come as a surprise to find that the Poles at the time were not very sure of the answer. The war was fought in that twilight period when the Russian Empire had definitely collapsed but the Soviet Union had not yet been founded.⁵ The legal connections between the various soviet republics, as distinct from their common political dependence on the Bolshevik Government in Moscow, were undefined, or at least were not known to the outside world, and Soviet diplomats were not slow to exploit the contradictions. Throughout 1919 the Bolsheviks pretended that they were not at war with Poland, even though the Red Army and the Polish Army were locked in combat. Until April 1919, they claimed that the war was a matter for the 'Lit-Byel', the S.S.R. of Lithuania-Byelorussia, at whose disposal they had put the Red XVI (Western) Army based on Smolensk, and on whose territory beyond the Berezina the action was taking place.⁶ After the fall of the 'Lit-Byel', they sometimes revived this fiction and sometimes ignored the matter completely. In April 1920, when the Polish Army moved on Kiev, they announced that *Russia* had been invaded, even though by their own terms of reference Kiev lay not in Soviet Russia,

(the R.S.F.S.R.) but in the Soviet Ukraine.⁷ On 17 August 1920 when armistice talks opened in Minsk, they took the opposite tack and told the astonished Polish Delegation that the Ukrainian S.S.R. was a sovereign republic whose separate existence must be recognized before negotiations could commence.⁸ In March 1921, they caused the treaty of Riga to be concluded by two signatories, one for the R.S.F.S.R., the other for the Ukrainian S.S.R.⁹ In this way, the Polish Government never knew exactly how its opponents would describe themselves and rested content with the victory over 'Bolshevism'. The historian is thus faced with a difficult choice. 'The Russo-Polish War' is obviously inadequate, in that it implies a war between Poland and the R.S.F.S.R. alone; it is better reserved for the Russo-Polish wars of the Tsarist period. 'The Polish-Bolshevik War' is aptly vague, but has earned certain associations which imply an ideological bias. One is left with 'Polish-Soviet War' or 'Soviet-Polish War', which, according to one's standpoint, best describe the campaigns fought on the one side by the Polish Army and on the other side by the Red Army on behalf of the several Soviet republics.

These few introductory remarks should serve to show that Western scholars have rarely studied the implications for Polish-Soviet relations of the extremely fluid situation which prevailed within Soviet Russia nor of the interpretations which Soviet diplomats and commentators propagated for their own purposes. English scholars above all, partly because Polish sources have usually been beyond the linguistic barrier and partly because sympathy for the Soviets was widespread at the time, have never questioned the Russian version as handed down and thoughtlessly repeated from that day to this.

The Russian version usually appears under the label of the 'Третий Поход Антанты', (the Third Campaign of the *Entente*). It was first formulated by Joseph Stalin in an article in *Pravda* dating from 1920 in which he attempted a 'periodization' of the Civil War years. It was never challenged in the brief span before Stalin's rise to power, when the humiliation of defeat naturally blunted the enthusiasm of Soviet researchers. After 1934, it was embellished with myths about Stalin's own heroic role in the war. Although in recent years some attempt has been made to remove the more blatant embellishments, its basic assumptions have never been scrutinized. These assumptions may be listed as follows:

- (1) as mentioned above, that the outbreak of the war occurred in April 1920;
 - (2) that Poland was the aggressor;
 - (3) that the Polish campaigns were an integral part of Russian Civil War and Intervention, with Piłsudski collaborating with Wrangel as Kolchak had collaborated with Semeonov and Denikin with Yudenich;
 - (4) that the *Entente* powers supported the Poles;
 - (5) that the war represented a Soviet victory.¹⁰
- (1) On 24 April 1920 Piłsudski led the Polish Army on Kiev, which was occupied on 7 May. His dramatic and unexpected *démarche* caused a sensation not only in Moscow, where the Russians were longing for an end to 'War Communism', but also in the world outside, where the new prospect of a defeat for the Bolshevik régime revived all the passions of the Intervention period. He invaded the Ukraine at a moment when news from the other troubled fronts in Russia and Eastern Europe was tending to die out, and created the impression that he had initiated an entirely fresh confrontation. But, as anyone knew who had been following Polish-Soviet relations closely, the Polish Army and the Red Army had been engaged in hostile operations for at least a year. As Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Minister, said in reply to a public challenge by Lord Robert Cecil: 'This episode does not constitute an outbreak of war, but merely a phase of a war which has been going on for some time.'¹¹ There had been battles on a major scale at Wilno in April 1919, at Minsk in August, at Dunabourg in January 1920 and at Mozyr in March; and at no point between the battles had the fighting stopped. The armies were patrolling an undefined front; skirmishes took place constantly: men were killed every day.¹² By capturing Kiev, Piłsudski undoubtedly raised the political stakes of the conflict and widened the scale on which it was contested, but in no sense was he responsible at this point for 'an outbreak of war'.

One reason for the misinterpretation of Piłsudski's action lay in the fact that the Russians, and by extension people in the West concerned with Russian affairs, had paid very little attention to Poland in the preceding period. Russians thought of Poland as an upstart republic

in one of their former Vistula provinces and did not imagine that the Polish Army was a serious threat to the central power. So long as the confrontation was only of importance for Poland, which since its emergence in November 1918 had never received any formal confirmation of its independence from the Soviet authorities, they almost forgot that it existed. They 'discovered' the Polish War only with the fall of Kiev when for the first time it became of vital importance to *them*.

- (2) The charge of aggression is often a dubious one, and in the case of the Polish-Soviet War does not seem to apply at all. The Polish Republic and the Soviet republics in Lithuania-Byelorussia, Russia and the Ukraine had all come into existence spontaneously, in consequence of the collapse of the Tsarist Empire. Neither side possessed accepted frontiers; neither side had recognized the other's government. The two armies first came into conflict in an area of Byelorussia which had been occupied since the summer of 1917 by the Germans, and which neither side in the few months of their existence had ever controlled. Neither side could justify its claim to this intervening territory by 'law'. Neither side in fact was claiming it for its own. The Bolshevik Government in Moscow assumed that the people of Lithuania-Byelorussia had willed their incorporation into 'the Lit-Byel'; the Polish Government in Warsaw declared that the people of Lithuania and Byelorussia should be allowed to decide for themselves. Both sides believed in their right of succession, the one to the inheritance of the Tsars left vacant since 1917, the other to that of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth defunct since 1795. God alone knows what that sort of right means in practice, and it was partly to resolve such irrational beliefs on both sides that a war had to be fought.

Soviet charges of military aggression are usually accompanied by charges of 'social' aggression. The Poles are invariably painted as 'the forces of reaction' and are called 'белополяки' (White Poles) to distinguish the supposedly reactionary ruling class from the supposedly pro-Soviet populace. The Polish Republic is dubbed 'Панская Польша' (lordly Poland) — a phrase snatched from Muscovite folk memories of the old *Rzeczpospolita* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Without

entering here into the complicated problems of Polish society, it does not require much imagination to realize that these slogans entirely belie the radical social outlook of the Polish Governments of 1918–21. The false social assumptions of the Soviets were amply exposed in the summer of 1920 when peasants and workers formed the backbone of spontaneous Polish resistance to the Red Army's onslaught.

- (3) The Polish-Soviet War overlapped with the Russian Civil War in time and to a certain extent in space. There were several occasions in 1919, in Volhynia, in East Galicia and in Byelorussia where three-sided actions were fought between the Poles, the 'Reds' and the 'Whites'. But there is no logical reason to presume that one war formed an integral part of the other. The Polish Government declared itself a neutral in the affairs of Russia, and, on the grounds that Polish Independence was in danger as much from the 'Whites' as from the 'Reds', ended up by opposing them both. As for Piłsudski, Chief-of-State and Commander-in-Chief in Poland and the dominant personality during this period, he was swayed by a revolutionary and socialist past to sympathize as much with the Bolsheviks as with their rivals. His decision not to press his advantage on the Byelorussian front in the autumn of 1919 was a cardinal factor in the Red Army's victory over Denikin, and makes nonsense of the much repeated claim that he was acting in collaboration with the 'Whites'. He was in contact with Denikin, of course, as he was with Wrangel in 1920, but in both cases negotiations collapsed when the 'White' leaders refused to commit themselves categorically either to Polish independence or to the frontiers which Poland demanded.¹³ In the event, the only anti-Soviet groups of the Russian Civil War to reach political agreements with Piłsudski were the Ukrainian, Semeon Petlura, and the national government of Latvia. All the other Russians who fought in the Polish ranks, like Bulak-Balakhovich's 'Army of Byelorussia' or Yakovlev's Brigade of Kuban Cossacks, were accepted as mercenaries but not as political allies.¹⁴
- (4) The relations of Poland with the *Entente* contained many contradictions. Undoubtedly there were prominent people in Paris and London who shared the expressed desire of the British War Minister, Winston Churchill, to

support the Polish Army against the Soviets. The mistake is to suppose that the Churchillian party ever got its way. In 1919, Churchill's plans for Poland were thwarted by Piłsudski's lack of interest and in 1920 by his own loss of influence. Lloyd George's reversal of Allied policy to Russia, engineered between November 1919 and February 1920, and the consequent abandonment of Intervention, was accompanied by a similar change in policy to Poland. Lloyd George specifically stated that the *Entente* could not be associated with a Polish attack on Russia, and throughout 1920 did everything in his power to avoid his admitted responsibilities when the Soviets attacked Poland. Much is made of Allied deliveries of *matériel* to Poland and of French military credits. It is usually forgotten that the *matériel* and the credit were intended to strengthen the Polish Army not against Russia but against Germany. When the Allied Governments found that their aid was being used by Piłsudski in ways not intended, they quickly brought it to a halt. As early as 24 October 1919 Churchill was obliged to inform the Polish authorities that the British Cabinet refused to accede to the request for supplies. The French Government followed suit. The small military credit of 375 million francs, equivalent to only one sixth of the British £100 million granted to Denikin in 1919, was not renewed when it ran out in June 1920 at the height of Poland's need. In the political sphere, the *Entente* constantly expressed intense irritation at the way in which the actions of the Polish Government frustrated hopes for a new understanding with Russia. Although the anti-Soviet stance of the Poles found echoes in the ideological prejudices of the *Entente*, it never evoked any practical response. The purpose of the Interallied Mission to Poland in July 1920, headed by Lord D'Abernon and General Weygand, was designed not to help Piłsudski but to remove him from power.¹⁵

- (5) It may seem odd that the rout of the Red Army following the Battle of Warsaw in August 1920, which no one denies, may be reconciled with the concept of a Soviet victory. This is quite possible, however. Given that Poland's war aim was to annihilate Soviet Russia at the behest of the *Entente*, as all Soviet historians believe, it follows quite naturally that the very survival of the

Bolshevik regime represented a Soviet victory. It is imagined that despite its strategic and tactical defeat the Red Army succeeded in weakening the Poles to such an extent that they could not exploit their success. Lenin expressed this view in his famous conversation with Clara Zetkin in October 1920.¹⁶ It is only by showing that the Poles had no intention of annihilating Soviet Russia in the first place that Soviet claims can be rejected. In reality, it is difficult to award an outright victory to either side. Although at the end of the War the Poles had been victorious on the battlefield they did not translate their advantage into political terms. They did not insist on the 1772 frontier, as claimed at the Paris Peace Conference, and did not succeed in establishing a Federation of Border States, as Piłsudski wished. For their part, the Soviets did not manage to revive the '*Lit-Byel*', and were forced to abandon their hopes of exporting the Revolution to Europe. The result of the Polish-Soviet War was not victory, but stalemate.¹⁷

Hence the so-called 'Third Campaign of the *Entente*' was not the third in a series; it was not just one campaign; and it certainly was not organized by the *Entente*. The idea that in April 1920 Poland was guilty of starting a war against Russia for socially reactionary and imperialist reasons, in collaboration with Wrangel and at the instigation of the capitalist powers, and that the outcome of the War was a victorious one, is a fiction whose origins lie deep in the Soviet subconscious.

To negate the Soviet version is only the first step, however. It dispels the fog of rooted misconception, but gives few indications as to what really took place.

The start of the fighting can best be determined by the simple method of tracing back the daily reports of the contestants and finding when the first engagements occur. These reports (*meldunki*) are readily available for the Polish Army and have been used in published research; they can be checked against the communiqués of the General Staff and in the Press.¹⁸ All these sources agree that the first engagements occurred in mid-February 1919. Pride of place can probably be awarded to an incident at Bereza Kartuzka in Byelorussia at 7 a.m. on 14 February, when a Polish detachment collided with a Soviet scouting party. By any stretch of the imagination, the Polish-Soviet War cannot be said to have been in

progress before this date. After this date and until 12 October 1920, hostilities between the Polish and Red Armies continued without interruption. Whether or not they constituted 'a war' is a matter of terminology. Formal declarations of war were never made by either side.

One complicated aspect of these early encounters has recently been clarified by the publication of Soviet documents. The Polish reports described their opponents as 'Bolsheviks', and there used to be some doubt whether these Bolsheviks were soldiers of the Red Army formally responsible to the Soviet government, or merely local Red Guards. The *Directives* of the Soviet Central Command, published in Moscow in 1969,¹⁹ enables the historian to follow the progress of the Red Army in a way previously impossible and permits one to conclude without hesitation that the units encountered by the Poles at Bereza Kartuzka and elsewhere in Byelorussia in February 1919 were indeed Redarmymen. There is also some doubt about the Polish units. In addition to Polish Army formations, subject to the Government in Warsaw, the Borders harboured numerous bands of Polish irregulars, some of them being remnants of Dowbór-Muśnicki's *Corps* which had fought in 1918 in the Civil War in Byelorussia, others deriving from the Polish *Samo-obrony*, or nationalist Councils of Self-Defence, which in 1918–19 appeared in Minsk, Wilno and Grodno.

At the moment of impact, the Red Army was engaged on an operation code-named 'Цель Висла', (Target Vistula), and was probing westward from its bases beyond the Berezina.²⁰ It raised panic in Poland, where Piłsudski assumed that its name and line of march signified its express intention of crushing the Polish Republic. He cabled Clemenceau to this effect on 28 December 1919, imploring Allied aid.²¹ His fears were misplaced. The 'Target Vistula' operation had been conceived in October 1918 at a point when the Polish Republic had not yet been born. It was launched as a result of the collapse of the German Army in France and in the expectation of its imminent withdrawal from the Eastern Front also. It was directed not against Poland but against the German 'Ober-Ost'. Its purpose was exploratory and not offensive – as shown by the extremely cautious language of its directives, and by the extremely feeble forces at its disposal. Its main army, the Red XVI (Western) Army, raised in October–November at Smolensk, consisted in December 1918 of only

19,000 men. It moved forward at a leisurely pace, concentrating not on the conquest of territory but on the consolidation of Bolshevik authority in the towns. It occupied Minsk on 15 December and Wilno on 5 January 1919. Its latest directive, issued by new Soviet Western command on 12 February 1919, had ordered 'a reconnaissance in depth as far as the Bug';²² and thus it happened that two days later a Soviet reconnaissance party found itself at Bereza Kartuzka, part-way along the railway line from Minsk to Brest.

There is no way of telling what exactly were the Red Army's plans with regard to Poland. It is doubtful whether they had any clear news of what had transpired beyond the German lines. There were no trains, no telegraph, no telephones and no diplomatic relations. In theory, the Bolsheviks subscribed to the principle of Polish Independence; but it is certain that they were not going to approve of 'a bourgeois republic of landlords and squires' under the 'renegade revolutionary' Józef Piłsudski. It seems that they envisaged a Polish S.S.R., subservient to Soviet Russia and confined to the frontier of the old Tsarist Congress Kingdom of Poland on the Bug. Their principal interest in Poland consisted in its function as the 'Red Bridge', the vital territorial link between Russia and Germany over which the Revolution must pass if it were to survive. This belief, that the Revolution could not survive in backward Russia unless it spread to the more advanced industrial countries of Europe, was a cardinal dogma in Bolshevik policy until the end of the Polish War.

The Polish Army had laid its plans without reference to the Soviets. It came into being in November 1918 in response to the creation of the Republic and the disarming of German forces in Warsaw and in the territory controlled by the war-time Regency Council. Its aims in the East were undefined, but from the start it assumed that it would occupy a large part of the Borders. Its immediate goal was to secure the two great border cities of Wilno and Lwów, both of which were regarded as predominantly Polish by ethnic composition and by culture. It was undoubtedly encouraged in its assumptions by the formal claim of the Polish Government to the frontiers of 1772, as presented to the Peace Conference at Paris on 29 January 1919. It was already engaged at Lwów in a campaign against the West Ukrainians, but was still prevented from approaching Wilno by the intervening territory of the *Ober-Ost*. In November 1918, it crossed the Bug at Brest into

a strip of territory along the river, ceded by the German Command. But there it stayed for the next three months, looking on anxiously as the Red Army nibbled away at the other side of the *Ober-Ost*. Its frustration reached a peak at the New Year, when the *Samo-obrona* in Wilno was overturned by the arrival of the Red XVI (Western) Army. Yet it had to wait another four weeks before the Germans would agree to let a small Polish detachment of 10,000 men cross their lines. This agreement was signed at Białystok on 5 February 1919.²³ After a few days' hurried preparation, the Poles set off eastwards from Brest, not knowing what sort of opposition to expect. On the 14th, one of their units reconnoitring the outskirts of Bereza Kartuzka at dawn found the town occupied by the Reds. Captain Mienicki led his men into the attack, surprised the Bolsheviks at breakfast, and took eighty prisoners.²⁴ The Polish-Soviet War, in effect if not by design, had begun.

From that point on, neither side was willing to withdraw. The Soviets set up their 'S.S.R. of Lithuania-Byelorussia' in Wilno and reinforced the XVI (Western) Army. The Poles built up two operational groups, one at Wolkowysk, the other at Brest, and prepared to advance. In March 1919 a continuous front emerged, and on 16 April the first major battle was joined in the Lida-Nowogródek sector. The Poles prevailed, and entered Wilno. For more than twelve months they never looked back. Throughout 1919, the area to the east of the Polish lines was subject to the complicated and multi-sided fluctuations of the Russian Civil War; but by the end of the year the general supremacy of the Bolshevik forces brought the Red Army face to face with the Poles not just in the original theatre of action in Byelorussia, but also along an unbroken line all the way from the Latvian border on the Dvina in the north to the Rumanian border on the Dniester in the south.

The success of the Red Army in the Civil War had ominous consequences for the Polish-Soviet War. It meant that increasing numbers of Soviet soldiers could be spared for service against Poland. As Trotsky declared: 'The Polish lords and gentry will snatch a temporary, marauders' victory; but when we have finished with Denikin, we shall throw the full weight of our reserves on to the Polish front.'²⁵ In due course, on 27 February 1920, Lenin put this threat into formal effect. 'All the indications are that Poland will present us with

impossible, even insolent conditions', he said; '... it is necessary to issue the slogan, "Prepare for war with Poland".'²⁶ On 10 March 1920 the Soviet Command drew up precise plans for an offensive to be mounted against Poland as soon as circumstances permitted.²⁷ Between 1 January and 25 April 1920, Red Army effectives on the Polish front rose from 4 Infantry Divisions and 1 Cavalry Brigade, to 20 Infantry Divisions and 5 Cavalry Brigades. The overwhelming mass of these troops (15 divisions), equivalent to some 99,000 men, were concentrating on the Berezina in an offensive posture.²⁸

The Polish Army took similar precautions. The implementation of the Treaty of Versailles on 10 January 1920, and the consequent confirmation of Poland's disputed frontier with Germany, released considerable forces for transfer to the east from Poznan and Pomerania. A tactical reduction from the frontline areas was ordered, owing to wastage and unnecessary hardship caused by an extremely severe winter; but reserves were constantly increasing at garrison towns in the rear. Throughout the early months of 1920 there was no attempt to redistribute these reserves according to an operational plan. In one exceptional episode at Mozyr in Polesie between 5 and 19 March, when the Soviets counter-attacked desperately with tanks and aeroplanes, Sikorski captured the vital railway network which linked the two possible theatres of future action on the Berezina and in the Ukraine. But in general, the Polish Command contented itself with consolidating its position. It was only at the beginning of April, following the breakdown of diplomatic efforts for an armistice, that the Polish Army was brought to a state of readiness, and a strike-force of some 50,000 men concentrated in East Galicia.²⁹

These military events, both the campaigns of 1919 and the manoeuvrings of the winter months, form the essential context of Piłsudski's decision to march on Kiev. If they are ignored, if one pretends that the war had not yet begun or that preparations for a new campaign were not being made by both sides, one is bound to reach some strange conclusions.

Piłsudski was notoriously taciturn, and it is not easy to document his motives. He rarely discussed his policy even with his closest confidants, and habitually left his ministers in the dark. The tougher the problem, the more silent he became. As a result, it is impossible except within the widest

limits to say when he decided to launch the Kiev campaign. There are certain indications, however, which allow the reconstruction of his thoughts. Firstly, Piłsudski was much more concerned with military than with diplomatic developments. As Commander-in-Chief he was formally responsible for the actions of the Polish Army in a way that as Chief-of-State he was not directly responsible for the conduct of diplomacy. As a soldier by profession, he was much more impressed by reports of the enemy's troop movements than by the wording of their Peace Notes. Faced with the challenge of the Red Army, he was disposed by temperament to seek a military solution rather than a diplomatic one. Secondly, he firmly believed that Soviet diplomacy was insincere. He could not accept the Soviet Peace Notes at their face value so long as the Red Army on the Berezina was receiving reinforcements. As he told a newspaper correspondent on 28 February:

'If some one puts a knife to my throat, I have an unpleasant feeling. I am not a person to whom you can speak in such a manner. I know the Bolsheviks are concentrating large forces on our front. They are making a mistake, thinking they can frighten us and present us with an ultimatum. Our army is ready.'³⁰

He did not reject the Soviet notes of 22 December 1919 and 28 January 1920, but he did not accept them either. He waited to see what the Red Army would do. He gave no lead to the Polish Foreign Minister, Stanisław Patek, who in January and again in March toured the capitals of Europe to learn the opinions of the allied Governments without knowing the opinion of his own Chief-of-State. He watched impassively between 27 March and 20 April as diplomatic exchanges concerning Borisov as a suitable place for negotiations ran into trouble and finally broke down. He waited for the diplomats to produce an agreement which would prove that his soldierly suspicions were unfounded, and this they failed to do. Thirdly, he was seriously embarrassed by the political campaign of strikes and propaganda waged within Poland by communists, socialists and Soviet sympathizers. He was forced to introduce repressive measures which earned him the praise of the Polish Right, whom he detested, and the hatred of the Left with whom he had long been associated. He was bound to interpret this internal subversion as a further sign of Soviet bad faith. These reasons are sufficient to explain why Piłsudski himself preferred the recourse to

arms. And it has never been suggested that someone other than Piłsudski was responsible for Polish policy-making.

It is impossible to know for certain whether Piłsudski's assessment of Bolshevik policy was correct. There was a strong current of opinion, led by Chicherin and Trotsky, which wanted to avoid a larger confrontation with Poland and which led the diplomatic offensive for peace. All one can say is that their efforts did not convince either Lenin, who continued to support the Red Army's build-up on the Berezina, or Piłsudski.³¹

It has been argued that Piłsudski never had any intention of accepting a diplomatic solution, even if the diplomats had reached an agreement; it has been said that a fight to the finish with Russia was something he longed for, believing it to be the only guarantee of Poland's survival, and the necessary prelude to Poland's return to her ancient position as the greatest power in the East. Some of his aphorisms support this view. 'Poland will be great', he once said, 'or she will not exist'. In December 1919, having terminated one of many rounds of Peace Talks with the Soviets, he produced this outburst:

'There's only one thing to tell the Bolsheviks, or Denikin for that matter: "We are a force in the world, and you are destined for the mortuary. . . . There can be no question of relations or diplomatic negotiations, where the fundamental conditions are trust and discretion. You don't practise the former and don't recognize the latter. . . ." No, No! I have not been negotiating. I have just been telling them unpleasant facts. . . . I have told them to understand that with us they must act like humble beggars.'³²

It would be wrong, however, to pay too much attention to Piłsudski's bad temper on one particular evening or to equate his general disinclination to negotiate with an absolute refusal to do so. After all, he *did* permit negotiations to continue to the very last minute before launching his offensive, and, as later experience was to show, his suspicions concerning the frailty of Bolshevik promises were very well founded.³³ In 1920, even Piłsudski realized that the stakes were too high for diplomacy to have been rejected lightly.

Piłsudski's hand was forced by the deteriorating predicament of the Polish Army. His first duty as Commander-in-Chief in a war situation was to engage and to defeat the enemy, and the chances of fulfilling his duty diminished with every day that passed. It was calculated that the vastly superior resources and manpower of the Red Army would

require some eight weeks from the order of concentration to tip the balance irrevocably in their favour. In March, the Poles observed a two-fold increase in the rate of Soviet reinforcements. At the beginning of April they learned that Budyonny's redoubted Cavalry Army, having finally disposed of Denikin, had set out for the Polish front. By mid-May at the latest, and possibly earlier, the Soviets would have assembled a strike-force of irresistible proportions. For the Polish Army a pre-emptive attack, to dislocate the enemy's preparations and to deliver the first telling blow of the season, offered the surest means of salvation.³⁴

The direction of Piłsudski's attack has given rise to much discussion. Some historians, like Tadeusz Jedruszczak, argue that an offensive in the south can only be explained by political motives. They stress the designs, which certainly existed in Piłsudski-ite circles, of detaching the Ukraine from Russia and establishing an anti-Soviet Federation of Border States.³⁵ They see the Polish treaty with the Ukrainian 'Ataman' Petlura, as an essential part of a long prepared plan. They think that the offensive into the Ukraine did not make military sense, and maintain that the subsequent failure of the Poles to keep Kiev proves their point.³⁶ Their arguments are not entirely convincing, however. It is more likely that Piłsudski's political aims were subordinated to military considerations. Presuming that a pre-emptive attack had already been decided, an offensive in the south had many advantages. The spring floods in the Ukraine subside earlier than in Byelorussia, and facilitate an earlier attack. The local population, which contained a sizeable Polish element and a large class of prosperous, anti-communist peasants, would provide a more friendly environment for intelligence and supplies. Most importantly, the weaker Soviet XII and XIV Armies on the South-West Front presented the prospect of a lightning victory, and hence of maximum psychological effect. Success at Kiev would then put the Polish Army in a position to use the lateral railways and to take the Soviet concentrations on the Berezina in the flank and the rear. Having only 50,000 men with which to launch the attack, it did not make sense to attack the Berezina frontally and directly, thereby risking an uncertain outcome in an uneven contest. A swift penetration along the southern plains, followed by a sudden swerve to the north behind the Soviet centre, provided the best chance of ultimate victory; it was the only way to trap the

Red Army into a confrontation on favourable terms and to prevent it from retreating into the depths of Russia.

In the event, Piłsudski's strategy very nearly paid off. The first step, the march on Kiev, was executed briskly. Kiev was occupied on 7 May, only two weeks after the attack was unleashed. The psychological effect was enormous, throwing the population of Russia into a patriotic panic and alerting the outside world to the reality of the war for the first time. The second step, the swerve to the north, was countered only in the nick of time by Tukhachevsky, who, arriving in Smolensk at the end of April, realized the danger and on 15 May mounted a desperate diversion with unprepared troops. This 'Battle of the Berezina' forestalled Piłsudski's planned attack on the Zhlobin-Mogilev area by only two days, and secured the main Soviet armies from encirclement; by diverting Polish attention from the south, it also provided the opening for Budyonny, whose freshly arrived Cavalry Army stormed the Polish lines in Galicia on 4 June. Tukhachevsky's action on this occasion was crucial. Had he delayed only two days more, Piłsudski's attack on Zhlobin-Mogilev would have brought the Poles into a position which commanded both the Berezina and the Dnieper valleys, opening up the Red Army's lines of communication to imminent destruction and threatening the very gates of Moscow.³⁷

Piłsudski's tactical moves during the Kiev Campaign support the view that military and not political considerations were uppermost in his mind. His extreme irritation after the battle at Malin on 27 April when he saw that the Soviet armies were not going to challenge the Polish advance, suggests that the destruction of the enemy was more important to him than the conquest of territory. On reaching Kiev, he immediately dismantled his strike-force, dissolved the Second Army completely, and began to transfer his divisions for service in the northern theatre. He made no attempt to garrison the Ukraine, and offered no military support to Petlura's feeble efforts at re-establishing the Directory. These were not the actions of an 'imperialist' aiming to absorb the Ukraine nor of a politician working for the imposition of a new political order.³⁸

It would be idle, of course, to imagine that politics played no part whatsoever. Here one must keep an eye on dates and timing, and make a distinction between Piłsudski's general acceptance of the Federalist schemes and his unwillingness to

concede that the time was ripe for their prosecution. Throughout the months preceding the Kiev campaign, Piłsudski explored the possibilities of an anti-Soviet Federation, making overtures in this direction with Finland, with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania at a conference of Baltic States, with Savinkov and Tchaikovsky representing the 'White' Russian Delegation at Paris, with Rumania and even with Georgia. But none of his overtures came to fruition and it was only by a process of elimination that he was left with 'Ataman' Petlura. It should be stressed that Petlura, during eleven months' refuge in the Polish lines, had constantly been rejected as a prospective ally and on occasion had provided the butt for Piłsudski's inimitable and derisive abuse. It is true that Petlura had formed the pretext for Piłsudski's abandonment of negotiations with the Soviets at Mikaszewice in December 1919; but this proves no more than that Piłsudski wanted to keep his options open and resented Bolshevik interference in the Ukraine. There is no evidence that Piłsudski gave serious thought to the idea of Petlura becoming Poland's ally until *after* the decision to march on Kiev was already made. The Treaties with Petlura were signed at the very last moment, in consequence of and not as a prelude to the offensive. The final order to the Polish Army was issued on 17 April;³⁹ the political agreement with Petlura was signed on the 21st, the military convention on the 24th and the economic treaty on 1 May⁴⁰ – these last two at a time when the Poles were already on the march. In this context, there can be little doubt that Piłsudski took Petlura along with him as a political afterthought and as an administrative labour-saving device. No doubt, if Petlura's régime had flourished in Kiev, no one would have been more delighted than Piłsudski; but he did not count on it, and was far too preoccupied with his military tasks to give it much attention.

The Kiev Campaign was not the unmitigated catastrophe which most historians describe. It did not succeed in winning the Ukraine, nor in outflanking the Red Army concentrations on the Berezina. It was upset by Tukhachevsky's tactical advance in May, by Budyonny's arrival in June, and by the successful withdrawal of the Red XII and XIV Armies, which lived to fight again. It ended in a prolonged Polish retreat which continued until the 18 August, and it had the effect that Poland was invaded from two directions at once. But it *did* win time. It did disrupt Soviet preparations. It meant that

Tukhachevsky's grand offensive against Poland, in preparation since 10 March, could not be launched until 4 July – by which time the Poles were much better prepared. It was a bold stroke, surpassed in cunning and daring only by the Battle of Warsaw in August which put an end once and for all to the Red Army's hopes of victory.⁴¹

In conclusion, the genesis of the Polish-Soviet War was very different from the generally accepted version. It originated in February 1919 without malice aforethought, or premeditated design. It continued without interruption through 1919, arousing fears and suspicions which the diplomats were unable to control. Piłsudski's march on Kiev in April 1920 was not an outbreak of war, but a decisive move in a game whose opening gambits had been played out long before. If the Poles forced the pace, their anxiety was amply justified by the behaviour of a larger neighbour with superior resources who took scant account of Poland's needs and who, in the desire to export Revolution into Germany, was willing enough to see Poland destroyed.

NOTES

1. This paper aims to discuss and substantiate the narrative of the Polish-Soviet War as recounted in my study *White Eagle, Red Star – the Polish-Soviet War 1919–20*, Foreword by A. J. P. Taylor, published 1972 by Macdonald's Ltd., (London) and St Martin's Press (New York). It may also be read in conjunction with the fundamental diplomatic study of the subject – P. S. Wandycz, *Soviet-Polish Relations, 1917–21*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

2. Antony Polonsky, *Politics in Independent Poland, 1921–39* (Oxford, 1972), 99; E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* (3 vols., London, 1966). Vol. III, 170; Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin* (Oxford, 1949), 214; A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–45* 143; M. Beaumont, *La faillite de la paix* (4th Edition, Paris, 1960). Vol. I, 85; R. Butler, in *New Cambridge Modern History* Vol. XII (Revised, Cambridge, 1968), 223; W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution* (London, 1935). Vol. II, 291; R. Charques, *A Short History of Russia* (London, 1959), 234; J. D. Clarkson, *A History of Russia* (Oxford, 1969), 536; W. P. and Z. K. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), 25; L. Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs* (Princeton, 1951). Vol. I, 259; H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (Revised edition, London, 1943). Vol. II, 1190; M. T. Florinsky, *Russia – a short History* (2nd edition, London, 1969), 466; D. Footman, *The Civil War in Russia* (London, 1969), 316; J. Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World* (London, 1956). Vol. III, 342; S. Harcave, *Russia – a history* (New York, 1968), 538; C. E. Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (London, 1947), 190; O. Hoetzsch, *The Evolution of Russia* (London, 1966), 188; C. A. Macartney and A. W. Palmer, *Independent Eastern Europe* (London, 1962), 113; H. Nicolson, *Curzon – the last phase* (London, 1934), 203; R. A. C. Parker, *Europe 1919–45* (London, 1969), 44; R. Portal, *Les Slaves* (Paris, 1965), 404; F. Spencer, in *A History of the World in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1956), 351; B. H. Sumner, *A Survey of Russian History* (2nd edition, London, 1947), 198; A. B. Ulam, *Expansion and Co-existence – a History of Soviet foreign policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 107; G. Vernadsky, *A History of Russia* (3rd Revised edition, Yale, 1951), 289; S. and B. Webb, *Soviet Communism – a new civilization* (3rd edition, London, 1944), 878; H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (Revised edition, London 1951), 1,121.

3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. XIX (Chicago, 1966) 826–7; 'To the very Gates of Warsaw' (Anon) *T.L.S.* i.ix. 72 being a review of Davies, op. cit.

4. *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya* (2nd Edition) Moscow, 1956, Vol. 39, 506–9.

5. Polonsky's statement about the outbreak of the war with 'the Soviet Union' (sic) in April 1920 is doubly misleading. Polonsky, op. cit., 99.

6. See Chicherin's Note to the Allied and Associated Powers, 18 February 1919, where he talks of a frontier 'между Литвой и Белоруссией с одной стороны и Польской Республикой с другой,' also of the Polish threat to 'советским республикам Литвы и Белоруссии и Русской Советской Республике, смязанной с ними неизменной сердечной дружбой'. *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR*, Vol. II, 78–9.

7. See the Appeal of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets 'Ко всем рабочим, крестьянам, и честным гражданам России' (To all workers, peasants and honourable citizens of Russia). 29 April 1920: *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR*, Vol. II, 492–5.

8. See Protokol of the First Session of the Minsk Conference, 17 August 1920: AMSZ (Warsaw) P.III w12 t2, printed in '*Dokumenty i Materialy do Historii stosunkow polsko-radziekich*', Vol. III, No. 184.

9. Treaty of Riga. . . 18 March 1921. '*Dokumenty i Materialy . . .*' III, No. 275.

10. J. V. Stalin, 'Noviy Pokhod Antanty na Rossiyu' in *Pravda* (Moscow) 25 May 1920; the full-blown Stalinist version can be found in *Istoriya Grzhdanskoi Voiny v SSSR*, ed Rabinovich (Moscow 1936), and in F. Zuyev, '*Mezhdunarodniy imperializm organizator napadeniya pan'skoi Pol'shi na Sovetskuyu Rossiyu*' (Moscow, 1954). The post-Stalinist variation appears in most works of state, party or military history written after the rehabilitation of Tukhachevsky in 1964 and the publication of Budyonny's memoirs in 1965 – e.g. N. F. Kuzmin, 'Voyna za burzhuyazno-pomeshchik'e Pol'shei' in *Istoriya SSR*, Institut Istoriy Akademii Nauk SSR (Moscow, 1967), Vol. III, 568–97; *50 Let Vooruzhennykh Sil SSR*, ed M. V. Zakharov (Moscow, 1968), 110–64; *Istoriya KPSS*, ed E. I. Bugayev (Moscow, 1968), Vol. III, 473–514. It is interesting that these official Soviet accounts represent a specifically Russian view of the Polish War, since they are not always followed in works originating elsewhere in the USSR. Histories written in the Lithuanian SSR or in the Byelorussian SSR tend to stress the Polish attack on Lithuania-Byelorussia in 1919 but distinguish it from the Polish 'attack on Russia' in April 1920. See A. F. Hatskievich, '*Pol'skie Internatsyonalisty v bor'be za vlast' Sovetov v Belorossii*' (Minsk, 1967) or '*Bor'ba za Sovetskuyu vlast' v Litve*' *Sbornik Dokumentov* (Vilnius, 1967). Soviet military accounts did not conform to the official political version until the 1930s. N. Kakurin and V. A. Melikov *Voinya s Belopolyakami 1920 g* (Moscow, 1925) is a first-rate source, as is Volume III of *Grzhdanskaya Voyna, 1918–21* – 'Operativno-Strategicheskii Ocherk Boevikh Deistvii Krasnoi Armii', (Moscow-Leningrad, 1930) of which M. N. Tukhachevsky was an editor.

11. Curzon to Cecil, 11 May 1920. PRO FO 371. 3914/197475.

12. Some commentators, whilst admitting to the fighting before April 1920, suggest that it was on a totally insignificant scale – 'a border conflict' in fact. This was not the case. Some 100,000 men, slightly fewer than 50,000 on the Soviet side and slightly more on that of the Poles – were engaged in the battle for Wilno in April 1919. The battle for Minsk assumed similar proportions. Polish casualties in the period January – April 1920 were running at 6,000 a month; and in 1919 the lowest monthly figure, in November, was 1,770. There is no reason to suppose that Soviet casualties were any lower. See W. Sikorski, *La Campagne Polono-Russe* (Paris 1929), Appendix.

13. For the fiasco of Polish relations with the Russian 'Whites' see A. Juzwenko, 'Sprawa uznania rządu Kotczaka w polskiej polityce zagranicznej, 1918–20' in *Studia z Najnowszych Dziejów Powszechnych* (Warsaw, 1963). Vol. IV, 195–222; A. Kamiński, 'Polska w świetle postanowień rządu omskiego' in *Ibid.*, III, 211–28; also A. Denikin, '*Ocherki russkoi smuty*' (Berlin, 1925), Vol. V, 177–81, and A. Leinwand, 'Polska a Denikin' in *Zeszyty Naukowe WAP*, Seria historyczne II, (Warsaw, 1964), 36ff.

14. At the very end of the Polish-Soviet War, on 3 October 1920, Wrangel issued an order putting Peremykin's new 'Third Army', formed from Russian refugees in Poland, under Polish orders until transferred to the Crimea. This, perhaps the only example of positive collaboration between Poland and Wrangel, was virtually a dead letter. Peremykin conducted one raid into the Ukraine in

November 1920 but never reached the Crimea. See *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . III, No. 229.

15. For Allied policy to the Polish-Soviet War, see Norman Davies, 'Lloyd George and Poland, 1919–20' *Journal of Contemporary History*, VI (3) (1971), 132–54; also 'Sir Maurice Hankey and the Interallied Mission to Poland, July 1920' in *The Historical Journal*, XV (3) (1972) 553–61; and Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 83–95, 112–13, 167–77, 220–5, 241–6.

16. Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (London, 1929), 19–22.

17. See Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 262–3.

18. E. G. A. Deruga, *Polityka Wschodnia Polski wobec ziem Litwy, Białorusi i Ukrainy, 1918–19'* (Warsaw, 1969); and S. Pomarański, *Pierwsza Wojna Polska, 1918–21* (Warsaw, 1920).

19. *Direktivy Glavnogo Komandovaniya Krasnoy Armii, 1917–20* Voenizdat (Moscow, 1969); also *Direktivy Komandovaniya Frontov Krasnoy Armii (1917–22)* I (Moscow, 1971).

20. *Direktivy* . . . Nos. 133, 136 and 153.

21. See *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . II, 98, note 7.

22. *Direktivy* . . . Nos 310, 311.

23. '*Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . ' II, No. 68.

24. Mienicki's *Oddział Wileński* (Wilno Detachment), making its way through the *Ober-Ost* to the Polish lines from Wilno, where it had fought for the *Samoobrona*, may have been moving in the same direction as the Redarmymen. There is some doubt as to whether it had already been formally subjected to Polish Army orders – hence the difficulty of stating with absolute certainty that this was the first engagement between the Polish and Red Army. It was not reported in the Warsaw press until 19 February, by which time several other clashes had occurred. On the 17th Mienicki was joined at Bereza by the main Polish column. On the 18th, a further collision occurred at Maniewiczze in Volhynia. See A. Juzwenko, 'Misja Marchlewskiego . . .' in '*Z Badań nad wpływem i znaczeniem Rewolucji Rosyjskich 1917 r.*', ed H. Zieliński (Wrocław, 1968), 31–89.

25. L. B. Trotsky, in an interview published by *L'Internationale Communiste* (Paris), 15 December 1919.

26. V. I. Lenin, *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . II, No. 331. This order perfectly illustrates the double-thinking which prevailed in Russia in relation to the Polish campaigns. In one breath Lenin refers to the question of 'peace terms', admitting, as he knew very well, that hostilities had been in progress for months past; in the next breath he launches a slogan which implied that the war was yet to begin. It is clear that in his mind the fighting against Poland in 1919 was of such marginal importance in comparison with the life-and-death struggle against 'the Whites' that it did not merit the status of a 'war'. In Lenin's estimation, 'war' could only be fittingly applied to the major confrontation with Poland which he expected in the Spring.

27. The text of this order is in N. E. Kakurin, V. A. Melikov, '*Voyna z Belopolyakami 1920 g*' (Moscow, 1925), 77ff.

28. Polish intelligence undoubtedly overestimated the numerical strength of these divisions which were not brought up to full strength until July. See T. Kutrzeba, '*Wyprawa Kijowska*' (Warsaw, 1937), 45.

29. *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . II, No. 375.

30. Published in '*Le Petit Parisien*' (Paris) 6 March 1920.

31. For a discussion of the debates within the Bolshevik Party see Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 66–70, 95–7.

32. Quoted from the Diary of M. St Kossakowski by A. Juzwenko, 'Misja Marchlewskiego . . .' op. cit., 78–9.

33. The Soviet double policy, of combining diplomatic overtures for peace with energetic military measures, is well documented in the period of the invasion of Poland in July 1920, and there is every reason to conclude that it had been their policy all along. See Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 95–7, 175–6.

34. See Kutrzeba, op. cit., Kutrzeba, as a staff officer in 1919–20, had been personally responsible for drawing up the Polish operational plan, and his opinion on this point is authoritative.

35. For Piłsudski's Federalist schemes see M. K. Dziewanowski, 'Piłsudski's Federal Policy, 1918–22' in *Journal of Central European Affairs*. Chicago, 1950, and J. Lewandowski, 'Prometeizm-Koncepcja Polityki Wschodniej Piłsudszczyzny' in *Biuletyn Wojskowej Akademii Politycznej* I Nr 2(12) (Warsaw, 1958).

36. T. Jedruszczak, in *Historia Polski* Vol. IV, part 1, PAN (Warsaw, 1961), 350–73.

37. Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 130–3.

38. *Ibid.*, 105–12.

39. CAW (Warsaw) WBH t 733/288 in *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . II, No. 375.

40. Respectively *Dokumenty i Materiały* . . . II, Nos 379, 381, and III, No. 14.

41. Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star* . . . , 127.