

The Bolshevik Revolution and the Ukraine Crisis: What Can They Possibly Have in Common?

Description

by

Dr. Karin Kneissl is Austria's former minister of foreign affairs. In June 2020, Dr. Kneissl published her book titled 'Diplomacy Makes History – The Art of Dialogue in Uncertain Times' (Olms Verlag, Hildesheim). The central point of the book is "Diplomacy means commitment to dialogue – no matter the circumstances."



Almost 40 years ago, I learnt in history class that the German general staff had organised a secret operation during World War I to bring Russian communist Vladimir Lenin from his exile in Geneva to Petrograd (now known as St. Petersburg) in a sealed train in April 1917. This chapter of the war fascinated me. Since then, I have been under the impression that it was a spontaneous operation to pacify the so-called Eastern Front. The real consequences, of course, were the October Revolution and the collapse of Russia.

The warlike chessboard of Helphand, aka Parvus

It wasn't until I read a book written in 2000 by Austrian historian Elisabeth Heresch titled 'Geheimakte Parvus – Die Gekaufte Revolution' ('Secret Files: Parvus – The Bought Revolution'), that I realized preparations for a power change in Russia had been long in the making. It was almost a fixed agenda of the foreign ministries in Vienna and Berlin. In their traditional rivalry with the Russian tsars, the Habsburgs were primarily concerned with their power in the Balkans.

The key lobbyist for this foreign interference in Russia was a Minsk-born man, Israel Lazarevich Helphand, who later went by the name of Alexander Parvus. As a publicist and, above all, as a financier of various revolutionary circles in Europe and in the Ottoman Empire, he pulled many strings from the 1890s onwards. On his chessboard, he moved figures such as Lenin and Trotsky but also the revolutionary Young Turks.

Using thoroughly researched documents, Heresch describes the intrigues of European diplomacy at the beginning of the 20th century, which aimed to stop Russia through anarchy and bring down the country and its people. So, it was not an ad hoc decision to ship the sidelined extreme Bolshevik Lenin to Russia, where the pragmatic Mensheviks had gained the upper hand. Rather, it was the last stone to be added to a pile of stones that had been building up for a long time. It would first affect Europe and later bury Russia.

Germany's General Erich Ludendorff wrote in 1917: "Lenin's entry into Russia was successful. It is working just as we wanted." Parvus was always involved in this operation. Not only did he pull the strings and place his pieces on the political chessboard, he also made millions doing it. However, his plan to become a minister in Lenin's revolutionary cabinet did not work out as intended.

Interference then and now

"Only internal unrest will shake the Russian colossus," wrote the Viennese diplomat Alexander Hoyos in September 1914. A few weeks earlier, the old Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria had sent Serbia a declaration of war. The text was based on false reports and the world staggered into the Great War. All attempts by Russian Emperor Nicholas II, in particular with telegrams to the German Emperor Wilhelm II, his cousin, to persuade him to find a diplomatic solution failed. Nicholas suggested in vain that the facts surrounding the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in June 1914 should be clarified by means of a precise legal investigation. Incidentally, the two cousins, Niki and Willi, often corresponded in English.

Austrian diplomacy also proved to be particularly active in its commitment to promoting revolutionary

movements in Russia, as well as the formation of a Ukrainian state. In her book, Heresch cites reports such as the following: “Simultaneously, with the beginning of Austria-Hungary’s war with Russia, the Austrian government took measures to spark revolutionary unrest in Russia. To this end, Austrian politicians offered some political émigrés staying in Austria the opportunity to leave for Russia – after providing them with false passports – and carry out revolutionary propaganda there. They were also offered sums of money.”

At the same time, an effort by Vienna and Lausanne was underway to promote the separation of Ukraine via publications such as the German-language daily *Der Bund*. It was supposedly about “freeing the Ukrainian people from the Russian yoke once and for all”.

Heresch goes on to say that these “proclamations were received extremely negatively by Russian socialists, largely thanks to the fact that the venality of their authors was so clearly expressed”.

Some parallels may come to mind in view of the current situation regarding Ukraine, in which it is almost impossible to distinguish between right and wrong. The media machine started up in October with a *Washington Post* [report](#) on Russian troop movements on Russian soil, which apparently agitated Ukraine less than it did NATO.