

THE LONG CRUSADE

Senator William E. Borah and the  
Campaign to Recognize Soviet Russia

Presented to the  
Athenaeum Society  
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by

Marvin D. Denison  
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*You, I believe, were the first American to recognize the full implications of amicable relations between your country and mine...*

Maxim Litvinov to William Borah  
November 11, 1933

One week before the formal announcement establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs wrote William Borah expressing his "warm respect and regard". Such an extraordinary communication came after sixteen years of patient effort by the Republican Senator from Idaho to achieve diplomatic recognition for the Soviet state. Why did a Western Senator, "irreconcilable" opponent of the League of Nations, champion such a "radical" cause? Why did he, not only espouse, but lead a campaign to diplomatically legitimize the Bolshevik rulers of Russia? In a time of such dramatic change in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it may be serve well to look at an earlier period of dramatic changes.

When the Senator from Idaho began his campaign for recognition, few in the United States were interested in the diplomatic status of Russia. Yet, his motivation was strong enough to weather a Daughters of the American Revolution black-list, and the political opposition of four presidents and three powerful Secretaries of State. Through the years, Borah held his position, gradually chipping away the substance of many of his opponents' arguments. It is this campaign that will be analyzed in the next few minutes.

William E. Borah (born-1865) was reared in Kansas, migrated to Idaho, and by the years of the Progressive crusades had developed a successful law practice, despite his father's efforts to have William follow him into the Presbyterian ministry. Marriage to the governor's daughter was followed by much improved political fortunes and selection to the United States Senate in 1906. There he remained until his death in 1940. During his tenure, he became widely known as a maverick, supporting no party program simply because it was Republican. His independent nature produced a wealth of political opponents, virtually as many Republicans as Democrats. Yet, it was universally agreed that his political disputes did not make personal enemies of his opponents. One of his distinguishing characteristics was the ability to omit personal rancor from political debates.

Although he never finished the University of Kansas, his reading was broad, largely devoted to history, foreign affairs and the classics. Several fundamental principles governed Borah's analysis of contemporary affairs. The foremost concept was a belief in the superior wisdom and foresight of American statesmen of the revolutionary and early Constitutional periods. Additionally, the United States should, based on Thomas Jefferson's wisdom, remain free of "entangling alliances" which could cause unforeseen problems in the future. From these related premises came a steadfast resolve to oppose United States' involvement in overseas activity that could limit our future freedom of action. The above point is vital to an understanding of Borah's position on diplomatic recognition by the United States. His distrust of Europe and Britain stemmed from the firm belief that European and British aims virtually always were in opposition to the best interests of the United States. The Idaho Senator in speeches and articles vigorously expressed his views on Europe, "that maelstrom of passion and fear."

Nevertheless, even before the Great War ended, Borah was showing interest in, and writing about, Russia. Less than a month after the Bolshevik Revolution, Borah urged definitive American action to prevent Germany from taking military advantage from the chaos. Writing in the New York Times, he urged that a high-level commission go to Russia and remain until stability returned. He firmly maintained that such an aid commission could succeed in preventing the loss of Russian participation in the war from being turned directly to Germany's advantage.

Borah hoped that direct United States' involvement in Russia would help mold the character of Bolshevik rule. He felt that any contact with representatives of our great democracy would help show the Soviets the many advantages of such a government. At no time, however, did Borah advocate a military invasion of Russia to overthrow the Bolsheviks. Although hopeful of a change in the Soviet regime, after July 1918, the Senator moderated his views regarding the survival of Bolshevism. Instead of advocating attempts to alter the Soviet government, he concentrated on efforts aimed at formal recognition of the Soviet government. Borah's shift in emphasis coincided almost exactly with United States' participation in the ill-fated Allied invasion of Russia. Initially, Borah had sought to mitigate remaining German influence in Russia. However, the campaign soon became a crusade to recognize Russia for its own sake. Borah's growing concern with formal recognition and his desire to prevent United States intervention were more representative of his principles concerning the proper overseas role for the United States.

President Woodrow Wilson, in July 1918, responded to Allied demands and committed United States' forces to a limited invasion of Russia. The invasion force was to help stabilize the Russian political situation (aid the Bolshevik's opposition), guard Allied military supplies, and help extricate from Russia Czech forces that had recently been liberated from German

prison camps. The Allied expedition soon turned into an attempt, by far too few men, to influence the outcome of the Russian civil war and defeat the Bolsheviks.

Borah soundly condemned the invasion. His objection was based on the conviction that the United States was being manipulated by Britain and France to help overthrow the Bolsheviks. On the Senate floor, Borah quoted at length from a House of Commons speech by Winston Churchill praising the United States' troop movement. Again, inbred antipathy to Britain surfaced in Borah's blustering condemnation of the intervention. While Borah had supported our involvement in World War I, his vote for war had not been out of a desire to extend democracy or from sympathy for the Allies or any of the "make the world safe for democracy" rhetoric. American loss of life and "complete national degradation" he saw as the inevitable result of continued "neutrality." Therefore, the moral rationale favoring attempts to overthrow Lenin had no effect on Borah. He demanded we withdraw. Yet, even after the Allied forces withdrew in 1920, the Senator continued to push for recognition.

The Wilson administration, after the Bolshevik Revolution, had adopted a policy that no formal recognition would be granted the Soviets unless certain conditions were met. The United States' position from 1917 onward had been that unless repudiated debts were acknowledged, American owners of nationalized property compensated, and revolutionary propaganda disseminated by the Third International (Comintern) was stopped, recognition would not be considered. Borah remained in the forefront of opposition to the Wilson policy.

Borah's seniority on the Foreign Relations Committee by the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century gave him a strong platform from which he could proclaim his views. The Idaho Senator used his position to help create another platform for his views. He was a master of "high

visibility" press relations. Flamboyant oratory, firm opinions, and a history of vigorous protest attracted the press. Additionally, Borah cultivated "good" press. The liberal papers and journals highly touted the "Lion of Idaho". The Nation and New Republic regularly featured articles, in the early twenties, on the Senator. The wire service and newspaper correspondents met virtually every afternoon in an informal session with the Senator. These off-the-record afternoon conversations became a Washington tradition. Both reporters and Senator found the meetings profitable. Borah used such press relations to great advantage in the campaign for Soviet Recognition.

Proclaimed in 1921 as the de facto "leader" of the Senate, Borah continued his activity for a new American Soviet Policy. When he found the Harding administration continuing Wilson "moral" recognition policy, the Senator tried a new method. May 15, 1922, he introduced Senate Resolution 293:

Resolved, That the Senate of the Unites States favors the recognition of the present Soviet government of Russia.

Borah spoke, May 15 and May 31, at length, favoring recognition of the Soviet government. Much of the first address was devoted to the simple fact of the existence of a Soviet regime. Since the Soviet government was the only government in Russia, the United States would not alter the fact of Soviet control in Russia.

The Senator opened his major speech supportive of his resolution by deploring the years of the Great War and casting equal condemnation on the four years "of hate and vengeance" that immediately followed the conflict. The United States should take the lead in risking something to further "amity and peace." In a series of specific points, Borah urged recognition. He felt that Russia was a vital key of the overall prosperity of Europe, and just

as vital to the United States. Until European markets were restored, the United States could not hope for prosperity. The United States had everything to gain by continuing friendly relations, but, with the Bolshevik takeover, President Wilson abandoned the existing harmonious state of relations and threw away a great opportunity to make America one of Russia's strongest allies.

Wilson, thus, abandoned the traditional de facto recognition policy and refused to recognize the Soviets. However, the many prophecies of immediate Soviet collapse failed. Instead, Soviet rule became more and more firmly established as the months passed. Likewise, the arguments of Soviet cruelty and barbarianism were greatly exaggerated. Even if one took the claims as factual, Borah maintained that both the Czarist and French revolutionary governments were far from humane, and the United States had never severed relations with either state. Borah spent much time discussing the English Parliamentary debates on the 1789 French Revolution to prove that Soviet excesses, which he deplored, had been surpassed by the French. Borah felt it was a great injustice to the millions (147 million in 1926) of Russian people, "struggling in almost blinded madness to be free of the inhumanities and cruelties of the past," not to recognize their government. On that theme, the Idaho senator ended his impassioned address.

By the time of Borah's resolution, several factors had changed the general situation between Russia and the United States. The civil war chaos forced the Soviets to appeal for foreign aid to combat famine. Although the United States had not recognized the Soviets, on August 20, 1921, the United States signed an aid agreement with Russia. During the next two years, the United States spent 60 million dollars for relief aid.

The Soviet famine and economic disruption forced Lenin to adopt a New Economic Policy to salvage the economy. The NEP was an admission of the need for private capital for development. While initially the policy

relied on domestic funds, it was only a short step to tapping foreign sources of investment capital. To acquire such investments, in 1921, the Soviet government began actively seeking the formal recognition of Western nations. The Soviets sent a formal note to the United States (March 29, 1921) requesting recognition and a trade conference. Borah, of course, urged immediate recognition. President Harding and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes refused to consider any trade conference until the Soviet government was overthrown. While trade did increase, the Harding rebuff ended immediate hopes for a government sponsored trade pact.

Borah used such events to help bolster his pro-recognition arguments. In the passion of speech-making, the Senator was given to dramatic statements, yet his arguments, developed by 1922, never fundamentally changed. Addressing the Chicago Press Club in September, Borah saw war clouds over Europe and tied settlement of the "Russian question" as the key to a general European settlement. Repeatedly, Borah condemned the validity of a policy that excluded millions of people from the rest of the world. In a major address, December 2, in Boston's Symphony Hall, Borah told the capacity crowd that, despite views to the contrary, recognition did not mean approval of a country's institutions. Becoming wrapped in his subject, the Senator exclaimed, "Life is as safe under the Soviet Government tonight as it is in Boston." Life, however, was not the main point of opposition to recognition--property was. Particularly, the repudiated debts of the short-lived provisional government of 1917.

In the forefront of the anti-recognition forces were the Catholic Church and the American Federation of Labor. The Soviet view on religion and "capitalists" were an anathema to such groups. Likewise, Borah had allies and supporters for his campaign. Senators George Norris and Robert LaFollette, Will Durant, John Dewey and Jane Addams supported renewed recognition. Chief among Borah's advisors on Russian matters was Colonel



Raymond Robins and his associate Alexander Gumberg. The Robins-Gumberg contacts provided a vital part of Borah's information on Russia. Robins, an American social economist, had been a member and chief of the American Red Cross Mission in Moscow during 1917-1918. During this time, Robins acquired the services of Alexander Gumberg as chief aide and interpreter. Both men were awed by the Portentous events of the Bolshevik takeover and were convinced of its noble and historic purpose. Additionally, Gumberg had two brothers within the Soviet government. Gumberg came to the United States with Robins where the two continually worked to benefit Russia. Combining their knowledge with Borah, the three formed a powerful triumvirate for recognition.

By mid-1922, the time of the Borah Resolution, the three chief proponents had developed a series of arguments supportive of recognition. These items formed the basis of virtually all of Borah's speeches until recognition was achieved. First, they saw the Czarist regime as more tyrannical than any of the Soviet excesses. Second, the founding fathers had granted recognition to the French Revolutionary governments. Borah continually retold accounts of the "reign of terror" to further show that governments which far exceeded the barbarism of the Soviets had been formally recognized. Third, the Senator also saw the Soviet citizens as a vital part of the world. Continued isolation would only heighten, not lessen, tension in Europe and thereby endanger the peace of Europe. Borah was further convinced that it was impossible to insure stability and prosperity without trade agreements with Russia. Finally, he strongly felt that recognition did not mean approval, merely an acknowledgement of the *de facto* existence of a new central government in Russia. The simple logic of such an acknowledgement, however, remained obscured by politics until late 1933.

The Borah-Robins-Gumberg campaign ebbed and flowed as events transpired through the twenties. Several times in the early twenties, it seemed that the success would soon come. Lenin's New Economic Policy gave the proponents of recognition great hope that Bolshevism was moderating. However, the March 1923 execution of the Vicar-General of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia for "counterrevolutionary" activity ended immediate hopes for recognition. Nevertheless, with the convening of Congress in January 1924, Borah reintroduced his recognition resolution and became chairman of a sub-committee to conduct hearings. During three days of hearings, held in late January, the State Department presented a thorough case establishing a direct link between the Worker's Party in America and the Communist Party in Moscow. The testimony then produced the evidence of unity between the Moscow Communists and the Government of Russia. Lenin's death (January 21) and the revelations of scandals in Harding's administration (teapot dome affair) made further hearings impractical. Although only "temporarily" suspended, the hearings never resumed.

Thus, the intensive campaign for diplomatic recognition ended by 1924. Other issues and domestic concerns took much of the apparent urgency out of the crusade. Not even Borah's assumption of the Chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, upon Henry Cabot Lodge's death in November 1924, significantly altered the situation. Yet, Borah continued to advocate recognition. Only two days after Lodge's death, before the Pennsylvania State Council of Republican Women, the Senator linked successful reconstruction of Europe to diplomatic recognition of the Soviets. In April 1925, in an address largely devoted to an attack on the World Court and the League of Nations, Borah saw recognition as a necessary prelude to any destruction of communism. The "economic disease" of Bolshevism could best be treated by contact between the United States and Russia. In May, the Idaho Senator told a University of Michigan audience

that "every country with a form of government" should be included in "the family of nations". His comments earned an anti-Borah editorial in the New York Times!

With regularity, during the next years, Borah included a plea for recognition in his speeches. In each new Congress, the Borah resolution was laid on the table. Specific issues, nevertheless, caused occasional renewal of attention on Russian affairs. In November 1926, the United States refused to permit the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico, Mme. Alexandra Kollontai, to travel through the United States on her way to Mexico City. The State Department cited her position within "the International Communist subversive movement" as its reason. Immediately, Borah condemned the action as "intolerable and unjustifiable". His protest, however, did not alter the decision.

The economic collapse in 1929 and the deepening world-wide depression of the early thirties put an added stimulus to the recognition drive. The long-used lure of trade took an additional meaning when presented to depression era politicians. Although the depression helped create new congressional support for recognition, the Hoover administration remained committed to the non-recognition policy of the preceding administrations. Franklin D. Roosevelt's election prompted new speculation on the diplomatic status of Soviet Russia. There was widespread press speculation that the change to a Democratic administration could lead to new Foreign Policy moves. By 1933, all the major world powers had recognized the Soviet Union. The bad economic situation, the growing military expansion of Japan and the increasing militarism of Nazi Germany provided additional reasons for recognition. Mutual United States-Soviet interest in resisting Japanese expansion and (possible) German aggressiveness became increasingly more important.

Yet, in April 1933, Borah was repeating essentially the same

recognition speech he had been delivering for over a decade. However, the effort promised success with Roosevelt in office. Deepening depression began to force new awareness upon policy makers of potential benefit from last recognizing the Soviets. Even the much condemned economic planning of the Soviet "five year plans" began to be seen by American labor in a more favorable light once the depression dramatically showed the bankruptcy of *Laissez-faire* economics.

Finally, in late 1933, one of the many Litvinov overtures was successful. Roosevelt and Litvinov worked out the details in what Roosevelt later called a "four or five day drag-down and knock-out fight." The fight was over certain Soviet concessions regarding Americans' rights in the Soviet Union, as well as a Soviet pledge to end all revolutionary propaganda activities in the United States. Although Roosevelt had not consulted him prior to the announcement, Borah hailed the recognition, in November 1933, "a stroke of genius" and issued a lengthy statement praising Roosevelt's action.

Several factors are evident from Borah's sixteen year effort to achieve recognition of the Soviet Union. Allan Nevins discovered "erratic" and "utterly contradictory principles" within Borah's psychological makeup. Simple distrust of large to complex governments was pitted against equally firm convictions concerning America's place of leadership within the world. World leadership came increasingly to demand complex governments. Yet, while Borah acknowledged the leadership role of the United States, he was never comfortable with the accompanying bureaucracy. Traditional values faced constant attack from the modern world. Borah's great campaigns to outlaw war and promote world peace were in constant conflict with his inherent distrust of any nation other than the United States. This natural distrust stemmed from the Senator's ardent nationalism. Yet, Borah's nationalism was tempered by a healthy fear of absolutism rising under the

guise of national security.

Borah saw himself above all else, a man of principle. It mattered not at all, to the Senator, that his positions seemed obstructionist or inconsistent. The positions he took on recognition of the Soviets were taken on principle. Borah's certainty of his own moral correctness caused Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, to call him "Saint Borah". The great historian Samuel Eliot Morison declared that in a Congress filled with hollow men, Borah was the "most pretentious and the emptiest", although he certainly looked the part of statesman. Borah wrote, "I do claim that I shall leave this post of service without ever having compromised upon a single fundamental political belief which I entertain". Such an attitude was a constant irritant to Borah's opponents. Within a legislative body that functioned largely on compromise, working with Borah often proved extremely difficult. Many of his opponents were less than charitable in their assessment of Borah's convictions. Senator George Norris (of Nebraska and TVA fame) said "He fights until he sees the whites of their eyes." However, from Borah's perspective, recognition of Soviet Russia was not only morally defensible, it was simply common sense. Essentially, Borah's basic argument for recognition was a simple acknowledgement of the fact of Soviet control in Russia.

Thus, one is faced with the question of the value of the Senator's campaign. Only indirectly can the crusade be regarded as ultimately successful. Borah's dynamic and forceful personality and position kept the cause before the public. Aided by excellent press relations, Borah was able to keep the issue alive in the public consciousness, if not politically alive in Congress. Yet, the campaign had clearly slowed in the years immediately before the Great Depression. World-wide economic disruption was necessary to force a new study of old politics, among them nonrecognition of Russian. It seems apparent, however, that recognition would have come

much as it did had Borah never actively promoted it. The chief result of Borah's service in the cause of recognition was lending his prestige and influence toward keeping the issue within the public's conception of possible foreign policy alternatives.