

The Royal Navy and its Experience of Bolshevism in the Baltic, 1918-1919 – LAURA ROWE

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In the aftermath of the Great War a Royal Naval mission was dispatched to the Baltic ostensibly to show the flag and to uphold Articles XXV and XXVI of the Armistice which guaranteed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the newly independent Baltic States. For Rear-Admiral Sinclair and his successor Rear-Admiral Cowan the mission was extremely politically sensitive: get the mission wrong and the danger of exploding mines was as nothing to the potential political explosions which might have followed. The United Kingdom was not at war with the Soviet Republic yet the Foreign Office was persuaded that a Bolshevik man-of-war operating off the coast of a Baltic State must be seen as doing so with hostile intent and treated accordingly.

This paper will look at the effect of this sensitive mission on the Royal Navy (RN) as an institution. Throughout 1919 the RN suffered repeated bouts of collective insubordination, culminating in the mutiny of the First Destroyer Flotilla. The operational efficiency of the navy had remained intact throughout the First World War, so what was it about this peace-time mission which broke it? This paper will evaluate the role of a number of factors in this fracture: demobilisation, service conditions (in particular the harsh climatic environment), the impact of reforms, and the relationship (and the perception of the relationship) between ideological transmission and physical experience of Bolshevism on sailors. It argues that the return to 'peace' (in the form of an 'undeclared' naval war) allowed the organised lower decks to reassess their relationship with the naval authorities. The return to notional peace ensured that the façade of the wartime tacit truce regarding the expression of grievances could be finally laid aside with the result that from 1919 the number and ferocity of grievances expressed increased markedly. It contends that, far from bringing unrest during the Great War, the men who enlisted for the 'current hostilities' in 1914 generated more unrest in the post-war period once the war they joined up for had passed. This turbulence was compounded by their active service counterparts who resented not their

presence in the Baltic *per se*, but the 'undeclared' nature of the mission which meant that in the event of a man's death or injury his family would be less well provided for than they would have been had they died on active service.

Most importantly this paper will focus the impact of Bolshevism, arguing that contrary to the fears of the naval authorities, Bolshevism in fact reviled rather than attracted the men. This will be set against the back-drop of events in the Royal Dockyards where Bolshevik propaganda was being circulated and will assess differences in reactions to Bolshevism between those who experienced it and those who imagined it. It will look at how the navy responded to this latest ideological threat and what impact it had in the run up to the Second World War and how its memory shaped the RN.