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## When Typhus Rode a Red Horse: Weaponizing Disease During the Polish-Bolshevik War

“The terrors of war visited upon the innocent peaceful population of Poland have been augmented by famine, pestilence and death.”<sup>1</sup>

*Appeal from Polish Organizations of the United States to British Prime Minister Asquith* (9 January 1916)

### Abstract

This work explores the role of the Red Army in the spread of typhus on Polish lands during the Polish-Bolshevik War, 1919–1920. As a result of the Bolshevik style of war, one of the results of the Soviet advance into Poland was the anti-typhus effort along the border and throughout the country. Polish efforts, supported by American humanitarian groups, had made great strides in eradicating typhus however, much of this was undone with the Bolshevik offensive of 1920. Through both active and passive means the Bolshevik advance drove typhus victims and refugees across the Polish lines, while at the same time Bolshevik forces destroyed or removed sanitation equipment and supplies across the frontier.

Undoubtedly, the struggles of everyday life in the Polish lands oftentimes appeared apocalyptic during the First World War. Throughout the war, the lands between the German and Russian frontiers were invaded repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> Library and Archives of Canada (Ottawa, Canada), Sir Robert Borden Papers, War File, Colonial Office, M.G. 26, H 1(e), Volume 288 A, “Polish Organizations of the United States to British Prime Minister H. Asquith,” s.l., 9 I 1916 r., 164712.

by both allies and enemies, occupied, and stripped of resources. It became common for communities to witness the frequent ravages of the riders of the biblical apocalypse: famine, pestilence and death. An American observer to the area noted:

“Just after the end of the war as one passed along the main roads leading out of Warsaw to the east could be seen masses of trees blasted by artillery fire, destroyed bridges barely replaced by rough wooden structures, frequently recurring military cemeteries, shallow trenches at close intervals, and then upon nearing the eastern frontier, damaged, destroyed, or utterly demolished houses in the midst of fields pock-marked by shell holes, until one arrived at the main section of devastation when all that met the eye was but a crumble of bricks, stones, shattered trees, and torn up fields. That was the desolation one saw along the road from Warsaw to Pinsk, mile after mile, more than 200 miles. That was the situation along the whole lateral eastern front of 230 miles. [...] a country absolutely barren. Only to see the poor people throughout a whole land wretchedly clothed in rags, emaciated, utter hopelessness staring from their eyes, amid unspeakable stench and the filthy surroundings could give the unforgiveable, indelible picture of Poland in her trial.”<sup>2</sup>

As war-weary Poles celebrated the collapse of the partitioning powers and the resulting birth of the new Polish Republic in November 1918, they realized her “trial” was not over. In the best of circumstances, the road to secure boundaries and domestic stability would be difficult to achieve in the post-war ethnic chaos of Eastern Europe. Particularly given Allied demands for national self-determination for all peoples of the region. The principles of self-determination from the Paris Peace Conference served to energize the already highly nationalistic and suspicious neighborhood Poles found themselves in following the collapse of the three great empires. While ethnic mistrust and infighting was a historic constant throughout the area, the rise of Bolshevism and the overthrow of Imperial Russia intensified and worsened problems throughout the region. Warsaw and Moscow were both in the hands of newly formed governments that sought to project power and create their own unique image of the region. The two historic rivals were inexorably drawn into border conflicts and eventually into open war as they pursued divergent visions for their nations – Marshal Józef Piłsudski’s attempt to create Polish security through a federated buffer zone against Bolshevik Russia was confronted by aggressive Bolshevik attempts to export Communist revolution throughout Europe.<sup>3</sup> As the

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Brooks, “America and Poland: 1915–1925,” *American Relief Administration Bulletin*, 2nd series, No. 44 (1925): 14.

<sup>3</sup> Józef Piłsudski Institute of America, Archiwum Józefa Piłsudskiego, 701/1/77, Józef Piłsudski, “Rok 1920”, typescript of the translation of the work into English, Brooklyn, New

border skirmishes of 1919 evolved into the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920–21, the inhabitants of the lands between Moscow and Warsaw once again faced the “riders of the apocalypse”. While the deprivations and destruction of the Great War were extraordinary, this outbreak of violence was in some ways different because of the Bolshevik reliance on revolutionary terror and the unbridled horde to accomplish its goal of global revolution. In the mind of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, the end goal of world revolution always justified the use of any means to accomplish the task – deception, terror, and even the spread of disease were acceptable tactics. Philosopher Leszek Kołakowski further illuminates the Soviet’s approach to war in his essay “On Violence”: “the Leninist principle that war is always justified if it is waged by a socialist state, which is the embodiment of the *progressive class*; the question of who started it is irrelevant.”<sup>4</sup> In a more direct appraisal of Bolshevik intentions, British statesman Winston Churchill described the new Russian state as it entered into conflict with its Polish neighbors,

“[To the East of Poland] lay the huge mass of Russia – not a wounded Russia only, but a poisoned Russia, an infected Russia, a plague-bearing Russia, a Russia of armed hordes not only smiting with bayonet and with cannon, but accompanied and preceded by swarms of typhus-bearing vermin which slew the bodies of men, and political doctrines which destroyed the health and even the souls of nations.”<sup>5</sup>

Churchill’s account paints a vivid picture of a Bolshevik military not only reliant on the traditional bayonet and cannon but also on the diseased and typhus-bearing to achieve its military objectives. While Europe viewed the practices of Russia’s “armed hordes” as an existential threat, Soviet Commander Mikhail Tukhachevsky saw the chaos, disease, and destruction spread by Bolshevik forces as an inherent strength. He observed of the Russian military “It is a horde, and its strength is the strength of a horde.” While the inherent power of the Bolshevik military lay in its ability to spread terror and destruction throughout the Polish territories, the tactics to achieve their goals were varied. An often unexamined aspect of the Polish-Bolshevik War is the Bolshevik use of typhus as a crude biological weapon aimed at weakening the new Polish state and reducing its ability to resist the advance of Communist forces against Warsaw. When viewed in the context of overall Bolshevik goals and tactics, it becomes clear that the spread of disease, destruction of medical facilities, and

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York, 1925, 211–216. See Marian K. Dziwianowski, *Joseph Pilsudski: A European Federalist, 1918–1922* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, “On Violence,” in *Freedom, Fame, Lying, and Betrayal: Essays on Everyday Life* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Winston Churchill, “Chapter XIII: The Miracle of the Vistula,” in *The Aftermath* (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1929), 262–263.

disruption of quarantines were all part of a prevailing strategy intent on weakening the Polish state and sowing despair among the populace. To that end, this essay will demonstrate that Bolshevik forces worked actively to spread typhus and exacerbate the public health crisis throughout Poland and its borderlands during the Polish-Bolshevik War.

Epidemic typhus is an old disease that is transmitted by lice (*Pediculus humanus corporis*) and traditionally associated with cold climates, impoverished populations, and the migrations of refugees and armies. It has been referred to by many names throughout history: “jail fever,” “famine fever,” “war plague,” “camp fever,” and “war pest.” In the eighteenth century, the diagnostic term *typhus* was applied to the disease. From the Greek word for smoke or stupor, *typhus* reflected the often erratic and disturbing neurological condition which accompanied the disease.<sup>6</sup> The illness typically runs its course in twelve to sixteen days and involves a generalized rash, high fever, severe headaches, and nervous disorder. The disease is passed in a peculiar cycle from louse to human and back to louse again, with both often becoming victims of the disease. Normally, the sickness is spread as the infected feces of typhus-bearing lice are scratched or smeared into the skin of the human host. Once infected, the human host then transmits the *rickettsia* bacteria to any uninfected lice that might seek a blood meal, thus bringing the disease full circle.<sup>7</sup> Given the virulent nature of the disease, some have suggested that epidemic typhus has potentially won more wars than armies and generals. With this in mind, bacteriologist Hans Zinsser wrote about the connection between typhus and war in his classic study *Rats, Lice, and History*. After decades studying the disease and its relationship to human societies, Zinsser concluded

“Typhus had come to be the inevitable and expected companion of war and revolution; no encampment, no campaigning army, and no besieged city escaped it. It added to the terror of famines and floods; it stalked stealthily through the wretched quarters of the poor in cities and villages; it flourished in prisons and even went to sea in ships. And whenever circumstances were favorable it spread through countries and across national boundaries.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 160–162.

<sup>7</sup> Gaines Foster, *The Demands of Humanity: Army Medical Disaster Relief* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1982), 84; S. Burt Wolback, John L. Todd and Francis W. Palfrey, *The Etiology and Pathology of Typhus: Being the Main Report of the Typhus Research Commission of the League of Red Cross Societies to Poland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 15–33.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History: A Chronicle of Pestilence and Plagues* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1935), 283.

In the first year of the Great War, typhus spread out of the Balkans and marched relentlessly across Russia and parts of Eastern Europe. Given the disastrous wartime conditions along the Eastern Front, the circumstances were extremely favorable for the spread of epidemic typhus among both soldiers and civilian populations. With the eventual overthrow of Tsarist Russia by revolutionary Bolshevism, the disease found a new lease on life in the widespread chaos, terror, and warfare associated with the establishment of the Soviet system.

While typhus existed in Russia before the Bolshevik seizure of power in the October Revolution of 1917, the ensuing Russian Civil War made the public health crisis exponentially worse across the country. As Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin exited his sealed train at Finland Station in Petrograd on 16 April 1917, the city was in the early stages of a typhus outbreak and recorded 517 cases for the year.<sup>9</sup> Lenin's German benefactors rightly saw "in this obscure fanatic one more bacillus to let loose in tottering and exhausted Russia to spread infection."<sup>10</sup> As Soviet influence spread, the city of Petrograd reported a staggering 10,976 typhus cases in 1918 – a more than 2000% increase over the previous year.<sup>11</sup> The disease spread rapidly throughout Russia in 1918, particularly in the areas hardest hit by civil war and the migrations of displaced persons. Red Cavalry Commander Semyon Budyonny witnessed firsthand the conditions of thousands of refugees on the road to Tsaritsyn in August 1918: "People and animals were tormented by the heat and thirst, choking with the dust and suffering from hunger. This was too much for the weak who collapsed and died either from hunger and thirst or from rife infectious disease."<sup>12</sup> By the following year, conditions had deteriorated dramatically across Russia as hunger, refugees, and war combined to intensify the spread of typhus. The disease was so common by 1919, that many victims of the Bolshevik terror campaign were buried in mass graves "under the guise of *typhus victims*."<sup>13</sup> Recognizing the threat posed by typhus to both his military and government Lenin addressed the issue on 5 December 1919, while speaking to the assembly of the Seventh All-Russia Congress of Soviets in Moscow

"A third scourge is assailing us, *lice*, and the *typhus* that is mowing down our troops. Comrades, it is impossible to imagine the dreadful situation in the typhus regions, where the population is broken, weakened,

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<sup>9</sup> K. David Patterson, "Typhus and It's Control In Russia, 1870–1940," *Medical History* 37, No. 4 (1993): 373.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Crankshaw, "When Lenin Returned," *The Atlantic* (October, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> Patterson, "Typhus," 373.

<sup>12</sup> Semyon Budyonny, *The Path of Valour* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 90.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei P. Melgunov, *Red Terror in Russia 1918–1923* (Berlin: s.l., 1924), 53.

without material resources, where all life, all public life ceases. To this we say, «Comrades, we must concentrate everything on this problem. *Either the lice will defeat socialism, or socialism will defeat the lice!*»<sup>14</sup>

Following Lenin's call for an all-out war on lice throughout Soviet-controlled territories, a comprehensive public health campaign was developed to reduce the disease among those faithful to the Bolshevik cause. As the Russian anti-typhus crusade began, the situation was dire throughout the armed forces. Soviet Commander Budyonny reported in January 1920, that his troops were "in the grip of a terrible epidemic of typhus, and field hospital were packed chiefly with typhus cases. All this was bound to affect the fighting efficiency of our troops."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the war on lice was waged primarily in areas critical to the preservation and expansion of Soviet power – the military and urban centers. The typhus epidemic convinced Russian leaders that if properly used the disease could be an effective weapon against the enemies of Bolshevism.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while working to control the disease in some quarters, the Soviets were also spreading typhus among enemies by driving the diseased into enemy lines, destroying active quarantines, and looting medical facilities. Based on the examples of the Great War, the Bolshevik hierarchy understood that typhus alone could not defeat their enemies but it could certainly help achieve their goals. Just as disease and deprivation had weakened the Imperial Russian state for Communist overthrow, the Red Army successfully defeated the diseased and weakened anti-Bolshevik forces of the Whites. Professor Lev Tarassévitch confirmed the debilitating effects of typhus on opposition White Armies in his *Report to the Health Committee of the League of Nations*. Professor Tarassévitch's report suggested a link between increased typhus morbidity rates in areas where the Civil War raged and the poor condition of the White troops. He noted specifically "that typhus helped the Red Army to defeat the [White] Army of Koltchak" and that "the epidemic raged so fiercely, especially during the period of Denikin's retreat, that, in many areas, the whole population was infected."<sup>17</sup> While the records from the early Soviet era are oftentimes uneven or nonexistent, it is estimated that Admiral Alexander Kolchak lost an astounding 50,000 men to typhus by 1920.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, General Anton Denikin's anti-Bolshevik forces

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<sup>14</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 228.

<sup>15</sup> Budyonny, *The Path*, 406.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Croddy, Clarisa Perez-Armentariz and John Hart, *Chemical and Biological Warfare: A Comprehensive Survey for the Concerned Citizen* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2002), 233.

<sup>17</sup> Lev A. Tarassévitch, *Epidemics in Russia Since 1914: Report to the Health Committee of the League of Nations* (Geneva: [League of Nations], 1922).

<sup>18</sup> Patterson, "Typhus," 375.

in Ukraine were ravaged by the epidemic and routed by Bolshevik formations. By the winter of 1920, many of Denikin's lice-infested troops joined the streams of refugees crossing Poland's eastern frontier ahead of the advancing Red Army.<sup>19</sup> Denikin's followers joined an estimated two million anti-Bolshevik migrants fleeing Soviet Russia between 1918 and 1922. With some 20% of Russian refugees settling in Poland.<sup>20</sup> While touring the internment camps and medical facilities of Tarnopol, Lwów, and Łańcut in January 1920, Dr. Harry Snively of the U.S Typhus Relief Expedition observed the dire conditions of the refugees and the impact of typhus throughout the region. In a letter to his family on 7 January, Dr. Snively wrote soberly "Tarnopol is like a city of the dead.... They tell me that ten percent of the men are now sick with typhus, and that there is an increase in the number of such cases each week. The situation on farther East is much worse, we are told."<sup>21</sup> Dr. Snively found the situation no better among the Ukrainian refugees interned in the town of Łańcut. He recorded the state of the refugees, "In the hospital were 594 patients. It is interesting to note that the entire number of men were 2,424. It suggests what the situation must be in Russia. These men brought their diseases with them when they were driven out of Russia by the Bolsheviks."<sup>22</sup> As infected refugees and the defeated remnants of anti-Bolshevik White forces were driven westward in 1920, the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity to strengthen the Soviet Western Army and begin operations against the last remaining threat to Communist ambitions – Poland.

As civil war, famine, and disease erupted across Russia in the wake of the First World War, the new Second Polish Republic labored to create a new state on the debris and detritus left by the partitioning powers. The newly revived Poland struggled with ill-defined boundaries, ethnic minorities, poverty, disease, famine, and a lack of just about everything. It was in many ways like trying to quickly construct a house without a blueprint or building materials, while the neighbors threw stones. To create stability, the new government set to work on all areas of the nation, but paid particular attention to the military and the various public health disasters

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<sup>19</sup> C.-E. A. Winslow, "European Health Conditions," *The American Journal of Public Health* 12, No. 2 (1922): 96.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Gatrell, "War, Population Displacement and State Formation in the Russian Borderlands, 1914–1924," in *Homeland: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe, 1918–1924*, ed. Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 26–27.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Hamilton Snively, *The Battle of the Non-Combatants: The Letters of Dr. Harry Hamilton Snively to His Family from Russia, Poland, France, Belgium, Persia, Etc.*, ed. J. George Frederick (New York: The Business Bourse, 1933), 166–167.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

festering across the country. A healthy and thriving population was vital to the establishment and maintenance of the new Polish state. As Professor Emil Godlewski of the Jagiellonian University Medical Faculty noted at the time “the greatest wealth of the state is life and healthy citizens.”<sup>23</sup> With this in mind, the new government set to work creating an effective healthcare system and enacting public health measures to combat the various diseases sweeping across the area at the end of World War One. Even before all of the combatants of the First World War left Polish territory, the Ministry of Public Health and the National Institute of Hygiene were created in December 1918. In quick succession over the following year, the government moved to approve legislation to combat infectious diseases, implement mandatory vaccinations, establish health insurance, constitute the Polish Red Cross, and create a Commission to Combat Epidemic Disease.<sup>24</sup> As Polish leaders worked anxiously to contain the spread of influenza, cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis, and typhus, they faced numerous setbacks caused by the flood of infected migrants and soldiers streaming westward out of Russia.

As this disastrous mix of diseases impacted post-war Europe, officials were particularly alarmed by the growing threat of typhus being transmitted out of Russia by Bolshevik forces and the refugees fleeing them. To contain the spread of typhus, the United States and its European Allies supported calls for a *cordon sanitaire* along Poland’s eastern frontier.<sup>25</sup> The Polish government in concert with Western Allies sought to establish a quarantine that coincided roughly with Poland’s ill-defined eastern boundary; it was viewed as a last-ditch effort to check the spread of the disease and possibly even prevent the spread of Bolshevism into Central Europe.<sup>26</sup> Dr. Tomasz Janiszewski, Polish Minister of Public Health, reinforced the call for a quarantine of Poland’s eastern border on 29 May 1919.<sup>27</sup> Janiszewski

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<sup>23</sup> Andrzej Chwalba, *1919: Pierwszy Rok Wolności* (Warszawa: Wyd. Czarne, 2019), 239.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–245.

<sup>25</sup> “Telegram No. 427: Sir Horace Rumbold to Lord Curzon, 11 March 1919,” in *Organization of American Relief in Europe, 1918–1919*, ed. Suda L. Bane and Ralph H. Lutz (California: Stanford University Press, 1943), 388.

<sup>26</sup> On 1 July 1920, Dr. Józef Jaworski of the Committee for Public Health authored an extensive report to the Polish Sejm (Parliament) on the ongoing efforts to combat typhus throughout Poland. The report highlighted the *cordon sanitaire* and international cooperation as the cornerstones for containing the spread of the disease. For a detailed account of Polish administrative efforts see “O planie i środkach, jakie stosuje Rząd w celu zwalczania tyfusu plamistego,” *Biuletyn Ministerstwa Zdrowia Publicznego*, No. 3 (1 July 1920): 3–8.

<sup>27</sup> Dr. Janiszewski also detailed his plans for dealing with the typhus epidemic in a short essay entitled *Zwalczanie tyfusu plamistego i masowe oczyszczanie ludności* (Warszawa: Ministerstwo Zdrowia Publicznego, 1919).



consistently appealed for assistance from the American Relief Administration, the Paris Peace Conference, and the League of Red Cross Societies in the establishment of two lines of quarantine in the East. The first line would consist of a “mobile cordon” behind the eastern frontiers and the second line of quarantine would be fixed within the borders of the former Polish Congress Kingdom and Galicia. His appeal to the Red Cross suggested the League manage and organize the quarantine at several points along the eastern frontier, specifically: Suwałki, Białystok, Siedlce, Brest-Litovsk, Biała, Dorohusk, Hrubieszów, Krystynopol, Krasne, Lwów, Chodorów, and Stanisławów.<sup>28</sup> The cordon was designed to filter out the infected carriers of typhus-bearing lice and prevent them from freely entering Poland from the Russian interior.<sup>29</sup> The plan called for those suspected of typhus infection or carrying lice to be detained, bathed, hair cut, their clothing disinfected and deloused. After processing, detainees were fed and placed under observation until they were released with a “certificate of delousation.” Delousing the people before entering Polish territory was essential to preventing the spread of the disease further westward since many of the primary disease carriers were initially refugees migrating into Poland from Belarussian and Ukrainian territories.<sup>30</sup> Given the magnitude of the intensifying public health crisis in the East, comprehensive Polish border control was essential to prevent the infection and re-infection of disease-free Polish areas in the future.<sup>31</sup>

While the Western Allies continually resisted Poland’s call for troops and direct military assistance against Bolshevik expansion, the United States provided much-needed expertise and humanitarian aid in the fight against the typhus epidemic. In reply to the repeated calls for assistance against the disease, American President Woodrow Wilson asked Herbert Hoover “to plan the attack on typhus.”<sup>32</sup> After numerous inquiries, Hoover requested that Colonel Harry L. Gilchrist of the American Army Medical Corps be assigned to work with the Polish Ministry of Health and organize

<sup>28</sup> “The League Sends Inter-Allied Mission to Poland,” *Bulletin of the League of Red Cross Societies* 1, No. 3 (1919): 2.

<sup>29</sup> This strategy for dealing with the spread of typhus in the east is also confirmed by Dr. Józef Jaworski’s follow-up reports to the Sejm. See “O planie i środkach, jakie stosuje Rząd,” 3–4.

<sup>30</sup> Urszula Sztuka-Polińska, “Sytuacja Epidemiologiczna Niektórych Ostrych Chorób Zakaźnych w Polsce w Okresie Międzywojennym XX Wieku,” *Przegląd Epidemiologiczny* 56, (2002): 140.

<sup>31</sup> “Typhus Campaign Report from Ministry of Public Health, 29 May 1919,” in *Organization of American Relief*, 516–517; Herbert Hoover, *Herbert Hoover: An American Epic*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), 443.

<sup>32</sup> “The Appointment of Colonel Gilchrist on the Polish Typhus Mission, 27 June 1919,” in *Organization of American Relief*, 579; Hoover, *An American*, 2:443.

a response to the epidemic. Colonel Gilchrist was a highly respected veteran of the anti-typhus delousing campaigns in post-war France and Belgium. Gilchrist's staff and their equipment were slated to be dispersed and returned to the United States, but given the need for their expertise, they were abruptly reassigned to Poland on 27 June 1919.<sup>33</sup> Colonel Gilchrist's initial staff delegated by the American Army, included: eight officers from the Medical Corps, eight non-medical officers, and some five hundred enlisted personnel that volunteered for the mission. All expenses associated with the formation, maintenance, and transportation of the unit were charged to the American Army.<sup>34</sup> To further assist the typhus mission, Herbert Hoover "secured the delousing equipment of the American, British, French and German armies. As a gift, the U.S. Army also sent 1,500,000 suits of underclothes, 3,000 beds, 10,000 hair clippers, 250 tons of soap, and 500 portable baths."<sup>35</sup> Hoover "also arranged with the American Liquidation Board to sell several million dollars worth of supplies and materials at a nominal figure to the Polish Government and undertook for the Relief Administration to secure the expenses of transportation."<sup>36</sup> To cover the "several million dollars worth of supplies," the U.S. Liquidation Board provided a \$6,500,000 credit to the Polish government. Included in the additional supplies liquidated by the American Army for use in Poland were 800 motor vehicles, 1000 steam disinfecting plants, 40,000 beds, and 30 mobile laundries.<sup>37</sup> While Poles viewed U.S. humanitarian aid and support as a godsend, their Bolshevik adversaries considered it "an invaluable contribution to the Polish War effort."<sup>38</sup> From the Soviet perspective, the food, medicines, and delousing equipment provided by various relief organizations were the equivalent of weapons and war materials. As the Bolsheviks became convinced that the aid was primarily intended to strengthen and assist Poland in its fight with Communist Russia, they worked to undermine international efforts to feed civilians and suppress the growing typhus epidemic across Polish-held territories.

Typhus was not new to Poland; indeed, it had flared up on several occasions during the war but never this bad. Originally, it probably entered

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<sup>33</sup> Hoover, *An American*, 2:445; William H. Donaldson, "American Polish Relief Expedition," *Journal of the United States Artillery* 54, No. 5 (1921): 483-485.

<sup>34</sup> "Typhus Relief in Eastern Europe, 30 July 1919," in *Organization of American Relief*, 656-657.

<sup>35</sup> Hoover, *An American*, 2:445-446.

<sup>36</sup> "Typhus Relief in Eastern Europe, 30 July 1919," 656-657.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, "America and Poland," 48.

<sup>38</sup> Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920 and 'the Miracle on the Vistula'* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 93.

the Polish lands with the Russian Armies early in the war. In January 1915, Englishman John Morse noted an abundance of vermin riding with the Russians as they engaged German forces throughout the Polish lands. Morse's firsthand account of his time with the Russian Army suggests an infestation of lice as he writes of a "vermin, which revels in dirt",

"No article is scarcer than soap in the Russian camp – it never found its way into the trenches, which were in a shockingly insanitary condition. [...] There are said to be no fleas in Russia. There are an abundance of another kind of vermin, which revels in dirt; and mice were so numerous in the fields that things had to be closely watched to prevent them from being destroyed."<sup>39</sup>

Following the introduction of typhus-infected lice to the Polish lands in 1915, the disease grew in intensity throughout the remaining years of the war.<sup>40</sup> By the end of 1919, the Ministry of Health confirmed 219,088 cases and 18,641 deaths from typhus throughout the territories held by the new Polish state.<sup>41</sup> The mounting public health crisis was made worse by the lack of basic sanitation and medical equipment across the country. While shortages were normal during the war years, the situation was exacerbated as German forces stripped everything of value from the region and took it home with them at the end of the war. The German withdrawal from the eastern territories typically followed one simple rule when dealing with property – if it's moveable take it, if it's not destroy it. In January 1920, Dr. Francis Palfrey of the Red Cross Commission to Poland arrived at his hospital posting in Wilno only to find it "seriously delayed in opening, chiefly on account of damage done to it by the Germans, who had torn out all the plumbing for the metal and had done other damage in pure vandalism."<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, widespread German pillaging at the end of the war contributed significantly to delays in addressing public health issues across the region. Poland's location at the heart of Europe also made matters worse as the country was crisscrossed repeatedly by soldiers and refugees in differing states of health returning home from the war.<sup>43</sup> The final piece of the

<sup>39</sup> John Morse, *An Englishman in the Russian Ranks, Ten Months' Fighting in Poland* (London: Duckworth, 1915), 183.

<sup>40</sup> According to the Polish Ministry of Public Health, reported cases of typhus in the Polish territories rose every year beginning in 1916. The ministry recorded the following number of cases: 35,000 cases (1916), 45,000 cases (1917), 97,000 (1918), 39,000 cases (1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 1919). "Typhus Campaign Report, 29 May 1919," in *Organization of American Relief*, 516.

<sup>41</sup> Sztuka-Polińska, "Sytuacja Epidemiologiczna," 140; Chwalba, 1919, 247.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Palfrey, "The Work of the League of Red Cross Societies' Typhus Research Commission to Poland," *American Journal of Public Health* 12, No. 2 (1922): 87.

<sup>43</sup> Regions east of Warsaw were hit particularly hard by population displacements and losses during the First World War. Polish Historian Albin Koprukowniak considered population

epidemic was the advance of the Bolsheviks and the ensuing Polish-Bolshevik War. The war with the Soviets meant districts under typhus quarantine were invaded, clean areas were infected by troop movements, and the re-infection of regions became a critical issue.<sup>44</sup>

It was under these deteriorating conditions in 1919, that Polish Minister of Public Health Janiszewski ultimately asked for the assistance of the League of Red Cross Societies in dealing with the growing epidemic in the country. On 6 August 1919, the Red Cross appointed the Inter-Allied Medical Commission to investigate the situation in Poland and report their recommendations.<sup>45</sup> The commission's initial onsite account warned of a major public health crisis in Eastern Europe, which if left unchecked, would eventually infect Western Europe as well. Soon after, the International Red Cross issued the following statement "very severe epidemics will occur this winter unless the most energetic measures are taken to deal with the situation in Poland and prevent the spread of typhus and other epidemics to Western Europe and America."<sup>46</sup> *The Times* of London in turn publicized the Commission's summary of the dire situation in Poland,

"Up to July 27 [1919] the number of cases of typhus declared was 124,000. The Commission reports that there is urgent need of large quantities of soap, underclothing, outer clothing, blankets, hospital equipment and utensils, drugs, especially salvarsan, iodides, quinine, castor oil, salol, and opium. Members of the Commission saw many hospitals which were without beds, sheets, or blankets. There is urgent need immediately for at least 50 additional doctors to begin with, and at least 100 nurses. At present there is an average of only one doctor to every 10,000 inhabitants."<sup>47</sup>

The League of Red Cross Societies ultimately, lacked sufficient funding, organization, and onsite coordination to confront simultaneously all the various epidemics in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the primary responsibility

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loss and displacement in the Lublin region (*Lubelszczyzna*) a significant issue of the period. Professor Kopruckowiak placed the 1913–1921 losses in the major districts of the area at around 35%–40% (Chełmski: 40.7%, Hrubieszowski: 32.7%, Lublin: 37.5%, Bialski: 42.1%, Włodawski: 36.9%). See Albin Kopruckowiak, "W okresie kształtowania się kapitalizmu (1864–1918)," in *Dzieje Lubelszczyzny*, ed. Tadeusz Mencil, Vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1974), 657–658.

<sup>44</sup> Francesca Piana, "Humanitaire et politique, in medias res: le typhus en Pologne et l'Organisation internationale d'hygiène de la SDN (1919–1923)," *Relations Internationales* 138, No. 2 (2009): 24.

<sup>45</sup> "Typhus in Poland," *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3070 (1919): 566; *London Times*, August 15, 1919, 9.

<sup>46</sup> "Investigating Typhus Epidemic in Poland," *Bulletin of the League of Red Cross Societies* 1, No. 5 (1919): 1.

<sup>47</sup> *London Times*, October 10, 1919, 9.

for supporting Polish efforts to confront the growing typhus epidemic fell to Colonel Gilchrist and the U.S. Typhus Relief Expedition. Colonel Gilchrist arrived in Warsaw on 9 August 1919 and began an urgent campaign to help educate the masses on the importance of cleanliness; particularly, on the need to eradicate all bodily lice.<sup>48</sup>

Once quarantine stations were established along the eastern border to secure the interior against migrating typhus-carriers, Poland's public health officials began confronting typhus outbreaks within its boundaries. Colonel Gilchrist recorded that the efforts to control typhus within Polish territories "was without doubt the most important as well as most difficult part of the campaign."<sup>49</sup> On 24 September 1919, Janiszewski's Ministry of Public Health issued regulations for combating infectious diseases within the country. The regulations did not provide specific penalties for non-compliance but did offer specific guidelines for cleaning up the diseased sections of the country.<sup>50</sup> Gilchrist was impressed with the measures taken by the Ministry of Public Health and later commented on its excellent qualities and support provided to American efforts.<sup>51</sup> Straight away, the expedition was placed at the disposal of the Central Committee of the Polish Ministry of Public Health. A governing committee was comprised of Colonel Gilchrist, Dr. Wiktor Hryszkiewicz, and Dr. Ludwik Rajchman. The committee in turn organized the anti-typhus efforts to run through the newly created administrative departments of propaganda, transportation, statistics, hospitalization, finance, and education. To increase efficiency, the Polish government ultimately, centralized all anti-typhus efforts under the newly created Extraordinary Commission for Epidemics. On 6 March 1920, Professor Emil Godlewski of the Jagiellonian University was appointed to head the new commission. As the new Director of the Commission for Epidemics, Dr. Godlewski was charged with bringing all typhus relief operations under his organizational control.<sup>52</sup> Given the prevailing conditions throughout the region, this proved an extremely difficult task. The virulent and stubborn nature of the disease itself often worked to hinder government efforts,

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<sup>48</sup> "The Appointment of Colonel Gilchrist on the Polish Typhus Mission, 27 June 1919," in *Organization of American Relief*, 579; Hoover, *An American*, 2:443.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks (Carlise, Pennsylvania), Harry L. Gilchrist Papers, Box 1: Folder 1, "Report of Activities American Relief Expedition from January 1, 1920 to November 1, 1920", Warsaw, 31 X 1920, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Elżbieta Więckowska, "Centralny komitet do walki z dudem plamistym (1 sierpień 1919 – 5 marca 1920)," *Przegląd Epidemiologiczny* 52, (1998), 206.

<sup>51</sup> Alfred Cornebise, *Typhus and Doughboys: The American Polish Typhus Relief Expedition, 1919–1920* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 53.

<sup>52</sup> Więckowska, "Centralny komitet," 210–211; Cornebise, *Typhus*, 54.

as health officials and even physicians were overcome by the sickness. On 30 May 1920, Dr. Tadeusz Majewski, Chief Sanitary Officer of the Lublin region (*Lubelszczyzna*) died of typhus. He was infected with the disease while caring for patients. His obituary read simply: "He lost his life in the performance of his duties!"<sup>53</sup>

American efforts focused on expanding and supporting Polish calls for better nutrition, regular baths, clean homes, clean clothes, and a delousing of everything. Colonel Gilchrist also established portable delousing stations and baths on trains to travel about Polish territory helping to educate and sanitize villages and towns throughout the country. Additional areas of concern were the many prisoner of war and refugee camps throughout the country.<sup>54</sup> A concerted effort was made during Gilchrist's stay to clean up the camps and sanitize them against both typhus and lice. Finally, to deal with the threat of re-infection from eastern refugees, he worked with Polish officials to set up a series of fifteen delousing stations along the eastern border by the end of 1919.<sup>55</sup> While Gilchrist reported some initial improvements in 1919, he also observed the disturbing trend of Russian forces driving diseased refugees before them as they moved westward.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the short-lived public health gains of 1919 were quickly overwhelmed by the invasions of 1920. As Colonel Gilchrist later lamented "The advance of the disease had attained such a rate of increase and refugees kept coming into the country in such numbers that for many months it seemed impossible to check the scourge. The number of new cases increased monthly so that in the first seven months of 1920 they averaged nearly 30,000 per month."<sup>57</sup>

To better understand the conditions in the field, Gilchrist made routine inspections throughout Poland and particularly along the sanitary boundary of the eastern frontier. He reported the worst conditions were east of the Bug

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<sup>53</sup> *Dzień Polski* (Lublin), May 31, 1920, No. 142, 2.

<sup>54</sup> As confirmed by both Polish Military Archives and the Russian State Military Archives, Poland's prison camps ultimately held a staggering 110,000 Soviet prisoners of war. Despite attempts to address the sanitary conditions in the camps, some 18,000 Soviets prisoners eventually perished in the camps. See Danuta Hanak, "Jeńcy sowieccy w obozach polskich 1919–1921," *Biuletyn Wojskowej Służby Archiwalnej* 18, (1995): 6.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Gillett, *The Army Medical Department, 1917–1941* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 2009), 413.

<sup>56</sup> Martyn Housden, "Document 19: Memorandum by Colonel H. L. Gilchrist," in *The League of Nations and the Organization of Peace* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 138. The poor state of Russia's anti-typhus efforts and the importance of sanitary check-points along Poland's eastern border are also borne out by Dr. Jaworski's regular reports to the Sejm. See "O planie i środkach, jakie stosuje Rząd," 3–8; "Polityka Ministerstwa Zdrowia Publicznego w sprawie zdrowisk i uzdrowisk," *Biuletyn Ministerstwa Zdrowia Publicznego*, No. 3 (1920): 3–7.

<sup>57</sup> Brooks, "America and Poland," 48.

River and in those areas touched by the Russian Armies. According to Gilchrist, “the Russians armies apparently adopted the same tactics in the late war which they had used against Napoleon when [he was] on the way to Moscow, leaving the country completely wasted.”<sup>58</sup> The miserable conditions in Ukrainian, Belarussian, and Russian territories caused waves of sickly, malnourished, lice-ridden, and typhus-infected refugees to seek entry into Poland. According to the *Dziennik Białostocki*, the situation east of the Niemen and Bug Rivers was nearly hopeless as the horrible sanitary conditions of the region were a major source of typhus infections.<sup>59</sup> The delousing stations and sanitary checkpoints along the eastern border came under increasing pressure, as Bolshevik Armies pushed back against Polish attempts to create a federated buffer zone against the expansionist Soviet state.

Even as the population in the East struggled with poor sanitation, hunger, and endemic disease in the summer of 1919, clashes between Polish and Soviet forces escalated along the Byelorussian and Lithuanian frontiers.<sup>60</sup> While a member of the Polish General Staff, Stanisław Rostworowski observed the poor sanitary conditions and prevalence of disease throughout the region. He noted a general lack of everything including hospitals and medical supplies. The only thing in abundance were the epidemic diseases brought by Bolshevik soldiers.<sup>61</sup> Polish forces entering Mińsk on 8 August 1919, found the city and its populace on the brink of collapse after months of occupation by Bolsheviks. While working with the American Relief Administration, Emeryk Hutten-Czapski entered the city with the first Polish forces and witnessed the horrible conditions. A couple of days later he recounted to Hugh Gibson, U.S. Minister to Poland, the dire situation found in Mińsk. In addition to a general lack of food, Czapski related a systemic terror campaign carried out by the Bolsheviks. In a letter home on 11 August, Gibson writes “The Bolsheviks seem to have carried out daily executions on a large scale. Czapski brought back copies of official Bolshevik publications giving lists of people whom he knew and who had been shot for all sorts of reasons, most of the them simply as being opposed to the Bolsheviks or suspected of having counter-revolutionary sentiments.”<sup>62</sup> Czapski’s dire account of the

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<sup>58</sup> Cornebise, *Typhus*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Chwalba, 1919, 240.

<sup>60</sup> Davies, “The Genesis of the Polish-Soviet War, 1919–20,” *European Studies Review* 5, (1975): 55.

<sup>61</sup> Stanisław Jan Rostworowski, *Listy z wojny polsko-bolszewickiej 1918–1920* (Warszawa–Kraków: Ofic. Wyd. Mireki, 2015), 129.

<sup>62</sup> “Letter from Hugh Gibson to Mary Gibson, 11 August 1919,” in *An American in Warsaw: Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland, 1919–1924*, ed. Vivian Hux Reed (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2018), 140–141.

city is confirmed in the writings of Dr. G. Chrzanowski, a local health official in Mińsk at the time. He also depicts the situation in the East as “desperate” following the departure of Bolshevik forces. As the Russians retreated they left a characteristic swath of death and destruction in their wake. Dr. Chrzanowski documented that the region was “deliberately destroyed and devastated by the retreating Bolshevik Army.” Given that the area was decimated by epidemic typhus, the Soviet destruction and appropriation of medical facilities and their inventories only exacerbated the public health crisis. He specifically notes the Bolshevik seizure of all medical materials; including the 1,200-bed Red Cross Hospital, its personnel, and inventory for transport into the Russian interior.<sup>63</sup> The Soviet military also waged war on the precious few medical professionals in the area as they tortured and murdered those not fully committed to the Communist cause. Shortly after the Polish entry into Mińsk, Dr. Chrzanowski supervised the “unpleasant and painful” exhumation of a mass grave of Bolshevik victims a few kilometers from the city. He recorded the following “evidence of atrocities committed by the Bolsheviks”:

“I exhumed the body of Dr. Haniczówna [a medical colleague arrested by the Soviet Cheka]. It turned out she had been murdered by inserting a blunt tool, a rod, or maybe a rifle barrel into the eye socket; the skeletal walls of the eye socket were shattered and the eye pressed deep into the cranial cavity. I found no other injuries. Therefore, she was not shot as originally thought, but simply murdered. As I exhumed the bodies of 19 victims buried in a common pit a few kilometers from Mińsk, I recognized my friends. I found that four people had no signs of wounds or injuries, they were likely stunned or fainted and buried alive. Some of the victims had their arms and legs tied with barbwire. These facts are so horrible that I would never have believed it possible if I had not seen it with my own eyes.”<sup>64</sup>

The targeted attacks on medical facilities and personnel by Bolshevik forces in the Mińsk region exacerbated an already bad situation and began the work of undoing public health measures throughout the area.

As humanitarian support continued to filter into Poland throughout 1919, Bolshevik troops pursued Denikin’s forces further into Ukraine and took control of large swaths of territory. The return of the Soviet military and colder climates to Ukraine in the autumn of 1919, caused the situation to go from bad to worse as Ukraine’s defenders, cities, and countryside were ravaged by the spread of typhus. To make matters worse, on 1 February

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<sup>63</sup> G. Chrzanowski, “Historja Organizacji Polskich Władz Sanitarnych na Kresach,” *Lekarz Polski* 2, No. 5 (1926): 6–7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



1920, Colonel Gilchrist reported to the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army from his Warsaw headquarters that Soviet forces were deliberately sending typhus cases into Polish territories. Gilchrist wrote "It is a known fact that the Commanders of the Bolshevik armies are ridding themselves of typhus fever cases by sending them in armoured trains to the Polish border. There they are unloaded and allowed to drift for themselves into Polish territory."<sup>65</sup> Even as the Polish government made attempts at a negotiated settlement with the Bolsheviks, the Soviets strengthened their military forces across Ukraine and worked to weaken Polish resolve and demoralize its citizens by spreading panic and epidemic disease into Poland. Soviet stonewalling of negotiations, coupled with the fact that Bolshevik troops were massing along the Polish frontier, led Poles to conclude that the Russians were not sincere in their peace initiatives.<sup>66</sup> The Polish *Sejm* therefore authorized Marshal Piłsudski to sign a mutual assistance pact with the Ukrainian Nationalist leader, Symon Petlura. The military agreement was signed on 24 April 1920, one day later Piłsudski began his offensive to drive the Bolsheviks from Ukraine. On 7 May 1920, the Polish Army entered the undefended Ukrainian capital of Kiev.<sup>67</sup> The Polish military success in Ukraine was exceedingly easy however, their victory proved costly and short-lived.

Only a month later on 5 June 1920, the 1st Cavalry Army of Semyon Budyonny (*Konarmia*) broke through the Polish-Ukrainian line just south of Kiev.<sup>68</sup> As Budyonny's cavalry eventually entered Polish territory and bedded down for the night, Russian Journalist Isaac Babel recorded his impressions: "So this is Poland, this is the arrogant grief of the Rzeczpospolita Polska! A violent intruder, I unroll a louse-ridden straw mattress in this church abandoned by its clergymen..."<sup>69</sup> Just as typhus-infected lice accompanied tsarist forces into the Polish lands during the First World War, they once again rode into Poland with the Red Army. On many occasions however, they also took a train as Colonel Gilchrist observed, "the leaders of the Bolshevistic movement shipped trainload after trainload of typhus

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<sup>65</sup> U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks (Carlisle, Pennsylvania), Harry L. Gilchrist Papers, Box 1: Folder 2, "Report to Surgeon General U.S. Army," Warsaw, 1 II 1920, 66.

<sup>66</sup> See "Telegrams from The Minister in Poland (Gibson) to the Secretary of State, 17-18 January 1920," in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920*, Vol. 3 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 371-376.

<sup>67</sup> Davies, *White Eagle*, 104-109.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 42.

cases to the Polish border, there to be unloaded and drift into Poland.”<sup>70</sup> The use of typhus and disease as crude biological weapons by the Soviets was widely embraced as a means to an end by a military command unconcerned with the wider implications of using disease to defeat its adversaries. Polish peasants were often heard to say, “what bullets did not do in the war, they do with contagious disease.”<sup>71</sup> While riding with the 1st Cavalry Army in 1920, Isaac Babel faithfully and eloquently recorded its role in the offensive against Poland. In his writings, he details a frequently ill-equipped Bolshevik military that is violent, rife with disease and prone to pillaging. As Babel’s “rag-looters” advanced on Poland he sadly noted near Khotin on 28 July, that typhus was not the only public health disaster riding with the *Konarmia* – “The terrible truth is that all the soldiers have syphilis.”<sup>72</sup> The Soviet advance not only threw back Polish defenders but also uprooted all public health initiatives and destroyed all quarantine stations along the eastern frontier. The Bolshevik offensive effectively opened the flood-gates of the East and allowed both typhus-infected refugees and the diseased Soviet military to pour unchecked into Poland. William Boyden of the Commission of the League of Red Cross Societies to Poland witnessed the invasion of the diseased and reported, “The Bolsheviks were very generous in allowing the sick to escape to Poland, especially those suffering from epidemic diseases, and of these there seems to be an almost unlimited number.”<sup>73</sup> With public health initiatives collapsing rapidly and the Soviet military encouraging the spread of disease to sap Poland’s resolve, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky’s “horde” broke through Polish lines in the north. By early-August 1920, Tukhachevsky had driven his forces to the gates of Warsaw.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the summer of 1920, the Western Allies debated the Polish dilemma and hoped for an end to the Bolshevik offensive. In August, American leaders openly condemned the “political system and methods of the Bolshevik government.”<sup>75</sup> By 12 August 1920, the Russian Armies

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<sup>70</sup> Harry L. Gilchrist, “Fighting Typhus Fever in Poland,” *University of Cincinnati Medical Bulletin* 1, No. 3 (1922): 37; Gilchrist, “Typhus Fever in Poland,” *The Military Surgeon* 46, (1920): 622.

<sup>71</sup> Chwalba, 1919, 239.

<sup>72</sup> Babel, *Red*, 220, 237.

<sup>73</sup> William Boyden, “An American’s Opinion of Poland,” *Journal of the American-Polish Chamber of Commerce and Industry* 1, No. 7 (1920): 6.

<sup>74</sup> Adam Zamoyski, *The Battle for the Marchlands* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 58–110; Davies, *White Eagle*, 279–288; *London Times*, August 2, 1920, 8.

<sup>75</sup> “Lubomirski to Lansing, 28 August 1920,” in *Papers Relating*, 3:396–397; *New York Times*, August 6, 1920, 1–2.

reached the outskirts of Warsaw, and most thought Poland would perish. The following day, Marshal Piłsudski eased Allied fears. He hastily assembled a strike force and launched a daring attack through Tukhachevsky's exposed flank. The offensive encircled the Bolshevik Army and forced the Russians into a rapid retreat from Poland. By the end of the day, the Polish Army had taken some 100,000 Bolshevik prisoners and nearly destroyed the entire Russian Army. All remaining Red Army units quickly retreated before the Polish advance.<sup>76</sup> A demoralized Isaac Babel described elements of the retreating Bolshevik Army on 12 September 1920, "The Russian Red Army infantryman is barefoot, not only not modernized, but the embodiment of «wretched Russia,» hungry and squat muzhiks, tramps, bloated, louse-ridden."<sup>77</sup> Many of the typhus-infected lice which rode into Poland with the Red Cavalry were finally returning to the East. As the Polish military continued their eastward drive, they uncovered the true extent of the Bolshevik destruction of public health measures and the resulting misery caused by the unchecked spread of typhus throughout the region. Polish Captain Stanisław Kawczak recorded in his memoirs the widespread typhus caused by the Bolsheviks' advance. Kawczak noted as he entered the town of Żałośce in September 1920, "As in all towns, there is a typhus epidemic brought by the Bolsheviks that decimates the people."<sup>78</sup> Captain Kawczak's observations linking Bolshevik actions to the spread of typhus were also confirmed by members of the American Military. First Lieutenant Robert Snidow of the American Polish Relief Expedition reported the appalling situation following the retreat of the Soviets from the town of Lida in September 1920:

"The Bolsheviks had gone but they had left behind them the results of their habits and disorganization. The town was full of Cholera and Typhus. Four days after the town was taken the streets were still full of dead and over ten days after the occupation I saw entrails of a man floating down the creek which is one of the principal water supplies. Also three hundred and seventy five Bolshevik wounded had been left behind mostly with gas gangrene but a few having also contagious diseases."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Neal Ascherson, *The Struggles for Poland* (New York: Random House, 1987), 58–59; *London Times*, August 20, 1920, 10; August 24, 1920, 9–11.

<sup>77</sup> Babel, *Red*, 292.

<sup>78</sup> Stanisław Kawczak, *Milknące echa: wspomnienia z wojny, 1914–1920* (Warszawa: Nakładem Towarzystwa Wydawniczego Bluszcz, 1936), 377.

<sup>79</sup> U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks (Carlisle, Pennsylvania), Harry L. Gilchrist Papers, Box 1: Folder 4, "Report of Duties Performed: American Polish Relief Expedition, January 1–November 1, 1920," Warsaw, s.l., 160.

As fighting came to an end, this scene was replicated throughout Poland's eastern territories as the magnitude of the public health crisis and numbers of typhus victims left by the Soviets was uncovered by the advancing Polish Army. Following Piłsudski's successful counter-offensive, the Russians sued for peace and on 12 October 1920, an armistice was signed between the two sides.<sup>80</sup> It was not until the evening of 18 March 1921 however, that the Treaty of Riga officially ended the war and established the Polish–Soviet boundary.<sup>81</sup>

With the end of the war, it became apparent that one of the greatest casualties of the conflict were the anti-typhus initiatives along the border and throughout the country. Polish and American efforts had made great strides toward containing typhus throughout the countryside and delousing thousands of refugees entering the country however, virtually all of the progress was destroyed by the Bolshevik advance and their efforts to use the disease to their advantage during the conflict. The Russian advance broke the typhus quarantine and either captured or destroyed valuable equipment and delousing stations along the frontier. The Soviets also engaged in the destruction of medical facilities and the murder of personnel acting to contain the typhus outbreak throughout the region. While destroying Polish efforts to contain the disease, the Russian military actively drove diseased refugees into the Polish border and encouraged their own sick to filter into the Polish state to undermine efforts to stop the disease. One estimate holds that 75% of the progress made against typhus was wiped out by Bolshevik actions.<sup>82</sup> Colonel Gilchrist lamented the Bolshevik invasion and its effect on the typhus situation in August 1920:

“Complete abandonment of all typhus fever work in the worst typhus fever districts of Poland; capture by the Bolsheviks of all eastern quarantine stations and removal of the barriers established under great difficulties; capture and destruction of much of the paraphernalia and materials which had been distributed in many towns and villages throughout the typhus districts, introduction of Bolshevik troops of a new source of contamination to places free from the disease, infecting of the armies of Poland, and infecting of the populace returning to homes recently occupied by Bolshevik soldiers.”<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, Russian efforts to employ typhus as a crude biological weapon aimed at weakening and demoralizing the new Polish state proved

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<sup>80</sup> The armistice was signed on 12 October 1920, but did not enter into effect until midnight on 18 October 1920. See Davies, *White Eagle*, 237.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>82</sup> Foster, *The Demands*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> *The Toronto World*, November 1, 1920, 3.

unsuccessful. They did, however, prolong the misery and death associated with the disease throughout the region. In the end, the Bolshevik experience with typhus left a lasting impression on Soviet leaders. After witnessing the destructive nature of the disease in wartime, Soviet authorities launched a biological weapons research program aimed at weaponizing typhus following the Polish-Bolshevik War. An unfortunate legacy of the war is the beginning of the modern Soviet Biological Weapons Program. According to British Intelligence, Soviet efforts to develop a stable biological weapon based on *typhus rickettsiae* began at the Trotsky Central Aerodrome near Moscow in June 1924.<sup>84</sup> The Soviet attempt to harness typhus for military applications during the 1920s is also confirmed by the former Deputy Director of the Soviet Biopreparat, Kanatzhan Baizakovich Alibekov. According to Alibekov “The casualties inflicted by a brutal epidemic of typhus from 1918 to 1921 made a deep impression on the commanders of the Red Army. Even if they knew nothing of the history of biological warfare, they could recognize that disease has served as a more potent weapon than bullets or artillery shells.”<sup>85</sup> Typhus seemed a promising biological agent at the time. It had no medical cure until the arrival of antibiotics and Soviet commanders were “especially impressed” by the viciousness of typhus.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, Bolshevik efforts to use the “viciousness of typhus” against Poland were unsuccessful. Their experience with the disease however, provided them an opportunity to evaluate the impact and uses of disease as a potential weapon of war for the future.

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<sup>84</sup> Anthony Rimmington, *Stalin's Secret Weapon: The Origins of Soviet Biological Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 123.

<sup>85</sup> Ken Alibek, *Biohazard: The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World—Told from the Inside by the Man Who Ran It* (New York: Random House, 1999), 32.

<sup>86</sup> Milton Leitnberg and Raymond Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 18.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### **Christopher Blackburn, Kiedy tyfus jechał na czerwonym koniu: militarne wykorzystanie choroby podczas wojny polsko-bolszewickiej**

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia rolę Armii Czerwonej w rozprzestrzenianiu się tyfusu podczas wojny polsko-bolszewickiej 1919–1920. Choroba ta nie była w Polsce nowa, epidemie tyfusu wybuchały kilkakrotnie w czasie I wojny światowej, ale nie w takiej skali, jak podczas wojny polsko-bolszewickiej. Pierwotnie prawdopodobnie pojawiła się na ziemiach polskich w 1915 r. wraz z wojskami rosyjskimi.

Nowo powstały polski rząd walczył z rozprzestrzenianiem się choroby od początku swojego istnienia. Polskie wysiłki, wspierane przez amerykańskie grupy humanitarne, poczyniły wielkie postępy w zwalczaniu tyfusu na terenach wiejskich, a także w procesie odwszenia tysięcy uchodźców przybywających do kraju; jednak wiele z tego zostało zniweczone wraz z ofensywą bolszewicką w 1920 r.

Będąc świadkami wyniszczających skutków tyfusu na opanowanych przez siebie terytoriach i we własnym wojsku, Bolszewicy podejmowali nierówne i często nieskoordynowane próby wykorzystania tej choroby do osłabienia i potencjalnego zniszczenia raczkującej II RP. Marsz bolszewików wypchnął ofiary tyfusu i uchodźców za polskie linie, celowo lub przez swoje bierne oddziaływanie, podczas gdy w tym samym czasie siły bolszewickie niszczyły lub rabowały elementy infrastruktury sanitarnej i zapasy medyczne. Taktyka bolszewicka ostatecznie zawiodła, gdy w sierpniu 1920 r. wojska polskie odparły sowieckie natarcie, co umożliwiło potworne podjęcie wysiłków na rzecz walki z tyfusem w całym kraju. Bolszewickie



doświadczenia z tyfusem podczas wojny polsko-bolszewickiej przekonały jednak przywódców sowieckich, że odpowiednio wykorzystane czynniki biologiczne mogą przynieść pozytywne rezultaty militarne. To, co zaczęło się jako chaotyczny wysiłek bolszewików, mający na celu wykorzystanie tyfusu jako broni w ich dążeniu do Wisły w 1920 r., zaowocowało narodzinami sowieckiego programu broni biologicznej, który stworzył różne wersje tyfusu w celu wykorzystania na polach bitewnych w latach trzydziestych XX w.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna polsko-bolszewicka, tyfus, Amerykańsko-Polska Administracja Pomocy w walce z Tyfusem, kordon sanitarny

## SUMMARY

### **Christopher Blackburn, When Typhus Rode a Red Horse: Weaponizing Disease During the Polish-Bolshevik War**

This paper explores the role that the Red Army played in the spreading of typhus during the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919–1920. The disease was not new to Poland as it had flared up on several occasions during the First World War, having probably been brought to the country by the Imperial Russian army in 1915. However, these flare ups were nowhere near the scale in which the disease appeared during the Polish-Bolshevik War.

The newly formed Polish government was involved with attempts to control the disease from its outset. With the support of humanitarian groups from the United States, these efforts, which included the delousing of thousands of refugees entering the country, had made great strides with regards to eradicating typhus from the Polish countryside; however, much of this work was undone by the Bolshevik offensive of 1920.

Having witnessed the debilitating effects that typhus had on their own country and military, the Bolsheviks made sporadic and often uncoordinated attempts to use the disease to weaken and potentially destroy the fledging Second Polish Republic. Through both active and passive means the Bolshevik advance drove typhus victims and refugees across the Polish border, while at the same time their military destroyed (or removed) sanitation equipment and medical supplies in the captured areas. The Bolshevik tactic ultimately failed as their advance was repelled by the Polish military in August 1920 and anti-typhus measures were restored throughout the country. However, after witnessing the military potential of typhus during the Polish-Bolshevik War, Soviet leaders were convinced that properly harnessed biological agents could produce positive military results. Thus, what began as a chaotic effort by the Bolsheviks to weaponize typhus during their drive to the Vistula in 1920 resulted in the birth of a Soviet biological weapons program, which by the 1930s was to produce various versions of typhus that could be deployed on the battlefield.

Keywords: Polish-Bolshevik War, Typhus, American Typhus Relief Expedition, Cordon Sanitaire

## АННОТАЦИЯ

### **Кристофер Блэкбарн, Когда тиф ехал на красном коне: военное использование болезни во время польско-большевистской войны**

В статье показана роль Красной Армии в распространении тифа во время польско-большевистской войны 1919–1920 гг. Это заболевание не было новым для Польши: эпидемии тифа в стране вспыхивали несколько раз во время Первой мировой войны, но не в таком масштабе, как во время польско-большевистской войны. Первоначально, вероятно, эта болезнь появилась в Польше в 1915 г. вместе с русской армией.

Недавно созданное польское правительство с самого начала своего существования боролось с распространением болезни. Польские усилия, поддерживаемые американскими гуманитарными группами, позволили добиться больших успехов в борьбе с тифом в сельских районах, а также в процессе выведения блох у тысяч беженцев, прибывающих в страну; однако большая часть этих усилий пропала даром с наступлением большевиков в 1920 г.

Наблюдая разрушительные последствия тифа на своей территории и в своих вооруженных силах, большевики предпринимали неравные и часто нескоординированные попытки использовать эту болезнь для ослабления и потенциального уничтожения юной Второй Речи Посполитой. Марш большевиков вытеснил жертв сыпного тифа и беженцев за пределы Польши, намеренно или посредством своего пассивного влияния, в то время как большевистские силы разрушали или грабили элементы санитарной инфраструктуры и запасы предметов медицинского назначения. Тактика большевиков окончательно провалилась, когда польские войска отразили советское нападение в августе 1920 г., что позволило возобновить усилия по борьбе с тифом по всей стране. Однако большевистский опыт с тифом во время польско-большевистской войны убедил советских лидеров в том, что при правильном использовании биологические факторы могут принести положительные военные результаты. То, что началось как хаотичное усилие большевиков по использованию тифа в качестве оружия в своем движении к Висле в 1920 г., привело к рождению советской программы биологического оружия, которая создала различные версии тифа для использования на полях битв в 1930-х гг.

**Ключевые слова:** польско-большевистская война, тиф, Американско-польская администрация помощи в борьбе с тифом, санитарный кордон