William Allen White (1868-1944) was the editor of the Emporia Gazette, and in his capacity as a journalist, he was invited to attend an aborted peace conference at Prinkipo in Turkey in early 1919, a trip that instilled in him a lifelong interest in Russia and its politics. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
William Allen White and the Russian Revolution

by Norman E. Saul

William Allen White is best known as a homespun and witty commentator on Kansas and American political, social, and economic life of the first half of the twentieth century. He accomplished this through editorials in his *Emporia Gazette*, syndicated columns and articles, and several popular books directed at mainstream, middle-class Americans. His role in and writings on international affairs are played down, in fact barely mentioned, not only by his biographers but by White himself in his classic autobiography. Yet White’s extensive correspondence, newspaper accounts, and many editorials reveal considerable interest in the far abroad, especially in what was happening in Russia, and to Russia, through the impact of World War I and by the consequences of the long-term and deeply ingrained radical socialist movement.

My interest in this other side of the “sage of Emporia” stemmed from learning of his “surprise” appointment by President Woodrow Wilson as one of two American delegates to the aborted Prinkipo Conference in early 1919. A subset of the Paris Peace Conference, this was an attempt by the peacemakers at Paris to bring the various Russian political factions, including the Bolsheviks, together to try to sort out their differences in a neutral setting. Prinkipo is one of the Princes Islands, an archipelago of nine islands in the Sea of Marmora, near the Ottoman Turkish capital, then still called Constantinople. The largest of these islands, Prinkipo (Büyükada in Turkish) was a popular summer escape from the heat of the capital and the site of a hospital complex for Ottoman casualties and of a sizable American Red Cross detachment during the war. White, an avid reader, may have already known about the location from reading

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An early version of this article was presented as a keynote address at an annual meeting of the Kansas Association of Historians.

2. “White and Herron Are U.S. Envoy to Russian Parley,” *New York Tribune*, February 8, 1919; 2; Griffith, ed., *Autobiography*, 290–91. The choice of Prinkipo was an attempt to find a neutral site and because Paris at the time was swamped with delegations and journalists of every stripe.
3. It should be noted that the United States did not declare war against the Ottoman Empire and maintained diplomatic relations and Near Eastern relief operations (mainly for Armenia) in Constantinople through the period, superintended by the allied commissioner for the region, Admiral Mark Bristol.
Samuel Sullivan Cox’s vivid depiction of spending a summer there, published after his year as U.S. minister to the Ottoman Empire.4

The choice of White for this assignment was due to the suggestion of the president’s adviser, Ray Stannard Baker, and President Wilson’s admiration for White. It was also part of an effort to add balance to the American observer team that was to be led by the international Christian socialist George Herron (1862–1925), best-known as an early advocate of “free love,” as well as to respond to criticism of the president for ignoring the American press corps during the peace negotiations in Paris.5

Herron was chosen because of his previous contacts with some of the Russian radical revolutionaries. As widely published as White and six years senior, Herron was well-known for his outspoken views on the peace negotiations.6 A complicated maneuver, the Prinkipo Conference was technically initiated by the Bolshevik government in Moscow with the trial mission of Maxim Litvinov (1876–1951) of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs that signaled a desire for recognition and relaxation of tensions in a letter to Wilson in December 1918. William Buckler, secretary of the American embassy in London, was dispatched to Stockholm to confer with Litvinov.7 His positive report back was quickly supported by Wilson and followed up by David Lloyd George, who knew Litvinov, in the Council of Ten. The letter of invitation to Prinkipo was sent to all concerned parties on January 22, 1919. The Soviet government responded quickly in acceptance, but other Russian parties, perhaps influenced by France, refused to join, hoping for a better outcome from the Paris peace negotiations and the course of civil war in Russia.8

How had William Allen White suddenly emerged as an American expert on Russian affairs? The president was probably aware that White had already developed a keen interest in events in Russia. On his return across the Atlantic from a well-publicized October 1917 tour along the Western Front with Henry Justin Allen, a fellow Kansas journalist and soon-to-be governor, White met and talked extensively with Samuel Harper (1882–1943), already recognized as one of the leading American authorities on Russia.9 Harper, a University of Chicago professor of Russian studies, was returning from an exciting several months in revolution-torn Russia, where he served as an unofficial guide and adviser for a special American delegation to the Provisional Government in May, generally known as the “Root Commission” because it was headed by Elihu Root, a former Secretary of State. Harper would soon become a top adviser to the State Department on the situation in Russia.10

Journalism was a major factor in providing information about the world and especially about the crucial events of

4. Samuel Sullivan Cox, The Isles of the Princes, or The Pleasures of Prinkipo (New York: Putnam, 1887). White would certainly have known about Cox, an ardent defender of the Lecompton Constitution as a Northern Democrat who served twenty-eight years before, during, and after the American Civil War as a representative in Congress from Ohio and New York. A progressive Democrat, he was appointed minister to the Ottoman Empire by President Grover Cleveland in 1886.

5. Though the literature on Woodrow Wilson and the Paris peace conference is immense, I do not know of a specialized study of his strategic appointments at the time, such as, besides White and Herron, of Norman Hapgood as minister to Denmark and the delegating of Chicago industrialist Charles R. Crane and Oberlin College president Henry C. Churchill as the American members of the important commission to decide the future of the Ottoman Empire, including the creation of Israel.


7. Litvinov was an assistant first to Leon Trotsky and then to Georgy Chicherin in the new Soviet foreign department. He had the advantage of being fluent in English and familiar with British politics from a number of years of exile in England and from having an English wife. He succeeded Chicherin as commissar for foreign relations in 1930 and charted the program of “collective security” in the 1930s (recognition by the United States, alliance with France, membership in the League of Nations) but was relegated to exile in 1939 in favor of Vyacheslav Molotov and a swing toward accommodation with Germany (Nazi-Soviet Pact). He escaped death in the purges to return as wartime ambassador to the United States in 1941. On his trip to that assignment, he traveled across the Pacific, stopping at Honolulu on December 6, 1941, and arriving in Washington the next day to learn of the attack on Pearl Harbor. For more details on Litvinov’s remarkable career, see Zinovy Sheinis, Maxim Litvinov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 294–310; Norman E. Saul, Historical Dictionary of United States–Russian/Soviet Relations (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 232–33.

8. A common perception in the West at the time was that the Bolshevik government was weak and subject to collapse at any time. Complicating the situation was the dispatch by Wilson’s closest adviser, Colonel Edward House, in March 1919, with the approval of Lloyd George but in the absence of the president, of a special mission to Russia by the United States, alliance with France, membership in the League of Nations but was relegated to exile in 1939 in favor of Vyacheslav Molotov and a swing toward accommodation with Germany (Nazi-Soviet Pact). He escaped death in the purges to return as wartime ambassador to the United States in 1941. On his trip to that assignment, he traveled across the Pacific, stopping at Honolulu on December 6, 1941, and arriving in Washington the next day to learn of the attack on Pearl Harbor. For more details on Litvinov’s remarkable career, see Zinovy Sheinis, Maxim Litvinov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 294–310; Norman E. Saul, Historical Dictionary of United States–Russian/Soviet Relations (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 232–33.


the Great War. Newspapers—obviously before television and even radio networks—were the main source of information. Moreover, Kansas was especially impacted by the war because of the greatly increased exports of flour to feed armies on the Western Front. It was a boom time in the state for millers, and farmers were planting fence row to fence row across the state to meet the demand. Also important was that much of the grain was tilled, threshed, and milled by immigrants from Russia: Mennonites from Ukraine in a large area north of Wichita and Volga Germans in the west-central part of the state around Hays and Russell. Almost every Kansan would have known about Turkey Red Wheat coming from Russia and of Bernhard Warkentin, the miller in Newton, who pioneered steel-roller milling for hard wheat.  

Moreover, William Allen White had ample editorial support and inspiration in meeting the demand for knowledge of what was going on: Victor Murdock (Wichita Eagle), Arthur Capper (Topeka Daily Capital), and Henry Justin Allen (Wichita Beacon), among others who strove to compete with smaller papers, including the Emporia News in White’s hometown. Finally, the obvious—many Kansans were marching off to war “over there,” awakening a cross-section of interest that otherwise would not have existed. And the Red Cross drives across the state, led by White and others, certainly brought the war home.

Samuel Harper (a son of the founding president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper) and White had several friends in common. Most important was the Chicago industrialist and philanthropist Charles R. Crane, a friend of the senior Harper who had inspired and financed Samuel Harper’s Russian studies. Crane had supported an attempt with William Rainey Harper in 1900 to bring Leo Tolstoy to the University of Chicago as a lecturer on Russian literature and culture. Crane, who had visited Emporia, had also supported White’s effort, along with John Phillips, to acquire Leslie’s Monthly and turn it into the Progressive journal American Magazine.  

During the voyage home, White and Samuel Harper discussed how to educate America on the important events transpiring in Russia. White was obviously impressed with Harper’s knowledge of Russia and of recent events there.

Back at his desk in Emporia and soon after the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, White wrote a series of editorials on Russia. In “Shall We Spank Russia?” he considered the option of cutting off all exports to that country. But after further thought, he was pessimistic about the outcome: “Russia is a child among nations. Russia is a nation of children. . . . Perhaps a bloody revolution, surpassing in horror even the French Revolution, may be necessary before Russia can lay aside completely the old order and take up the new.”  

Then White saw a progressivist silver lining: “Today in Russia, all uninformed, all blind, all mad and tremendously stupid, stands a new man in the world. The worker. This will be his century. . . . For the first time since history dawned he is having an international say.”

The Kansas publisher also renewed contact with Samuel Harper: “I wish you would write me and tell me what you think of the situation in Russia. I am among

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those who have great and unfaltering hope in the Russian situation, and I still would rather go there than any place in the world just now.” He added in his own hand, “Will there be another Russian commission? Should like to go.”

Repeating this offer to a friend in the administration, White emphasized, “I have faith in Russia. I believe that the Russian revolution is the greatest gain of this war so far. And the best thing in the President’s peace terms, it seems to me, is his consideration of Russia and the Russian views and rights in the matter.”

Committed his whole life to keeping the public informed about crucial matters, White then proceeded to arrange a lecture tour for Harper through the Great Plains. He wrote to college president friends in Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, and, of course, Kansas, emphasizing that Harper “knows Russia and the recent Russian Revolution as no man in the country knows it, and he knows his story well.” The universities in Colorado and Nebraska quickly responded positively.

William Allen White was naturally most interested in Harper’s engagements in Kansas and in obtaining an important commitment from Chancellor Frank Strong of the University of Kansas (KU). To White’s request of January 28, Strong replied in a few days, “I will get in touch with the people who handle such matters in the University at once. I have no doubt we can get it [the money].” White could finally put the Kansas schedule together, as he advised Harper, who was already in Colorado Springs: Manhattan on Monday, February 25; Lawrence on Tuesday; and Emporia on Wednesday. He had secured funding from KU for the lowest amount: fifty dollars, plus travel reasons: White was truly a national figure, and there was no facility in Kansas capable of handling a collection of this size at the time (1946). The collection, covering in detail American and international political, cultural, and social history of the first half of the twentieth century, consists of 136,800 items in 537 containers and occupying nearly 200 linear feet of space. It is divided into six series: A (family correspondence); B (letterbooks of outgoing correspondence); C (general correspondence, mainly letters received—430 boxes); D (special correspondence, such as matters concerning the Emporia Gazette and speaking engagements); E (miscellany, mainly literary manuscripts); and F (one box, index to collection). See the twenty-six-page guide “William Allen White Papers: A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress,” Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Finding Aids, revised February 2012. Citations to the collection that follow will be to series B and C.


17. WAW to Herbert Hadley, University of Colorado [and others], January 28, 1918, B, White Papers; C. H. Hastings (Nebraska) to WAW, February 2, 1918; and Samuel Harper to WAW, February 6, 1918, box 45, C, White Papers.

Henry Justin Allen (1868-1950) was the editor of the Wichita Beacon and a good friend of William Allen White. In 1917 Allen and White travelled to the Western Front as newspaper correspondents, where White met Russia expert Samuel Harper. Harper first introduced White to the complexities of Russian society and politics. Allen (above, right) also served as governor of Kansas from 1919 to 1923 thanks in large part to White, who served as his campaign manager.
expenses from Manhattan. Obviously, Harper would be busy that week.

Harper’s whirlwind tour began in Iowa and continued through Nebraska and Colorado, with talks in Omaha, Lincoln, Colorado Springs, Denver, and Boulder in February 1918, after which he returned through Kansas. After a Monday-morning appearance at the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan, he arrived in Lawrence on the evening of February 25 and spoke the next afternoon in Robinson Gymnasium, in the middle of campus, before what must have been a very large audience, since Chancellor Strong had canceled all classes, declared the event a university convocation, and expected all faculty and students to attend; he obviously wanted to get his money’s worth. He also urged townspeople to come. In case anyone was indisposed or otherwise unable to be present, the local press devoted much space to the event.

In over a full column, under the heading “Russia’s Woe Detailed at K.U.,” the Lawrence Gazette noted Harper’s emphasis on the debt the Allies owed to Russia for not leaving the war a year earlier. The front page of the Journal-World echoed Harper’s plea for understanding and patience for Russia and his hopes that Russia might yet be saved from extremism. In a front-page column titled “Bolshevik Chaos Caused by Sins of Monarchy,” the University Daily Kansan cited Harper for blaming the old monarchy for what had happened. “Russia may well be considered an experimental laboratory,” it quoted him, “and a failure of the Bolsheviks to cause a natural readjustment of affairs should be taken as a lesson by the world.” At least for a period the students of the University of Kansas and residents of Lawrence may have been the best-informed on Russia of any in the country.

The next day in Emporia, White himself hosted a dinner for Harper, which was served by ladies of the Methodist Church and sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and the City Club. Unfortunately, the event coincided with the appearance of a nationally known repertory company in the town. White, however, arranged for the raising of the curtain to be held until after Harper’s talk. It must have been a long evening for some of the 226 Emporians who paid the eighty cents for the dinner, since Harper began his talk at 6:45 and spoke for over an hour and a half. The Gazette naturally gave ample coverage to Harper’s visit, boasting that “it was one of the largest social gatherings ever held in Emporia, and was most successful.” Harper again recounted the history of the revolution, stressing the democratic motivations of the first February revolution and blaming the recent Bolshevik excesses on the old regime. He preached that it was important for Americans to “strive to interpret and understand the Russian situation.” This would become a refrain in White’s subsequent editorials on Russia.

Samuel Harper was pleased with the results of his tour. He wrote one Russian official living in New York, “I have just returned from the West—Colorado and Kansas—where I have been lecturing on Russia. I find the people out West much more ‘understanding’ and ready to stand by Russia. In fact, I have come back greatly encouraged.” And to E. Chapel Porter of the Russian American Chamber of Commerce, Harper reported, “They are more open-minded there, thinking more deeply, calm but determined and active—in fact it was most encouraging from every point of view. . . . We are thinking more out here and not allowing ourselves to get panicky. . . . The people out here will back any effort to help Russia through.” Interestingly, neither White nor Harper mentioned anything about this tour in their respective autobiographies.

William Allen White continued to have Russia and its future on his mind, not without difficulty, because of the confusing and conflicting information emanating from Europe.

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18. Frank Strong to WAW, February 4, 1918 (carbon copy), box 33, folder W, Frank Strong Correspondence, Chancellor’s Office, General, University Archives, University of Kansas Libraries; WAW to Samuel Harper, February 20, 1918, box 4, f. 22, Samuel Harper Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago (hereafter Harper Papers).
19. Samuel Harper to WAW, February 10 and 14, 1918, box 45, C, White Papers. Perhaps the most difficult part of the tour was enduring the requisite hospitality. On the Chamber of Commerce dinner at the Antlers Hotel in Colorado Springs, he wrote of having to indulge in bowls of pinto-bean soup and heaping plates of sirloin of beef. Samuel Harper to Richard Crane, February 22, 1918, box 5, Harper Papers.
24. Ibid.
Emporion in business acumen or common sense. If he had lived in Emporia he probably could have made good as a grocery clerk, but only in a small grocery store. He would have starved to death as an insurance agent. He could not have reached first base as a candidate for county clerk.

And last week in the name of democracy, presumably, Nicholas, who knew nothing of the meaning of the term, was taken out and shot by a group of Bolsheviki, who know nothing of it. Poor old Nick! He was a good piece of bric-a-brac and he could look grand and inspiring when facing a camera. But in reality he was a two-spot, and possibly he knew it. And he lived an unhappy life and died for something which wasn’t entirely his fault. But still he is good and dead. Berlin papers please copy. Eddie and Willy please write!

The year 1918 was a busy one for William Allen White: he was doing his best to promote the American war effort; running the gubernatorial campaign for Henry Allen, who was in France with the Red Cross; responding to the surprising success of *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*; writing another book, *In the Heart of a Fool*; and speaking throughout the state on behalf of local Red Cross drives. White also carried on a very active correspondence (averaging roughly twenty letters a day) with a variety of political progressives and internationalists: among many were Walter Lippmann; Norman Hapgood; his former University of Kansas classmate Vernon Kellogg; and Raymond Robins, who had been a self-appointed American ambassador to the Bolshevik government as head of the Red Cross mission to Russia in 1918 and who also came to Emporia at White’s invitation to speak about it.

There were also rumors about the United States sending another mission to Russia during the summer of 1918. “I do not think a better selection could be made for a member of the proposed Russian Commission than William Allen White,” wrote Colonel Edward House to Norman Hapgood. “However, the situation at present is so confusing that I hardly know how to advise. I shall be glad to warmly recommend his appointment.”

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27. “Exit Cousin No. 1,” *Emporia Gazette*, July 1, 1918.


By the end of the year and with the war coming to a close on the Western Front, and the president determined to superintend the peace conference, White packed his bags for Paris. Within a week of his arrival came the preliminary report that he might be asked to go to Prinkipo. The appointment was confirmed on February 7, but he still had two months to bone up further on the Russian situation. In one of his first reports from Paris, he reflected that "always to the north [floats] the unsettled black cloud of Bolshevism." He knew it would be not an easy mission but a very important one.

From the beginning, White and Herron had a difficult relationship with each other, the latter justifiably taking some credit for launching the idea and perhaps considering White an inexperienced and bothersome intruder. They still managed to have some success in seeking the cooperation of some of the several Russian representatives in Paris, "considering," White reflected, "that [Herron] was a most unpleasant personality, a deadly serious person with no sense of humor and tremendously impressed with his own importance." Noting that he carried on a conversation as if he were lecturing to a large audience, White added, "He was one of God’s pedestal dwellers, always moving about in bronze or marble." Impressed by Herron’s success with women, White wondered "if he made love in paragraphs, pages, or chapters." "But, man alive," White concluded, "he did make the time of the Peace Conference a season of joy for me!"

Were they the Abbott and Costello of the peace conference?

The Prinkipo proposal, relayed to Moscow, was promptly accepted by the Soviet government, but was sabotaged in Paris by those hoping for a military solution—that is, the overthrow or collapse of the Soviet regime. White sharply blamed France for its failure:

The [Prinkipo] conference was abandoned because the French owned so many bonds that they did not want any settlement with the Russians except a military settlement and they thought they could furnish arms and ammunition and money and whip the Bolsheviks, rather than to make peace and let food and civilization come into Russia, thereby overcoming the Bolshevik principal with reason rather than force.

Nicholas II (1868-1918) was the last Emperor of Russia. He inherited the throne in 1894 after the unexpected death of his father, Alexander III. During his reign, Nicholas faced multiple challenges, including the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) and World War I, as well as two revolutions (the Revolution of 1905 and the February Revolution of 1917). Nicholas abdicated the throne in March 1917, but after the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks decided that he and his family would provide a possible focal point for counterrevolutionaries. He, with the rest of his family, was executed in 1918, which evoked a strong editorial from White’s pen. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

31. WAW, "Realists or Idealists?" (column dated January 10, 1919), Emporia Gazette, February 1, 1919.
32. George Herron to Department of State, November 20, 1918, vol. 10, George Davis Herron Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California (hereafter Herron Papers).
34. WAW to Charles Feron (Lindsborg), March 5, 1920, B, vol. 41, White Papers.
Left somewhat in the dark in regard to the Prinkipo matter, White wrote to the President,

From Colonel House, who gave me the only official notice I had of my selection as a delegate to Prinkipo, I have had no notice of its abandonment; but I have presumed that the onrush of events has made that particular conference impossible. . . . [If] there is the slightest possibility that I may be of service here in any other conference with the Russians, I should be happy to stay. For Russia is very much on my heart. During the last ten weeks—especially since I was asked to go to Prinkipo—I have made Russia a kind of major study.

White went on to recommend that a new commission be sent for direct negotiations with the Bolshevik government.

Russian conditions are profoundly confused. There seems to be in Russia a reversion to some ancient type of feeling, somewhat racial, somewhat medieval, somewhat ethical; yet deeply removed from things of this modern world. One cannot say what it is, but certainly the Russian condition is a tinder box from which the world may strike fire at any time.

Expounding further on the need for a new commission to Russia that was serious and academic, he wrote,

That means study; not study a few days or a few weeks, but a long, serious, unbiased investigation by men of academic and political and military training—men not of one nation but men from at least England and America—who will go to Russia—all Russia (Moscow and Petrograd of course) but the exterior countries as well, and then formulate a policy for the civilized world to follow in Russia. If I could help on such a commission, I should be greatly pleased. But no one man is important. The commission itself is vital.35

One can only fantasize about William Allen White debating the world situation with Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky in Moscow during the summer of 1918.

The president responded to White with apologies but saw the problem differently:

It was shabby to treat you as you were treated in the matter of the Prinkipo conference. You ought to have had official notice of each stage of the matter but I am sure you will forgive irregularities in the presence of so uncertain and unforeseen a situation as the Russian.

The suggestion you make about a small commission of observation in Russia impresses me as a very reasonable one and I would be inclined to urge that it be acted on at once if it were not evident that such an investigation, to bear its full fruit, would have to continue through several months and before it was concluded we would have signed the Peace.36

William Allen White’s columns from Paris for the Wheeler Syndicate contained frequent references to the
Russian Question, revealing a moderate but far-from-naive approach to the Soviet regime. In “Russia and World Peace,” he perceived the dilemma: the League of Nations could not function properly without Russia as a member, but Russia could not be a member unless it adopted some orderly form of government. Bolshevism, he feared, was dividing Europe. In Russia, “They believe in majority rule only after the majority has been inoculated with their ideas.” He was firmly convinced that “the great problem of the world peace today is the Russian problem.”

Whiteisms on Russia continued to roll off his Paris pen. “[Bolshevism] is anarchy organized! It is a psychological rather than a material manifestation.” But like so many others, he was frustrated about finding a solution. After visiting the battlefield at Verdun, just prior to his departure from Europe, White wrote,

As for the Russian thing. I have about decided this: That I will pass it up: I can do my little thing at home, write my books, live simply and keep in touch with certain real sure things. Russia is mysterious; its problems are beyond my ken, and I fear only God in His own time and way can solve them. One cannot look at a battlefield like Verdun without feeling profoundly how futile are men’s attempts to solve things. Here the greatest mechanical forces of men for four years banged and smote the air, and yet when the wise men gathered in Paris to say what it was all about, who won, and what was won, no one knows! . . . So I feel that Russia is not for me.

But the Emporian abroad had caught the disease and could not let Russia go, comparing the new League of Nations with a collection of soviets. By May, at the end of his European sojourn, he saw “Bolshevism becoming conservative,” but it was still “the tyranny of the proletariat.” White was obviously depressed about conditions in Europe in the wake of the war and the apparent American failure at peacemaking. In his last report from the continent in May, he especially lamented the blockade of Russia that was preventing food from

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37. “Russia and World Peace,” dated from Paris, March 5, 1919, Emporia Gazette, March 29, 1919. These editorials for the Gazette also had national circulation as syndicated columns.
machinations in the American delegation at the Hotel Crillon in the absence of the president for the dropping of the project in favor of a direct recognition of the Bolshevik regime, the chief proponents being Edward House and William Bullitt, and the dispatch of the latter to Moscow “while the question of Prinkipo was held in the balance, and all the voices were in favor of an agreement with the Soviet government. . . . It was only when it was discovered that all Russian parties were likely to participate in the Conference, and that the Conference would be open to the world, that Prinkipo lost favor with Hotel Crillon.”

Back home again in Kansas, White made certain that readers of the Gazette were amply exposed to world affairs and grew increasingly concerned about labor unrest in the wake of the war and about the fate of the League of Nations. In the fall of 1919, he prevailed once again upon Chancellor Strong to host a knowledgeable internationalist from Great Britain at the University of Kansas, A. F. Whyte, member of Parliament and editor of the liberal journal New Europe.

Many things were on White’s mind that year. He briefly considered becoming the retiring Frank Strong’s replacement at the University of Kansas but reflected, “I would not be Chancellor if they would give the job one hundred thousand a year and then appoint a deputy. . . . Two thirds of my joy in life is my independence and that would be gone immediately if I took a Chancellor’s job.” But he could not put aside his bitterness over the French sabotage of Prinkipo, writing to Upton Sinclair in July:

Edward M. House (1858-1938), often known as “Colonel” despite his actual lack of military rank, was a diplomat and adviser to Wilson until 1919. House ran afoul of White when House insisted that the Prinkipo Peace Conference was a mistake and that the better solution was to simply formally recognize the Bolshevik regime. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.


41. WAW to Frank Strong, September 29, 1919, and Strong to WAW, October 4, 1919, Chancellor’s Office, Frank Strong, box 37, General Correspondence, 1919–1920, University Archives, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries.

42. WAW to Bill Morgan (Hutchinson), November 1, 1919, B, vol. 40, White Papers.
There never has been a time when the Russian situation could not be settled without arms if France would consent to such a settlement. But there has never been a time when France would consent to such a settlement. It is . . . the story of a great Nation drunk with victory, turned reactionary, blind with materialistic philosophy, and going to hell in a handcar.\footnote{WAW to Upton Sinclair, July 29, 1919, B, vol. 38, White Papers.}

In a letter to Cyrus McCormick Jr., who had a special interest in Russia as a member of the Root Commission and because of his investment in the International Harvester factory near Moscow, White corrected an article in the\textit{Chicago Record} entitled “We Should Get Out of Russia, says W. A. White.” He clarified his position:

Bolshevism is the tyranny of the proletariat minority trying to overcome by sheer fiat or mandate of faith the differences between men, which have their economic expression in wages, interests, profits, rents, and superintendence. . . . \[But\] America’s participation in the Kolchak conquest of Russia is an inexcusable folly. . . . The thing for America to do is to get out of Russia and let bolshevism hang itself with its own rope.\footnote{WAW to Cyrus McCormick Jr., September 29, 1919, C, box 48, White Papers. The United States was supporting very minimally the campaign of Alexander Kolchak’s army in Siberia during the Russian Civil War at this time.}

White was also concerned about the impact of the Russian revolution on American politics. In an editorial, “The Republican Party,” he charted the party’s then liberal social and economic goals, such as nationalization of natural resources and fair public policies, commenting, “This is not a radical program. But it would be called Bolshevik in Wall Street.”\footnote{“The Republican Party,” \textit{Emporia Gazette}, July 24, 1919.} On the approaching presidential election, he advised General Leonard Wood,

We must be radical enough to admit progress in the distribution of the wealth of the American people. But we must not be so radical that we take the Soviet view of progress, nor so reactionary that we take the purely capitalist view. If we can get a middle course adopted, a policy of steady, unswerving progress, with no hint of reactionary motives, and at the same time avoid this new Bolshevik radicalism, I believe we as Republicans, can win the election. . . . The trouble is, that the Republican Party is in danger of taking the reactionary shoot.\footnote{WAW to Leonard Wood, August 7, 1919, B, vol. 38, White Papers.}

White summed up his views about Russia in opposition to American intervention in an October letter:

There is no question but that Russia is in for a long bloody time, no matter what happens. And the blood letting will come, no matter what happens. And the blood letting will come, no matter who wins. It is in the Russian people. They have been ruled by an autocracy with cruel tyranny so long that when the autocracy changes from one group of society to another the ruthless, bloody tyranny remains. It would take a million American soldiers to forcibly restore order in Russia. And probably we would shed as much blood in doing it as would be shed inevitably. When Kolchak comes in, he will massacre the Bolsheviks to keep them in order, and then there will be a reaction against Kolchak and the Bolsheviks will go in and massacre the Kolchak expedition and so the pendulum will swing year after year. And I cannot see that the presence of our soldiers there is going to help. . . . The whole trouble with Russia is Russia.\footnote{WAW to A. M. Holt (secretary of Cyrus McCormick Jr.), October 2, 1919, B, vol. 39, White Papers.}

At the end of the year, White reappraised the Russian situation:

Russia is coming along all right in spite of the stupidity which seems to be inspiring the world in dealing with Russia, but the Russian is only suffering the martyrdom of birth which every new idea must suffer in the world, and like every other new idea in the world the Russian idea will be more or less modified by life on this planet in due course, in spite of the malice which greets it now. I have no idea what that place will be. Humanity must react, and the idea of the chemical change is beyond my talent. Whatever is good will be retained and the rest will go.\footnote{WAW to Blanche Brown, December 29, 1919, B, vol. 39, White Papers.}
Though the number of references to Russia on the editorial pages of the Gazette declined in the 1920s, it is clear from private correspondence that White despised the trend toward isolationism of the Republican administrations and pleaded the cause of international participation on various levels. Regarding Russia, he applauded the withdrawal of Allied forces from that country and encouraged the subsequent famine aid efforts of the American Relief Administration, directed by Herbert Hoover, and other agencies and the lowering of trade barriers. Moreover, he worked behind the scenes for diplomatic recognition of the Soviet state.

White especially deplored the “Red Scare” of 1919–1920 in America and castigated Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. “The deportation business is going to make martyrs of a lot of idiots whose cause is not worth it,” scolded White.\(^49\) He summed up the failed intervention effort:

Democracy is reason—not force. It cost the world 7 million lives to write that definition, in the Great War; and then the winners of the war turned around and began a war on Russia, the use of force to propagate an idea. Russia was mad with the madness of ignorance and greed. An organized minority was conducting a brutal campaign of repression on a dazed majority, and so the Allies tried to overcome the Russian government. Millions of treasure were squandered, and thousands of lives, and in the end Bolshevism triumphed. The crazy people waging a war of defense defeated the sane people waging a war of punishment. The war on Russia made heroes of the Bolshevists, and national unity made all Russians come to the defense of an indefensible minority. Force met force and the lesson in Russia of the war was ignored.\(^50\)

Clever editor that he was, White would satirize local events by giving them a Russian flavor. Under a headline “Student Soviet at Hays Normal School Dissolved,” he commended the state attorney general for not punishing a group of students at the school for tossing two faculty members into a pond for failing to turn out for a collective effort to build a cinder track.\(^51\)

And as soon as he learned about America’s favorable response to the Soviet appeal for famine assistance, White wrote a column entitled “Step by Step”:

America is going to feed the Russians. Good! . . . Now we are feeding Russia on the same terms that we should have fed Russia two years ago. This is but the first step toward recognizing Russia. The next step will be the establishment of trade relations. . . . Step by step we are getting ready to accept Russia into the family of civilized nations.\(^52\)

A. Mitchell Palmer (1872-1936) was the attorney general of the United States during Wilson’s second term. Palmer is often considered the preeminent cause of the “Red Scare,” the virulent anti-communist and anti-anarchist campaign that lasted from 1919 to 1920. The key feature of the “Red Scare” was the “Palmer Raids,” which led to the arrest and deportation of many suspected radical extremists. White hated the “Red Scare” and wrote a scathing editorial criticizing Palmer and the program in general, writing “The deportation business is going to make martyrs of a lot of idiots whose cause is not worth it.”

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

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52. “Step by Step,” Emporia Gazette, August 3, 1921. Trade would be restored soon after this writing, but diplomatic recognition would have to wait until after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt.
A few months later, after Jane Addams had been to Emporia to plead the cause of relief for the Russian famine, in “Investment for Democracy,” White boasted, “America is doing the real thing in Russia. . . . No dollar invested any place on earth will bring more righteous good will among men than a dollar sent to the Hoover Relief Association.” At the same time White criticized Hoover for not promoting the opening of free trade with Soviet Russia: “I can’t see what Hoover fears in trading with the Bolsheviki. England is going to take a shot at it and I don’t believe there is enough Bolshevism in it to affect America. We are not of a revolutionary tendency.”

One reason that references to Russia in the Gazette were less frequent in the 1920s was that White had turned his attention to political biography. But even then Russia would come into the picture. Writing on Woodrow Wilson and the Russian revolution, White quipped, “He could have stopped that debacle, but Russia was a friend who questioned his imperious will, and so became an enemy. . . . It was his first minor blunder; the first time he let his spirit, his happy Irish spirit, be guided by the dour Scot within him.” In 1924 White was again on the campaign trail, noting to Colonel House that he had driven his old Dodge 2,700 miles over Kansas in six weeks with no campaign funds: “As you know, I never wanted to be Governor. There were moments when I thought it would be a grand thing to be Governor just for what I could to help the men and women in the state educational institutions live a free and happy life. But I really wanted to hit the Ku Klux Klan a public smash. That I did.”

White was continually reminded of Prinkipo throughout the 1920s. A fellow editor and future Secretary of State, Christian Herter, wrote him in 1924 to solicit an article on the subject for the Independent, recalling meeting him in Paris as a young man “who was tremendously interested in the Prinkipo Mission of yours which never happened.”

In early 1926 White again seriously considered going to Russia. The occasion was a tour organized by Sherwood Eddy, another strong advocate for recognition. Eddy, born and raised in Leavenworth, Kansas, had graduated from Yale with distinction and then turned to philanthropic Christian missions, especially in developing the YMCA’s work in Russia and India before World War I. After a breakthrough visit to Moscow with a few other pro-recognition Americans in 1923, Eddy organized a tour—with Soviet cooperation—of an elite group of educators, journalists, businessmen, and scholars for the month of August. “We should make an unbiased investigation of political, economic and religious conditions in the Soviet Republic.” After a favorable response, dated January 27, Eddy assured White that “both during the trip and after

53. “Investment for Democracy,” Emporia Gazette, March 8, 1922. For an excellent and thorough study of the American Relief Administration in Russia from August 1921 through 1923, see Bertrand M. Patenaude, The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

54. WAW to W. S. Culbertson, March 28, 1921, C, box 56, White Papers.

55. WAW, Woodrow Wilson: The Man, His Times, His Task (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 364. The book on Wilson received high praise from the best of critics: “I had a bully time reading your Wilson. Nobody could have done a fairer, more incisive or more eloquent job. You have succeeded beyond the best of my expectations. And of course you have written a book that is more interesting than a novel.” Walter Lippmann to WAW, December 4, 1924, C, box 83, White Papers. And his old comrade for Prinkipo was impressed enough to seek European publishers with translators. George Herron to WAW, May 29, 1925, C, box 82, White Papers.

56. WAW to House, November 25, 1924, C, box 82, White Papers.


you come back you can write about Russia anything on God’s earth that you wish, whether you agree or disagree with the report the majority will probably sign.”

White sought advice by telephone from Russophile Charles R. Crane, who warned him in a written response to avoid former “Eastsiders” (Jews of lower Manhattan New York). Crane told White to concentrate on learning everything possible about the people, folk customs, the church, and so forth and recommended visits with some of the refugee intellectuals in Berlin and Prague. Eddy had hoped to couple White with Walter Lippmann, but both declined, White on account of his wife’s health, though the criticism Eddy was taking from anti-Soviet sources may have been a factor.

Eddy persisted with another invitation for a planned 1927 trip to Russia, adding, “It would seem after nine years of propaganda, red and white, that it is time to come to a closer understanding of actual conditions in Russia.” White responded that “I would like to do this tremendously,” especially since it had broken his heart not to be able to go in 1926, but that, unfortunately, he had other plans for 1927. William Allen White would finally go to Russia in 1933 with his fellow Kansas journalist, Henry Justin Allen, resulting in important consequences for the diplomatic recognition by the United States of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The newborn internationalist from Kansas was far from perfect in his analysis of the world during and in the wake of war and revolution. Was any American doing any better? The question “Whither Russia?” had stymied most “experts” since it had first been posed by Nikolai Gogol in the early nineteenth century at the end of Dead Souls. Even one of the most astute of twentieth-century observers, Winston Churchill, was baffled in October 1939, after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but he suggested a solution: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

William Allen White in his approaches to the Russian Question after the 1917 revolutions was flexible, understanding, positive, yet perplexed regarding courses of action. He clearly opposed the interventionist, nonrecognition stance of his party in the 1920s, but, like others such as William Borah and Raymond Robins, remained a loyal supporter of the party in local and national elections. Perhaps this reflected on his rural and small-town moderate roots, as opposed to urban machine operations of the Democratic Party. One thing is clear: he was dedicated to improved education of Kansans and all Americans to give them a better knowledge about the broader world they lived in. He worked to prepare them for the grand events on the international scene in his writings and lectures—and would play his own part as the national chairman (recruited by President Franklin D. Roosevelt) of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies in 1940–1941. Had he survived World War II, White would have applauded the emergence of another Kansan, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and his roles in war and peace.

60. Charles R. Crane to WAW, February 5, 1926, box 1 (reel 1), Charles Richard Crane Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
63. WAW to Sherwood Eddy, November 27, 1926, C, box 105, White Papers.
64. This will be the subject of a succeeding article in this journal.