

Alfred, Lord Milner in Russia, 1917



From 1897 to 1905, Alfred Lord Milner had served in South Africa as, variously, Governor of the Cape Colony, Governor of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony and High Commissioner. As such he was one of the key figures in the British administration there before, during and after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. In December 1916, Milner entered his first Ministerial office in Britain, having been offered (on 8 December) the post of Minister without Portfolio by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, in the five-man War Cabinet. While not overjoyed at the appointment (he wrote that “my own disposition is strongly against being in the Government at all...”), Milner accepted the position.

While Britain’s military strategy and foreign relations were under constant study and analysis by the War Cabinet, Lloyd George, with limited knowledge of either, looked to Milner’s knowledge and advice (he later wrote that “Milner was much the best all-round brain that the Conservative Party contributed to our Councils”). They both attended a major Allied Conference in Rome in January 1917 at which it was agreed to provide Russia with vital munitions. Favouring a renewed attempt to erode Germany’s position from the East, Lloyd George asked Milner to lead the British delegation of an Allied Mission to Russia (a position initially offered to Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour who had refused it). The Mission had the multiple objectives of attempting to co-ordinate the coming summer’s offensives, reaching an agreement for supplying equipment to Russia and, in consequence, help to boost the Russians’ morale.

The Mission sailed from Oban in Scotland on 20 January 1917. When they arrived at Port Romanov near Murmansk they found a scene of chaos, with thousands of tons of munitions lying on the docks with little or no apparent attempts being made to clear them. Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, the then British Consul-General in Moscow, wrote of Milner’s frustrations: “From the first day of his arrival he had realised the inefficiency of the Russians, and he made no attempt to conceal his opinion that he was wasting time...” It was clear to Milner that, in terms of Russia’s capability as an industrial state to efficiently supply its military, it stood in poor comparison to both South Africa and England, with their High Command poorly organized.

On 31 January, the delegation travelled to the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, 15 miles south of Petrograd (St. Petersburg) to be presented to the Tsar. Two days later Milner returned for a private audience when he was introduced to, and had lunch with, the Tsarina and her daughters. However, from his meetings with the Tsar it was obvious to Milner that there was nothing the Mission could achieve on the political side. Sir Henry Wilson, a senior Army staff officer and corps commander who had been appointed by Lloyd George as the Senior Military Representative for the British delegation, wrote that: "Milner tells me that yesterday the Emperor and Empress ... made it quite clear that they would not tolerate any discussion of Russian internal politics."



After another two days, on 4 February 1917, the whole Mission returned again to the Palace for a State dinner. A photograph exists in the New College Archives Milner collection which features a group portrait of officials, military officers and other dignitaries; Tsar Nicholas II is seated at the centre and it would appear that, seated third to his right, is Lord Milner. Consultation of photographs of the internal rooms of the Alexander Palace allows for a confident conclusion that the picture was taken in the Semi-Circular Hall, the room used in Imperial times for receptions, galas and dinners. Given that all evidence seems to indicate that Milner did not visit Russia in an official capacity before 1917, the State dinner of the 4 February would appear to be the only occasion at which this photograph could have originated.¹

With Robert Bruce Lockhart as his guide, and glad to get away for a while from the seemingly endless round of functions, Milner visited Moscow for three days, meeting with Prince Lvov (a leading liberal statesman and the soon-to-be Prime Minister of the Russian Provisional Government) and M. Chelnokov, the mayor of Moscow. In the course of the meeting the Russians attempted to impress on Milner the effects poor administration and mismanagement of people and resources were having on the country, as well as the increasingly unfavourable way in which the Tsar himself was now seen for doing little to help alleviate the situation.

On his return to Petrograd, Milner launched into more days of meetings, interviews and receptions and on 18 February met with the Tsar for the final time. Milner had, in fact, written a confidential letter to the Tsar in which he set out his views on the matter of the help the Allies could give Russia. The donation of supplies would need to be perceived to genuinely enhance the probability of the success of any future military operations. It was possible that materials which may not make a significant difference to operations on the Western Front, for example, may prove vital to success on the East. Milner felt there was also a need for Russia to demonstrate that it had already exhausted its own supplies of the resources requested, to prove in effect that it was truly necessary for the Allies to hand over their own vital supplies. No doubt partly with his recent meeting in Moscow fresh in his mind, Milner went on to point out that it “has come to my knowledge from many independent sources which deserve confidence and are obviously well-informed” that Russia had not, in fact, fully exploited such resources but that it was the management and organisation of them that was currently at fault. Not only was the use of manpower being mishandled but also: “... although factories are being closed, there is no absolute shortage of coal, nor of rolling-stock for coal transport; the distribution and turnover of the available rolling-stock is, however, carried out most inefficiently.” In short, the blame for any short-comings lay at the hands of the Russian authorities. He further recommended that, should materials be supplied by Allied countries to Russia, personnel from those countries should be in charge of the distribution and implementation. Despite Milner attempting to present this as an offer of aid, it would be difficult not to perceive this as demonstrating a clear lack of confidence in the abilities of the Russian government to get the job done.

The Mission left for home on the 22 February; landing at Scapa Flow they reached London in the afternoon of 3 March. Some days later riots and disturbances broke out in Petrograd, sparked by food shortages. Strikes and demonstrations took place in the capital and the government collapsed. On 15 March 1917, the Tsar abdicated and the new Provisional Government was formed.

In his report on the Mission, while acknowledging the fact that the general population of Russia were “in an unhappy frame of mind” as a result of all the domestic problems and general war-weariness, Milner declared that he had “formed the opinion that there is a great deal of exaggeration in the talk about revolution...there is a long distance separating dissatisfaction in the army and the nation...from a genuine revolutionary movement.” Later, in his “War Memoirs”, Lloyd George bemoaned the fact Milner had not apparently grasped the immediate seriousness of the situation: “Having regard to the warnings which were blaring at them in every direction, it is incomprehensible that they should have been so deaf and blind.” On the other hand, Milner was not alone – the Germans did not see the Revolution coming and even many leading Russians felt that, while talk of revolt was certainly audible in Petrograd, nothing would conceivably happen until the war was over. It was the speed with which events unfolded that seems to have taken most people by surprise.

Certainly, no-one present in the Alexander Palace on that lavish evening of 4 February 1917 could have predicted the events of less than six weeks later, when the world they had known would be turned upside down and eventually swept away, never to return.

¹ This photograph has been used on the dust-jacket of “Inside the enigma: British officials in Russia 1900-1939” by Michael Hughes, London: Hambledon Press, 1997. The acknowledgment note indicates that the photograph originated “in the early days of the First World War”. However, as the seated figure is almost certainly Lord Alfred Milner, who does not appear to have officially visited Russia until the Allied Mission of January/February 1917, the precise dating of this photograph may become a subject for debate. His presence in the group would also provide an explanation as to exactly why the picture is in New College’s Milner collection.

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For views of internal rooms of the Alexander Palace, the website “Alexander Palace Time Machine” (www.alexanderpalace.org/palace) is particularly useful.