

American Military Units in Russia, 1918-1920

As members of the 31st Infantry Regiment Association and former members of the regiment, we all learned that the Regiment's first deployment was to Vladivostok in East Siberia where it adopted the Polar Bear as its fierce totem and mascot. The reasons for the unit's deployment are less well known and vague: to protect "American interests"; to secure supplies on the docks and warehouses in Vladivostok.¹

Before the advent of the internet research into underlying causes would require a journey to where records are archived, an expensive and time-consuming process restricting research to dedicated scholars and academics. These days, the internet makes pursuing such knowledge a bit easier. Bloggers and video creators who are able to finance their research activities with monetizing their products on the internet do the basic scholarship of locating archived material, and creating digestible essays, podcasts, and videos.

While recognizing that these internet content creators are summarizing their findings, telling stories by including important details, but omitting the majority of the information in the records that they access, still, they are providing interesting information that would otherwise not be available to most people. Using internet sources, I am going to summarize the events that led to the creation of the 31st Infantry Regiment in 1916, and its first deployment to east Siberia in 1918. Some of the events that I will be describing are briefly mentioned or alluded to in Karl Lowe's *The 31st Infantry Regiment: A History of "America's Foreign Legion" in Peace and War*. However, Karl's focus is on the Regiment's experiences and not upon the events that led inexorably to the creation of the Regiment and its deployment to east Siberia.

¹This account is mainly sourced from the internet with backup from Karl Lowe's *The 31st Infantry Regiment: A history of "Americas" Foreign Legion" in Peace and War*. It is mostly retold in my

Much is written (and can be found on the internet) on the causes of "The Great War" or the "War to End All Wars" between the "Allies" or "Triple Entente" of France, Britain, Romania and Russia on the one side and the "Central Powers" of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire on the other. I'll presume you have the "usual" knowledge of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist teenager (Gavrilo Princip). Serbia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, a relic of the 18th century ruled by monarchs of the Hapsburg dynasty. The empire was multi-ethnic and included not only Austrians and Hungarians, but also Serbians, Bosnians, Croatians, Romanians, Slovaks, Czechs and Ukrainians. The Russian empire, also a relic, included Ukraine and modern-day Poland. Not all of the ethnic minorities in Austria-Hungary were happy to be included in the empire. This was evident from the assassination of the Archduke (and heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary) by a Serbian, but was a sentiment shared also by many Czechs, and especially Slovaks, some of whom resided in the Ukrainian territory of the Russian empire.

With the commencement of hostilities in August of 1914, some Czechs and Slovaks residing in Russian Ukraine petitioned Czar Nicolas II to form a military unit in the Russian army, hoping that in the event of Allied victory, they could return to the defeated Austro-Hungarian empire to found a new nation of Czechoslovakia. Beginning as a battalion in the Imperial Russian Army, over the course of the war the unit grew in size to first a regiment and then a brigade, a division and finally to two divisions. By 1918 the unit, which became known as the Czechoslovak Legion, had about 40,000 officers and men. (This number varies, depending upon the source. Karl Lowe cites the number as 70,000).

own words, but at times I have used sentences from the references verbatim, as they were so well said I did not see how to improve upon them.

I mention here that Czechoslovak units were also engaged on other fronts in the war, including in France and on the Italian-Austrian front.

The setting for the war had been constantly in flux from its beginning. In the USA, President Woodrow Wilson (elected in 1912) vowed to keep America out of the war as it began in 1914. The sympathies of Americans were divided as to who were the “good” and “bad” guys. However, as the war in France stalemated into trenches, and became punctuated by ferocious battles with tens of thousands of soldiers dying on both sides with no gains in territory or advantage, Germany which early in the war had declared a policy of “unrestricted submarine warfare”, meaning that neutral, as well as allied, ships sailing to and from British and French ports were subject to attack without warning by German submarines. The sinking of the passenger liner Lusitania in 1915 with loss of 128 American lives among the 2000 who perished, shifted most public opinion to consider the Germans the “bad” guys. The USA demanded the cessation of unrestricted submarine warfare, which the Germans did.

However, it was resumed on February 1, 1917. In addition, the “Zimmerman Telegram”, an encoded secret proposal from Germany to Mexico promising aid to Mexico in reclaiming Texas and the southwestern states if it went to war with the United States proved to be a casus belli for the Wilson Administration who asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917; Congress responded by declaring war on Germany on April 6.

Having been observing events in Europe since August of 1914, Americans in government and the military had been fidgeting over the country’s lack of military prowess should it be needed. This resulted in the National Defense Act of 1916, passed in May and signed by Wilson on June 3. This set in motion the creation of the 31st Infantry Regiment, which would be formed on August 13, 1916, a mere two and a half months later. It would be interesting to know what happened in the War Department during

this time; however, if any records are extant, they are not readily available on-line. (Congress did not authorize conscription till May 17, 1917; Wilson signed the bill into law the next day. The first American units will arrive in France on June 25, 1917. Americans will not see significant combat with Germans till late November or early December 1917.)

Of course, momentous events continued to happen in Europe. While the Western front, although a meat-grinder, was stagnant and stalemated, in the east the war was one of maneuver and not static defenses. The forces of the Russian empire were arrayed against those of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Russia was a country in transition from a feudal, agrarian, monarchy with tyrannical tendencies toward a more modern western-style urbanized, industrial economy. However, the transition was too slow for much of the population, and a revolution happened in 1905, after which Czar Nicolas II liberalized some government institutions in return for his remaining as the final authority.

In 1914 following the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian presumptive heir to the throne in Serbia and the subsequent mobilization of the Austro-Hungarian army against Serbia, the czar mobilized the Russian army against Austria-Hungary, and through a network of international alliances, the countries of Europe found themselves committed to a war. Of course, in the summer of 1914 they all thought it would be over “by Christmas”.

Although not in trench-warfare style of the Western Front in France, the war in the east was still a no-less bloody war of attrition. The German army was best-led and best-equipped; the Austro-Hungarians suffered from poor leadership; and the Russians had only the advantage of numbers. This did allow them some success on the battlefield. However, there were also disasters. In September 1915 Czar Nicolas II took command of his armies in the field. This was a strategic blunder for him as it both separated him from events and attitudes developing in his

capital of St. Petersburg, and also exposed him to direct responsibility for failures on the battlefield. In addition, the Czarina was managing the civil affairs of the capital and country in a manner that was alienating support for the monarchy.

In February 1917 the population of St. Petersburg revolted; Czar Nicolas abdicated his throne, and the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky assumed authority in the country. Kerensky attempted to continue Russia's participation in the war.

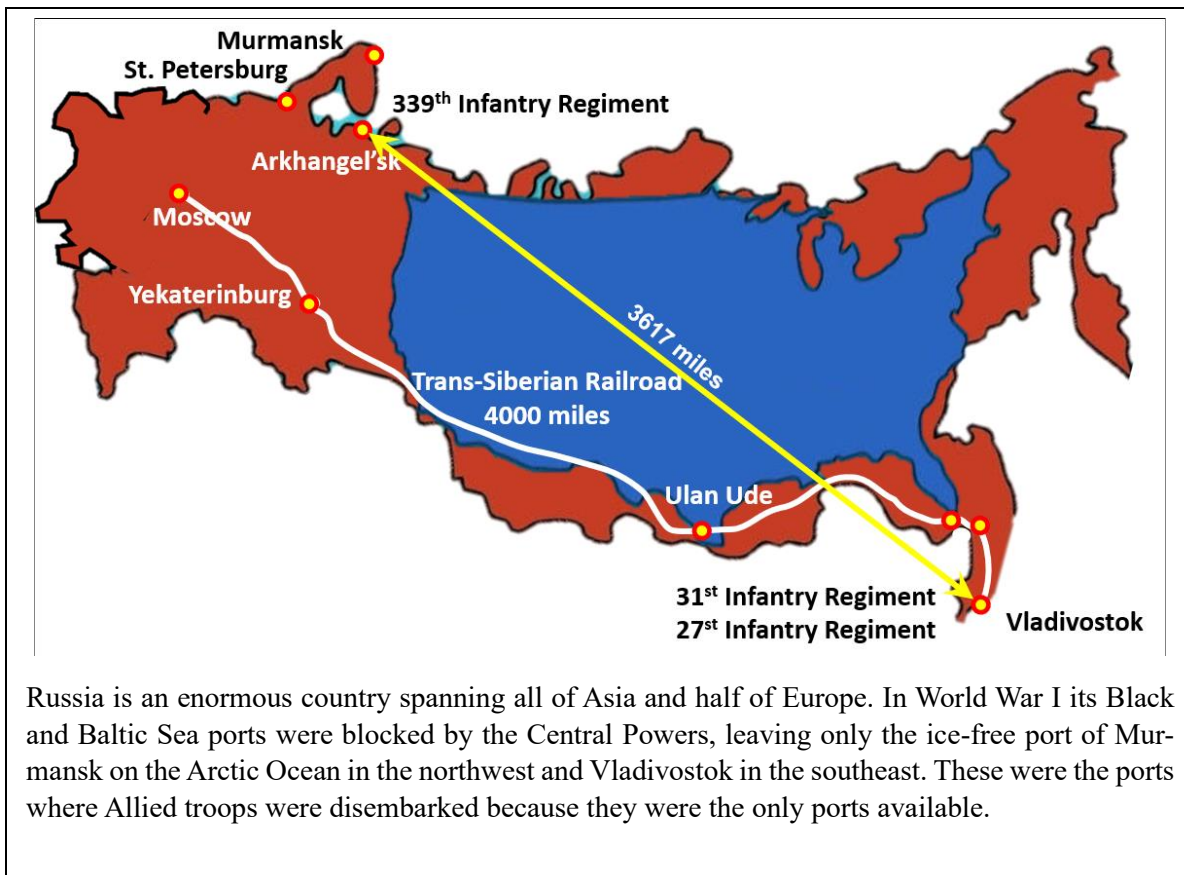
The Germans were, of course, aware of events in the Russian capital. In a move to destabilize the situation in St. Petersburg, the Germans allowed the repatriation of 32 exiled Russian communists stranded in Switzerland by clandestinely arranging for transport by rail from Zurich to the Baltic seaport of Sassnitz, thence to Sweden, Finland, and St. Petersburg. Chief among these was the future founder of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin. Part of Lenin's agenda was to take over the revolution and take Russia out of the war,

both of which he did. He took over the provisional government in his October Revolution of 1917, and took Russia out of WW I with the treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918.

The final German offensive in the east was Operation Faustschlag (first strike) launched on February 18, 1917. The purpose was to prevent the evacuation of the Czechoslovak Legion. From March 5 to 13 the Czechoslovak legionaries resisted this attempt to prevent their evacuation, prevailing in the Battle of Bakhmach.

France and Britain viewed this event with foreboding, as it seemed pretty clear that Germany would be shifting its troops from the eastern front to the west, putting new pressure on the Allied lines.

There was already a Czechoslovak Legion unit fighting in France on the Western Front. Apparently, allied planners had realized that if they could be joined by the 40,000-to-70,000

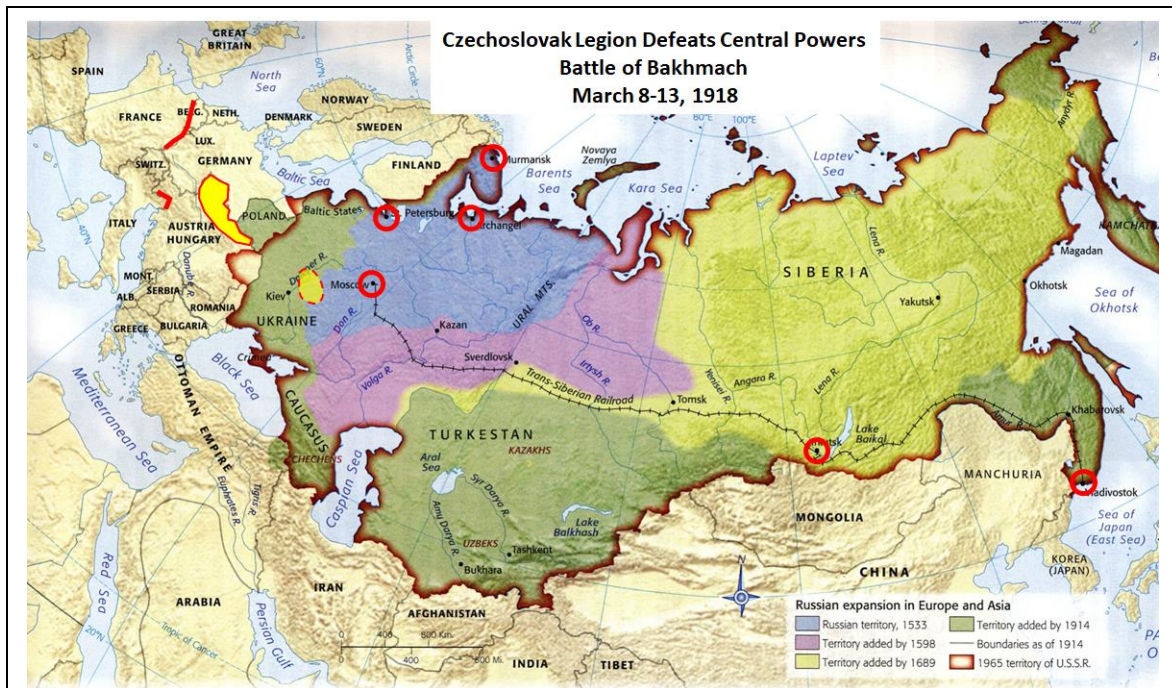


Russia is an enormous country spanning all of Asia and half of Europe. In World War I its Black and Baltic Sea ports were blocked by the Central Powers, leaving only the ice-free port of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean in the northwest and Vladivostok in the southeast. These were the ports where Allied troops were disembarked because they were the only ports available.

(depending upon the source) Czech-Slovak Legion the German reinforcements could be offset.

As you can well imagine communications more than 100 years ago significantly lagged the unfolding of events. Western planning for the evacuation of the Czechoslovak Legion contained contingencies. The Black Sea was nearby, but access to it was controlled by the Ottoman empire. Russia had only three other ports: Murmansk and Archangel on the northwest coast on the Arctic Ocean, and Vladivostok on the east Siberian coast facing the Sea of Japan. Murmansk and Vladivostok are ice-free year-round. The White Sea port of Archangel freezes in winter. Evacuation would have to be by one or the other of these ports. Both are quite remote from the Czechoslovak Legion which was located after the Battle of Bakhmach in Ukraine.

Following the February Revolution, in order to assist the provisional government in continuing the fight against Germany and Austria-Hungary the Allies had been shipping war materials to Russia through Murmansk and Vladivostok, and these materials were warehoused on and near the docks in those ports. According to Karl Lowe, warehouses in Vladivostok contained 725,000 tons of material valued at \$750,000,000. The concern of the Allies was that these supplies (including you must surmise a lot of weapons and ammunition) intended for Kerensky's western-friendly provisional government not fall into the hands of the communists whose publicly avowed ultimate aim was "world revolution" of the "oppressed" against their "oppressors". (In those days the oppressed were the 'proletariat' or 'workers of the world' and oppressors were 'capitalists' or bourgeoisie; that turned out to have



Russia is a huge place. The maps shows as red lines the location of trenches in France and Italy. Circled in red are the cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Archangel, Murmansk, Irkutsk, and Vladivostok. The Location of Czechoslovakia is shown to the south of Germany in Austria-Hungry. The location of the Czechoslovak Legion's victory in the Battle of Bakhmach, early March 1917, is shown circled by a red-dashed line in Ukraine. To evacuate to the Western front there were two possible routes. To the north lie Archangel and Murmansk; to the east lies Vladivostok. The eastern evacuation route was the one chosen. The war ended before the Legionnaires could make it to France.

not worked well, with communism having failed wherever it has been tried, so far, and the role of “oppressor” having been shifted to “white” Europeans and “oppressed” to everyone else.)

So when the missions of the American troops is stated as “guard the docks and warehouses” and “western interests”, that is what is being referred to.

So, the Legionnaires were blocked to the south by the Ottoman empire, to the east by enemy powers, leaving as the only possible evacuation routes as north to Murmansk or Archangel, or east to Vladivostok.

I don't have any sources for the following guesses, other than looking at maps. You can look at the maps too, and make your own guesses.

The route north lay between St. Petersburg and Moscow, the former and new capitals of the communists Reds. Here could be found (I would imagine) the main military strength of the communists. Further, although it was March, spring comes late in the far north, so winter conditions would have prevailed until, maybe, June.

At any rate, for whatever reason, the evacuation route would be across the whole expanse of Asia; that's the bad news. The good news was that there was the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Ukraine, hugging the southern border of Russia, all the way to Vladivostok.

So, that's what happened. It is said that when the Americans arrived in Vladivostok to secure the docks and the city for the arrival of the Legionnaires, the Czechs and Slovaks greeted them as they disembarked from the ships.

The American Expeditionary Force, North Russia, including the 339th Infantry Regiment (a national guard unit from Michigan) arrived in Archangel in September 4 of 1918. Its two mission objectives were to secure material stored in warehouses against falling into German hands (the Germans had units across the border in Finland), and to “rescue” the Czechoslovak Legion.

It turns out the Legion could take care of itself and was not in need of “rescue”. The Germans did not raid the stores, but it was equally an objective to keep the supplies out of Bolshevik hands, as the Allied powers preferred a non-communist successor to the czar. The Great War would conclude November 11, just two months later. However, the unit would not be withdrawn till early June, 1919.

The American Expeditionary Force, Siberia, including the 31st Infantry Regiment, arrived in Vladivostok beginning August 15, 1918 and remained until April 1, 1920. The last of the Legionnaires left Vladivostok in September, 1920, almost two years following the conclusion of that “War to End All Wars”. Those who successfully repatriated themselves to their newly-formed republic, in bitter irony would be present for its betrayal by Nevil Chamberlain and its consumption by Hitler's Reich, and subsequent enslavement by the Soviet Union until 1991.

I hope that this brief recounting of events that would fill volumes if explained in their entirety supplies some of the *raison de guerre* of why the Polar Bears came into existence, and their first mission.

There is a lot of confusion of the two expeditionary forces in the “popular” literature and internet videos. For the record, northwestern Russia with Murmansk and Archangel is *not* Siberia. It is confusing as both the 339th Infantry Regiment (the Polar Bear) and the 31st Infantry Regiment (the Polar Bears) have chosen similar mascots and names for their regiments. And, their mission objectives were (arguably, perhaps) basically the same. It is not only civilians that fail to make the necessary distinction.

The forces of evil never rest. The only defense is for free people to remain vigilant, resolute, and prepared to do battle so that they may never have to.

Pro Patria

dk

