

The Polar Bear Expedition: The U.S. Intervention in Northern Russia, 1918–1919

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Outside the wooden walls of the outpost in northern Russia, the wind picked up again, causing the frozen snowflakes to rattle against the thick, smoke-colored glass of the window panes. The young American corporal blinked and then looked out again. Something was moving out there in the tree line beyond the railroad tracks. Was it the “Reds” scouting the Allied positions, or was it the equally frightening pack of wolves that roamed the forest near this lonely guard post? With luck, it was neither but merely a Canadian patrol coming to make contact and perhaps get warm before heading back to their own outpost.

Not taking any chances, the corporal yelled across the room to his sergeant and then picked up his Mosin-Nagant rifle to be ready in case the visitors were hostile. As he did so, he had the fleeting thought that this sure was one heck of a way for a draftee from Detroit to spend Christmas of 1918.

As described in the article, “Logistics in Reverse: The U.S. Intervention in Siberia, 1918–1920” in the January–February 2012 issue of *Army Sustainment*, the U.S. Army was present in Russia at the end of World War I

for several reasons. One was that the massive amounts of military supplies and equipment stockpiled at the Siberian port of Vladivostok and the northern Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel had to be recovered for retrograde to their countries of origin or distribution to the anti-Bolshevik “White Russian” forces fighting the Bolshevik “Red” army in the Russian Civil War.

These supplies, including 110,000 rifles in the northern Russian warehouses alone, had been provided to the Czar’s forces by France, Great Britain, and the United States in a vain attempt to keep them fighting against the Germans. But that had not worked. The Russian leaders had been incapable of distributing the war materiel to their forces, and most of what they received still sat in the warehouses where it had been initially offloaded from Allied ships. Some wishful politicians subsequently hoped that a small Allied military force could stabilize the area long enough for the Russians to create a democratic government and field a viable army.

Four thousand miles east of Archangel, in the vast expanses of Siberia, two other reasons led to American involvement: supporting the movement of the Czech Legion in its attempt to escape from Russia and halting



En route to Archangel, a group of 339th Infantry Regiment doughboys pose with their newly issued M1891 Mosin-Nagant rifles. Most would have preferred to keep their originally issued British Enfields, but the large supply of Nagant ammunition already in theater drove the rearming decision. (Photo courtesy of Charles G. Thomas)

The only resource in great abundance in northern Russia was lumber, and it was used as the basic material for defensive positions and blockhouses. Even the sawdust was useful, serving as insulation between interior and exterior walls. In an indication of the scarcity of vehicles, a number of American, French, and British soldiers catch a ride on one of the trucks assigned to the American lumberyard in Archangel.



further encroachment of Imperial Japanese forces into the region.

Why Were Murmansk and Archangel Important?

Archangel and Murmansk were strategically important to the White Russians and their supporters for several reasons. With the tumultuous events of the revolution in Russia, many of the ambassadors of the Allied nations and their military liaison staffs had retreated north from Moscow and settled in the northern towns controlled by White Russian forces. These included Archangel and Murmansk, which were located in the thinly populated region bordering Finland and the Arctic Ocean. Both were port towns and therefore valuable entryways into northern Russia. With the Red forces controlling the large central part of the country, the anti-Bolshevik forces were primarily arrayed on the borders, in Siberia, Crimea, and northern Russia.

That Murmansk remained ice-free year round, thanks to the flow of relatively warmer North Atlantic waters, made it an invaluable site for naval activity. The availability of such an ice-free port during the frigid Russian winter obviously made Murmansk a prized possession worthy of defending. During the early years of World War I, the ports of Archangel and Murmansk had remained out of reach of the invading German forces, which permitted supplies to enter Russia from the international community and the Czar's allies.

The two towns were also critically important because of their close proximity to the railway lines and the navigable rivers in the region. Control of these towns gave the White Russian forces and the Allied expeditionary forces direct access to waterways that were essential for their campaigns in this isolated region close to the Arctic Circle. The combination of rail and river access allowed the Allies to move supplies, communicate with the rest of Russia, and deploy their troops where they desired throughout the countryside.

The American Northern Russia Expedition

In response to a request similar to that from the Allies

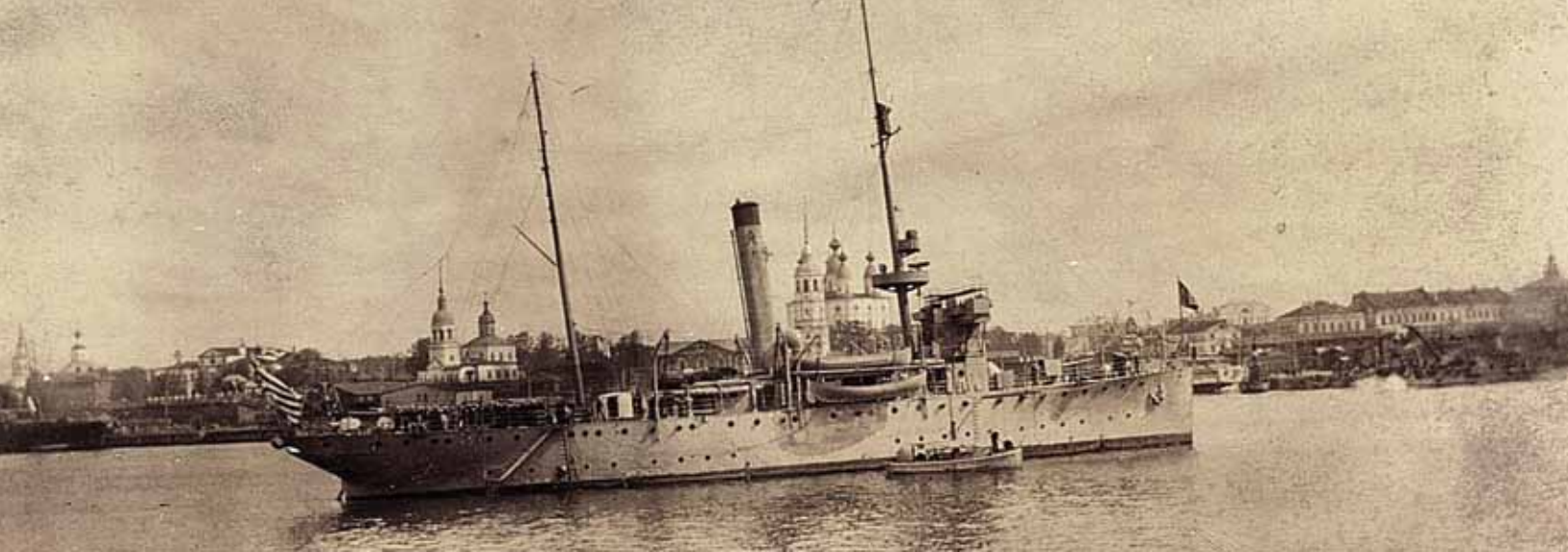
to send U.S. Army troops to Siberia, the U.S. Government ordered the Army to deploy a force, which soon became known as the Northern Russia Expedition, to Archangel Province in Russia. Unlike the U.S. Regular Army units that deployed to Siberia, the Soldiers sent to northern Russia in August 1918 were mainly draftees from the Midwest. The force consisted of the 339th Infantry Regiment (also known as "Detroit's Own"), a battalion of the 310th Engineer Regiment, the 337th Ambulance Company, and the 337th Field Hospital. Including later reinforcements, fewer than 6,000 Americans were deployed.

The U.S. units, originally assigned to the 85th Division, had been destined for frontline duty in France when the orders arrived diverting them to Russia. Along with the new destination, the doughboys of the expeditionary force were directed to turn in their recently issued British Enfield rifles and were armed instead with Russian made Mosin-Nagant rifles. Though an unpopular exchange, this order made sense logistically since significant stockpiles of Nagant ammunition were already awaiting the force in warehouses at the Russian ports.

The convoy that delivered the 339th Infantry Regiment from England to Russia also carried two other significant passengers: a small Italian army contingent and influenza. Unfortunately for the Italian and American Soldiers, influenza proved to be a terrible foe. Over 100 Soldiers died from its effects either en route or almost immediately after arriving in Russia.

Awaiting the arrival of the American force, and spread thinly throughout northern Russia, were the British, Canadian, and French expeditionary detachments and their sometimes reluctant allies, the White Russians.

The mission to protect and redistribute the stockpiles of military equipment in Archangel was nearly a failure before the 339th Infantry Regiment even set foot in Russia. Pro-Bolshevik forces had seized the port and were loading supplies onto railcars when a small force of British and French soldiers, accompanied by 50 American Sailors from the USS *Olympia*, managed to retake the town. This mixed force was able to stop the passage of some of the trains and recover some supplies; however, a large



The gunboat USS Sacramento arrives in Archangel to assist in withdrawing the American forces from northern Russia in June 1919. The Sacramento served the Navy for many years and is credited with shooting down a Japanese aircraft during the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941.

amount had already been “liberated” by the Bolsheviks.

With more enthusiasm than common sense, the Allied force then set out after the fleeing Reds and soon became trapped and required rescue from the just-landed, and flu-ridden, 339th Infantry Regiment. The newly arrived Americans, under British command, hurriedly scrambled a battalion of Soldiers onto a Russian train and sent them south to rescue their Allied comrades. Although successful in their rescue mission, the Americans were now spread across the countryside in small detached units. Just like their fellow Soldiers in Siberia, the doughboys soon found themselves fighting from blockhouses and guarding isolated railheads and small villages.

Sustainment Operations and Challenges

Supporting the American forces was the 339th Infantry Regiment’s regimental supply company under the command of Captain Chauncey Wade. Complicating Wade’s mission was the fact that the distances between some of his “customer” units were equal to the distance from New York City to St. Louis. His Soldiers were forced to rely on riverboats, railroads, horse-drawn wagons, and even reindeer-drawn sleds to deliver the required supplies to the scattered outposts.

Another harsh reality for the Americans was that the supply pipeline ran back to Britain, and most of the U.S. Soldiers did not care for British rations or their version of military shoes. With the harsh winter setting in almost immediately after their arrival in Russia, most Soldiers, rather than wearing the uncomfortable British shoes, replaced their own worn-out footwear by trading with the local inhabitants or removing the boots from dead Bolsheviks. Similarly, medical supplies proved almost impossible to obtain, and the medical service personnel assigned to the 339th Infantry Regiment were constantly foraging for medicines to treat the sick and wounded.

Adding to the complexity of the logistics mission was

the tendency of the local inhabitants to switch sides on a regular basis, which required the Americans to diligently guard every barracks, hospital, and support facility. In a short while, an entire battalion was gainfully employed guarding the streets of Archangel. Ironically, several of the Soldiers who had previously worked in Detroit as train engineers and conductors now found themselves performing similar duties on Archangel’s streetcars as American logisticians and engineers took over responsibility for the city’s powerplant and other infrastructure.

Combat Operations

In contrast to the U.S. forces in Siberia, whose main function was the protection of the logistics stockpiles and maintenance of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the majority of U.S. Soldiers in northern Russia quickly became involved in combat operations. In time, it became obvious that those Soldiers who were involved in maintaining the infrastructure and security of Archangel got the better deal. Their less fortunate comrades, deployed across hundreds of miles of swampy marshes and thick forests, were engaged in a very active series of campaigns against the Reds.

Unfortunately, by the time the real winter weather arrived, the Americans and their allies were stranded at remote sites that could not easily support each other. The Red forces that had given ground rather than contest each Allied advance now returned with a vengeance and began a series of hit-and-run raids. Countering these raids was complicated by temperatures that at night dropped to 50 degrees below zero, freezing the oil in machineguns. Wounded Soldiers who were not retrieved and brought under cover quickly froze to death.

Adding to the Americans’ discomfort was the fact that most operation orders came from British officers who outranked their U.S. counterparts. It was a common belief among the U.S. Soldiers that Britain had provided a large

staff but few soldiers and, as a result, the Americans were doing the bulk of the fighting and the work. John Cudahy, a lieutenant in the 339th Infantry Regiment (and later U.S. Ambassador to Poland, Ireland, Belgium, and Luxembourg) accused the British officers of “muddling, blundering and fuddling,” and he found them generally to have a “lack of understanding, the brutal arrogance and cold conceit.”

Other American officers were equally upset by the disparity in rations provided to wounded American enlisted men at British-operated hospitals in comparison to the rations provided to British officers. In time, with the help of the American Red Cross, U.S. medical personnel were able to establish their own facilities. For a while thereafter, many U.S. Soldiers, discharged as “fit for duty” from the British hospital, were immediately reexamined by American medical personnel and placed in their hospital for proper treatment and feeding.

Relations between the two Allied forces did not improve when an American medical officer was officially reprimanded for refusing to order his enlisted Soldiers to dig a latrine for British officers. It was not until British Major General William Edmund Ironside arrived to take command of all of the Allied forces in northern Russia that the Americans developed any confidence that they were being properly led.

Interestingly enough, American relations with their French and Canadian allies remained strong throughout the deployment. French expertise with machineguns and Canadian proficiency with artillery turned the tide in several battles and saved a number of the doughboy detachments from being overrun by Red forces.

It was Canadian artillerymen and their extremely close-range fire support that prevented the annihilation of a number of U.S. Soldiers at the battle of Toulgas. After Canadian fire stopped a large Red force from encircling the American position, a desperate bayonet charge led by Lieutenant Cudahy inflicted heavy losses on the Bolsheviks and forced them to retreat. The Americans were then obliged to burn the village of North Toulgas to the ground to prevent its use for further infiltration in that area. Nonetheless, a number of senior “Bolo” (as the Bolsheviks were nicknamed by the Americans) leaders were killed in the fight at Toulgas, and the area remained peaceful for a while.

Deteriorating Conditions

Unfortunately, though successful in most of the battles and skirmishes against the Reds, the Allied forces were fighting against time and an ever-improving Red Army. When the armistice ending World War I was signed in France on 11 November 1918 (coincidentally, the same day as the battle of Toulgas), the Americans in northern Russia began to ask when their war would end. Red forces also took advantage of this event to increase their propaganda campaign by circulating leaflets that asked

the question, “If the war is over, why are you still here?”

The Americans were also increasingly disheartened by the local inhabitants’ lack of interest or enthusiasm in building their own army to fight the Reds. Though some White Russian units fought well, for the most part they required the leadership and presence of Allied soldiers to ensure that they would stay in the fight.

Similarly, dealing with the civilian population was difficult and confusing. One officer wrote that the Bolos dressed like every other Russian peasant: “No one could distinguish them from a distance, and every peasant could be Bolshevik.” In words that would also echo in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, he further stated that the enemy “had an uncanny knowledge of our strength and the state of our defenses . . . despite the closest vigilance there was working unceasingly a system of enemy espionage with which we could never hope to cope.”

Under these conditions, every American supply convoy venturing out to the remote outposts had to be prepared to fight off ambushes en route to its destination. It was also becoming quickly apparent that, regardless of the politics of the armistice and governmental decisions, the Allied forces were subject to a higher, more powerful authority: the Russian winter.

Surviving the Winter and the Bolsheviks

The arrival of Major General William Edmund Ironside in late November 1918 soon marked a change in philosophy. Under his command, the Allies adopted a more defensive posture and attempted to survive until spring brought better weather. Operating and defending in an area the size of Texas and Oklahoma combined, the Allies reinforced their fortifications and prepared to hunker down in the bitter cold.

It became painfully obvious just how poorly informed the U.S. Army headquarters in Paris was about the events in Russia when, in response to a telegraphed report about the status of U.S. forces in Pinega sent by 339th Infantry Regiment headquarters in Archangel, it received a telegram back asking, “Just where is the Pinega front?” What had started as an expedition to rescue military supplies and stabilize a portion of Russia had changed focus to staying alive through the winter.

Sensing the shift in Allied tactics, the Bolsheviks began a winter campaign aimed at dislodging the foreigners from their country. Using their knowledge of the terrain and their ability to move swiftly through the countryside on skis and sleds, the Bolshevik forces infiltrated the region. In January 1919, after a pitched battle, they managed to drive the Allies from a stronghold at Shenkursk and force them to retreat toward Archangel. By April 1919, when a new U.S. commander arrived in Archangel with orders to evacuate the American force as soon as practicable, the Allies had been forced to evacuate many of their distant outposts.

Accompanying the new commander were the only unit-

sized reinforcements the Americans would receive: two Army Transportation Corps railroad companies, the 167th and 168th. By this time, however, it was obvious to the U.S. Government and to the American public that it was time to bring the 339th Infantry Regiment home. While preparing for their withdrawal from Russia, the Americans awarded themselves the nickname of the “Polar Bears” as a testament to surviving the arctic winter.

Going Home

In June 1919, the cruiser USS *Des Moines* escorted a convoy of supply ships to Archangel to extract the Americans. The only U.S. forces remaining behind after the Polar Bears’ departure were the two railroad companies and a graves registration detachment attempting to recover the bodies of the Soldiers who had died in Russia. A short while later, even those logistics units departed, leaving behind more than 120 bodies still unaccounted for. (Efforts by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other organizations would later succeed in recovering the remains of nearly a hundred of those Soldiers in the 1920s and 1930s.)

The British forces stayed a while longer, until the fall of 1919, when they too had had enough and departed, leaving the White Russians to defend Archangel by themselves. In February 1920, the world received news, via telegram from Moscow, that the city had fallen to Red forces and that “the troops remaining in the town passed over to the [Bolshevik] side.” The sudden shift in loyalties would not have surprised any of the Polar Bears.

On the frozen White Sea, the USS Des Moines cuts through 15 feet of ice en route to Archangel in May 1919.



Lessons Learned

We can take away several lessons from the U.S. Army experience in northern Russia.

Trust your people on the scene. When the British requested U.S. support for the Northern Russia expedition, they stated, “The dispatch of additional French or British reinforcements is impossible and it is therefore essential that America should help by sending a brigade . . .” And then they added, “It is not necessary that the troops sent should be completely trained, as we anticipate that military operations in this region will only be of irregular character.”

The U.S. consul in Archangel at the time, Felix Cole, strongly opposed American participation. Cole replied in June 1918, with some foresight, “Intervention will begin on a small scale but . . . will grow in scope and in its demands for ships, men, money and materiel. . . . It means establishing and maintaining telegraph, telephone, wireless, railroad, river, White Sea water, sledge, automobile and horse communication with repair shops, hospitals, food warehouses, munitions trains, etc.” He also predicted that the Russians would not prove to be effective allies against the Reds: “They work for themselves neither willingly nor effectively. Still less so will they work for others.”

The U.S. Government ignored Cole’s warnings and deployed the 339th Infantry Regiment to Russia anyway. As a result, out of a force of 5,500 Soldiers, the Polar Bears suffered 244 deaths from action or accidents, 305 wounded, over 100 dead from influenza, and one suicide.

Rank is important. When operating in a coalition, the leaders of an expeditionary force must have rank commensurate with their responsibility. If this is not possible, ensure that they understand that they maintain the ultimate authority in how U.S. forces are employed. In far too many cases in northern Russia, the senior American officer on the scene was only a captain or a lieutenant and therefore was outranked by an attached British or French officer. Though they commanded fighting forces, the American junior officers were obligated to take orders from senior foreign officers who were completely unfamiliar with U.S. goals, tactics, and capabilities.

Because of some of the complications arising from this problem, General John J. Pershing, the overall U.S. commander in Europe, would later insist on keeping a major general, Henry T. Allen, as the commander of the U.S. forces during the occupation

of Germany. Though the size of that command was more suited for a lower-ranking officer, Pershing insisted that the commander be of the higher rank so he could deal on an equal footing with the other Allied occupation commanders from Great Britain, France, and Belgium.

Understand the weather, terrain, and distances, and send a large-enough force for those conditions. This is pretty much the same lesson learned by the U.S. forces in Siberia. Even today, with advanced communications and transportation technology, no commander would attempt to defend and police an area the size of Texas and Oklahoma with 5,500 Soldiers. By comparison, in November 1918, to occupy the American zone in Germany, which was a much smaller area than northern Russia, the U.S. Army deployed 250,000 Soldiers and maintained another 50,000 in nearby Luxembourg.

Adding to the problem was the fact that much of the area was impassable swamp or nearly impenetrable forest, which increased reliance on rail and riverine transportation.

The U.S. Soldiers sent into this region soon found their cold-weather gear, suitable for the trenches in France, to be inadequate for what was waiting for them in the Russian winter. They also had little knowledge of the type of issues this weather would bring them during the defense of their bases and supplies.

Coalition operations are hard, and coalition logistics are even harder. Many of the same problems that confronted coalition operations in Siberia were also present in northern Russia, but they were magnified by the isolation and weather constraints. As difficult as it was for U.S. forces to receive their supplies in Siberia, it was even harder in northern Russia. Making matters worse, most of the supplies they did receive came from British sources and, particularly in the case of rations and clothing, were not well received by the American Soldiers. Other than lumber for building facilities and fortifications, very few resources were available in the Archangel area.

When the White Sea froze around Archangel, the only way to get supplies to the Allied forces there and to the remote outposts in the surrounding region was by the rail line from the port of Murmansk. Attempts to build up the White Russian forces also proved frustrating to the Americans when they recognized several of the Bolsheviks they had captured only weeks before when they appeared, apparently rehabilitated, as part of the British-trained White forces.

What can be concluded about the American efforts to protect and recover the mountains of military supplies in Russia during 1918 to 1920? It was a tough mission. That can be said about many military operations, but certainly the two American expeditions into Russia after World War I were unique in their concept, execution, and difficulty. While the rest of the world celebrated the end

of the bloodiest war in history to that time, two relatively small groups of American Soldiers were fighting for their lives at opposite ends of a country that was undergoing a violent revolution.

For their part, the Soldiers were only partially successful in their Siberian and northern Russian missions. Most of the supplies they were sent to preserve and protect were lost to the Reds or were misused by the Whites. However, the Czech Legion was aided in its successful withdrawal from Siberia and transported to its new homeland. Obviously, such small forces as the Americans provided could not stabilize revolutionary Russia in time to prevent the ultimate victory of the Bolsheviks, especially when it became apparent that the White forces were ineffective and suffering from poor leadership.

On the other hand, the U.S. Soldiers did prove themselves capable of operating and sustaining combat forces in an extremely austere and harsh environment. In that environment, where the greatest measure of success often was survival, the American Soldiers served bravely and remained loyal to their country and to their Allies. That they did so in spite of overwhelming odds and an ever-increasing sense of isolation is evidence of their courage and perseverance.

When the infantrymen and logisticians of the two expeditions to Russia finally returned to the United States, they found that few people knew or cared about their sacrifices. Ninety years later, fewer people are aware that U.S. forces had even been there. Nonetheless, in the vast wilderness of Siberia and hidden in the deep forests near Archangel, the remains of some of their comrades are still buried. As one American Army veteran of northern Russia wrote in 1920, "Why if the job had been worth doing at all had it not been worth while for our country to do it wholeheartedly with adequate force and with determination to see it through to the desired end . . . Why had we come at all?" It would not be the last time American service members would ask that question in the 20th century.

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