

AFD Ep 390 Links and Notes - US Intervention in the Russian Civil War [Bill/Rachel/Kelley] - Recording July 25 2021

[Bill] Intro/Overview: We've talked on many episodes about the relationship between the US government and leftists in the United States during and shortly after World War I, as well as the early US-Soviet relations, but we haven't previously talked about the US military's most direct involvement on the subject: the doomed boots-on-the-ground intervention in the Russian Civil War. That's the subject of this week's episode. Let's start with the background chronology leading up to that intervention. In the beginning of 1917, nearly three years into World War I and just weeks ahead of the official US entry into the war, Russia began to experience a revolution. The liberal reformers tried to keep the war effort going, but this proved so untenable for a variety of reasons that the Russian lines began collapsing backward across what is now Eastern Europe, and the communist Bolshevik faction seized power at the end of the year with the promise of an immediate end to the Russian war effort. By this point, the United States had entered the war on the Western Front, bolstering unsteady French allies, but they were too late to prevent the complete withdrawal of Russia from the World War in December 1917 by separate armistice with the Central Powers. Russia devolved into a full-scale Civil War between various pro-Bolshevik, anti-Bolshevik, and unaligned eccentric factions or cliques. Germany proceeded to occupy large sections of the former Russian Empire, but mostly began redeploying its Eastern forces into the Western front. In March 1918, the German Empire threw almost everything it had at the Allies in France and Belgium during the so-called German Spring Offensive or Ludendorff offensive, hoping one big lurch forward could end the war in a draw before the United States could fully spin up its gigantic war machine potential. By July 1918, this offensive had theoretically gained a bunch of ground but primarily had simply stalled out at great cost and left Germany essentially too weak to hold off the Americans and the British in the coming counter-offensive that would end the war in German defeat by November 1918. With the German push stopped in July 1918, some of the Allies (without much American enthusiasm) were trying to figure out if they could get the communists out of power in Russia and restore a pro-Western military command willing to re-enter the war on the Eastern Front for one final pincer on Germany. With extreme reluctance, in the summer of 1918, the Americans found themselves getting dragged into this under-developed plan to interfere in the Russian Civil War and to take part in the other Allied Powers' Great Game activities in the former Russian sphere. The last US troops would depart, having been assigned very little and having achieved very little, by the spring of 1920, less than two years later, and more than three years before the Russian Civil War drew to a close.

The two primary locations of these US military interventions, which would nevertheless unsurprisingly sour relations between the US government and the victorious Bolshevik Russians for some years to come, were in the Russian Far East and subpolar Northwest Russia. Kelley is going to talk about one and Rachel is going to talk about the other.

I will also include in the written notes for this episode at ArsenalForDemocracy.com, but not read today, from the US document on the scope of the intervention. The summary is that in July 1918, shortly before US deployment, President Wilson had the State Department circulate an unofficial document to the other Allied governments defining the scope of the upcoming American military operations in Russia extremely narrowly to focus on securing Allied war materiel and assisting the Czechoslovak Legion and expressing extreme skepticism about the likely prospects, while advising that it would not interfere with other Allies in their own plans except if it violated Russian sovereignty more broadly. There were vague allusions to helping to organize a self-determined Russian state, but this was the least emphasized.

[Kelley] Siberia and the Russian Far East

There are three big things to focus on with the American military intervention in the Russian Far East during and after World War I: the Japanese, the Czechoslovaks, and the railroad. The (eventually) nearly 8,000 American troops were given a confusing mandate to keep one in line, rescue the other, and salvage as much as possible of the third. It was also vaguely implied that the Americans might actively help the right-wing White Russians in the Far East, but that didn't end up happening.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Force,_Siberia

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-doughboys-who-died-fighting-russian-civil-war-180971470/>

(Aug 1918-April 1920 - Note: after Wilson's October 1919 stroke)

- Was commanded by General William S Graves and involved 7,950 men in total.
- Graves believed that the purpose of his mission was to protect American-supplied property and help the Czechoslovak Legion evacuate. He did not want to directly believe it was their role to directly engage in fighting against the Bolsheviks.
- Graves actually allied for restraint in the scope of the mission clashed with heads of British, French, and Japanese forces who wanted the US to take a more active role in the military intervention in Siberia.
- Historians still disagree about what the exact intentions of this intervention was, but all agree that it was a failure.
- Of course, living in Siberia was absolutely miserable and dangerous. There were shortages of food, supplies, fuel. Horses used to temperate climates were not able to function. 189 soldiers died from all causes during the mission.
- *By every measure, President Wilson's interventions in Russia had failed. The Eastern Front had not been reestablished, the war supplies stockpiled in Russian ports had not been saved, and no popular, progressive, non-Communist government had been established. The Japanese continued to meddle in Siberian affairs for another two years in a futile effort to carve out a puppet state. Even the successful extrication of the Czech Legion had little to do with Graves' small expedition. In the words of Chief of Staff Peyton C. March, the expeditions in Russia had been little more than "a military crime".*

The Japan Factor:

- In August 1918, the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia began arriving in the Pacific Russian port of Vladivostok for operations alongside primarily the Allied Japanese forces – less out of concern for the struggles of the right-wing anti-Communist Russian forces in the area, and more out of concern that Japan might try to seize on the chaos to make a substantial land grab against its former regional rival, less than a decade and a half after the shocking Japanese military victory over Russia for which US President Teddy Roosevelt had ended up negotiating the peace treaty in 1905 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Portsmouth) .
- The Japanese had been asked in 1917 by the French to intervene in Russia, but had declined. In 1918, Wilson asked the Japanese to send 7,000 troops as part of an international coalition. Japan declined to participate in the international coalition, but instead sent 12,000 troops under its own command. This force eventually grew to 70,000 Japanese troops, much larger than anything else the Allies were deploying. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberian_intervention)
- The reasons for Japanese involvement in the region were also fairly poorly defined and was both militarily and politically a failure for Japan, whose Army was dragged for misrepresenting the size of the force and the amount of money spent on the effort. The Japanese military was in the region for longer than their counterparts, and did not

withdraw until 1922. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberian_intervention
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_intervention_in_Siberia)

The Czechoslovaks:

- The Czechoslovak Legion was a unique feature of WWI. They were a group of Czech and Slovak armed forces that sided with the Allied Powers during WWI in hopes of winning support for independence of Bohemia and Moravia from the Austrian Empire. They grew into a force of 100,000 and included many prisoners of war or war deserters from the Austro-Hungarian Army.
- In 1917 the CS Legion began planning their departure from Russia to France to continue to fight the Central Powers and began to travel to the Pacific Port of Vladivostok. However, the German military soon launched Operation Faustschlag, and were essentially “stuck”. Their only exit was to go through the Pacific port. While it was not their original intention to fight the Bolsheviks they needed to in order to survive.
- *After leaving Ukraine and entering [Soviet Russia](#), representatives of the Czechoslovak National Council continued to negotiate with Bolshevik authorities in Moscow and [Penza](#) to iron out the details of the corps' evacuation. On 25 March, the two sides signed the Penza Agreement, in which the legionaries were to surrender most of their weapons in exchange for unmolested passage to Vladivostok. Tensions continued to mount, however, as each side distrusted the other. The Bolsheviks, despite Masaryk's order for the legionaries to remain neutral in Russia's affairs, suspected that the Czechoslovaks might join their counterrevolutionary enemies in the borderlands. Meanwhile, the legionaries were wary of [Czechoslovak Communists](#) who were trying to subvert the corps. They also suspected that the Bolsheviks were being pressured by the Central Powers to stall their movement towards Vladivostok.^[13]*
- *By May 1918, the Czechoslovak Legion was strung out along the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#) from Penza to Vladivostok. Their evacuation was proving much slower than expected due to dilapidated railway conditions, a shortage of locomotives and the recurring need to negotiate with local soviets along the route. On 14 May, a dispute at the [Chelyabinsk](#) station between legionaries heading east and [Magyar](#) POWs heading west to be repatriated caused the People's Commissar for War, [Leon Trotsky](#), to order the complete disarmament and arrest of the legionaries. At an army congress that convened in Chelyabinsk a few days later, the Czechoslovaks – against the wishes of the National Council – refused to disarm and began issuing ultimatums for their passage to Vladivostok.^[14] This incident sparked the [Revolt of the Legions](#).*
- *Fighting between the Czechoslovak Legion and the Bolsheviks erupted at several points along the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#) in the last days of May 1918. By June, the two sides were fighting along the railway route from Penza to [Krasnoyarsk](#). By the end of the month, legionaries under General [Mikhail Diterikhs](#) had taken control of Vladivostok, overthrowing the local Bolshevik administration. On July 6, the Legion declared the city to be an Allied protectorate,^[15] and legionnaires began returning [back] across the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#) to support their comrades fighting to their west. Generally, the Czechoslovaks were the victors in their early engagements against the fledgling [Red Army](#).*
- *By mid-July, the legionaries had seized control of the railway from [Samara](#) to [Irkutsk](#), and by the beginning of September they had cleared Bolshevik forces from the entire length of the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#).^[16] Legionnaires conquered all the large cities of Siberia, including [Yekaterinburg](#), but Tsar [Nicholas II](#) and his family were executed on the direct orders of [Vladimir Lenin](#) and [Yakov Sverdlov](#) less than a week before the arrival of the Legion.*
- The Czechoslovak Legion was a precursor to an independent Czechoslovakia. In order for the allies to establish Czechoslovakia, they needed the CS Legion to survive. The CS legion would then become 1/3 of the Czechoslovakian army and would hold nearly all of the initial positions of leadership.

The railroad:

- Another motive for the US' involvement in eastern Russia was protection of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which had nearly 1 billion dollars of guns and other American equipment on it.
- 285 men from various American railway companies formed the Russian Railway Service Corps.
- Control of the railroad (and being able to operate it) was of a key to any military operation in Russia at the time. The railway gave you the opportunity to traverse and carry supplies across an incredibly inhospitable environment.
- As mentioned above, the railroad was key to the maneuvers of the CS Legion.
- <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/winter/us-army-in-russia-1.html>

[Bill] Finally, it's worth noting that the operation could have gone much worse, not just in terms of casualties and pointlessness, but in the sense that the US troops did not become overly involved in helping out the ghoulish, brutal White Russia anti-communist commanders or their rampaging Cossack forces. A lot of that is down to General William Graves resisting getting his troops embroiled more deeply:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-doughboys-who-died-fighting-russian-civil-war-180971470/> (Feb 2019)

- *But Wilson decided to keep U.S. troops in Siberia, to use the Trans-Siberian Railway to arm the White Russians and because he feared that Japan, a fellow Allied nation that had flooded eastern Siberia with 72,000 troops, wanted to take over the region and the railroad. Graves and his soldiers persevered, but they found that America's erstwhile allies in Siberia posed the greatest danger.*
- *Sticking to Wilson's stated (though disingenuous) goal of non-intervention in the Russian Civil War, Graves resisted pressure from other Allies—Britain, France, Japan, and the White Russians—to arrest and fight Bolsheviks in Siberia. Wilson and Baker backed him up, but the Japanese didn't want the U.S. troops there, and with Graves not taking their side, neither did the White Russians.*

There's some good stuff on the Far East political/military situation here part way into the Smithsonian article:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-doughboys-who-died-fighting-russian-civil-war-180971470/>

- *In November 1918, an authoritarian White Russian admiral, Alexander Kolchak, overthrew a provisional government in Siberia that the Czechs had supported. With that, and the war in Europe over, the Czechs stopped fighting the Red Army, wanting instead to return to their newly independent homeland. Now Graves was left to maintain a delicate balance: keep the Trans-Siberian Railway open to ferry secret military aid to Kolchak, without outright joining the Russian Civil War.*
- *Across Siberia, Kolchak's forces launched a reign of terror, including executions and torture. Especially brutal were Kolchak's commanders in the far east, Cossack generals Grigori Semenov and Ivan Kalmikov. Their troops, "under the protection of Japanese troops, were roaming the country like wild animals, killing and robbing the people," Graves wrote in his memoir. "If questions were asked about these brutal murders, the reply was that the people murdered were Bolsheviks and this explanation, apparently, satisfied the world." Semenov, who took to harassing Americans along the Trans-Siberian Railway, commanded armored trains with names such as *The Merciless*, *The Destroyer*, and *The Terrible*.*

- *Just when the Americans and the White Russian bandits seemed on the verge of open warfare, the Bolsheviks began to win the Russian Civil War. In January 1920, near defeat, Kolchak asked the Czech Legion for protection. Appalled at his crimes, the Czechs instead turned Kolchak over to the Red Army in exchange for safe passage home, and a Bolshevik firing squad executed him in February. In January 1920, the Wilson administration ordered U.S. troops out of Siberia, citing "unstable civil authority and frequent local military interference" with the railway. Graves completed the withdrawal on April 1, 1920, having lost 189 men.*

[Rachel] Archangel (Arkhangelsk) - Later known as The Polar Bear Offensive of the 339th U.S. Army regiment

Meanwhile in Russia's subarctic northwest on the White Sea coast, some 5,000 American troops arrived in September 1918 to join an increasingly aimless and overwhelmed British force attempting since March 1918 to guard the port of Archangel from both Bolsheviks and the newly, nominally independent but German-dominated Finland. As in Vladivostok in the Far East, an unfortunate volume of Allied war materials had arrived in the port shortly before the Bolshevik coup and Russian exit from the war, and the Allies wanted to prevent anyone else from capturing those supplies. By the time the Americans actually arrived in the fall of 1918 in Archangel to help the British, French, Australians, Canadians, and Italians, this goal was basically too late to accomplish, and the Bolsheviks had already made off with most of the Allied supply caches. The British commanders with much more expansive goals then attempted to use the American troops to push south against the Bolsheviks, to mount a breakout from their isolated coastal position and somehow link up with the Czechoslovak Legion troops traversing Siberia from West to East. This ended up putting the Americans into direct combat against the Bolshevik forces, against what the Wilson Administration had wanted, until this advance stalled and the Allies realized the local population was thoroughly uninterested in mobilizing to support this effort. They never reached anywhere near the Czechoslovaks from this direction and the Bolsheviks counter-attacked in winter, devastating the Allied troops. They were by now extremely demoralized, as World War I had ended in the West on November 11 during this Bolshevik counter-offensive, and they were now wondering why on earth they were there and how they were supposed to evacuate with the Arctic Ocean frozen. Probably the only reason they weren't annihilated was because they were much better trained and equipped than nearby Red Army forces typically were. After the Armistice, family and friends of AEF troops called for them to be brought home, writing letters to newspapers and petitioning their congressmen. The newspapers published op-eds calling for the recall of the troops, and congressmen questioned why they were there (more on that later). Meanwhile, with morale so low, rumors of mutinies abounded. The British doubled down, sending relief troops in the spring when the ice cleared, but the American commanders outside of Russia worked quickly to arrange for the Americans to evacuate through Archangel by the summer of 1919.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020657/1919-07-15/ed-1/seq-1/> [Alaska Daily Empire article on the return of 339th Regiment] *With steel helmets of white above their ruddy faces, forty-six officers and 1,495 men of the 339 Infantry, first American troops home from service in Northern Russia, arrived in Hoboken aboard the Von Stueben. The 339th is the regiment about which the "mutiny" story, which aroused nationwide comment, was circulated several months ago.*

"Pure bunk" was the characterization of the story by Major. J. Brooks Nichols, wealthy Detroit manufacturer and clubman, who was in command of the returning troops.

"More bunk has been published about the North Russia expedition than any phase of the war," said Major Nichols. "What gave rise to the story that Company I, of the regiment, had mutinied

was an incident in which an order was misunderstood by a soldier who could not understand English well.”

The rest of the AEF disbanded in August 1919.

A year after all of the expedition members had returned home, in 1920 Polar Bear veterans began lobbying their state and Federal governments to obtain funds and the necessary approvals to retrieve the bodies of at least 125 of their fellow American soldiers which were then believed to have been buried in Russia and left behind. By that time, 112 sets of remains had already been transferred to the United States.^[9] By 1929, additional research found that 226 fallen "polar bears" had originally been buried in North Russia,^[9] with a total of approximately 130 sets of U.S. soldier remains then estimated to still be buried in North Russia. Hampered by the lack of diplomatic recognition between the United States and the [Soviet Union](#), it took many years before they finally received permission. An expedition under the auspices of the [Veterans of Foreign Wars](#) (VFW) was successful in organizing and conducting a recovery mission in the autumn of 1929 that found, identified and brought out the remains of 86 U.S. soldiers.^[10] Fourteen remains of AEF in North Russia soldiers were shipped by the Soviet Union to the U.S. in 1934,^[11] which reduced the number of U.S soldiers still buried in North Russia to about 30. [Tuscaloosa News](#) September 10, 1929 article about the 1929 mission conducted by 5 veterans from the 339

During the entire operation in northwest Russia, there was virtually no contact or communication between the American troops trapped there and the American troops in the Russian Far East.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Force,_North_Russia (Sept 1918-July 1919 - Note: Before Wilson's October 1919 stroke and before the December 1919 Red Ark deportations [we discussed previously](#))

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-doughboys-who-died-fighting-russian-civil-war-180971470/>

- *The U.S. soldiers in northern Russia, the U.S. Army's 339th regiment, were chosen for the deployment because they were mostly from Michigan, so military commanders figured they could handle the war zone's extreme cold. Their training in England included a lesson from Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton on surviving below-zero conditions.*
- *The Bolsheviks' January 1919 offensive against American troops in north Russia -- which began with the deadly attack on Mead's platoon -- attracted attention in newspapers across the nation. For seven days, the Polar Bears, outnumbered eight to one, retreated north under fire from several villages along the Vaga River. On February 9, a Chicago Tribune political cartoon depicted a giant Russian bear, blood dripping from its mouth, confronting a much smaller soldier holding the U.S. flag. "At Its Mercy," the caption read. **On February 14, [Hiram] Johnson's resolution challenging the U.S. deployment in north Russia failed by one vote in the Senate, with Vice President Thomas Marshall breaking a tie to defeat it.** Days later, Secretary of War Baker announced that the Polar Bears would sail home "at the earliest possible moment that weather in the spring will permit" -- once the frozen White Sea thawed and Archangel's port reopened. Though Bolshevik attacks continued through May, the last Polar Bears left Archangel on June 15, 1919. Their nine-month campaign had cost them 235 men. "When the last battalion set sail from Archangel, not a soldier knew, no, not even vaguely, why he had fought or why he was going now, and why his comrades were left behind -- so many of them beneath the wooden crosses," wrote Lieutenant John Cudahy of the 339th regiment in his book Archangel. [See below]*

Notable participant: Lieutenant John Cudahy of Wisconsin served with distinction during combat with the Bolsheviks in November 1918. In 1924, he published a book under a pseudonym,

entitled "[Archangel: The American War with Russia.](#)" in which he sharply criticized the US military intervention in northwest Russia. He dedicated the book to a Sergeant killed in action in March 1919, before the arrival of the American rescue icebreakers, and he compared his criticism to General Ulysses Grant's disgust with the Mexican-American War. Lt. Cudahy was the son of a Milwaukee-based Irish-American meatpacking magnate, and he ended up serving as FDR's Ambassador to Poland, then Ireland, and then briefly Belgium and Luxembourg until the Nazis invaded. In June 1941, just ahead of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Ambassador Cudahy was commissioned by Life magazine to interview Hitler in Bavaria, which the publication emphasized was clearly intended by Hitler to convince the American public not to worry about his intentions despite FDR's escalating warnings, which they published alongside the interview. Cudahy then wrote a memoir shortly before his death in a horse-riding accident in 1943.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cudahy

From the introduction chapter: *Whether there was any political connection between the Archangel Expedition and the Vladivostok Expedition is for the statesmen to answer . Surely there never was any military connection. Obviously, there never could be any support or communication between the two forces , and the American soldier at the Arctic Circle who was not told the reasons why he faced death and unknown dangers there , and why he was weakened and broken , and made old by privation and intense cold , never knew that there was a Siberian Expedition , and does not know even to this day .*

[...]

[The soldier] asked his officers why he fought , and why he was facing an enemy vastly superior to him in strength and equipment and armament , and why he was separated from his family and home and the ways of life , and when the end would come . But his officers were silent under this inquisition . They asked the same questions themselves , and got no reply . The colonel who commanded this fated regiment told his soldiers that he could give no reason for them to oppose the enemy other than that their lives and those of the whole expedition depended upon successful resistance.

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A concluding thought from the 2019 Smithsonian article: *Historians tend to see Wilson's decision to send troops to Russia as one of his worst wartime decisions, and a foreshadowing of other poorly planned American interventions in foreign countries in the century since. "It didn't really achieve anything—it was ill-conceived," says [James Carl] Nelson of the Polar Bear Expedition. "The lessons were there that could've been applied in Vietnam and could've been applied in Iraq."*

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In July 1918, shortly before US deployment, President Wilson had the State Department circulate an unofficial document to the other Allied governments defining the scope of the upcoming American military operations in Russia extremely narrowly and expressing extreme skepticism about the likely prospects, while advising that it would not interfere with other Allies in their own plans except if it violated Russian sovereignty more broadly:

It is the clear and fixed judgment of the Government of the United States, arrived at after repeated and very searching reconsiderations of the whole situation in Russia, that military intervention there would add to the present sad confusion in Russia rather than cure it, injure her rather than help her, and that it would be of no advantage in the prosecution of our main design, to win the war against Germany. It cannot, therefore, take part in such intervention or sanction it in principle. Military intervention would, in its judgment, even supposing it to be efficacious in its immediate avowed object of delivering an attack upon Germany from the east, be merely a method of making use of Russia, not a method of serving her. Her people could not

profit by it, if they profitted by it at all, in time to save them from their present distresses, and their substance would be used to maintain foreign armies, not to reconstitute their own. Military action is admissible in Russia, as the Government of the United States sees the circumstances, only to help the Czecho-Slovaks consolidate their forces and get into successful cooperation with their Slavic kinsmen and to steady any efforts at self government or self defense in which the Russians themselves may be willing to accept assistance. Whether from Vladivostok or from Murmansk and Archangel, the only legitimate object for which American or allied troops can be employed, it submits, is to guard military stores which may subsequently be needed by Russian forces and to render such aid as may be acceptable to the Russians in the organization of their own self-defense. For helping the Czecho-Slovaks there is immediate necessity and sufficient justification. Recent developments have made it evident that that it is in the interest of what the Russian people themselves desire, and the Government of the United States is glad to contribute the small force at its disposal for that purpose. It yields, also, to the judgment of the Supreme Command in the matter of establishing a small force at Murmansk, to guard the military stores at Kola and to make it safe for Russian forces to come together in organized bodies in the north. But it owes it to frank counsel to say that it can go no further than these modest and experimental plans. It is not in a position and has no expectation of being in a position, to take part in organized intervention in adequate force from either Vladivostok or Murmansk and Archangel.

[...]

It hopes to carry out the plans for safeguarding the rear of the Czecho-Slovaks operating from Vladivostok in a way that will place it and keep it in close cooperation with a small military force like its own from Japan, and if necessary from the other Allies, and that it will assure it of the cordial accord of all the allied powers; and it proposes to ask all associated in this course of action to unite in assuring the people of Russia in the most public and solemn manner that none of the governments uniting in action either in Siberia or in northern Russia contemplates any interference of any kind with the political sovereignty of Russia, any intervention in her internal affairs, or any impairment of her territorial integrity either now or hereafter, but that each of the associated powers has the single object of affording such aid as shall be acceptable, and only such aid as shall be acceptable, to the Russian people in their endeavour to regain control their own affairs, their own territory and their own destiny.

http://pbma.grobbel.org/aide_memoire.htm

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Background overview link:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allied\\_intervention\\_in\\_the\\_Russian\\_Civil\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allied_intervention_in_the_Russian_Civil_War)

There were also Allied troops in Ukraine and Crimea during this period as well, and there were British troops in the Caucasus and Turkmenistan. Americans did not participate in these operations.

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