

Tragedy at Archangel



Snowshoe patrol from Company B, 339th infantry, on the Drina river.



(Signal Corps, U. S. Army, photos.)

Men of Company I pass in review at Archangel, Oct. 12, 1918.

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which stretched out bleak and coverless 800 yards to the main village.

"Some tried to make a run of it over the bottomless intervening snow, where they struggled piteously like hobbled animals and were killed. But in most part they dashed in frantic relays down the open road, sprinting forward a score of yards, then flattening out on the ground, and so on, rushing and sprawling and flat, until the fatal course was run, while every rifle from the abandoned village on the height and the flanking forest and across the Vaga spurted death, and machine guns rattled, and bullets lashed the air with the furious cracking of ten thousand whips, or sped fluttering through the snow and went off whimpering into space, or felled men with sledgelike blows, until the doomed way was strewn end to end with the prostrate forms of the fallen ones, and a pitiful few, by some fluke of luck, had gained the shielding hill. Not ten minutes had been taken in that terrible dash through that valley of death's shadow, and of the forty-seven who began the journey six reached the goal of the main village."

Such were the perils faced by the little-known, seldom-remembered American military expedition to Archangel, Russia, in 1918. Most readers will open their eyes to a brand new page in history as they read this story, for this is a tale of an expedition which cost hundreds of American lives and millions of American dollars and yet was so futile and needless that it has been all but lost in a shameful silence.

It was undertaken at the request of foreign governments in an atmosphere of uncertainty, diplomatic intrigue, conflicting reports, and general remoteness from reality.

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The objects of the Archangel expedition as defined in a proclamation issued to the troops by British general headquarters, which largely promoted the venture, were:

1. To save the Czecho-Slovaks, several thousand of whom under command of General Gaida were believed to be strung along the Siberian railway from Pensa to Vladivostok.

2. To prevent the Germans from exploiting the resources of southeastern Russia.

3. To prevent the northern ports of European Russia from becoming bases for German submarines.

Another official British statement explaining the expedition declared: "Bolshevism has grown upon the uneducated masses to such an extent that Russia is disintegrated and helpless, and therefore we have come to help her get rid of the disease that is eating her up. We are not here to conquer Russia, but want to help her and see her a great power. When order is restored here we shall clear out, but only when we have attained our object, and that is the restoration of Russia."

An American dispatch from Washington later stated concerning the expedition's purpose: "The only present object for which American troops will be employed will be to guard military stores which may be subsequently needed by Russian forces, and to render such aid as may be acceptable to the Russians in the organization of their own defense."

But in practice such purpose as America had in Archangel was Britain's purpose, for the United States war department assigned our force of 4,344 en-

listed men and 143 officers to the command of Brig. Gen. F. C. Poole, the British ranking officer in Archangel, who already had some French troops under him and was said to be "thoroughly familiar with Russian character and Russian conditions."

Actually Poole seemed to share the British general headquarters' arrogantly imperialistic view that one British soldier was the equal of twenty bolshevik soldiers. He had endorsed the British military plan of invading vast Russia with a total Allied force of only 12,000 men, of marching southward through an unfamiliar, hostile wilderness while spreading fanwise over a 500-mile front with widely separated communication and supply lines growing to several hundred miles in length as the advance continued into the homeland of millions of Russians of uncertain military strength and unknown allegiance.

The advance party of Americans landed in Archangel on Aug. 3, 1918, joining the brigade of British infantry already there and the force of a little more than 1,000 French infantrymen and artillerymen. There were also two batteries of Canadian field artillery there by the time the American infantry regiment arrived 4,487 strong on Sept. 4, and a small detachment of Americans and others had been



Part of the U. S. S. Olympia landing party that engaged the bolsheviks at Vologda.

sent to the port of Murmansk, 400 miles to the northwest, there to guard in lonely isolation the Murmansk railroad, which extends southward paralleling the Finland border.

That is what the Allied forces in north Russia consisted of. The Americans in Archangel were all drawn from the 85th division of the national army. Most of them were Wisconsin and Michigan boys who had left civilian life to do their share of any fighting their country asked of them. They had not envisioned an arctic vastness for No Man's Land, with an almost mythical enemy on the other side firing real shells at them from guns much bigger and more numerous than their own—an enemy who had nothing to do with the Germans and against whom no war had been declared. But they were soldiers, and for all their unanswered questions they obeyed orders with a will.

The Archangel adventure started off ominously. Even before the wheezing engines of the troop ships Somali, Tydeus, and Nagoya had come to rest across the harbor from the garish turnip-top domes and gold minarets of Archangel's sky line, death was coming to grips with the doughboys from Milwaukee and Detroit. At sea 500 of them had been stricken with the dreaded Spanish influenza. Eight days out all medical supplies were exhausted and "conditions became so congested in the ships' quarters that the sick, running high fever, were compelled to lie in the hold or on deck exposed to the chill winds."

Even after landing the sick

The Amazing Story of America's Futile Expedition Into Bolshevik Land

could not be adequately provided for. They lay on pine boards in rickety barracks deserted by the bolsheviks a few months before. "They had insufficient bedding, and for warmth had to keep on their clothing and boots. In this way many died and many more were enfeebled for months, but stuck it out with their companions and went to the front."

The port of Archangel was founded by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, and most of the time since has been a British trading post for the exchange of furs, flax, and lumber. But the sterile asperity of the weather and the barrier of the White sea, which is frozen for six months of the year, destined Archangel to poverty or dependence on the charity of more fortunate regions.

The dismal, forsaken quality in the air of this old city at the northern hinge of the eastern and western worlds was depressing to the usually cheerful boys from the Great Lakes. They were in a land of exile. Everything seemed alien, forgotten by the rest of the earth, as if they were looking from behind a veil.

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In the words of one American soldier—who anonymously wrote "Archangel—The American War with Russia," a book that is almost the sole available source of material for this story: "Bearded, sad-faced priests with their black robes glide through the streets like nether spirits and the mysticism of the ancient, mystic east. This is the native atmosphere of Archangel. . . . The glaring electric lights, the incongruous modern buildings, and the noisy tramway that clangs down the street—these do not belong to Archangel. They are a profane encroachment on her ageless, dreaming tranquility. . . . Fundamentally Archangel is a primitive center of primitive beings. Instinctively it is a dirty hole . . . where noxious stenches greet the nose and modern sanitation is unknown."

Continuing to describe the people who live in the country surrounding Archangel, our nameless chronicler of 1918 says:

"As a whole the inhabitants are moujiks, dwelling in little villages of two or three hundred log huts that in structure and design bear close resemblance to the cabins of our frontier civilization. About these villages the peasants have cleared the forest for a few hundred yards, and in the brief, hot months of the midnight sun they raise meager crops of wheat and flax and potatoes. When winter comes they are continually indoors, gathered about great ovens of fireplaces, and long through the dismal, cold, black days they sit and dream, or merely sit."

"They are unsophisticated folk, incredibly ignorant, but gentle, quiet-mannered, sweet-natured. . . . Cholera visits them with recurrent devastating plagues and takes fearful toll, for they live in the midst of nauseating squalor with total disregard to sanitation and drink from surface wells that in the sudden spring are reservoirs of sewage and all manner of obscene refuse. . . . He asks so little of life, this gentle moujik with his boots and his shabby tunic and his mild bearded face—only to be left alone."

This was the country, then, and these its peasants, into whose bosom a whim of Uncle Sam sent four thousand odd of his young men to play their

weird part in helping "make the world safe for democracy." Under the optimistic dauntlessness of General Poole the great majority of his British, French, Canadian, and American soldiers were ordered to advance southward along the railroad and up the rivers as shown on the map on page one, leaving a garrison to guard Archangel.

The principal river expedition traveled hopefully forth in barges towed by tiny tugs and escorted by a small armored British gunboat. The railway expedition was largest and boldly marched southward with thoughts of reaching the strategic Trans-Siberian railroad at Vologda. After one brief victory over the retreating bolsheviks, however, this force was surprised to meet serious opposition on the part of the despicable Reds about 100 miles from Archangel.

According to our American chronicler, the bolsheviks "came back in force and greatly outnumbered the Allies, and there

was in the defiant attitude of the Red troops reason to believe that the soviet chieftains had taken stock of the military situation, had verified the preposterous intelligence that the three great powers—Great Britain, France, and the United States—were definitely bent upon war and seriously intended to invade the great domain of Russia with scarcely two infantry combat regiments!"

...

Poole's "columns" were in reality nothing but patrol expeditions, and as soon as the Reds realized it all disposition to retreat left them and they struck back with such numbers that only the utmost courage and determination on the part of the Allied men saved them from annihilation. And still the unimaginative, unadaptable Poole from his headquarters in quiet Archangel gave orders urging greater aggressiveness and saying:

"It must be impressed on all

ranks that we are fighting an offensive war and not a defensive one."

And so the American officers under British direction moved their companies forward "to do or die." The terrible and in many cases tragic results on the several isolated fronts in this rash offensive are too numerous to be told, but let it be said that the men from Wisconsin and Michigan acquitted themselves gallantly in the bewildering and discouraging circumstances in which they found themselves. One example from the adventures of the railroad "column" will reveal their caliber:



Lieut. L. P. Keith, Chicagoan cited at Archangel.

"One platoon of the Americans, separated in the swamps of the woods, was nearly enveloped. It fought until all ammunition was exhausted, and then the officer, Lieut. Gordon Reese, had no thought of submission. After the last cartridge was gone the bayonets still remained, and after the bayonets came doubled fists. At word of

command the platoon fixed bayonets, went forward with a yelling charge, broke down the bolsheviks by their sheer courage and impetuosity, and the endangered men were able to join the main body of their comrades, repulsing the attack."

As the fall wore on and the swamp land began to show ice in the dark mornings, and the sun shortened its swing above the southern horizon to only six hours a day, the situation grew increasingly worse for the Allies. As late as January, 1919, William C. Bullitt of the American state department cabled Colonel House at the Paris peace conference:

"The 12,000 American, British, and French troops at Archangel are no longer serving any useful purpose. . . . They are in considerable danger of destruction by the bolsheviks. . . . The situation at Archangel is most serious for the soldiers, but it is also serious for the governments which seem to have abandoned them. Unless they are saved by prompt action we shall have another Gallipoli."

The lack of artillery was one of the most discouraging factors in the Allied dilemma. "Time

(Continued on page nine.)

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