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# Voices of the Past

## WORLD WAR I

### Highlights:

- When Russia pulled out of World War I and formed a communist government the Allied Powers sided with the Tsarist White Russians against the new communist government in hopes of reestablishing the Eastern front.
- President Wilson sent American troops to Russia in a limited support role.
- Upon arrival in Russia the situation and mission objectives changed rapidly, and the "Polar Bears" soon found themselves in combat against the Red Army, struggling against brutal cold, and dealing with logistical nightmares.
- Ultimately, the AEF in North Russia failed to remove the Bolsheviks from power or achieve other Allied objectives.

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## The White Wastes & the Red Menace: The Polar Bear Expedition & the Roots of the Cold War

**(Russia, 1918-1919)** When the new communist government in Russian ratified the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, the Eastern front of World War I collapsed. The end of the fighting in the east freed 50 German divisions for operations against the American, British, and French forces on the Western front. On March 21, 1918 the Germans launched the Spring Offensive.

Civil war immediately broke out in Russia between the Bolshevik's Red Army and anti-communist White Russians. The British and French saw an opportunity to stop the spread of communism and reestablish the Eastern Front by intervening on the side of the White Russians, and they asked the American President, Woodrow Wilson, for help. Reluctantly, Wilson agreed, on the condition that U.S.

Soldiers would play a limited role.

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) included the 339th Infantry regiment's three battalions of Infantry, the 337th Field Hospital, the 337th Ambulance Company, and the 310th Engineers Battalion; or about 5,000 Soldiers. By the end of the war, these Soldiers would take on the name "Polar Bears".

The British had three primary goals in Russia: keep stockpiles of war materials from falling into the hands of the Germans or Red Army; rescue the Czech Legion, a unit of pro-Ally soldiers cut off by the civil war and stranded on the Trans-Siberian railroad; and recruit an army consisting of the Czech Legion and local forces to defeat the Bolsheviks and restore the Eastern Front. Wilson, however, insisted that American troops



American Camp at Murmansk, Russia. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.



President Woodrow Wilson. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



COL George E. Stewart, commanding forces of the North Russian A. E. F. in his office at regimental hdqrs. Archangel, Russia. Oct 7th, 1918. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.

remain neutral in Russia's internal quarrels. The Polar Bears were authorized to guard the supplies, but not to take any further action.

Upon arrival at Archangel in October of 1918, the Polar Bears discovered that their mission objectives were impossible: Bolshevik force had already seized the supplies stockpiled at Archangel. The American commander, Colonel George E. Stewart, soon bowed to pressure from the British Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces in Russian, Brigadier General Fredric C. Poole, and the Polar Bears found themselves heading south to fight in the Russian Civil War.

Heavily outnumbered by the Red Army and plagued by logistical problems, the Allied forces failed to advance more than a few hundred miles against the Red Army. American troops came to resent the British officers who did not seem to care much about their welfare, and morale began to suffer. Even worse, they began to wonder what they were doing in Russia, especially since the mission they had been sent on had ended before they even arrived.

Wilson wanted to withdraw the Polar Bears, but the fearsome Russian winter intervened. The port froze solid early in the season before the troops could be organized for departure. General Poole took advantage of the situation, and began directing the Polar Bears in combat operations, ordering them to take Seltso on September 20, 1918; Plesetskaya, an intermediate goal on the way to taking Vologda on September 28-30, 1918; and an important railhead along the Dvina River.

From September 5 to November 10, the Allies engaged in offensive operations against the Red Army, but

soon found themselves outnumbered and outgunned. Russian artillery frequently proved decisive, and by mid-November the Allies were on the defensive. With affixed bayonets, Allied forces successfully assaulted the Bolsheviks causing a panicked retreat on November 14, 1918. Among the challenges facing the Allies was the Russian winter.

The area in which the Allies were operating contained numerous rivers which the Allies used to move troops and supplies. As the winter progressed, however, the rivers froze and became useless to the Allies. The Bolsheviks, however, received their supplies from the south, where more of the rivers remained navigable later into the year.

Throughout the winter, the Polar Bears continued to engage the Red Army, eventually suffering over 500 casualties.

Finally in May 1919, troops began preparations to return to the United States. On June 3, 1919, the companies moved from town to town bound for Brest and then Archangel to finally depart on the British transport ship, the British *Menoninee*. By August 5, 1919, Headquarters for the AEF in North Russia had been officially closed.

In retrospect, the Polar Bear Expedition accomplished little and failed to achieve even the limited goals Wilson set forth for the American forces. The Russian Civil War continued for another several years, ending with a Bolshevik victory that paved the way for the creation of the Soviet Union. In the end, "the Allies had done just enough to alienate the Reds and far too little to save the Whites" (Bolger 76).

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Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections

[http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node=Polar%20Bear%20History&lastnode\\_id=272](http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node=Polar%20Bear%20History&lastnode_id=272)

Frederick E. Bury, 1898-1941 (1 box), an officer in the American Expeditionary Force, North Russia, and Henry Cook, 1917-1921 (1 box), a private in the 339th Infantry, at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa..

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Soldiers lined up to board *Menominee*. Photo courtesy of the USAHEC, World War I Signal Corps Collection.