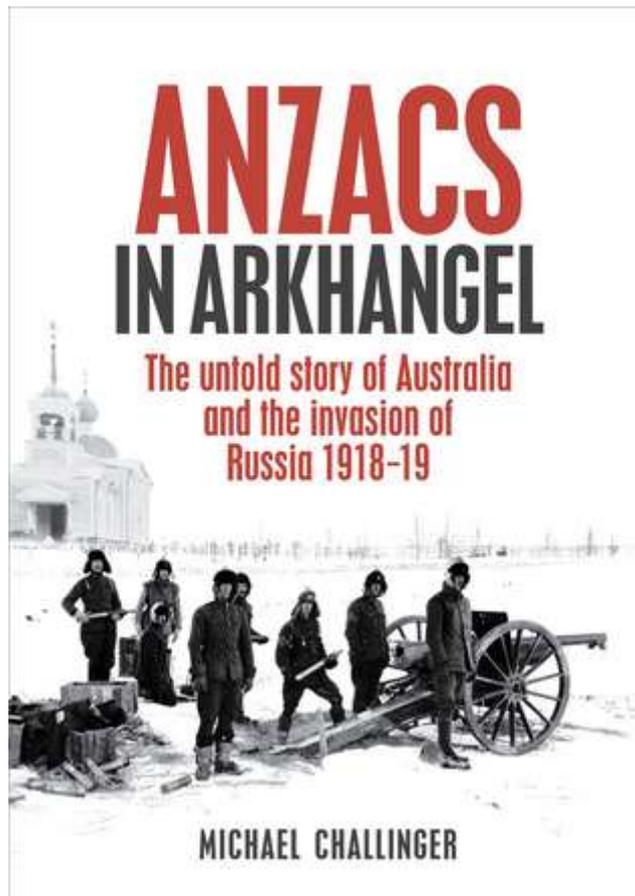


1919-1920



By Michael Challenger

Published by Hardie Grant Books (Australia)

While most Australians have some appreciation of the Anzac's contributions in various theatres during the Great War, few will be aware of our country's involvement in the bloody Russian civil war in the north of that country in the months from June 1918 through to September 1920.

Michael Challenger's work 'ANZACS in Arkhangel' provides a valuable coverage of this extraordinary but little-known episode in our Australian military history.

In order to better comprehend the nature of our involvement in this event a brief overview of the role Russia played in the Great War might prove helpful.

While the 'victorious' Allies blamed Germany for starting the Great War, my research leads me to conclude that France and Russia were just as much at fault in the events that lead to the outbreak of that world conflagration.

By the year 1914 each of the major European powers had in place a system of *compulsory national conscription* whereby large numbers of their young men were trained for war.

Under this arrangement the country with by far the biggest army in 1914 was Russia, which had a potential army of some ten million men.

With compulsory national conscription the key assumption of each of the European powers was that in the event that war was declared, the most critical factors would be to first *mobilize* (call up) ones army reserves and then to *transport* them quickly to the locations where battles were expected to be fought. Logically the nation that was first to mobilize its army and deploy it onto enemy territory could expect to be victorious.

It was for this reason that in addition to *compulsory national conscription* countries such as France and Germany established extensive and efficient railway networks that connected to all parts of their respective countries, and particularly to their border regions.

Following the assassination of Austrian Prince Ferdinand at Sarajevo in June 1914, Austria Hungary first blamed and then threatened Serbia with war. Whereupon Russia, in support of Serbia, initiated it's *mobilization* process. A request from Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm to his cousin Czar Nickolas to *demobilize* was ignored, and in response Germany and then France activated their respective mobilizations, which logistically meant from that point war was unavoidable.

In German planning for such a war, Germany, confronted on two sides by France in the east and Russia in the west, had devised the Von Schleiffen plan. Under this scheme, while a portion of the German army would block the Russian army in the east, the bulk of her troops would sweep through neutral Belgium and into northern France, quickly defeat the French army, take Paris and then sue for peace. According to the theory the Germans would then redeploy the bulk of her army by rail to the east to take on and defeat the numerically superior Russians.

History shows that key elements of this plan went totally askew on both fronts with the Western initiative turning into a long and protracted campaign while in the East, although the Russians were numerically stronger, they were poorly equipped, badly lead and inadequately trained. As a consequence the Russians suffered a number of significant defeats with heavy casualties.

Russia's military losses were accompanied on the home front by food shortages and political instability, with many people reacting to a long period of harsh feudal system of government. By mid 1917 conditions in Russia had deteriorated to such an extent that revolution threatened, causing Czar Nickolas to abdicate.

While the replacement middle class government initially established under Alexander Kerensky endeavoured to continue the war with Germany, this was an initiative that was supported by few Russians.

It was within this context that the German Government implemented one of the tactical successes the war, when they conveyed the exiled *Vladimir Lenin* from Switzerland through Germany by rail and into Russia, where they also provided him with funding for a campaign against the Kerensky government.

Lenin adopted a slogan of '*peace, bread and land*' which won widespread appeal from the majority of Russian peasants, and allowed the Communists led by Lenin to form government and immediately begin peace negotiations with the Germans. In November 1917 Russia withdrew from the Allied cause.

However not all Russians were supportive of the new regime, and as a result a *civil war* erupted between two Russian factions. The Reds (communists) and the 'Whites' who fought for the re-instatement of the Czar and the feudal system.

The Russian Civil War in a Nutshell

Soviet records claim between 1918 and 1920 that no fewer than sixteen foreign governments sent troops to invade Russian soil after the Bolshevik Revolution. Challerger explains the interventions succinctly: *"Each national government gave its force different instructions – except for those which gave none at all. Apart from wanting to be rid of the Bolsheviks, the foreigners didn't know quite what they were aiming to achieve. They committed their forces in the vague hope that something good would come out of it."*

Civil war raged throughout the whole of Russia. Anti-Bolshevik White armies formed in different parts of the country, as did bands of Cossacks, nationalists, anarchists and out and out brigands. More than thirty 'governments' claimed authority over all or part of Russian territory. Outside powers latched onto the various 'Whites' and sent troops and supplies to support them.

Basically, four 'White' armies operated in different parts of the country, separated from each other by hundreds of kilometres, making military co-ordination between them well nigh impossible. Also Government in White controlled areas was corrupt, brutal and sometimes anti-Semetic.

Challerger notes that most importantly, the Whites alienated those who would have been their natural allies. Finland, the Baltic states, Poland and the Ukraine would all have thrown their weight behind the anti-Bolshevik cause if only the Whites had recognised their aspirations to independence. In this, however, the Whites were

more obdurate than the Bolsheviks themselves – they refused to countenance the secession of even an inch of the motherland.

Opposing them, the Red Army enjoyed three significant advantages. First, despite their own brutality the Bolsheviks had the acquiescence, if not the support, of most of the population. The Bolsheviks promised land reform and a new social order, whereas the Whites offered nothing but a return to the old regime. Second, the Reds had internal connected lines of communication, centred in Moscow, and could move troops by rail from one front to another as needed. Third, they had a centralised command under the ruthless genius of Leon Trotsky.”

The Interventions of the Allies

This synopsis provides the background for what happened next, as Britain, France and the United States made the decision in March of 1918 to intervene in the Russian civil war on the side of the pro Czar white armies in the north of Russia (**that is, some months before the 11th November Armistice**).

An irony of this intervention was that it ran counter to one of the key War objectives of the Allied democracies, which was to allow the people in all countries around the world to have the right of 'self determination' with respect to choosing a system of government of their choice.

In his book Challenger describes in some detail how The British (including Australian) interventions in the Russian civil war took place in *two distinct phases*.

The First (British) Intervention

The first intervention began in March 1918, when British military depots in England (including Australian and Canadian camps) were asked to provide *volunteers for a secret mission abroad. (Italics mine.)*

This clandestine British contingent, codenamed 'Elope' consisted of several hundred British soldiers, nine Australians, twenty-one Canadians and four New Zealanders. The volunteers were specifically told that once they had agreed to join they could not withdraw, despite the fact that before their embarkation they were given no idea of their destination.

Challenger explains that Elope headed to Arkhangel in Northern Russia to organise, instruct and lead White Russian units in their fight against the Communist Red armies. It was classified as a '*military mission*', a nebulous term that seemingly precluded that they would be involved in actual fighting, while being vague enough to cover all contingencies.

The city of Arkhangel, accessible from the White Sea provided a hub from which two major communication / transport and fighting spokes protruded into the Russian hinterland. The first of these consisted of the railway line which ran due south from

Arkhangel to the Bolshevik held city of Vologda, while the second spoke was provided by the Dvina River which ran south west.

There was no continuous front line connecting these two spokes, as the Allied defences only extended for several kilometres on each side of the railway line and river, and then petered out into thick natural forests.

The North Russian war was different to what the Allied forces had known. Compared with even the smallest offensive in France, operations in North Russia were minor in the military sense. The fighting in the civil war was nothing like that on the Western Front. There were skirmishes, raids and massacres but few significant battles.

The Bolsheviks probed the various Allied defensive points, making sudden attacks whenever they found a weakness. Patrols from both sides easily penetrated each other's positions, setting ambushes and skirmishing. The *battle front* was simply the place wherever the two forces chanced to meet.

In a winter climate where temperatures dropped to below 30 degrees Fahrenheit according to Challinger waging war in the extreme cold created unforeseen problems. *'Grenades failed to explode. The fuses on trench mortars didn't function properly. The propellants in shells lost so much power their range almost halved, and the artillery range tables had to be recalculated. The lubricant in fire-arms froze, the metal became brittle and parts broke off. Machine guns froze solid and had to be thawed with boiling water before they could be stripped and reassembled.'*

Moreover, transporting men, arms munitions and equipment proved to be a herculean task.

Back on the Western Front, the signing of the Armistice on November 11th 1918 undermined the morale of the allied forces in North Russia. The men had joined to fight Germans in a war they believed in. Now, for reasons they didn't understand they found themselves taking a side in a cause in which they had no interest. With Germany defeated and the world war over, all sense of purpose evaporated.

While this strange war would meander on for many more months, the Australians of Elope force left Arkhangel by 17th June 1919, twelve months to the day from when they embarked from England.

'Relief Force'- The Second British Intervention - a Churchill Deception

On 4th March 1919 the British War Cabinet resolved to withdraw the British 'Elope' forces before the oncoming winter.

Responsibility for carrying out that decision was given to then British Secretary for State Winston Churchill, the chief architect of the failed Gallipoli campaign. Churchill possessed a deeply felt hatred of communism and a personal desire to destroy the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war.

While Cabinet had empowered Churchill "*to make whatever preliminary arrangements he judged necessary to bring about a safe evacuation*" he took a distorted view of his instructions to authorise the despatch of a new force.

Churchill justified this step by emphasising the risks of withdrawing in the face of an undefeated enemy, and manipulated key local newspapers to create a sense of looming catastrophe. This enabled him to get grudging government approval and to also attract volunteer army recruits for the 'North Russia Relief Force' - an ambiguous term that left it unclear as to whether the force was to rescue the existing troops or to replace them. In Churchill's mind it was clearly the latter.

In mid 1919 there were still tens of thousands of AIF soldiers in Britain waiting to be repatriated home, a process that would take many more months. It was in this context that some 138 Australians volunteered for Churchill's relief army.

While AIF diggers in the Great War were paid a very generous six shillings a day on overseas service (a British Tommy received one shilling), volunteers for the Relief Force were paid *fourteen shillings* a day, which proved an attractive inducement for some. Others, who had missed out on seeing action in France, viewed Russia as a last chance opportunity to prove themselves in battle.

To join the relief force diggers first had to obtain a discharge from the AIF, which entailed signing away the right to a passage home from the Australian government and released the Commonwealth from any claim except for a war pension.

The former diggers then formally enlisted to join the British army, where they were able to form a discrete Australian Company under Australian NCOs, while retaining the right to wear their distinctive slouch hats.

The eight thousand strong Relief Force was divided into two brigades, each of four thousand men, with the Australians being part of the second brigade which arrived at Arkhangel on 20 June 1919.

It is my understanding 'Relief Force' continued to employ the same battle tactics used by the earlier 'Elope' Force', with British troops based at Arkhangel and deployed along the railway line to Vologda, and along the Dvina River, where they were involved in frequent skirmishes and raids on their Red Army enemy.

In his book, based on first-hand accounts from letters and diaries, Challenger gives considerable details about many of the Australians who fought in this phase of the civil war, which I don't propose to cover in this summary.

In northern Russia by 1920 it seemed that a stalemate situation had developed between the British backed White Army and the Bolsheviks, and it became clear that little progress if any could be made against the Bolsheviks. In response, and given

the costs of continuing the campaign the British government decided to withdraw its troops, a task which was completed on 26th September 1920.

Following the evacuation of the British 'Relief Force' The Bolshevik commander Leon Trotsky virtually ignored the remaining Whites around Arkhangel and redeployed his troops to successfully defeat the other three White armies further south. Then, on 21st February the Red army moved north again and marched into Arkhangel unopposed.

Challinger concludes; '*The Allied intervention had only delayed the inevitable. It had put off the collapse of the Whites*', and in so doing had prolonged the suffering and increased the number of human casualties. For the Whites the Intervention produced only tragedy, as those leaders that could, fled to the West and lived out their lives in exile. Those who remained in Russia were persecuted.

The Intervention also produced some perverse and unintended consequences. Despite the frantic efforts of the British to destroy surplus war material, enormous quantities were seized by the Bolsheviks, enabling the Red Army to be equipped with the latest weaponry, courtesy of the British taxpayer.

On a political level the Intervention allowed the Bolsheviks to portray their struggle as one against foreign invaders, thus helping them to consolidate Soviet power.

On the world stage it created a legacy of distrust that had ramifications for many years to come, including the *cold war*.

Following their evacuation and given free passage by the British government, most of the Australians returned home in dribs and drabs. According to Challinger however the men had no illusions about what they had achieved in Russia as almost all who committed their thoughts to writing acknowledged the futility of the venture.

In the preface to his book Michael Challinger attempts to refrain from pointing out the obvious parallels between the North Russia campaign and more recent foreign entanglements made by *Australian coalition governments* in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and now Iraq Two.

In 1919 there was a *coalition of the willing*, there were *muddled aims*, an *invasion by subterfuge*, and *escalation* in numbers. There was optimism and reassurance, followed by a sudden announcement that the situation was untenable.

Challinger asserts that North Russia provides some obvious lessons. Take care before you intervene in a civil war. Make sure your allies have the same aims. Have a political plan to put in place before you engage in 'regime change'. ***Don't embark on military action without firm support at home based on evidence and logic and following a comprehensive and thorough debate in the national Parliament including decisions on the expected consequences, magnitude and costs of PTSD. (My insertion).***