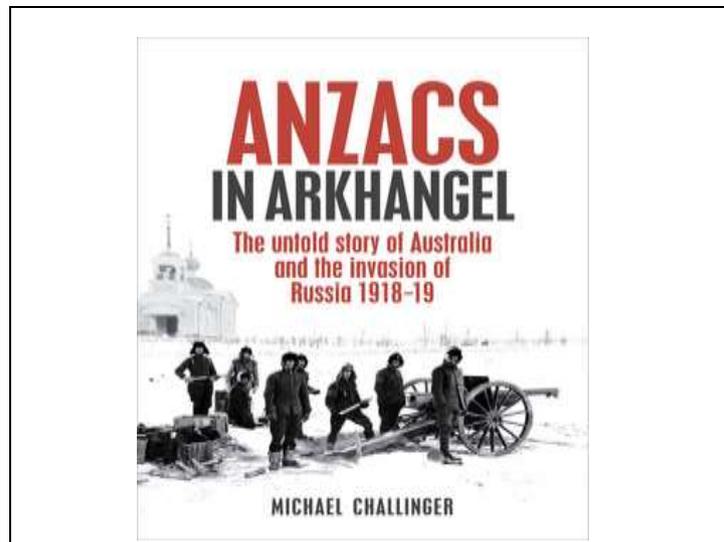


Slide 1

# **ANZACs in Arkhangel**

**Michael Challenger**

## Slide 2



**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.

## Slide 3

### **The Interventions of the Allies**



The above photo shows Australian Fusiliers of the 45th Battalion in Russia, 1919

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 Challerger describes in some detail how The British (including Australian) interventions in the Russian civil war took place in *two distinct phases*.

## Slide 4

### **The First (British) Intervention**



The photo above shows a group of Australians in Elope Force.

The first British 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.

Challinger 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.

## Slide 5



### Notes

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 Challenger 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> June 1919, twelve months to the day from when they embarked from England.

## Slide 6

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



#### *Notes*

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.

## Slide 7

### **Australian soldiers from NRRF in Russia, 1919**



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.

## Slide 8

### **Bolshevik blockhouse, 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, Challinger 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> February the Red army moved north again and marched into Arkhangel unopposed.

## Slide 9

**HMAS *Swan*, c. 1916–18 in the Black Sea**



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 dregs 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.

Slide 10



In the preface to his book Michael Challerger 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.

Challerger 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).

## **Reflections**

- Prior to this unit of study, how much did you know about Australia's involvement in Russia's Civil War?
- In your opinion, what steps do you think should be taken before Australian military personnel are committed to overseas conflicts?