

The extended war on the Eastern Front, 1918-1925: the Russian Intervention



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Bryce M. Fraser

Military Historian

Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales¹

Conflict in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East, over issues which plagued the region at the end of the Great War, continues to this day. Although considered insignificant by some historians and overshadowed by the gigantic scale of warfare during the two World Wars, the Russian Intervention was substantial and Australians played a significant role in it, two winning the Victoria Cross and one the Distinguished Service Order.

Key words: Australia; Russia; Russian Intervention, 1918-1919; North Russian Expeditionary Force; North Russian Relief Force; Murmansk; Archangel; Siberian Intervention; South Russia; Transcaucasus Intervention; Dunsterforce; Lionel Dunsterville; Stanley Savige.

The late historian Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremes* (Hobsbawm 1994) coined the term 'the short twentieth century' to describe the period of conflict in Europe from 1914 to the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, in contrast to the customary view that fighting in the Great War ended with the armistice of 11 November 1918 on the Western Front. In other European theatres and in the Middle East, there also were armistices in 1918: the September armistice in Salonica with Bulgaria; and the armistice at Mudros in October 1918, which initiated a temporary end to fighting with the Ottoman Empire, although hostilities with Turkey continued until 1923.

The events on the Eastern Front in 1918 are better understood as products of the October 1917 Bolshevik Russian revolution. The German and Ottoman armistice with the Russians at Brest Litovsk in December 1917 was followed by the Russian Civil War from February 1918 to 1922 and saw the creation of the USSR. Also, in December 1917, the Ottoman Empire signed the Erzincan armistice with the Russian authorities in Transcaucasia/north-west Persia which set the scene for Soviet rule there until 1991.

This paper will give some insight into selected events arising out of the Russian Civil War, showing how they still shape current events. There were four regions of the former Tsarist Russian Empire where Allied interventions occurred with Australian participation. These were in:

- North Russia (Murmansk and Archangel);
- Siberia;
- South Russia; and
- Transcaucasia/north-west Persia (the region north east of Mosul and Baghdad towards the Caspian Sea).

Overview of the Great War at the end of 1917 and early 1918

The chance of Allied victory in the Great War seemed

precarious at the end of 1917. In October, the inconclusive battle of Passchendaele had a month to run. In the Atlantic, despite the introduction of convoys, submarine warfare was still sinking 300,000 tons of shipping per month. In Palestine, the Third Battle of Gaza was just underway. The only good news would be the Allied capture of Jerusalem on 11 December 1917. In the period from March 1918 to July 1918, the Allies still feared they might yet be beaten in Palestine and on the Western Front before United States troops could arrive and become effective.

On the Eastern Front, Russia's capacity to continue the war against Germany had weakened throughout 1917 following the February overthrow of the Czarist regime. After the Bolshevik Revolution in October, Russia signed an armistice with the Germans and adopted a neutral, even pro-German, position. The revolution, however, had many internal opponents known as White Russians. In 1918, they obtained Allied funding, advisors and equipment to campaign against the Bolsheviks and to resume the war against Germany.

The peace treaty with Germany was signed by the Bolsheviks at Brest Litovsk on 3 March 1918 after the Germans invaded southern Russia and the Ukraine, and advanced through the Baltic provinces towards St Petersburg; and Finland had seceded from Russia and accepted German support. The Bolsheviks were forced to cede territory in Finland, Poland, the Baltic provinces, Ukraine, and Bessarabia. In the Caucasus, the Bolsheviks were forced to cede to the Ottoman Empire a province in the north-east of Turkey and hitherto Russian-occupied areas of Transcaucasia and north-west Persia down to the road running east from Baghdad to the Caspian Sea at Anzali.²

The German Spring offensive on the Western Front in March 1918 forced the British Empire to send reinforcements there from Allenby's Palestine front. During this time,

²The reader can best locate places in this paper using the Google maps feature. The paper uses modern map spellings and less obvious name-changes since 1918 are indicated in squared brackets.

¹Email: brycef717@gmail.com

two unsuccessful attacks eastwards from Jerusalem were made before Allenby's force could resume the offensive when reinforced from India.

In Mesopotamia, the British resumed their offensive in late February 1918, capturing Baghdad in March and securing the western (Mesopotamian/Iraqi) end of the road to Anzali in April.

Overview of the Allied Response to the 1917 Russian Revolutions

The Western allies had several concerns after the two Russian revolutions in 1917. Firstly, they had delivered large quantities of military stores to the ports of Archangel, Murmansk and Vladivostok. There was a risk that these would be used by Germany or the Ottomans against them. They also hoped to support the White Russian forces in re-forming active fronts against the Germans and the Ottomans.

Secondly, they feared that Germany's February 1918 advance into Russia would capture important natural, industrial and military resources enabling Germany to evade the British North Sea blockade.

Thirdly, they needed to counter the German strategic push south-eastwards through the Ukraine to capture the oil from the Caucasus. White Russian forces might be capable, if supported, of blocking this German push.

Fourthly, it was vital to reduce the German capacity to reinforce the Western Front. Before the peace treaty with the Bolsheviks, the Germans had transferred 40 divisions. There were still 1.6 million German and Austrian prisoners-of-war in Russia who could rejoin their armies in the West (Winegard 2005).

In pursuit of these considerations, eight Allied nations intervened against the Red Army from June 1918. Within six months, the armistices of late 1918 made an Eastern Front against Germany meaningless and took the Ottomans out of the war. Allied efforts were hampered by divided objectives, war-weariness and a lack of domestic support. Over the summer of 1919, Allied forces withdrew. The Red Army defeated the White Forces in Ukraine, south Russia, and the Crimea by 1920, and in Siberia by 1923. Soviet republics were established in Transcaucasia in 1920. Japanese forces occupied parts of Siberia until 1922 and the northern half of the island of Sakhalin until 1925.

The North Russian Expeditionary Force

In pursuit of the objectives of the Allies, an Allied 'North Russian Expeditionary Force' (NREF) of about 14,000, including about 25-30 Australian volunteers (Grey, 1985), was landed at Murmansk in March 1918 to guard the military stores and raise and train a White Russian Army. Further landings were made at Archangel on 2 August but by then the Bolsheviks had moved the Allied war material south up the Dvina River.

A United States regimental combat team pushed back the Bolshevik forces for the next six weeks but the rapid onset of winter forced a defensive posture. During that winter, a Bolshevik offensive caused the Allies to withdraw a considerable distance.

The Australians assisted by recruiting and training former Russian soldiers, and then encouraging the

resulting White Army to link up with the White Russian forces in western Siberia nearly 2000km to the south-east, and so create a new front opposing the Bolsheviks.

By the time of the Western Front armistice, the Allies had over 14,000 personnel at Murmansk and 16,000 at Archangel. The contributing nations were: Britain, Canada, France, United States, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Finland and White Russia. It was a forlorn intervention to prop up an ineffectual and already disaffected force.

The North Russia Relief Force

In January 1919, the British Government adopted a strategy of either a negotiated peace or a complete withdrawal of all British forces in Russia. The United States president, however, wanted a complete withdrawal (Gilbert 1992: 405-409). This was agreed and Churchill organised the North Russia Relief Force (NRRF), an 8000 strong brigade group, to mask the evacuation by launching an offensive against the local Red Army. The surprise offensive enabled all Allied forces to be evacuated by September 1919. In any case, the White Russian forces in North Russia had mutinied (and killed one Australian advisor (Grey 1985)) and had gone over to the Bolsheviks, while the White Russian Siberian forces proved unable to cross the 2300km gap to their north (Gilbert 1992: 412).

Australians in the North Russia Relief Force

About 200 to 300 Australians waiting in England for repatriation joined the NRRF. They were discharged from the Australian Imperial Force and enlisted to form two companies in the 45th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers and the 201st Battalion, Machine Gun Corps. When escorting the British commander for 130km south down the railway line to Moscow, they surprised the enemy during a relief of their forward blockhouses, killed 30 with the bayonet, wounded many others and set fire to the blockhouses before withdrawing. Australian Corporal Arthur Percy Sullivan was killed-in-action on 29 August and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross (Wigmore 1986:183-184). In another attack, over 3000 prisoners were taken and heavy losses inflicted. Nineteen-days later, the two Australian companies again charged the Bolsheviks and Sergeant Samuel George Pearce won the Victoria Cross (Wigmore 1986: 184-185). Grey argued that the North Russian intervention was pointless because more decisive theatres were elsewhere on the Russian peripheries (Grey 1985). He was referring to Siberia, South Russia and the Transcaucasus.

Allied Intervention in Siberia

Omsk, 2700km east of Moscow on the Trans-Siberian Railway, was the seat of an insecure White Russian Siberian government under Admiral Kolchak. Among Kolchak's Allied advisors were a number of Australians (Grey 1985). The railway continued a further 6400km east from Omsk to Vladivostok, the Pacific port where Allied supplies had been landed.

The Siberian Intervention of 1918–1922 was the name given to the dispatch of Allied troops to the Russian Maritime Provinces with four objectives:

1. to prevent the Allied war *matériel* stockpiles and rolling stock from falling into German or Bolshevik hands;
2. to help the Czechoslovak Legion redeploy to the Western front;
3. to resurrect the Eastern Front by installing a White Russian-backed government; and
4. to secure resource-rich Siberia.

The Allies began landing at Vladivostok in Siberia in April 1918 and remained until 1925. By autumn 1918, there were 70,000 Japanese, and about 7000 other Allied troops in the region.

The Czechoslovak Legion had been a force of 40,000 ethnic Czech and Slovak volunteers in formations of the Tsarist Russian Army. In February 1918, the Bolsheviks granted the Legion permission to journey to the Western Front via Vladivostok along the Trans-Siberian Railway. After delays, the Legion left Vladivostok in September 1920. Some 60,000 soldiers and 11,000 civilians were evacuated with the Czechoslovak Legion. Many formed the core of the new Czechoslovak Army.

Royal Australian Naval Involvement in the Russian Civil War in South Russia

From June to November 1918, the White Russian, General Denikin, controlled South Russia between the Black and the Caspian Seas. There were several Australian advisers with the British Military Mission, one of whom commanded a company of the 7th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment (Grey 1985).

In December 1918, an Australian destroyer, HMAS *Swan*, conducted a reconnaissance on behalf of the British military mission at Denikin's headquarters at Novo-cherkassk to report on conditions at the ports of Mariupol and Taganrog (110 km apart on the Sea of Azov) and the surrounding country. The shallowness of Kerch Strait between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov precluded the use of anything but shallow-draught vessels.

Swan visited Kerch before proceeding to Mariupol. Commander A. G. H. Bond RN, with three Australian officers and six ratings, was travelling by train northwards along the Don River to inspect the training and the fighting some 450km north of the Sea of Azov, when a sudden break-through by the Bolshevik forces caused the abandonment of the investigation.

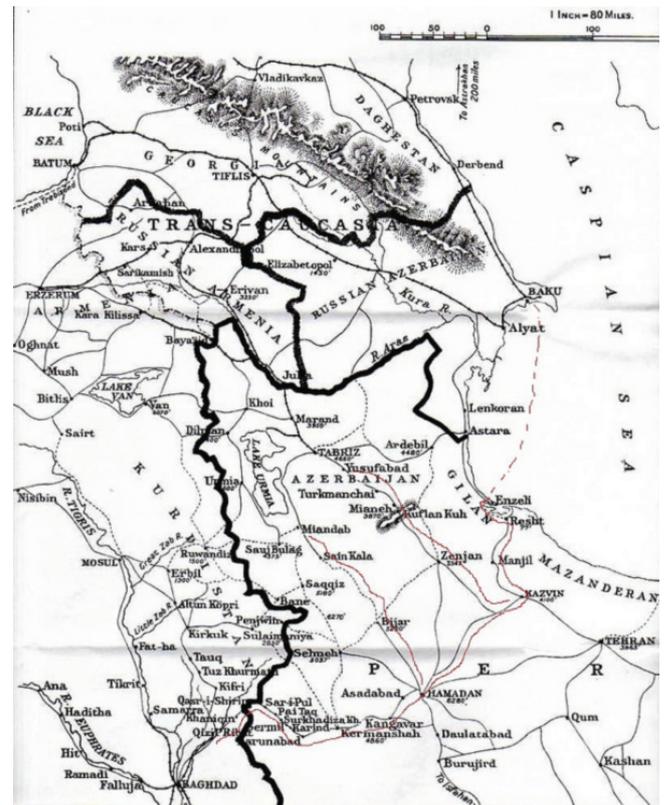
Returning south, they visited an ammunition factory at Taganrog, then the British Mission at Krasnodar, then re-joined *Swan* at Mariupol and proceeded home via Britain in January 1919³.

In the summer of 1919, Denikin attempted to capture Moscow but was forced to retire in October 1919 some 360km south of Moscow and then to the Crimea by March 1920 (Gilbert 1922: 417-420).

Allied Intervention in the Transcaucasus

From the 19th century, Tsarist Russia had governed the Transcaucasus and had linked the oil resources of Baku on

the Caspian Sea by rail and pipeline to the Black Sea at Batumi. A Russian sphere of interest in North Persia had been agreed with the British in 1908, including Russian occupation as far south as the Baghdad–Hamadan–Qasvin–Anzali road to the Caspian Sea, still held by the Tsarist Russian Caucasus Army in March 1917 (Busch 1976: 20-21), when the British Mesopotamian Army captured Baghdad. The Russians, however, had become inactive and, by summer, had abandoned the Baghdad end of the road (Bean 1937: 718-720).



Russian territories in Transcaucasia and north-west Persia in 1918 where Dunsterforce operated.
[Source: The Western Front Association]

In the Transcaucasus, conflicting ethnic, religious and nationalist groups existed. After the late 1917 armistices, Bolshevik Russia ceased operations there, but some small units of Tsarist loyalists remained and the newly independent republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan negotiated local armistices. To the south, Anzali itself was held by pro-Bolshevik forces and the intervening country was subject to raiding by Ottoman, Kurdish or Persian insurgents paid by German agents, who destroyed crops and villages (Winegard 2005). Widespread famine and disease were devastating the local populations.

From February 1918, the Ukraine was held by Germany. Across the Black Sea in Georgia, the Batumi terminus of the oil line was within its reach. Ottoman-German rivalry led to Georgia seeking a German protectorate. The Ottoman forces advanced towards Baku forcing Armenia to surrender (June 1918), then the Ottomans moved into the new republic of Azerbaijan where Baku was held by a separate non-revolutionary government made up of Armenian and Russian forces (Busch 1976: 23).

³HMAS *Swan* (I). Royal Australian Navy website at <http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-swan-i>.

The region was of extreme importance to Britain. Throughout the war, notions of a German-backed pan-Islamic alliance from the Caucasus, across the Caspian Sea and beyond, along the Russian borders of British India, disturbed British supremacy in Afghanistan and modern Pakistan (Busch 1976: 24; Lindenmayer 2018: 157). The defence of Baku would prevent that.

Further south, a 1000km gap had formed on the right flank of the British Mesopotamian Army in which Ottoman and German agents were active. There were pro-British Armenian and Assyrian Christian refugees at Urmia, and a Russian Cossack force of about 1500 men at Qasvin (Busch 1976: 29). The military solution was to limit Ottoman/German access to the western ends of the transportation routes leading towards India. The west to east Baghdad–Hamadan–Qasvin–Anzali road intersected these routes and linked with Tehran. Sufficient Allied forces to close this gap could not be spared, so raising and training local forces seemed to be the only alternative.

Dunsterforce

Major-General Lionel Dunsterville was appointed to lead an Allied force ('Dunsterforce') among whom were 40 Australians, 20 British, 41 Canadians and 10 New Zealanders, drawn from the Mesopotamian and Western Fronts, accompanied by wireless detachments in cars (Winegard 2005). Later, he acquired an infantry battalion mounted in 500 Ford cars, a squadron of cavalry, eight armoured cars, and three aircraft. The Royal Navy set up an impromptu gunboat force on the Caspian Sea to support him (Busch 1976: 44; Dunsterville 1918: 1 June).

Dunsterville needed to secure his line-of-communication along the road from Baghdad to the port of Anzali on the Caspian Sea. The road climbed for 1000km through a succession of mountain ranges and desolate regions, and was frequently raided by Ottoman or hostile Persian forces funded by German/Ottoman agents. Kurdish clans controlled all approaches. By 1 June 1918, he had disposed his force along the road and placed forward elements at Bijar, and near Tabriz which was already Ottoman held (Dunsterville 1918: 1 June).

Once the Tsarist Russians left, the Ottoman Army formed the Islamic Army of the Caucasus to advance towards Baku and mobilise Muslim supporters in the Transcaucasus. They excluded their erstwhile allies, the Germans. By July 1918, they were advancing on Baku (Busch 1976: 23).

The Germans, seeking to secure the oil supplies from Baku for themselves while preventing the Ottomans capturing the area, crossed the Black sea to Batumi on 8 June 1918 to stabilize the pro-German Democratic Republic of Georgia with a 3000-strong cavalry brigade, an infantry regiment, machine-guns and mortars, later reinforced. The Germans confronted the Ottomans crossing the Georgian frontier while advancing on Tbilisi [Tiflis], forcing them to change direction to reach Baku through Azerbaijan.

Dunsterville arrived in Baku on 17 August by sea with a battalion group and an artillery battery, but could not rally its defenders and evacuated his troops by sea on 14

September (Busch 1976: 30). The Ottomans captured Baku on 15 September.

Australians in Dunsterforce

Dunsterville, with his headquarters at Hamadan on the Baghdad–Caspian road, needed to pacify the surrounding region to its north. He established three combat outposts, one of which was commanded by Captain Stanley Savige MC, AIF⁴. Each outpost blocked raids by Ottomans, Kurds and bandits, or delayed them until reinforcements could arrive. All posts had wireless detachments to summon support. Local forces were to be raised (paid with British money), roads constructed and improved, and order established by forming a local police force. Mapping the unknown terrain was essential. The funds paid for this work enabled the local communities to resume trading and alleviate famine. Dunsterville hoped that the British would be able to advance northwards to the oil and rail lines from Baku to Batumi (Savige 1920: Ch 21 – 26).

Savige's party of 35 reached Hamadan on 18 May 1918 and on 26 May was directed to go to Bijar, 177km from Hamadan, via Zanjan where there were two troops of British Cavalry as a ready-reaction force. Bijar (in the Kurdistan Province of modern Iran) was a suitable location to control several routes from the north. Savige's party set about route reconnaissance, map making, famine relief, policing and the raising and training of a local Kurdish militia (Savige 1920: Ch 21).

Pacification soon turned to an operation to rescue Assyrian and Armenian refugees from Urmia, 450km north of Bijar via Quoshachay [Miandab]. This operation has been overshadowed by Australian achievements on the Western and Palestine fronts, yet, Charles Bean called it 'as fine as any episode ... in the history of this war' (Bean 1937: 750). It is still remembered in the Assyrian communities in Australia amongst whom Savige is revered⁵.

In July 1918, Captain Savige, two officers and 23 non-commissioned officers, were ordered to move from their post at Bijar to Urmia to bolster its Armenian, Assyrian and Russian defenders who were under Ottoman siege (Savige 1920: Ch 29). Unfortunately, the defence collapsed before Savige arrived and the city fell to the Ottoman Army on 31 July causing about 70,000 refugees to flee south pursued by Turks and Kurdish militia. The operation now became a humanitarian rescue (Lindenmayer 2018: 169-170; Savige 1920: Ch 32).

From 5 August, Savige placed two officers, six sergeants and two Lewis guns as a rearguard on the withdrawal route to move in bounds on a succession of key ridges once the rear of the long refugee column had passed. By bluffing with fire and movement, they delayed the 500 pursuing Ottomans and Kurds for about 14 days (Savige 1918; 1920: Ch 37, 38). Though many refugees died en route, Savige had saved them from massacre by getting them to Hamadan, from whence they were evacuated to a field hospital near Baghdad. There were 48,927 Assyrian survivors and many Armenians. Perhaps 30,000 were lost without trace (Lindenmayer 2018: 200).

⁴Later, Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Savige KBE, CB, DSO, MC.

⁵K. Kiwarkis *Captain Stanley Savige* at <http://assyrianlevies.info/index.html>.

Savage was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for inspiring his men and putting ‘... heart into the frightened refugees’ (*London Gazette* Supplement, 4 October 1919).

After the decisive British victories at Megiddo, Palestine (25 September) and Mosul (30 October), the Ottoman army had to withdraw from the Caucasus. After the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October, a British occupation force re-entered Baku. The Germans left Georgia in December 1918 and were replaced by the British 27th Division until 1920. A separate British force occupied Baku at the same time and helped establish the Azerbaijan Republic (Qasimly 2006).

Present issues

After a brief alliance with Poland, Ukraine could not prevail against Russian pressure and in 1922 became a republic of the USSR. It achieved independence again in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR.

Ongoing tension between Russia and Ukraine, however, has continued. During unrest in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, skirmishes broke out in Mariupol between Ukrainian government forces, local police, and pro-Russian militants. Russia seized the Crimea and several Australians were among the passengers and crew killed in the shooting-down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine by pro-Russian militia. On 26 November 2018, Russia blocked the Kerch Strait preventing Ukrainian shipping from entering the Sea of Azov. Conflict between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine continues.

The USSR invaded the Transcaucasian republics in 1920 and controlled them until 1991. On 15 September 2018 at Baku, the 100th anniversary of Liberation of Baku from ‘Armenian-Bolshevik’ forces was celebrated with the Turkish and Azerbaijani presidents being the guests of honour at a parade by the armed forces of both countries. In Armenia and Georgia, there have been periodic disputes over territory. The Assyrians remained in Iraq, never receiving territorial recognition and endured a massacre by Iraqi forces in 1933.

The Kurds continue to seek independence in the adjacent parts of four countries: Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The Kurdish regions, however, are not only home to ethnic Kurds, but also to Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens. In south-eastern Turkey, an insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) seeks to liberate a Kurdish region. The PKK is listed as a terrorist group by the United States and several of its allies. North-eastern Syria has recently been liberated from ISIS fighters by the United States-supported Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), but President Trump has just announced withdrawal of United States support. The Kurds there now fear intervention by Turkey. In Iran, a short-lived Soviet-sponsored Kurdish republic was established in 1945-1946 around Urmia. There is now a Kurdistan province of Iran in the region of Bijar; and Iraqi Kurdistan is autonomous within the Iraqi state.

Conclusion

Hobsbawm’s ‘short’ century of conflict has not yet ended. 1991 proved to be a false dawn of peace. Conflict

on the same issues in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East continues to this day. While the late Australian military historian, Jeffrey Grey, writing before the collapse of the USSR, dismissed the Russian Intervention as part of a ‘pathetic sideshow’ (Grey 1985), other historians have thought differently (Winegard 2005; Qasimly 2006). Although overshadowed by the gigantic scale of warfare during the two World Wars and some other disputes, the Russian Intervention was a substantial intervention and Australians played a significant role in it, two winning the Victoria Cross and one the Distinguished Service Order.

The Author: Dr Bryce M. Fraser RFD ED is a former Army Reserve infantry officer who rose to command the 4th Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment, and the 5th Brigade. In civilian life, he became general manager of a major health insurance organisation. Since retiring, he has gained a PhD in military history from the University of Wollongong and has been both a regular contributor to the Institute’s military history seminars and a ‘peer reviewer’ of papers submitted to *United Service*. [Photo of Dr Fraser: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson MC]

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