

RUSSIA BEYOND THE HEADLINES

A global media project sponsored by Rossiyskaya Gazeta
www.rbth.com

Opinion 03

RUSSIAN ROOTS ARE HIDDEN IN ANZAC HISTORY



ELENA GOVOR

HISTORIAN

In Australia, the legend of the Anzacs during World War I grows with each new generation. The Anzacs — the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps — were formed in Egypt in 1915 out of the First Australian Imperial Force and the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force. The Anzacs are best known for their bravery at the Battle of Gallipoli, and for generations, it was commonly accepted that the Anzac tradition was inseparably identified with Australians of British descent. This prevented many of modern Australia's émigré communities from fully engaging with the nation's Anzac past. Only now, almost 100 years after the formation of the Anzacs, is the true diversity behind this national legend finally coming to light — including Russia's contribution.

Examining the Anzac story through the lens of its Russian component poses challenges, as Russia was often considered an enemy rather than a friend of Australia. During the Great War, however, Russia became an ally of the British Empire, and Russian-born servicemen constituted the largest national group in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) of non Anglo-Celtic origin. More than 1,000 Russian-born Australians enlisted in the A.I.F.; of these more than 800 served overseas.

It is not quite correct, however, to call these men "Russian Anzacs." The Russian Empire was a multinational state, and ethnic Russians comprised only half of its population. The composition of the Russian enlistees into the A.I.F. reflected this diversity: many of them were not ethnically Russian; moreover, some of them had fled their native land owing to ethnic or religious persecution by the Russian state. It was ironic then, that in the eyes of the Australian state and people, all Russian-born Australian citizens were considered "Russian," despite these split allegiances and ethnic differences. This complicates the task of determining the self-identification of these "Russian" Anzacs.

The largest group among them, more than half, were Baltic seafaring people — Finns, Latvians, Estonians, Baltic Germans and Lithuanians. Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, Belarusians and Poles, who were then coming to Australia in increasing numbers as laborers, cane-cutters and, occasionally, as political refugees, accounted for roughly 30 percent. The remainder con-

sisted of Jews, Ossetians from the Russian North Caucasus and Russians of Western European heritage.

Russian émigrés had a range of reasons for enlisting in the A.I.F., including patriotic sentiments toward their new country, pressure exerted by the Russian consulate, or even unemployment. But their acceptance into the famous Anzac brotherhood was often hard-won. A lack of English was one stumbling block. In battles fought together, a comradeship with their Australian friends was forged. Major Eliazar Margolin was a Jew who grew up with Russian humanist literature in the Russian town of Belgorod, 400 miles south of Moscow, virtually on the border with present-day Ukraine. He never lost his thick Russian accent. While commanding the 16th Battalion at Gallipoli, Margolin fought tooth and nail for the lives of his "boys," who lovingly dubbed him "Old Margy" — a recognition probably no less important

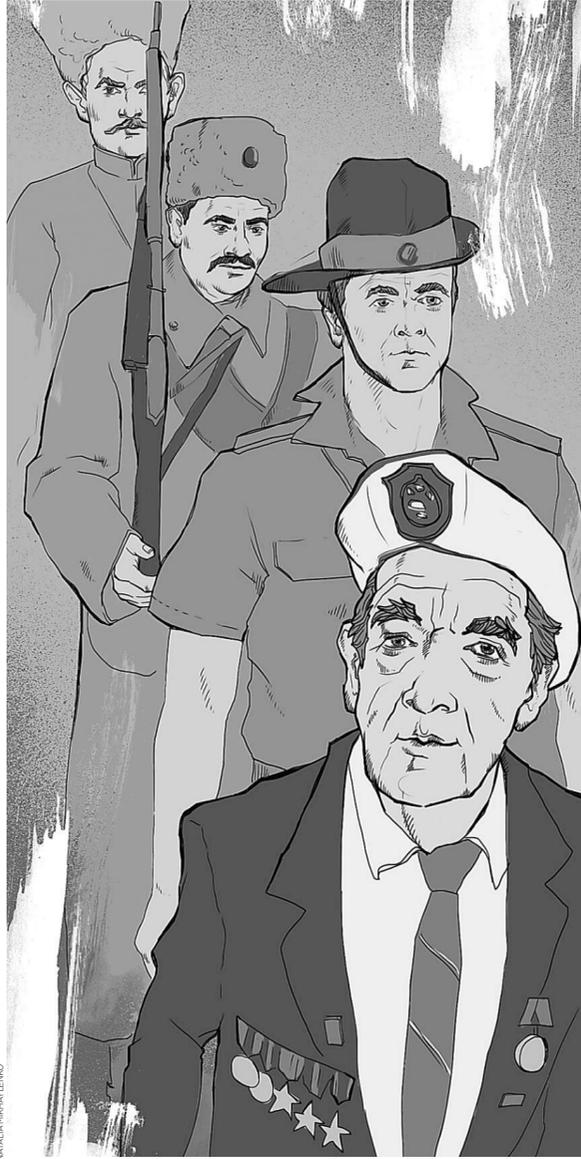
More than 1,000 Russian-born Australians enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force; of these more than 800 served overseas.

to him than the official one acknowledging his bravery with the Distinguished Service Order.

New trials came in 1917 when Russia withdrew from the war and the Bolshevik Revolution began. Favst Leoshkevitch, a seaman who learned English in the trenches from his Australian comrades, later told his son: "What wonderful people our army people were, just soldiers, general soldiers. When the revolution erupted in Russia, nobody spoke to [me] about it and [I] thought that was wonderful."

The decision by these soldiers not to question a friend because of the actions of some far-away politicians in his country is an attitude that is still cherished by the Leoshkevitch family.

But the trials of history were not always so easily overcome. Peter Chirvin from Sakhalin fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front for four years. He was wounded twice. Risking his own life, he carried the wounded from the battlefield — for which he was awarded the Military Medal. He returned to Australia aboard the troopship Anchises in 1919, soon after the Red Flag riots in Brisbane. These riots, which took place throughout 1918 and 1919, were an outgrowth of a growing anti-union and anti-trade movement in Australia, coupled with fears brought on by the Bolshevik Revolution. When soldiers on board the Anchises started



NATALIA MIKHAYLENKO

The acceptance of Russians into the famous Anzac brotherhood was often hard-won. A lack of English was one stumbling block.

abusing him, the only Russian, as a dreaded "Bolshie," their commanding officers did not intervene, regarding the taunts as the usual teasing that most foreigners received. Chirvin committed suicide aboard the ship, the last Australian victim of the long war.

Integrating the Russian Anzacs into Australian life after the war was no easy process either. Here, Australian women were the first to brave the ethnic and linguistic differences in marrying these foreigners. Just like their Australian counterparts, these Russian Anzacs hardly ever told their families about the horrors of the war. But their silence went even deeper: They also left behind their Russian past. Many of them never spoke about it to their

children, who grew up without hearing a word of Russian, Estonian or Ossetian from their fathers. In some cases, children only learned that their fathers were born in Russia when they applied for a passport. This was the case for Pamela Myer, the daughter of Norman Myer, a lieutenant on the Western Front and heir of the Myer Emporium, Australia's largest department store. These men had burned all bridges with their homeland because they had no wish to be associated with the Bolshevik-Stalinist taint of the new Russia. A few returned there, but many of them were arrested and perished in the Gulag.

During this centenary period marking World War I, the Australian War Memorial is projecting the names of those who fought and fell as Australians. This will include the names of the 162 fallen Russian-born Anzacs.

Elena Govor is a research fellow in the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University and author of the book "Russian Anzacs in Australian History."

FINALLY READY TO REMEMBER WORLD WAR I



ALEXANDER VERSHININ

HISTORIAN

Modern Russian historians attribute their country's disregard of World War I to the Soviets. "The principal reason for the unjustified neglect of the First World War in the national consciousness," writes the historian Natalia Narochitskaya, "is the ideologically distorted interpretations put forward during the Soviet era."

Indeed, World War I was forgotten almost as soon as it was over. Official Soviet ideology branded the conflict as an imperialist war in which the bourgeoisie fought each other using the defrauded workers and peasants. The country soon destroyed every reminder of the war. In Moscow, a cemetery where Russia's World War I soldiers were interred was leveled.

World War I was remembered and discussed only insofar as it was the catalyst for the Russian Revolution, and in the end led the Bolsheviks to power. The facts of the extraordinary loss of life the country suffered, as well

"The First World War was the most interesting of wars since before the war there was one Russia, which after became another."

as the success of Russian weaponry, were consigned to oblivion. And after the Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany, the memory of this lost imperialist war slipped completely from the public consciousness. There was no place for World War I in the ideological and political context of the Soviet system.

The war is perceived very differently in the West. For Europe, the events of 1914-1918 were a tragic and painful ordeal: millions were killed, cities ruined and the continent's foundation collapsed. In Russia, where World War I was followed by a no-less-destructive civil war that resulted in the establishment of a totalitarian system, all this was quickly forgotten.

Europe had a similarly long road to recovery to eradicate the deep cultural trauma of World War I. Attempts to overcome the negative memories of the war by creating war heroes and by using it as a principal symbol for the birth of European nationalism led to the even greater catastrophe of World War II.

The grandchildren of those who fought in France at the Marne and Verdun, however, perceived World War I entirely differently than their grandfathers did. For this younger generation — the citizens of a uniting Eu-

rope — the war was an utter tragedy; its memory should be preserved so that nothing like it will ever happen again.

Today, this is the narrative that dominates European attitudes toward the war. Armistice Day, Nov. 11, is celebrated as a national holiday in several European countries and is recognized as a day of remembrance across the continent.

This way of remembering the war can be attributed to the changes that Europe has undergone in the past 100 years. Today, the continent is united and former enemies in the Great War are now connected through both economic and political structures.

There is no place for nationalism in a united Europe. The experience of World War I is meaningful, but it is treated as a historical event, albeit a significant one.

Russia also has the opportunity to look at World War I as a historical event. World War II, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, has been transformed into a mythic event in the nation's historical narrative. As such, its events will always be shielded from revision and reinterpretation.

World War I has no such halo of sacredness, and, as a result, Russians can study the events and learn from them. And indeed the war could provide some interesting case studies and lessons for Russia.

The historian Anatoly Utkin wrote: "The First World War was the most interesting of wars, since before the war there was one Russia, which after became another. Moreover, the memory of this war appears more relevant to us decades later, when the mistakes and losses of those years resound with a new echo. On the whole, World War I was a test of Russia's maturity. And Russia, unfortunately, did not survive this test, although the country demonstrated incredible dignity and heroism."

For most Russians, however, World War I remains a blank page in the historic record book. It is not clear to the average man on the street why Russia got involved in the conflict in the first place, given the turmoil in the country at the time.

Was it not possible for Russia's leaders to see the approaching revolution in the events leading up to the war? And how was it possible that Russia lost a war that was nearly won, not as a result of problems on the field of battle, but because of the final disintegration of the political system?

These are key questions in Russian history, and today attempts to find the answers to them are arousing interest in World War I among Russians. The number of books now in circulation devoted to the topic is growing; museums are being established, and family memories of those distant events are being revived. In Moscow in August, a long-awaited monument to Russian soldiers of World War I was dedicated. After 100 years, historical justice has finally been done.

Russia Direct

CONVERTING MONOLOGUE INTO DIALOGUE

Russia Direct is a forum for experts and senior decision-makers from Russia and abroad to discuss, debate and understand the issues in geopolitical relations from a sophisticated vantage point.

Quarterly Report: The Future of Innovation



The Russian government identified innovation development as a priority in the mid-2000s. Now, economic growth based on innovation is gaining new momentum thanks to an unexpected push — economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Sanctions could force Russian companies to look for domestic solutions to technological problems and to accelerate economic modernization.

ARE THERE LESSONS FOR TODAY IN PAST COOPERATION?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Menning sees World War I as "a tale of two endeavors," pointing to the "paltry amount" of direct military assistance and arms transfers to Russia in comparison with other countries, as well as to the facilitation of aid and assistance to enemy prisoners of war in Russia.

"Each of these endeavors was marked by false starts, misunderstandings, structural impediments, practical obstacles and mid-course alterations," he explained.

In contrast, Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union during World War II was an impressive success story, he added. The U.S. offered military assistance early; by October 1941, a Soviet delegation was in the U.S. to work out administration and details.

Oleg Budnitskii of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow pointed out that although U.S.-Russia relations before and during World War I were not the best, Russia relied on American technology and equipment to build railroads that were crucial for the country's military logistics during wartime.

In those years, Russia was facing a collapse of its transport system and needed to fix the problem urgently to

carry troops and materials to the front. Likewise, World War II saw the U.S. propping up Russia with its Lend-Lease program, so that Russia wouldn't have to fight with Germany without allied support.

The opinion of Vladimir Pechatnov of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations echoes Budnitskii's view. The experience of bilateral cooperation during World War II showed that a union between Russia and the U.S. is possible, provided that joint and common interests exist, Pechatnov said, adding that nothing brings countries together more than a common enemy. After all, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill hated Russia, but did his best to contribute to its victory over Germany, while U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt was the main initiator of the union despite the U.S.-Russia rivalry.

Pechatnov argued that Russia and the United States are more likely to see each other in black-and-white terms during the Ukrainian crisis because "now we don't have a common enemy."

Oleg Grinevsky, a diplomat and professor at the Russian State Humanities University, suggested that a common enemy could be found in radical Islam and terrorism, and that forming

a united front against these threats should bring the U.S. and Russia to the negotiating table. Pechatnov, however, disagreed. "[Fighting against] international terrorism doesn't bring us together," he said, admitting that tensions are exacerbated by the fact that turbulent events are happening on Russia's border.

Vladimir Sogrin from the Institute of World History at the Russian Academy of Sciences says that despite their history of collaboration during the world wars, Russia and the U.S. have always been at loggerheads, but that these differences were simply de-emphasized when the countries were allies.

Olga Pavlenko, the Head of the Department of International Relations and Area Studies and another of the conference's organizers, agreed: Regardless of the difference in geopolitical goals and interests, the U.S. and Russia should work together no matter "if we like it or not," because such collaboration is vital today for future security, she said.

"In the current situation, there is an increasing role for the political leadership of both countries," Pechatnov said, arguing that instead of playing up to public opinion or the narrow interests of lobbying groups, U.S. and

Russian leaders should find deeper connections between the two countries.

Mark Kramer, Director of the Cold War Studies Program at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, is doubtful that any agreement can be found in the current political climate. While Kramer acknowledges that the West and Russia have overlapping interests on issues such as counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, nuclear proliferation, public health and environmental problems, he believes that the potential for cooperation shouldn't be overstated.

Although there is "definitely some leeway for cooperation," Kramer said, Russian President Vladimir Putin is hardly likely to agree to anything more ambitious.

Kramer is also doubtful that lessons from history really help. "My experience over the years has taught me that policymakers will cherry-pick the 'lessons' they want to learn (lessons that reinforce their existing beliefs) and ignore things they don't find suitable. As a result, I regard the whole practice of drawing historical lessons to be a waste of time."

Pavel Koshkin is the deputy editor-in-chief of Russia Direct and a contributor to Russia Beyond the Headlines.

ACCESS ALL RUSSIA DIRECT REPORTS WITH ONE CLICK
russia-direct.org/archive

September Monthly Memo: Terrorism



How and why did counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and Russia fail to reach its early promise? Today, in the face of threats from radical Islamic terrorist organizations to both American and Russian interests, is there anything that can bring U.S. and Russian negotiators back to the table to discuss the best way to work together to combat new terrorist threats? Find out in the latest RD monthly memo.