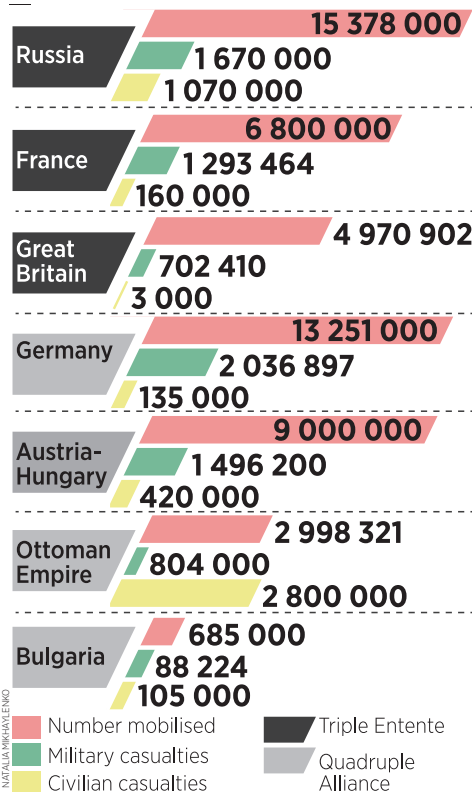


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MIRALIA WIKALENKO

WHEN EMPIRES WERE ALLIES

The forgotten stories of WWI's "Russian Anzacs"

Elena Govor
HISTORIAN



Examining the Anzac story from a Russian perspective poses challenges, as Russia was often considered an enemy of Australia.

During WWI, however, Russia was an ally of the British Empire, and Russian-born servicemen were the largest national group of non-Anglo-Celtic origin in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). More than 1000 Russian-born immigrants enlisted in the AIF, of whom more than 800 served overseas.

The expression "Russian Anzacs", which I use as an umbrella term for all these men, needs some clarification.

Many "Russian" enlistees had been born in the Russian Empire but were not ethnically Russian

The Russian Empire was a multinational state in which ethnic Russians comprised only half the population. And the composition of the "Russian" servicemen reflected this diversity.

Many "Russian" enlistees had been born in the Russian Empire but were not ethnically Russian. What's more, some of them had fled their native land because of religious persecution by the Russian state.

But in the eyes of Australians and the Australian government, all these men were "Russian" despite their split allegiances and ethnic differences. The largest group among them, making up more than half, was of Baltic peoples: Finns, Latvians, Estonians, Baltic Germans and Lithuanians.

Ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and Poles (who had been coming to Australia in increasing numbers as labourers, cane-cutters and occasionally as political refugees) accounted for roughly 30 per cent. The remainder consisted of Jews, Ossetians from the Caucasus and Russian-born Western Europeans.

Russian emigres had a range of reasons for enlisting in the AIF, including patriotic sentiments, pressure

from the Russian consulate and even unemployment.

Their acceptance into the famous Anzac brotherhood was often hard-won, and lack of English was one stumbling block. But it was in battles fought together that comradeship with their Australian mates was forged.

Major Eliazar Margolin, a Jewish-Australian who grew up in Central Russia, never lost his thick Russian accent. While commanding the 16th Battalion in Gallipoli, Margolin fought tooth and nail for the lives of his "boys", who lovingly dubbed him "Old Margy" – a recognition probably no less important to him than the official one acknowledging his bravery, his Distinguished Service Order.

But new challenges faced Russian servicemen when Russia withdrew from the war after the 1917 Bolshevik coup.

Peter Chirvin, from Sakhalin, fought at Gallipoli and on the Western front for four years, where he was wounded twice. Risking his 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 so-called Red Flag riots in Brisbane. When soldiers on board started abusing him, the only Russian around, as a dreaded "Bolshie", their commanding officers knew about it but did nothing to intervene.

What they regarded as "the usual teasing that most foreigners got" drove Chirvin to commit suicide aboard the ship.

Integrating the Russian Anzacs into Australian life after the war was no easy process either. Australian women were the first to brave ethnic differences in marrying these strangers. But like many of their Australian mates, these men rarely told their families about their experiences at war.

Sometimes their silence went deeper, with them not even telling their children about their background. In some cases, children only learned that their father had been born in the Russian Empire when they applied for a passport. This was the case for Pamela, daughter of Norman Myer, a lieutenant on the Western Front and heir of the Myer Emporium.

These men had burnt their bridges with their homeland because they had no wish to be associated with the new Bolshevik Russia.

Exhibitions A museum dedicated to World War I opens near St Petersburg

New museum first of its kind in Russia

Russia's first museum dedicated entirely to its involvement in World War I opened this summer in the town of Pushkin, near St Petersburg.

IRINA KRUZHLINA, KATHERINE TERS
SPECIAL TO RBTH

A new museum with a permanent exhibition called *Russia in the Great War* opened in August in the St Petersburg satellite town of Pushkin (also known as Tsarskoye Selo).

The museum is housed in a striking heritage building called the Martial Chamber – a complex built in Russian Revival style as a military history museum during the final years of Tsar Nicholas II's reign.

Elena Tretyakova, widow of the brother of the founder of the Tretyakov Art Gallery in Moscow, was the museum's founder, curator and one of its key patrons.

The Martial Chamber's

Great War Museum first opened in early 1917.

But in 1919 it was closed down, and in the early years of Communist rule its exhibits were relocated or destroyed.

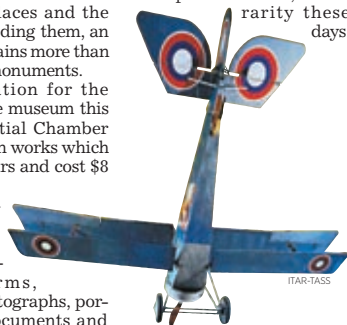
In 2008, the building was transferred to the Tsarskoye Selo State Museum-Preserve. This is a heritage trust which includes Catherine and Alexander's palaces and the parks surrounding them, an area that contains more than 100 historic monuments.

In preparation for the opening of the museum this year, the Martial Chamber had restoration works which took three years and cost \$8 million.

The museum's collection includes clothing, military uniforms, weapons, photographs, portraits, and documents and correspondence from the period.

Probably the most striking exhibit is a model of a French Nieuport-17 fighter – a common fighter plane in WWI – which is suspended from the ceiling of one of the museum's halls.

A black, yellow and white Imperial Coat of Arms flag is also part of the exhibition. Flags like this, which symbolise Imperial Russia, are a rarity these days.



Nieuport-17 is also part of the permanent exhibition

Few of them survived the Soviet period, because until World War II, being in possession of them was an offence punishable by execution.

A very personal exhibit is a telegram sent by Tsar Nicholas II to German Kaiser Wilhelm II (who was his first cousin), shortly before the outbreak of hostilities. In the message, Nicholas reminded Wilhelm of their friendship, and affectionately signed the telegram "Nicky."

Ominous photographs of dogs and horses in gas masks stand out in the museum's photo galleries. And gas masks themselves, which were developed in Russia by scientist Nikolai Zelinsky, are also on display.

For further details about the museum and other attractions in Pushkin, go to tzarru.

The town of Pushkin, just 24 kilometres from the centre of St Petersburg, is easy to get to by local train or minibus.

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