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The Forgotten Expedition of the Michigan Polar Bears

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Introduction

In 1917, President Wilson signed off on the sending of thousands of American troops to fight in Northern Russia, the beginning of an operation that would mark a monumental piece of history. The American Expedition into Northern Russia, also known as the Michigan Polar Bear expedition, saw Allied forces leading a controversial invasion of Russia, occurring near the end of World War I. Some historians argue that this invasion served as a catalyst of the Cold War, physical fighting that led to great tension and terror created and sustained between the two great superpowers of the USSR and the United States. Despite thousands of soldiers being sent to Russia to fight in the Russian Civil War, the Polar Bear Expedition has been lost from collective memory. After something as significant as an American invasion of Russia, how did we as a country forget? Knowing the deep impact the event had on the soldiers who fought, where in the timeline from then to now did this piece of history become erased? Our research looks at the impact that the intervention had on the soldiers and on the Holland community, and how that impact has changed over time to the state of being nearly forgotten.



Hypothesis For Why It Was Forgotten

- Some soldiers believed that they were overlooked because politicians believed that the Russian expedition was insignificant in comparison to the troops returning from Europe. Another reason that this piece of history became obsolete in American history is the shame and embarrassment felt by President Wilson's administration for involving American troops in such a quagmire.
- The unwillingness of the government to acknowledge these events suggests their desire to suppress this time in history.



A Soldier's Perspective

- The general experience of the Polar Bear soldiers consisted of confusion, frustration, and a little resentment.
- Many believed they were on their way to Europe to join the US front in Italy or France. On soldier from Holland, MI wrote "I do not know myself where we are going, but I suppose it will be somewhere in France."
- After docking in England, the soldiers went through further training with the British army, under who the expedition would be facilitated.
- No official reasons for fighting were ever fully disclosed to US soldiers.
- Left under the command of the British Army, soldiers no longer felt that America was even looking out for them. Veteran Martin Rotman commented on his memories of the events saying, "the way I understand it the members of Congress didn't even know we had American soldiers in Russia! That was, we was sold."
- One son of a veteran recalled that, "The British just treated them like garbage. They were lucky to get enough to eat....They had to hunt for wild life."
- American soldier morale was low, and only continued to drop as the ambiguous expedition continued. They were not fighting to save their homeland, or even for the idea of democracy, but only to get back home.
- Even when the Great War in Europe came to an end, and celebrations back home were in full swing, the Polar Bears continued their fight in Russia for several months.

Community Reaction

- Troops remained in Russia for more than six months after the armistice without any idea of when they were going to return home.
- Families traveled to Washington D.C. to demand that Congress bring their boys back home. In Holland, the mayor organized an official petition to appeal to the government to bring back the soldiers who were in Russia.
- Parades and celebrations greeted the soldiers in Detroit and Holland to celebrate their safe return.
- The bodies of those who had died in Russia remained there for nearly ten years until the government allowed an expedition in 1929 to return to Archangel and retrieve the bodies of 86 fallen soldiers of the Expeditionary Force.



Why This is Important

- America demonizes the USSR and continues to criticize Russian intervention and spying into US affairs. Americans forget that the US was the first to interfere by invading Russia.
- Multiple US Presidents have contradicted its occurrence in public speeches. President Reagan, while giving a radio address to the nation, proclaimed, "No American boy has ever stood toe to toe against any Russian boy and as long as I am President, that will never happen."
- Anytime a piece of history is forgotten, it puts the future at risk to repeat a similar course of action. A more informed public is always important, as we are all political members of this democracy.

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