An Inconceivable Odyssey

The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia, 1914-1920

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Abstract

A great deal of the material produced regarding the Czechoslovak Legion that fought in Russia focuses on its story rather than the reasons for its remarkable successes. This article begins by briefly summarizing the Legion's activities in Russia, then outlines the various military and geopolitical challenges that beset this army, and finally explores why the Legion was able to overcome these difficulties, which, I argue, was due to the Legion's unorthodox structure, its adaptable diplomatic policy, and its ability to supply itself. Along with secondary sources, newspaper articles, and contemporary accounts of both the Legion's campaigns and the Allied intervention in Siberia, this article primarily uses the memoirs of Gustav Bećvář, a former Legionnaire who published *The Lost Legion*, an account of his time in the Legion, in London in 1939.

Article

Introduction

The Czechoslovak Legion's achievements on various Russian fronts between 1914 and 1920 cannot be understated. A small force of men, initially fighting under the banner of the Russian Empire, was forced, during the Russian Civil War, to transform itself into an army and to make its way across thousands of miles of desolate and potentially hostile territory, going all the way from the Ukraine to Vladivostok in the Russian Far East. For much of its existence, this detachment operated as an army without a country. It was an army whose aim was to aid in the creation of a country through military service with the Entente against the Central Powers. Even after that aim had been fulfilled with the creation of Czechoslovakia on October 28, 1918, the situation on the ground remained unchanged, and the Czechoslovak Legion stayed in Russia until its final evacuation was complete in 1920.[1] The Legion was obliged to conduct its campaign on unfamiliar terrain, surrounded by foreign forces, and without the prospect of steady supply and reinforcement from the Czech lands, as Czechoslovakia did not achieve independence until October 28, 1918 and was unable to support an expeditionary force in the middle of Russia even after it had achieved self-rule, and the Legion itself was blocked from overland supply routes by the Red Army.

[1] John F. N. Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia, 1914-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 148-156.

With hindsight, the odds stacked against the soldiers of the Czechoslovak Legion seem nearly insurmountable to any modern army. They belie the question of how was the Legion able to successfully fight across and extricate itself from Russia? However, the Legion was not an ordinary army. Predating the creation of Czechoslovakia, in the eyes of the Entente the Legion was one of the greatest legitimating forces for the nascent Czechoslovak liberation movement. It behaved akin to a state unto itself, as, for all intents and purposes, it was one. It was viewed as a co-belligerent with the Entente, though the Volga-Ural campaign would show this to be a double-edged sword. It had its own command hierarchy, independent from a central government prior to Czechoslovak independence, and far too removed for effective governmental control afterwards. Though it did receive some blanket directives from Czechoslovak political leadership, the Legion by and large pursued its own foreign policy. It also maintained its own independent economy as it traveled through Russia from 1918 onward. In this regard, it can be viewed as a Czechoslovakia *in absentia*. Despite the difficulty of its journey through Russia, the various military forces and political entities it had to contend with, and the lack of a supply and reinforcement base, the Czechoslovak Legion was mostly able to maintain its cohesion as a unit and successfully extricate itself from Russia to an independent Czechoslovakia in 1920. It did so through an organized yet unorthodox structure that allowed flexibility when dealing with the warring Soviet and White Russian governments as well as with British, French, American, and Japanese interests, and successfully creating and maintaining its own supply base.

This article focuses solely on the Czechoslovak Legion that fought in Russia. Through four sections, this article first examines the origin of the Legion in Imperial Russia. It then briefly traces the Legion's various campaigns across Russia. The final two sections are devoted to analyzing the various obstacles the Legion faced during its time in Russia and the solutions it undertook in response to these challenges. This article shows that, thanks to its unusual structure and state-like attributes, including an independent foreign policy through an independent command and its own mobile economic infrastructure, the Czechoslovak Legion had the wherewithal to fight in and withdraw from Russia successfully.

The Legion's Creation

World War One provided the impetus for the creation of the Czechoslovak Legion. There was a large expatriate population of around 120,000 Czechs and Slovaks living in the Russian Empire by 1914.[2] This fact did not go unnoticed by the Tsarist government, which had issued a proclamation at the outset of hostilities declaring the First World War to be a conflict between Germanic and Slavic cultures, regardless of the government's actual interest in independence movements.[3] Thus, Saint Petersburg was extremely receptive to—or at least eager to pay lip service to—the idea of pan-Slavism, wherein Russia would lead and protect a united Slavic world, and to a military force that embodied this vision. In this context, the Czechoslovak unit was made all the more attractive as it could provide valuable service against the Central Powers. Sensing Russian interest, the Czechoslovak

[2] Ibid., 14.

[3] Henry Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 20. This is a reprint of an account of the Legion first published in 1926.

nationalist committees, which had been formed in Russia, were only too happy to assist in this endeavor.[4] Despite dissension both within the various Czechoslovak political organizations in Russia and between those organizations and the Russian government, the formation of the Česká Družina, or Czech Brigade, was approved by the Russian Army Council on August 20, 1914.[5][6] This was the initial unit of what became the Czechoslovak Legion.

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding its formation, the Brigade had a relatively muted beginning. The first volunteer drive within the Czechoslovak expatriate community was only able to produce 777 men willing to serve in the Brigade's ranks. This inability to recruit would continue to challenge the Družina as well as the later Legion.[7] Furthermore, many of the Brigade's higher-ranking officers were Russian rather than Czech or Slovak.[8] Despite this, several talented Czech and Slovak soldiers went on to have distinguished careers in postwar Czechoslovakia. For example, Stanislav Čeček, Zdeněk Fierlinger, and Vojtěch Klecanda joined the Družina at its inception and helped provide the backbone for its later success.[9]

The Legion's Activities

Following some further expansion to reach a strength of around 1,000 men, the Družina was assigned to the southwest front to fight against Austro-Hungarian forces.[10] It soon distinguished itself in combat and in intelligence gathering.[11] Until 1917 the Družina was engaged primarily in intelligence rather than combat, as the ability to glean information from the Czech and Slovak troops fighting for the Central Powers was deemed to be more important than fighting on the front lines.[12] Then, in the late spring and summer of 1917, the Družina saw real action as an entire unit for the first time and distinguished itself in Galicia at the Battle of Zborov.[13] This was a critical juncture in the history of the Legion. It was at this point that the Legion evolved from an intelligence unit into a fully fledged fighting force. At the close of the 1917 offensive, the former Družina, now part of the 1st Czech Division, was sent behind the lines in Ukraine for rest, replenishment, and reorganization.[14] By the end of 1917, the Czechoslovak Legion had become a reality, consisting of two divisions and at least 28,000 soldiers.[15] During the interim, another

[4] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia,* 16.
[5] Ibid., 18-21.
[6] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 22.
[7] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 17.
[8] George Kennan, "The Czechoslovak Legion," *The Russian Review* 16, no. 4 (October 1957): 4.
[9] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 26.
[10] Ibid., 27.
[11] Ibid., 29. For example, seven men under then-Lieutenant Čeček captured 127 prisoners on December 24-25, 1914.
[12] Ibid., 42.
[13] Ibid., 54-55; Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 48. At Zborov, the Družina captured over 4,000 enemy troops while suffering less than 1,000 casualties of its own.
[14] Vladimir Nosek et al., "The Odyssey of the Czecho-Slovaks," in *Source Records of the Great War*, vol. 6, eds. Charles F. Horne et al. ([New York]: National Alumni, 1923), 148.
[15] Ibid.; Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 57; Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 56. There are numerous estimates of force size within the sources I have used for this article. Bradley gives the most

revolution had convulsed Russia in November 1917, this time advancing the cause of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks.[16] Czechoslovak leadership, worried that the Legion might find itself entangled in the Russian Civil War, counseled a policy of nonintervention, and, outside of some early November engagements in Kiev, this was adhered to.[17] The Legion spent the remainder of 1917 actively abstaining from the conflict.[18]

At the beginning of 1918, it was clear that the situation in Ukraine was becoming untenable. The country had declared independence in January 1918, but was heavily dependent on Germany, and, in any event, it was roundly defeated by the Red Army at the end of the month.[19] The Czechoslovak Legion, though ostensibly neutral in "Russian" internal affairs, was still an army of a belligerent power fighting on the side of the Entente, and it became increasingly threatened by German and Austro-Hungarian forces throughout the late winter of 1918, being compelled to make a fighting retreat out of Kiev at the beginning of March.[20]

On March 15, 1918, Czechoslovak representatives concluded an agreement with the Soviet government for the Legion's free and unmolested passage across Russia to Vladivostok, and units immediately began to embark on trains.[21] However, this agreement broke down by mid-May 1918 due to an incident between the Legion, repatriated prisoners of war, and Bolshevik officials in Chelyabinsk.[22] As a result, the Legion had to engage in open conflict with Red forces in order to withdraw from Russia, and, by September, it had fought its way into control of a contiguous portion of almost the entire Trans-Siberian Railway, the sole transportation artery in 1918 that crossed the whole of Russia and upon which the Czechoslovak forces were moving.[23] It seemed that a rapid redeployment to the Western Front was in the offing. However, this was not to be. Tomáš Masaryk, who would later become the first president of Czechoslovakia, was instrumental in the Czech Legion and had by this point engaged in talks with the Americans, British, and French, and, despite his "Tokyo Memorandum" urging recognition of the new Soviet government, anti-Bolshevik elements prevailed upon him.[24] At the urging of the Entente powers, it was decided that the Legion would, in conjunction with an allied expeditionary force and White counter-revolutionary troops, open up an anti-Bolshevik front.[25]

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conservative estimate, at 28,000 troops, which is the one listed. Hoyt gives a figure of 40,000 men, and Nosek claims that there were between 60,000 and 80,000 effectives within the Legion at this time.

[16] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand,* 54-55.

[17] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 61.

[18] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 92.

[19] Ibid., 94.

[20] Ibid., 98-99.

[21] Ibid., 80.

[22] Gustav Bečvář, *The Lost Legion: A Czechoslovakian Epic* (London: S. Paul & Co., 1939). 88. This was the only full original account from a legionnaire's perspective that I was able to find in English. Bečvář began the First World War serving in the Austro-Hungarian Army, was taken prisoner by the Russians, and later joined the Legion in 1917. He served though the final evacuation in 1920.

[23] Ibid., 151.

[24] Josef Kalvoda, "Masaryk in America in 1918," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 27, no. 1 (1979): 86-90.

[25] R. Ernest Dupuy, *Perish by the Sword: The Czechoslovakian Anabasis and Our Supporting Campaigns in North Russia and Siberia 1918-1920* (Harrisburg: The Military Service Publishing Co., 1939), 78.

The front took shape along the Volga River in the late summer and fall of 1918 and despite early victories, the Legion soon found itself engaged in a fight it could not hope to win.[26] It was outnumbered by four Red armies in the Volga area and was stretched out with other military formations in a 150,000 man army across an 800-mile front.[27] The hold on the front grew steadily more tenuous while morale began to drop precipitously, and several regiments mutinied.[28] This demoralization had become so pervasive that the Legion was ordered off the line for good in January 1919 and was instead assigned to guard the length of the Trans-Siberian Railway.[29] From then on, the Legion was not involved in any front-line combat. At this point, it seemed nigh-on-impossible that the Legion would be able to successfully remove itself from Russia, and if not for its innovation in the face of such adversity, this would have almost certainly been the case.

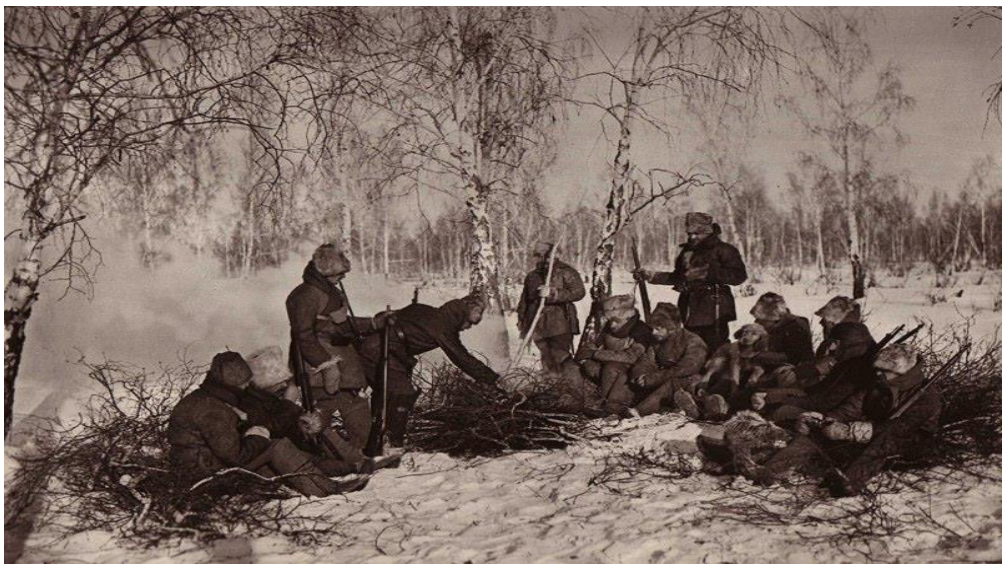

Figure 1: A patrol of Czechoslovak Legionnaires in Russia., c.1918.[30]

Throughout 1919, the Czechoslovak Legion stood guard along the railroad, while the White government in Siberia lurched from crisis to crisis.[31] It became increasingly clear that the Legion would need to be evacuated from Siberia for good or face its own destruction, as the White armies had collapsed and internal dissension became more pronounced by the day.[32] Finally, on September 28, 1919, the official order for a final retreat to Vladivostok and subsequent departure from the port was given.[33] The evacuation—a chaotic and grim affair

[26] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 186; Dupuy, *Perish by the Sword*, 194. The important town of Kazan, along with the State Bank of Russia's gold reserves, fell in early August, but was evacuated in September.
[27] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 187.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 186.
[30] *A Czechoslovak Legion patrol in Russia*. 1918, Wikimedia Commons, accessed April 22, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Czech_Legion_in_forest.jpg.
[31] Ibid., 187-189.
[32] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 137-139.
[33] Ibid., 141.

that witnessed the final breakdown between the Legion and the White Siberian government and subsequent handover by the Legion of the head of that government, Admiral Kolchak, to leftist elements—finally ended on November 30, 1920, well over a year since it had begun.[34] Czechoslovak military involvement in Russia was over, more than six years after the Družina was formed. Though it had been a bloody, complicated, and drawn-out journey, the Czechoslovak Legion was eventually able to make its way across Russia to be sent home at long last.

The Legion's Obstacles

In order to appreciate the how the Legion was able to succeed, it is first necessary to examine how it could have failed. The three greatest issues that dogged the Legion were bolstering morale, the geopolitical circumstances in which the Legion found itself entrapped, and the lack of a supply base. The maintenance of morale and unit cohesion in an entirely foreign setting was of great importance to the Czechoslovak Legion. This is an issue that plagues any army, especially those that are isolated without the recourse of calling up fresh troops, but, due to various events that transpired in Europe from late 1917 onward, was made doubly important for the Legion. The Russian Revolutions brought with them a breakdown in the social hierarchy, as illustrated by this episode witnessed by Gustav Bečvář, a former prisoner of war who joined the Legion prior to the retreat from Ukraine:

> Just then a policeman rode up and shouted at the carter to stop torturing his beasts. Long custom had taught the officer to expect almost abject servility in response to the smallest complaints, and it was clear that he was astonished at the immediate effect produced by his words. Instead of obeying the order, the carter shook his whip furiously and swore aloud. "You—, you have nothing to say any more. Your time has gone for good. Clear out of my way, or I'll smash you as you deserve." In the old days such a reply would have been utterly inconceivable. Now the constable looked round awkwardly to see if anyone had witnessed the incident, and, turning his horse, rode away without a word in reply to the insult that had been offered to his authority and to the uniform he wore. We watched this scene with amazement. "That," said Fiala solemnly as we passed on our way, "means that the Tsarist regime is finished."[35]

This phenomenon was, of course, not solely limited to the home front in Russia. In fact, the Russian Army and Navy experienced even more extreme versions of it, with unpopular officers being removed from their units and occasionally lynched.[36] Such attitudes were extremely common in Russia during the Civil War, and so this kind of revolutionary fervor was always going to be a threat to unit cohesion in the Legion, given its regular interactions with Russian soldiers, officials, and civilians who espoused these views, as well as its extended and steadily more unpopular stay in Russia.

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[34] Ibid., 148-156.
[35] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 50.
[36] S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis 1890-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 115.

Morale was also negatively impacted by events happening outside of Russia. The declaration of Czechoslovak independence and the armistice on the Western Front both occurred at roughly the same time and were twin blows to Legion morale when word arrived of their occurrence in late fall 1918.[37] As Czechoslovakia now existed and the German Empire was no longer fighting on the Western Front, the Legion now had no reason to continue to fight, and many Legionaries began to question why they were still in combat in Russia.[38] Mutinies and more mundane acts of insubordination happened with greater and greater consistency throughout the last quarter of 1918, to the point that the Czechoslovak Legion was no longer viable as an offensive fighting force, and it was ordered off the line in late January 1919.[39] The Hungarian invasion of Czechoslovakia was a further blow to morale, though this occurred after the Legion had been pulled off the line.[40]

Another challenge that the Legion faced was that it was isolated on foreign soil and caught between competing interests at almost all times. These interests were not necessarily well-disposed towards the Legion, especially since the Legion's nominal allies could prove troublesome. The Družina did not engage in much front-line combat while the Tsar was in power, and even after the February Revolution the Družina's status was very much murky, as Kerensky, the Defense Minister in the Provisional Government, did not trust Czechoslovak soldiers and considered them to be "reactionary."[41] As a result, the challenging task of negotiating with Kerensky and the Provisional Government had to be undertaken, and it would require an exceptional individual to do so.

The October Revolution was a further complication. When the Legion was withdrawn from the front following the 1917 Kerensky Offensive, it was stationed in Ukraine, and there it found itself in an unenviable position following the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd.[42] At the beginning of 1918, it was clear that the situation in Ukraine was becoming untenable. The country had declared independence in January 1918 but was heavily dependent on Germany, and, in any event, was roundly defeated by the Red Army at the end of the month.[43] However, German forces began to pour into Ukraine at the Ukrainian Rada's request, and thus the Legion was caught between German forces and, because it had fought under the Provisional Government the year before, unfriendly Red ones.[44] Eventually, the Legion chose what it perceived to be the lesser of two evils and negotiated with the Bolsheviks rather than fighting them along with the Germans. On March 15, 1918, Czechoslovak representatives concluded an agreement with the Soviet government for the Legion's free and unmolested passage across Russia to Vladivostok, and units immediately began to embark on trains.[45] Unfortunately for the Legion, this agreement was only honored in the breach throughout its journey to the Russian Far East, and subsequent

[37] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 104
[38] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 198-200.
[39] Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 186.
[40] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 207.
[41] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 51.
[42] Nosek et al., "The Odyssey of the Czecho-Slovaks," 148.
[43] Ibid., 94.
[44] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 63.
[45] Ibid., 76-78.

confrontations with the Bolsheviks were commonplace.[46] Some units found themselves almost completely disarmed, as the Bolsheviks sometimes demanded the surrender of most weapons and left only the bare minimum for self-defense.[47] Furthermore, the Legion also encountered many German and Austrian former prisoners of war in the process of repatriation, and, as Bečvář illustrates, violence could break out:

> The train was actually beginning to move slowly out of the station when suddenly a piece of iron was hurled from one of the prisoners' coaches. The missile struck a Czech named Duchacek in the head. Duchacek collapsed, badly wounded. Furious anger seized the friends of the victim of this malicious and entirely unprovoked attack. Leaping on the running-boards of the coaches, they succeeded in stopping the still slow-moving train. Other Czech troops came running, and when they heard what had happened they assisted in dragging the prisoners from their coaches, and only the strenuous efforts of officers saved the Austrians from being lynched on the spot. The Legionaries had had previous experience of the lenience often extended by the Bolshevik authorities towards the Austrian and German prisoners, and so they now insisted that the matter should be investigated on the spot, and the identity of the aggressor established before the train was allowed to proceed on its way. The prisoners were, therefore, interrogated at once, and, frightened by the threatening attitude of the Czechs, they indicated the man who had thrown the piece of iron. Fierce shouts broke out in the crowd, and a moment later the Legionaries had thrown themselves upon the culprit. It was useless for the officers to intervene. When, after a few minutes calm was restored, the Austrian's limp body lay still upon the ground.[48]

This incident, which occurred on May 14, 1918 in the town of Chelyabinsk, resulted in a complete breakdown in relations between the Legion and the Bolsheviks, and open hostilities had commenced by the end of May.[49] This interrupted the already disorderly evacuation, and Czechoslovak forces were once again obliged to fight in order to leave Russia.

Diplomacy with its allies was also problematic for the Legion. The Entente powers wished to keep the Legion in Russia to fight the Soviets alongside White forces, even after the Legion's purpose for fighting in Russia in the first place had been fulfilled with Czechoslovak independence and the end of the First World War.[50] The Entente Powers pinned their hopes in a counterrevolution against the Bolsheviks on Admiral Kolchak, the White dictator of Siberia after November 18, 1918 who was manifestly unsuited to the task set before him and greatly ill-disposed toward the Legion, both of which made him

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[46] Kevin J. McNamara, *Dreams of a Great Small Nation: The Mutinous Army that Threatened a Revolution, Destroyed an Empire, Founded a Republic, and Remade the Map of Europe* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 178.
[47] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 80-81.
[48] Ibid., 88.
[49] Nosek et al., "The Odyssey of the Czecho-Slovaks," 149-150.
[50] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 199.

extremely difficult to deal with.[51] However, the Entente's support for an independent Czechoslovakia was of the utmost importance, even after official Czechoslovak independence, and so the Legion had to find some sort of accommodation with them, in spite of the frustrations such a course engendered.

Finally, the Legion was also faced with the task of staying supplied. It had to deal with either mistrustful or outright hostile Russian governments, who were loath to grant it assistance and sometimes even demanded the Legion's own supplies in exchange for safe passage.[52] The Legion did not have a home country for much of its existence, and even after Czechoslovakia had declared independence, it had to organize its own internal affairs and deal with a Hungarian invasion, so there would no help coming from that quarter.[53] The Legion's allies in the Entente were attempting to supply White forces in Russia and encountering enormous amounts of corruption and apathy, so any help from them would be limited as well.[54] Therefore, the Legion had to assume the lion's share of responsibility for supplying itself.

The Legion's Solutions

The reasons for the Legion's success can be distilled into three distinct factors. It was well organized, and yet it had an unorthodox structure. Given that the Legion acted akin to a state unto itself and adopted its own diplomatic stance in lieu of direction from Prague or the rest of the Entente, it was able to deal with various political and military bodies flexibly, no matter the alignment of those bodies, while, for the most part, keeping in mind its goal of eventually reaching the Western Front to fight the German army and then going on to an independent Czechoslovakia post-victory. Finally, the Legion was obliged to make its own supply base and did so with great success.

The Czechoslovak Legion's structure and organization stood it in good stead throughout its sojourn in Russia, especially given the social upheaval that unfolded around it. Some of the Russian officers in the Družina feared revolutionary fervor in their men like that which had gripped the Russian armed forces, but in 1917, these fears were not realized.[55] The Družina's structure, as stated by Bečvář, helped to prevent this:

> In certain respects our organization was curious, for we were certainly not a military group in the ordinary sense of the term. Discipline was strict, but the relationship between officer and private was brotherly. That is to say, we called each other "brother," and when speaking to an officer the correct form of address was "brother captain," "brother lieutenant," as the case might be. And under all circumstances the second person singular, the intimate "thou," was used.[56]

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[51] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 222-226.
[52] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 76-81.
[53] Ibid., 207.
[54] Phelps Hodges, *Britmis: A Great Adventure of the War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 74-76.
[55] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 53.
[56] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 53. John Reed mentions a similar relationship existing between the officers and men of the Serbian Army in his *The War in Eastern Europe* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916). Given that comparatively small force's surprising successes against the Austro-Hungarian forces in the early days of

The importance of the relationship between officers and enlisted men cannot be overstated, particularly in the extremely demoralizing context of revolutionary Russia. The closeness of the enlisted Legionaries and their officers played a large part in insulating the Czechoslovak Legion from the instability and upheaval that characterized Russian formations during this period. It provided for the retention of pre-revolution organization and discipline. Furthermore, the Legion had its own "parliament," giving the soldiers a sense of representation in government, though it was dissolved by Milan Štefánik in late 1918 after Czechoslovak independence had been declared and the Legion was no longer obliged to act as a nation unto itself in that regard, as it now had a central government to direct it from Prague, though this did not change the situation on the ground.[57] This stability enabled the Legion to embark on its campaign to Vladivostok and maintain the campaign for an extremely long period of time. The fact that discipline in the Legion only broke down well after the way to Vladivostok had been cleared is due in large part to the fact that the enlisted men trusted and obeyed their officers, at least in some measure due to their "brotherly" bond and to the feeling that even an enlisted man's opinion counted for something in the Legion, despite the horrendous circumstances in which they found themselves. Furthermore, this meant that officers were able to retain their positions and gain valuable experience without having to worry about their men deciding to remove them from their positions or worse. This produced an experienced officer cadre, which was a great asset to the Legion when it was facing the less experienced, less organized, but numerically superior Red forces in 1918. Though the Legion did foster an extremely unorthodox officer-enlisted man dynamic and was far more democratized than armies generally are, this proved greatly beneficial in the long run, notwithstanding its "unmilitary" aesthetic.

The Legion was also caught between powers which were at best unreliable allies and at worst bitter enemies, most of which could destroy the Legion if pushed hard enough. Therefore, the second factor contributing to the Legion's success in the face of challenges was its flexibility. The Czechoslovak Legion had to deal with most of the players in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Russia in one form or another, outside of the Central Powers, and its pliability in handling various agendas was a major factor in its successful movement across Russia. Tomáš Masaryk was supremely important in this regard. He had contacts within the Russian Provisional Government, such as Paul Miliukov, and he not only utilized those contacts but also personally intervened with Kerensky in order to ensure that the Družina was properly looked after.[58] After the October Revolution, the Legion was faced with the reality that it could no longer count on Russia as a patron and that it would have to find a way to leave the country. Meanwhile, German troops were closing in on the Legion's positions in Ukraine.[59] Rather than retreat pell-mell or engage the Germans alone, the Legion fought alongside Bolshevik troops.[60] Following that, in March 1918, after

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the First World War, as well as the aforementioned feats of the Czechoslovak Legion, there is some merit to the idea that a degree of familiarity between officers and men can be highly beneficial to an army.

[57] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 198.

[58] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 52-55.

[59] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 98-99.

[60] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 79.

protracted negotiations, the Legion was granted permission to cross Russia by the Sovnarkom.[61] Unfortunately, the price of this freedom was the loss of a good deal of the Legion's equipment to rapacious commissars who either modified or ignored Moscow's instructions.[62] This willingness to work with the Bolsheviks was not a mistake, however. As the Volga-Ural campaign of the summer and fall of 1918 illustrated in stark detail, the Legion was simply not capable of fighting a protracted land war on a wide front with the Bolsheviks. By negotiating with them, the Legion was able to buy itself valuable time to continue sending contingents down the Trans-Siberian Railway, as a break with the Bolsheviks was most likely inevitable in any case.

Along with the Bolsheviks, the Czechoslovaks had to handle White Russian entities and their erstwhile allies in the Entente. Although it was not in outright conflict with the Entente or the Whites, the Legion still encountered difficulties with both of these groups, yet it was necessary to work with them. Though there was no real reason to stay in Siberia and fight the Red armies, the Legion acquiesced to an Entente-White request to remain on the Volga-Ural front, and then continue to guard the Trans-Siberian Railway once it had been withdrawn from the front lines.[63] This was necessary for several reasons. Thanks to a 1917 agreement, the Legion was technically considered to be part of the French Army.[64] Allied ships and money would have to be used in the final evacuation from Vladivostok, and the French, British, and Americans had to be kept mollified in order to ensure that, when the time came, the resources necessary to depart from Russia for good would be forthcoming.[65] Further complicating matters in this regard, there was a great deal of dissension among the Entente powers concerning the degrees of responsibility Britain, France, and the United States would take when the Legion was evacuated, adding a greater sense of urgency to the Legion leadership's efforts to forestall tensions with the Entente.[66] Additionally, there were some Allied troops fighting in Russia alongside the Legion, and, as such, the Legion had to accede to at least some Entente requests or risk abandonment and the destruction of the entire Czechoslovak Army Corps.[67] To boot, Admiral Kolchak, the dictator of White Siberia after November 18, 1918, virulently disliked the Legion and could have easily worsened its situation had they not nominally been on the same side.[68] Thus, the Legion had to work with the Allies and the Whites to leave Russia, though it paradoxically meant delaying its departure from Vladivostok.

This flexible foreign policy would not have been possible if the Legion was not empowered to act with a remarkable degree of independence. Had it been more constrained by higher political authorities, there is a chance that the Legion would have either acted too slowly or simply would have made incorrect decisions due to directives that were not issued with an

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Bečvář, *The Lost Legion*, 80.
[63] Dupuy, *Perish by the Sword*, 78; Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 186.
[64] Karel Herman, "The Czechoslovak National Liberation Movement in the Nineteenth and Beginning of the Twentieth Centuries," *East European Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (June 1990): 222.
[65] Rowan A. Williams, "The Odyssey of the Czechs," *East European Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 25.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 278.
[68] Ibid., 212, 223-224.

understanding of the situation in Russia. Although there was some direction from higher authorities that could prove costly, most notably when the Legion was ordered to stay in Siberia to fight the Bolsheviks, the Legion exhibited a remarkable state-like autonomy, and this independence proved to be supremely valuable asset.

Creating and maintaining a supply base was another large part of the Czechoslovak Legion's success in Russia. Czechoslovakia had not declared its independence in 1917, and, even after it had in 1918, there was simply no feasible way for the Legion to be supplied from Czechoslovakia. It was alone in a foreign country, without its own stocks of weapons, ammunition, and other necessities of war, let alone food and clothing for the cold climate. In this regard, the February Revolution and the failure of the 1917 Kerensky Offensive were of great help. These two factors combined to form a heavily demoralized and almost entirely impotent Imperial Russian Army, which was apt to leave the field in a hurry, minus its weapons. For example, "At Tarnopol … they [Czechoslovak soldiers] came upon the very heart of the Russian retreat, and found field guns, rifles, ammunition, stores, and every military item lying on the roadside. But … the men managed to salvage only two rifles apiece, ammunition, and some machine guns."[69] Furthermore, the Provisional Government continued to supply the Legion before the October Revolution.[70] The Ukrainian collapse of early 1918 also afforded the Legion similar opportunities to those found in Galicia.[71] Additionally, the Legion was able to avail itself of captured stocks on several different occasions.[72]

The Legion also had an independent financial infrastructure that helped to spur economic development in its environs and helped ensure a steady supply of purchased supplies. This was the Legionaries' Bank. Founded in 1918, the bank was funded by Czechs and Slovaks both in Russia (as part of the Legion or otherwise) and abroad.[73] It was used (in Russia) to revive the war-torn economy of Siberia and restart production at munitions factories, as well as to make purchases of foreign weaponry, munitions, and parts.[74] This was a truly unique entity, and further evidence of the Legion's state-like qualities. Conventional armies generally do not operate their own banking systems, nor do those banking systems purchase munitions, provender, and other martial supplies, or help sustain regional economies. However, the Legion did just that and, in doing so, helped to secure its supply base. Thanks to the capture of foreign supplies as well as the purchase and production of the same financed by the Legionaries' Bank, the Czechoslovak Legion was able to sustain its operations in a foreign country without a country of its own upon which it could depend for supplies. The creation of its own supply base and network was one of the greatest coups accomplished by the Czechoslovak Legion in Russia, and without it, the Legion would almost certainly have been destroyed or severely diminished.

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[69] Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 52.
[70] Bradley, *The Czechoslovak Legion in Russia*, 56.
[71] Ibid., 74.
[72] Hoyt, *The Army Without a Country*, 141; Nosek et al., "The Odyssey of the Czecho-Slovaks," 150.
[73] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 200-201. This entity has alternately been referred to as a "financial office." However, "Legionaries' Bank" is the term Baerlein gives.
[74] Baerlein, *The March of the Seventy Thousand*, 202.

Conclusion

The Legion did not fade into irrelevance after it returned home. The Legion Bank in particular assumed great importance during the postwar years. The bank followed the Legion home in 1920 and immediately became a crucial part of the Czechoslovak central banking system.[75] Though the bank would eventually decline before its nationalization after the Second World War, the Legion Bank building in Prague remains as both a memorial to the Legion and a testament to its lasting legacy in postwar Czechoslovakia.

Figure 2: The façade of the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions in Prague.[76]

The Czechoslovak Legion faced overwhelming odds during its service in Russia and still managed to accomplish its primary objective. This success would not have been possible without the Legion's exceptional qualities. A conventional army with a conventional hierarchy that did not have the wherewithal to act as a sovereign power unto itself would most likely have met its doom on the steppes. However, the Legion was not a conventional army, and it acted with a state-like autonomy, and thus, it triumphed. Though the Czechoslovak state was not forged during the Legion's trek, it is not at all a stretch to state that the Czechoslovak state's shield was. Marching and fighting across the vast Russian wastes nearly broke the Legion, but it soldiered on and helped foster the hopes of an unborn country until it triumphantly returned after that country had been made a reality.

[75] Jakub Šiška, "Bank der Tschechoslowakischen Legion-Sonderbare Kreditanstalt der Zwischenkriegsära," *Radio Praha auf Deutsh*, March 3, 2015, https://www.radio.cz/de/rubrik/geschichte/bank-der-tschechoslowakischen-legion-eine-sonderbare-geldanstalt-der-zwischenkriegsaera.

[76] Photo by Nicholas Fixler. "The Façade of the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions in Prague," April 15, 2019.