

Russian Expeditionary Force

By [Sofya Anisimova](#) and [Gwendal Piégais](#)

Summary

The Russian Expeditionary Force in France and in Macedonia (“Brigades russes en France et en Macédoine” in French and “Russkij èkspedicionnyj korpus” in Russian) was an ensemble of four brigades (approximately 45,000 men) sent to the Western and Macedonian Fronts by the Russian Empire to fight alongside the French army in 1916. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the brigades underwent several mutinies against Russian officers and French authorities.

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Negotiations

In December 1915 and March 1916, two French delegations led by [Paul Doumer \(1857-1932\)](#), and [Albert Thomas \(1878-1932\)](#) and [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#) respectively asked Tsar [Nicholas II \(1868-1918\)](#) to send [Russian soldiers](#) to [France](#), which desperately needed more manpower on the [Western Front](#), in exchange for an increase in war material deliveries. The tsar declared he wanted to help his allies but was sorely lacking the men to do so. Despite being also opposed to the project, General [Mikhail Alekseyev \(1857-1918\)](#) consented to send around 40,000 soldiers to fight in foreign theatres in exchange for war material. These troops came to be known as the Russian Expeditionary Force (or Corps in Russian literature) and were arranged in four special brigades (two for France and two for [Macedonia](#)). The decision to send Russian troops to the Balkans was in fact the implementation of a plan already suggested by [Nikola Pašić \(1845-1926\)](#) in 1914 and supported by the Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Sazonov \(1860-1927\)](#), who believed that [Russian](#) presence in the Balkans would give Russia leverage in the postwar negotiations.

France

The First Russian Special Brigade consisted of two regiments and was formed in January 1916. Major-General [Nikolai A. Lokhvitskii \(1867-1933\)](#) was appointed as its commander. It reached Marseille in April 1916 after having traveled via the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#) to Dailan and then via boat through the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. It was joined by the Third Special Brigade in August 1916. Both brigades fought at [Verdun](#) before being transferred to a quieter section on the front in Champagne.

In April 1917 [Champagne](#) became the ground of the bloody offensive conceived by the French Commander-in-Chief [Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#). Russian troops performed well, but both brigades suffered multiple [casualties](#) and were pulled out of the front and stationed in [La Courtine Camp](#) for [rest and reformation](#). At this time, the news of the [February Revolution](#), which was previously concealed by officers, reached the majority of Russian soldiers. As a result, a [mutiny](#) broke out. The soldiers formed [Soviets](#) and requested to be sent back to Russia.

Remarkably, at the early stage of the mutiny Russian soldiers were not protesting the war itself, but rather fighting away from their homeland. As the mutiny progressed, soldiers' demands radicalized. The French command and the loyal elements of the Russian forces violently suppressed the mutiny in September 1917. Its leaders were arrested. Some were [executed](#) and some sent to prisons in France and North Africa. The mutiny and the news of the Bolshevik revolution magnified French concerns regarding the loyalty of the Russian soldiers. The brigades never returned to the frontline.

Macedonia

Immediately after arrival in Salonika in August 1916, the Second Russian Brigade, under command of Major-General [Mikhail K. Diterichs \(1874-1937\)](#), was sent to the frontline near Florina. There, Russian soldiers took part in the fighting against the [Bulgarians](#), along with their French and [Serbian](#) allies. After taking the city on 17 September 1916, they were joined by the Fourth Brigade. Both units were involved in the capture of Monastir (now Bitola) in December. During winter of 1916-1917 they held the line along the Cerna River and waged a mountain war of coups de main.

The news of the February Revolution did not cause great trouble in the ranks of the Second and Fourth Brigades. The soldiers were sworn into the new [government](#) peacefully. But malaria ravaged all the armies in Macedonia. Between October 1916 and September 1917, only a quarter of Russian evacuees were wounded ones, while the overwhelming majority were sick. In February and March 1917 alone, around 7,500 Russians were evacuated;

staggering figures for two brigades of just 24,000 men, with no reserves. Due to the constant deficit of manpower on the Salonika Front, the brigades also contributed to several actions in [Greece](#), including the forced abdication of [King Constantine \(1868-1923\)](#) when allied forces seized Athens in June 1917. Petrograd also took advantage of other actions in Greece to assert their influence in contested areas, for example the orthodox monasteries on Athos Mountain.

After their participation in the May offensive, the brigades were assigned to new positions around Prespa Lakes. As in the rest of the Russian army and Russian brigades in France, Soviets were formed. These various committees and meetings taking place in the Macedonian villages increasingly became a forum for discussion and debate that the rank and file made their own. Soldiers asked for clarification of the reasons for their presence in Greece and soon enough asked to go back to Russia. War weariness, lack of [permissions](#), Bulgarian [propaganda](#), and finally the news of the Bolshevik coup caused massive refusal to resume the fighting in November and December 1917. Fearing a frontline collapse, French General [Adolphe Guillaumat \(1863-1940\)](#) decided to finally remove Russian troops from their positions.

After 1917

After the mutinies in La Courtine Camp and Macedonia, Russian soldiers were split into three categories: loyal elements that were willing to continue to fight; soldiers unwilling to fight but ready to become workers in France or Greece; and those unwilling to fight or work.

The first category formed the Russian Legion of Honour (Légion Russe pour l'Honneur), a few hundred-strong units that continued to fight with the French army until 1918. It was part of the French Moroccan Division under command of General [Daugan \(1866-1952\)](#). It took part in the [Second Battle of the Marne](#) in July-August 1918 and in November-December 1918 was a part of the first French occupying troops in the [Rhineland](#).

The second category was scattered across farms and factories in France, while the third category suffered the harshest treatment: soldiers were organized in [forced labor](#) battalions and were predominantly sent to [Northern Africa](#). In Greece, the setting up of workers' detachments met with pronounced hostility. Despite the conditions under which the soldiers were detained, they tried to set up clandestine soviets. They were brutally repressed by the French military authorities.

Once the war was over, the question of repatriation of the Russian soldiers was raised. Most were gradually sent back by the [French government](#) in 1919-1921. Most of the officers and about 3,000 soldiers chose to remain in France rather than to return to Soviet Russia.

Memory of the REF

Russian soldiers sent to fight in foreign lands for Imperial Russia's allies were an important political gesture that was later widely recalled both in France and in Soviet Russia.

The beacon of REF remembrance in France was the [Association of Russian Officers](#) – Veterans of the French Front. It took care of the [cemetery](#) for REF soldiers in St Hilaire-le-Grand. Appealing to the fact that the Russian legion kept fighting for France even after the revolution, the Association presented the soldiers as a part of Imperial Russia that kept its promises to the Allies. This image has persisted in Russian emigration [historiography](#).

In Soviet Russia veterans also formed an Association of Former Soldiers of the Special Russian Brigades in France and in the Balkans, but it promoted very different values from its French counterpart. Supported by the Soviet government, the association tried to portray France as a “treacherous ally” that paid for its [imperialist](#) interests with the blood of Russian soldiers.

Even today, the [memory](#) of the REF continues to be politicized. For instance, in France there are two separate memorial associations dedicated to the memory of the Russian soldiers in France and the munition in La-Courtine respectively, which lean to either monarchist or socialist views.

In Russia the image of the REF is now often used to highlight Russia's ties to France. In 2011 Russian President Vladimir Putin and French Prime Minister François Fillon unveiled a memorial to the REF at Place du Canada in Paris.

Sofya Anisimova, University of St. Andrews

Gwendal Piégais, Université de Bretagne Occidentale

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- [Danilov, Yurii N.: **Russkie otriady na frantsuzskom i makedonskom frontakh, 1916-1918 g.g. : po materialam arkhivov frantsuzskago Voennago ministerstva**, Paris 1933 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
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[Sofya Anisimova](#) and [Gwendal Piégais](#)

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