

## Military Matters – The Czech Legions Return through the Suez Canal.

Edmund Hall (ESC 239)



*Czech troops passing through the Suez Canal*

At the outbreak of war in 1914 the Czech people, living mainly in Bohemia Moravia, were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austro-Hungarian regiments were based on region, so some comprised as much as 90 per cent Czechs or were dominated by another ethnic group.

Calls for more autonomy or even independence arose at the end of the 19th. century. At the start of the 20th century, the idea of a “Czecho-Slovak” gained support for the shared aspirations of the two peoples for independence from the Habsburg state. In early 1915, after

the outbreak of World War I, Tomáš Masaryk made his way to Western Europe, where he was recognised as the representative of the underground Czech liberation movement and conducted a vigorous campaign against Austria-Hungary and Germany. In 1916 Edvard Beneš, Milan Štefánik (a Slovak ) and Masaryk created the Czechoslovak National Council. Masaryk in the United States, Štefánik in France, and Beneš in France and Britain worked tirelessly to gain Allied recognition. They helped to form Czech legions for the French and Italian fronts.

At the turn of the century, some 100,000 Czechs had emigrated to Russia, settling mainly in and around the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. At the start of the war, anxious to prove their loyalty to their new homeland (and to avoid internment), these expatriate Czechs asked the government of Czar Nicholas II – who spoke often of pan-slavic brotherhood and had hinted at support for an independent Czechoslovakia - to allow them to form their own army units to fight the Austrians.. These units are normally thought of as the Czech Legion.

The majority of the Czech regiments of the Austrian Army fought on the eastern front with many deserting to Russia, in a couple of case nearly whole regiments. By 1917 the total number of Czech soldiers in Russia exceeded 130,000.

After the February revolution of 1917 the Czechs organised an executive council and appointed their own officers to rule their army, instead of submitting to Russian generals. With the ensuing chaos of the Russian Revolution resulting in the collapse of any central authority, the Czechs found themselves entirely free to do as they wished.

They set off for Vladivostok in order to be shipped to France where they would serve with the French. This immeasurably lengthy route was considered safer in avoiding the main warring factions of the civil war.

The Allies began to realise that the Czechs could be of use to stop the Bolshevik revolution: they promised the Czechs independence in return for their maintaining control of the Trans-Siberian railway and supporting the anti-Bolshevik White Russian forces. The Allies sent their own forces to northern Siberia, comprising troops from various countries including a large Japanese contingent. Not until February 7, 1920, when a truce with the Bolsheviks was signed at Kujtun Station did the Allies agree to transport the legion home from Vladivostok. The last detachment left in September 1920.



together with two stamps produced for the Legion's use.

The sea route, in most cases, included a passage through the Suez Canal. Whether there were opportunities for sightseeing is doubtful but I have an Egyptian postcard, of Medinet Abou, written in Czech and properly franked with a four millième stamp, sent to the new republic of Czechoslovakia. It's 'cancelled' with one of the field post office handstamps used in Siberia,

### Russian Office cover goes for €8,500

Mike Murphy (ESC 240)

There are not many items that can truly be said to be unique – but if the Russian Office cover presented among the “Rarities of the World” at Feldman’s in Geneva on the evening of December 4 does not qualify, then I do not know what does.

This truly beautiful and fascinating postal history item from the Russian Office in Alexandria is a folded letter that started out in 1864 from Haleb (Aleppo) in Syria, with a sender’s blue oval handstamp of Joseph E Hava / Aleb, Syrie. Addressed presumably to a relative in Marseille, it is endorsed in manuscript “voie d’Alexandrie”, and received the Russian Office stamp PORT ALEXANDRIA in blue on both back and front on arrival in April 28.



Transferred to the French Post Office, it had two Napoleon 10 centimes and two more of 40 centimes added and tied by the French '5080' in a diamond of dots on May 12. Alongside is the Alexandrie Egypte doubling CDS, with an ornate boxed P.P. in blue together with a boxed P.P. in black. The Paq. Ang. Marseille arrival CDS in red is May 24(?).

**Set in auction with an estimate of €6,000 - €9,000, it went for €8,500. And why not?**