

Frozen in Time:

Public Memory, the Polar Bear Expedition, and the Triumph of the Regional Vernacular

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Forgotten: Past and Present

The Soldiers of the 339th Infantry Regiment, part of the American Expeditionary Force North Russia, found themselves forgotten in more ways than one. While the rest of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) celebrated the armistice on November 11, 1918, the 339th Infantry Regiment found themselves engaged in a desperate fight for their lives. Outnumbered and outgunned in the forgotten hamlet of Toulgas, they might as well have been on the Moon in the minds of the American public.¹ Their war would drag on for another nine long months. These soldiers composed the smallest slice of American troops committed to the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War. They would soon be known as the Polar Bears, due to their service in what became known as the Polar Bear Expedition.

Carol Reardon's *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* notes that, "memory begins when something in the present stimulates an association."² By that measure, the of conflict of World War I stimulates comparatively little in the public consciousness of America. An outside observer needs to go no further than visiting the "Price of Freedom: Americans at War" exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. The space dedicated to World War I is the smallest area in the entire exhibit. It is only natural that there is not a single note or reference within the museum regarding the American participation in the Russian Civil War. Admittedly, the Allies' intervention in North Russia constituted only a minor

¹ Joel Moore, Harry Mead, and Lewis Jahns, *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviki: Campaigning in North Russia 1918-1919* (Detroit, Michigan: The Polar Bear Publishing Co, 1920).

² Quoted in Carol Reardon, *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3.

part of World War I, and a forgotten one at that. It is perhaps no surprise that the Polar Bears possessed little agency in crafting the national narrative of their conflict.

John Bodnar, author of *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, infers that two types of memory, vernacular and official, exist in the United States. In this line of thinking, the official memory is crafted by the nation-state. A certain “dogmatic formalism,” exists within the elite social classes that typically dominate government. This unseen force shapes the narrative to fit the goals and purposes of those in power. In turn, the localized memories of those impacted most by conflict constitute the vernacular memory. The vernacular culture and memory often conflict with that of the official memory. Bodnar alleges that public memory begins where those two types of culture meet.³

The story of the Polar Bears is a story of the triumph of local vernacular memory against the juggernaut of official memory. It begins with their return home far after the end of the Great War. Arriving back in Michigan, the soldiers of the 339th Infantry Regiment quietly filtered back into their prewar civilian lives and careers. Their impact on their community would be much more pronounced than other American regiments, however. The 339th lacked geographic diversity in its composition. This differed from some other US Army formations from World War I, such as the 82nd Infantry Division which included members from all 48 states in the union at

³ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, 1. paperback print (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 13-16.

the time.⁴ Due to the makeup of the unit, 90% of the 5,500 soldiers in the 339th came from the state of Michigan. Of the vast majority of these men, 70% in fact, were from Detroit.⁵

In many ways, the Polar Bears were the proverbial black sheep of the American Expeditionary Force during the Great War. While the rest of the American forces went to Europe and achieved glory in the fight against Germany, the 339th found itself in an ambiguous conflict against Bolshevik forces. Public records of their exploits in the United States spoke noticeably less of them in comparison to their more famous comrades fighting in France. When the AEF in North Russia finally made the news, most Americans were likely surprised to learn that their nation's sons were fighting the nascent Bolshevik state in a place that few could find on a map. When their deployment to northern Russia carried on, seemingly indeterminably, there arose a public furor demanding their return home.

Establishing Regional Agency

The Polar Bears bore the unfortunate hardship of being reluctant participants in an unlikely war that none of them intended to fight. Reports of mutiny and disobedience marred an otherwise exemplary service record forged in the most trying of circumstances and conditions. These allegations would haunt the early American public memory of their wartime exploits. As the days turned into months, the 339th remained unaware of the debate caused by their continued absence. Devoid of leadership, soldiers began to grumble. Over time these grumbles turned into near rebellion and mutiny. News of their recalcitrance would meet with

⁴ G.K. Rutledge, "Name for 82nd Division to Be Chosen by next Sunday," *The Atlanta Georgian*, April 2, 1918.

⁵ Gladys Cooper, "Polar Bears No Longer 'forgotten Men' of WWI," *The Lapeer Country Press*, August 26, 1981.

disastrous consequences in the United States.⁶ To put things in perspective, the 339th was made up of draftees, and the war in France was over.

In the early spring of 1919, months after the end of the Great War, news of the 339th's alleged mutinies began to filter back home. These reports, reluctantly confirmed at the time by the War Department, were quickly seized upon by major newspapers such as the *New York Times*. The men of the 339th contended that they were drafted to fight Germany, and that America was not officially at war with the Bolsheviks in Russia.⁷ The American public was not ready for a debate about the legality of a foreign war, nor the status of conscripts fighting it. It was 1919 and the public consciousness was already fixating on peace and establishing postwar prosperity.

As dark clouds of suspicion gathered, the initial public goodwill garnered by the Polar Bears began to dissipate. Only in the Upper Midwest region, specifically their home state of Michigan, would the public remain loyal. In terms of the vernacular memory, the support that the Polar Bears would enjoy in the future was already present. The relatives of the Polar Bear soldiers actively wrote to the War Department in an effort to preemptively influence any expected discipline for the mutiny.⁸ Subsequent effort to redeem themselves in the public eye would see members of the regiment go so far as to accuse that, "a Polish boy [in the 339th]

⁶ David Foglesong, *America's Secret War against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917- 1920* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 228.

⁷ "Americans Rebel in North Russia," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1919, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/04/11/97087435.pdf>.

⁸ "ASK LENIENCY FOR MEN: Detroit Relatives of Mutinous Soldiers Appeal to War Department," *The New York Times*, April 13, 1919, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/04/13/96292805.pdf>.

misinterpreted [an] English order.”⁹ Somewhat contradictorily, their commanding officer, Colonel George Stewart, would state that the reports were, “very, very highly exaggerated.”¹⁰

Although the rest of the nation may not have noticed, a surprising amount of fanfare awaited the 339th Infantry Regiment by the time they returned home in the summer of 1919. On July 4, 1919, the citizens of Detroit would greet the regiment with parades, and a public ceremony honoring their service.¹¹ They were unaware at the time that their experiences and the vernacular memory of their exploits would pale in comparison to the official memory of World War I and those who served in France in the coming years. Regardless, there existed a pulsing vein of pride that emanated from the state of Michigan.

Returning the Fallen

The true extent of the casualties suffered by the Polar Bears in Russia would not be public knowledge until several months after their return.¹² Few remembered their loss outside the state of Michigan. In the decades to come, the American narrative on the history of the Great War rendered the Polar Bears of the 339th a footnote at best. However, they remained beloved in their home state of Michigan and the upper Great Lakes region. Far from being treated as an also-ran, the years following the return of the Polar Bear Expedition would see several books on their wartime service published. Nearly all of these were published in the

⁹ “339TH SAY MUTINY CHARGE IS FALSE,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1919, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/07/01/96325326.pdf>.

¹⁰ “BACK FROM FIGHTING BOLSHEVIST TROOPS,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 1919, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/07/13/112642959.pdf>.

¹¹ Godfrey J. Anderson, *A Michigan Polar Bear Confronts the Bolsheviks: A War Memoir: The 337th Field Hospital in Northern Russia, 1918-1919*, ed. Gordon L. Olson (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2010), 160.

¹² “OUR RUSSIAN LOSSES: Complete Record of Casualties on the Archangel Front,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1919, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/10/17/118164870.pdf>.

Upper Midwest. These early works tended to focus on the firsthand accounts of the soldiers of the 339th and its attached units that served in Northern Russia. These books sought to preserve the nuanced vernacular memory of the 339th against the more blindly patriotic official memory forming at the time.

The decade after the of World War I would see the Polar Bears punch far above their weight class in their efforts to give agency to their unit's memory. Three former officers of the unit would each publish their own work on the regiment's wartime service. Judging by the books' publishers, remained largely a regional effort confined to the upper Midwest. Joel Moore's *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviki* and Harry Mead's *The Romance of Company "A"* were both published in Detroit; while John Cudahy's *Archangel the American War with Russia* was published in Chicago. Regardless, the unit histories generated enough publicity, both vernacular and official, to make the book review section of the *New York Times* in 1927. The question asked by the newspaper could be the same one asked today:

"How many will remember, and how many in the American Legion and in the country at large really know that the soldiers of one relatively small part of that great expedition overseas- the one that went to Murman Coast, and North Russia, composed largely of Michigan troops, part of the Eighty-fifth division, trained and commanded by Major Gen. C. W. Kennedy- continued fighting throughout the long Artic Winter following the armistice?"¹³

Such efforts should not be underestimated, as the vernacular efforts kept the Polar Bears alive in the public consciousness during the 1920's. Interesting enough, the book review was written by retired US Army general Wilds Richardson. To give brief historical background,

¹³ Wilds Richardson, "With the A.E.F. In Russia: Three Books That Recall the American Expedition To Siberia," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1927, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1927/07/03/96659329.html?pageNumber=36>.

Brigadier-General Richardson was personally sent by General Pershing in April of 1919 to coordinate the withdrawal of the Polar Bears from North Russia.¹⁴ In his review, he takes offense to the notion that Cudahy's work stated that the Polar Bears returned home from Russia "stricken in health and dazed in spirit."¹⁵ Richardson evidently takes issue with this, stating in rebuttal:

"As a matter of fact no healthier, more spirited and upstanding body of men returned to the United States from overseas than those from North Russia. They returned with a courageous and joyous spirit with just pride in their great adventure, although saddened, of course, by the memory of their brave companions left behind under the soil of Russia."¹⁶

It seems the fight over the official memory of the Polar Bear Expedition began there.

The authors of the three books, all of whom were veterans of the expedition, represented the vernacular memory of those who served in North Russia. Although Brigadier-General Richardson served there as well, he was an outsider from Washington D.C. and arrived very late to the expedition. He likely represented the official desires of the US government in asserting that the Polar Bears possessed high morale and never faltered in thought regarding their uncertain mission. Such idealistic thoughts are debatable when one considers that the Polar Bears spent seven months longer fighting than their comrades in France, and in much worse conditions as well.

Nevertheless, this sudden agency at the national level gave the Polar Bears an opportunity that no other regiment from World War I would be able to duplicate whilst acting

¹⁴ Moore, Mead, and Jahns, *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviki: Campaigning in North Russia 1918-1919*, 226.

¹⁵ John Cudahy, *Archangel the American War with Russia* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1924); quoted in Richardson, "With the A.E.F. In Russia: Three Books That Recall the American Expedition To Siberia."

¹⁶ Richardson, "With the A.E.F. In Russia: Three Books That Recall the American Expedition To Siberia."

unilaterally. Many of their fallen comrades remained buried in the frozen earth in the expanses of northern Russia. One of the first ways in which the vernacular culture of the Polar Bears crossed into the American public consciousness would be the subsequent efforts to bring their remains home from their frigid and forgotten graves. Some of these forgotten soldiers would be return home in the years to come, and some remain there to this day.

At the time of their departure from Russia, the fallen members of the unit were left buried in North Russia under the dubious assumption that their graves remained safely under the control of anti-communist White forces. This belief proved sadly mistaken, and the forces opposing the Bolsheviks quickly threw in the towel after the departure of Allied forces. The lack of diplomatic relations with the newly minted Soviet Union hampered these efforts throughout the coming years.¹⁷

Undaunted, the Polar Bear veterans were aided by the Polar Bear Chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization. They created a bubble of public concern after 5,000 letters were written.¹⁸ The concern stayed alive in the public sphere long enough for a major recovery effort to be launched in 1929. Their efforts were aided by \$70,000 in funds from the US Congress, and \$15,000 from the Michigan Legislature.¹⁹ This effort would eventually recover and repatriate 75 sets of remains.²⁰

¹⁷ "75 OF OUR WAR DEAD COMING HOME TODAY," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1929, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1929/11/29/97783569.html?pageNumber=17>.

¹⁸ Walter Duranty, "SEARCHERS NEARING ARCHANGEL GRAVES," *The New York Times*, August 11, 1929, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1929/08/11/91914520.html?pageNumber=8>.

¹⁹ Duranty.

²⁰ "CITY PAYS TRIBUTE TO 75 SOLDIER DEAD," *The New York Times*, November 30, 1929, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1929/11/30/94212849.html?pageNumber=12>.

In 1930, the city of Troy, Michigan commissioned a monument to commemorate the return of their fallen soldiers. A total of 56 of the returned soldiers would subsequently be reinterred in a circular pattern around the monument.²¹ The marble monument, fittingly of a polar bear, was sculpted by renowned French sculptor Leon Hermant. Standing atop a black granite fortress, the polar bear is shown standing protectively over a fallen cross with helmet on it, representing those who fell in Russia.²²

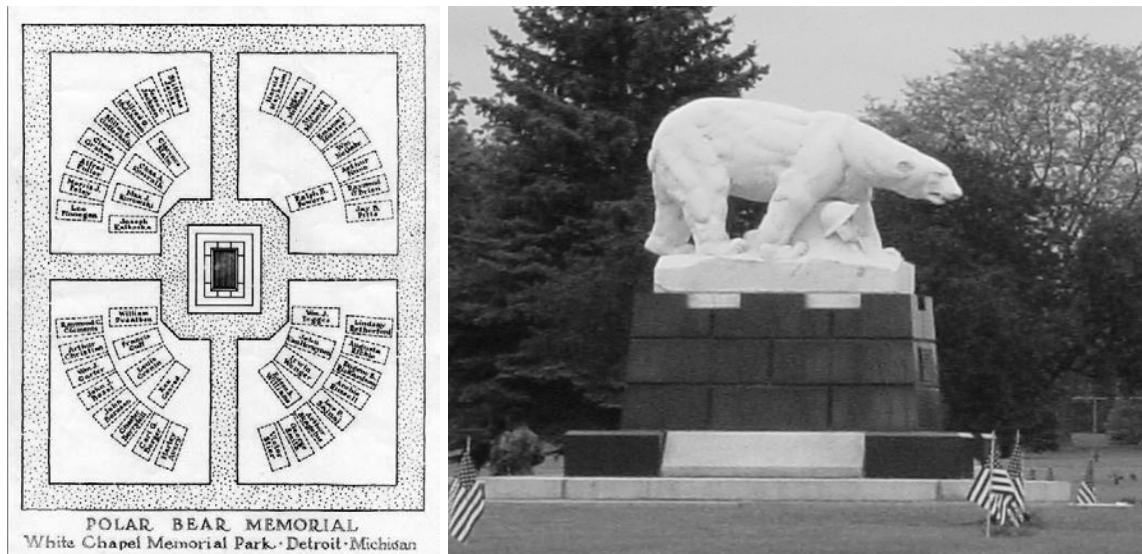


Diagram for layout of reburials in the cemetery, Polar Bear Monument: <http://pbma.grobbel.org/burials.htm>

It would also constitute the Polar Bear's limelight on the national stage for many years as they faded from the public dialogue. It would take decades of silence and another frozen conflict with a familiar foe for the Polar Bears to resurface in public memory.

²¹ "Troy: Polar Bear Monument, Troy, MI (Sculpture, 100 Cities - 100 Memorials, Michigan) - World War I Centennial," The United States World War I Centennial Commission, 2018, <https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/michigan-in-ww1-places/8:polar-bear-monument.html>.

²² Mike Grobbel, "Ceremonies & Events," "Detroit's Own" Polar Bear Memorial Association, 2018, <http://pbma.grobbel.org/>.

A Cold War Brings Opportunity

In 1959, America found itself in the midst of a new undeclared war. The Polar Bears were about to prove Reardon's assertion that a spark of interest in the present creates an association with the past.²³ Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier, made a visit that year to the United States. Many Americans probably wondered what he meant when he stated:

"We remember the grim days when American soldiers went to our soil headed by their generals to help our White Guard combat the new revolution ... all the capitalist countries of Europe and of America marched upon our soil to strangle the new revolution ... Never have any of our soldiers been on American soil, but your soldiers were on Russian soil. These are the facts."²⁴

For a brief period in time, there emerged a sudden resurgence in the official memory about the Polar Bear Expedition and the 339th Infantry Regiment. In the year prior to Khrushchev's visit, famed historian George Kennan wrote *The Decision to Intervene*. This constituted a voluminous work covering President Woodrow Wilson's decision to send American troops to Russia in 1918. Once again the official memory came into conflict with that of the vernacular. Kennan attempted to state in his work that the American forces in North Russia only took part in defensive actions.²⁵ That indeed was the original justification for the involvement of American forces, but the events on the ground played out much differently. There exists a possibility that Kennan, a realist in US policy and relations with the Soviet Union, was attempting to follow the official narrative to limit the potential explosiveness of his work amidst the Cold War.

²³ Reardon, *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory*, 3.

²⁴ Quoted in E. M Halliday, *When Hell Froze Over* (New York: Ibooks: Distributed by Simon & Schuster, 2000), 305.

²⁵ George Kennan, *The Decision to Intervene*, vol. II, *Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 408.

The national media eventually picked up the renewed interest in the story as well, with major newspapers publishing articles. Building upon Khrushchev's remarks, the *New York Times* published a story that bore an uncanny resemblance to their previous coverage of the Polar Bears during the 1920s. Declaring that Khrushchev's facts were "far from straightforward," Richard Ullman's article evaluates the available literature on the subject. While acknowledging that E.M. Halliday's vernacular work on the subject was "highly readable," he defaults to the official dogma of Kennan in stating that specialists will "have to wait for the publication of the third volume of George F. Kennan's brilliant history of United States-Soviet relations."²⁶ Apparently the vernacular works written during the 1920s had already faded into obscurity.

The Cold War would see the entrenchment of the Polar Bear Expedition's official memory on the national level. However, the regional tapestry of the subject remained vibrant and strong in Michigan. The papers in Michigan, regardless of size or location, continued to run stories on the Polar Bears. In one article well prior to Khrushchev's visit to the United States in 1959, the *Battle Creek Enquirer* published an article chronicling the Polar Bears' service. In a front page spread, the local paper identified surviving members of the expedition living near the small town. In contrast to the *New York Times* article, the *Battle Creek Enquirer* praised the decidedly vernacular work of Halliday as a "stirring account of the war." The paper made a point to highlight the established nature of the subject, noting that "Local Polar Bears ... recall

²⁶ Richard Ullman, "When U.S. Soldiers Were on Russian Soil," *The New York Times*, August 14, 1960, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/08/14/99785677.html?pageNumber=101>.

the story from earlier books, of which more than a dozen were written by veterans or historians interviewing veterans in the last four decades.”²⁷

However, the Polar Bears could not outlast time itself. They were honored with another front page spread in 1964, this time in the much larger *Detroit News*. More somber than the *Battle Creek Enquirer’s* piece a half decade prior, the publication’s text made it easy to see why the Polar Bears still captivated the local memory. Special emphasis in this article is placed on the statistic that the state of Michigan remained the home of 800 of the surviving 1,300 members of the expedition. Somewhat proudly, the article makes known that although “the average age of the Polar Bears is 71,” the veterans held reunions “biennially – on even years.”²⁸

The Polar Bears Today

Despite the death of the last surviving member of the expedition in 2001, the resurgence of Russia on the world stage provided fertile ground for the national media to resurrect the Polar Bears on an intermittent basis. Fears of newfound conflict with Russia inevitably result in staffers from major publications retrieving the Polar Bears’ story from their dusty archives. The possibility of “mission creep,” in foreign entanglements resulted in a piece by the *New York Times* last year diagnosing the Polar Bear Expedition as “an incursion that still irks the Russians a century later.”²⁹ This memory deals with what Reardon diagnoses as the present forming an association with the past.³⁰ In doing so, the Polar Bears exist in public

²⁷ “40 Years Ago: Polar Bears Learned About Reds, Earned Name, Fame in 45-Below,” *Battle Creek Enquirer*, January 18, 1959.

²⁸ William Lutz, “Honoring the Yanks Who Died in Russia,” *Detroit News*, May 31, 1964.

²⁹ Nathan Hodge, “When U.S. Troops Battled Bolsheviks: An Early Example of Mission Creep, the Incursion Still Irks Russians a Century Later,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2018.

³⁰ Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory*, 3-4.

memory due to what Bodnar would cite as the decades old conflict between their official and vernacular memories.³¹ Reflecting this, the Polar Bears received distinction in a *New York Times* piece in 2006 that chronicled national reflections on the observance of Memorial Day in the United States:

"The soil of the United States is almost spoiled for choice when it comes to commemorative sites. They range from Gettysburg itself -- still one of the most staggering places of memory in the world -- to the Confederate statue of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and extend from the Polar Bear monument in Detroit (honoring those Michiganders who helped invade Russia in 1919: a forgotten war if ever there was one) to Maya Lin's masterpiece of Vietnam understatement on the National Mall."³²

The mention of the Polar Bear Monument and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the same sentence by the *New York Times* represents quite an accomplishment for the 339th. The Polar Bears enjoy more effervescent commemoration than perhaps any other defunct infantry regiment from the First World War. Staffed by historical enthusiasts and descendants of the Polar Bear Expedition's members, The "Detroit's Own" Polar Bear Memorial Association is "dedicated to honoring and maintaining the memory of the 339th Infantry Regiment, the 1st Battalion of the 310th Engineers, the 337th Ambulance Co. and the 337th Field Hospital of the U.S. Army's 85th Division."³³ Their persistent regional remembrance of the 339th is perhaps the greatest reason that the unit's vernacular memory is kept alive today. A fitting conclusion for oft forgotten

³¹ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13-16.

³² Christopher Hitchens, "Memorial Day: Reflections on Those Who Made the Ultimate Sacrifice," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2006.

³³ Grobbel, "Introduction - 'Detroit's Own' Polar Bear Memorial Association."

soldiers that shimmered in and out of the American public consciousness for over a century.

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