



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: Public Affairs, 2016); 395 pages with notes and index.

Review by Kenneth Janda

This book is about the Czecho-Slovak Legion fighting in Russia from 1918 to 1920. Come again? Didn't the Bolsheviks withdraw Russia from the war after the 1917 revolution? Didn't the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with the Central Powers formally end Russia's fighting on March 3, 1918? Wasn't World War I itself over in November 1918?

And you say the Czechs and Slovaks had their own legion? They didn't even have their own country at the time! Not only were both minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the Czechs lived almost entirely in

Austria, while the Slovaks lived almost entirely in Hungary. How could they combine to fight against Russia?

And what was a "legion" anyway? We know about the "Roman legions" that conquered people in ancient times. Thanks to the movies, people today visualize sandaled Romans marching behind standards topped by golden eagles. We also are familiar with the "French Foreign Legion" romanticized in 20th century movies (several with "Beau Geste" in their titles). We envision ex patriates escaping from personal demons to find redemption through battle in the sands of Africa.

Although relatively few Americans know about the "Czecho-Slovak Legion," some learned of it from documentaries on the Internet and YouTube. People can view the legionnaires' exploits in central and eastern Russia, when they fought Russian Bolsheviks, Austro-Hungarians, and even Czecho-Slovak Bolsheviks all along the Trans-Siberian railway.

Better yet, people can read this book to obtain a fuller understanding (a complete understanding is impossible) of the extraordinarily complex situation in Russia at the end of World War I. The Czechs and Slovaks did indeed fight valiantly, fiercely, and successfully in Siberia for two years after the war ended, despite contradictory directives and abysmal support from the French, British, and American governments. In truth, they fought for survival.

Nearly one hundred years after the bizarre military conflict, Kevin McNamara bravely tackled the task of explaining events that unfolded faster than they could be reported from the vast Russian interior. Officials in all the warring governments—France, Britain, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the United States—typically had little understanding of what was happening. If they thought they understood, they were often wrong.

McNamara's book skillfully plucks at the tangled knot. After signing the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, as McNamara explains at the start, Russia released more than 2.3 million German and Austro-Hungarian POWs held all across Russia. (p. 7) About 200,000 were Czechs and Slovaks. Many of these POWs had no desire to return to Austria-Hungary. They feared being shipped to the Western Front to fight for Germany, Austria-Hungary's Central Powers ally, or being shot by their own government as suspected defectors to the Russians, their Slavic brothers.

In addition to hundreds of thousands of Czech and Slovak POWs in Russia, thousands of Czech and Slovak émigrés had volunteered to fight for their new Slavic homeland against the country they had fled. (p. 63)

They formed a small armed force (*družina* in Russian) which fought against Austro-Hungarian troops, often against Czech and Slovak conscripts. The *družina* also persuaded many hundreds, if not several thousands, of their fellow Slavs to defect and fight alongside them against their Austrian (German) and Hungarian (Magyar) rulers. McNamara said that the *družina* in the Russian army had almost 10,000 men by May 1917—most were former POWs who had fought for Austria-Hungary before switching sides.

So at the end of the war, the Russian landscape was strewn with five potential combatants: (1) hundreds of thousands of freed Czech and Slovak POWs who did not want to return to Austria-Hungary; (2) a few thousand Czech and Slovak *družina* loyal to Russia; (3) the Red Guard, a militia loyal to the Bolshevik revolutionaries; (4) remnants of the Russian army, disorganized and demoralized after losing to Germany, reformed into a “White” army to wrest control from the Bolsheviks; and (5) hundreds of thousands of German and Magyar POWs.

Many freed Austrian and Hungarian POWs, facing redeployment on the Western Front, also declined to return home. Most who stayed aligned with the Russians, their former enemies, instead of the Czechs and Slovaks, their former comrades. Austrian Germans and Hungarian Magyars had never been friendly with Czechs and Slovaks in Austria-Hungary, and they did not become buddies with the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

No one had worked harder and more effectively to create Czechoslovakia than Tomáš Masaryk, its new president. In Paris in 1915, Masaryk and other Czech and Slovak émigrés formed what became the Czecho-Slovak National Council. Initially, it pushed for Czech and Slovak governmental autonomy within Austria-Hungary but later demanded full independence outside of the decaying empire. To obtain support from the Allied Powers, he strived to create a Czech and Slovak army to fight against the Central Powers.

McNamara reports that Masaryk went to Russia in May 1917, and in July Russian General Brusilov agreed “to transform the *družina* into an independent Czecho-Slovak corps that would remain militarily under Russian command but politically under the Czecho-Slovak National Council.” (p. 133) Russian generals agreed to Masaryk’s plan to transport the troops by train via the Trans-Siberian railway to Russia’s eastern port of Vladivostok for shipment to France. McNamara implies how the new force became known as the Czecho-Slovak

Legion. The French government issued a decree on December 16, 1917 making the group a part of the French Army. (p. 154) Presumably, it was called a “legion” after the glamorous model of the French Foreign Legion.

Although under the supreme authority of the French army, the unit fought under a Czecho-Slovak flag and remained politically under the control of the Czecho-Slovak National Council in Paris, swearing allegiance to a Czecho-Slovak nation that did not yet exist. They were willing to fight against Germans on the Western Front but not for them, as Austria-Hungary would have demanded.

Russia’s internal political affairs were complicated following the February 1917 revolution and the Tsar’s abdication. The Czecho-Slovak National Council instructed the lightly armed troops to observe complete neutrality between Russian factions as the legionnaires traveled in scores of trains across Siberia. That was the plan when Russia was still in the war, but the October 1917 revolution gave power to the Bolsheviks who withdrew from the war. Russia’s new leaders disliked having thousands of armed foreigners commanding trains on the Trans-Siberian railroad. McNamara describes a pivotal event on May 14, 1918 in Chelyabinsk, east of the Ural Mountains. The legionnaires were traveling east, toward Vladivostok, when they encountered Hungarian POWs traveling west. A legionnaire was spitefully injured by a Hungarian POW, whom the legionnaires killed in retaliation.

On May 25, Leon Trotsky responded to the killing with this order: “Every armed Czecho-Slovak found on the railway is to be shot on the spot, every troop train in which even one armed man is found shall be unloaded, and its soldiers shall be interned in a war prisoners’ camp.” (p. 207) Masaryk, in the United States by then, was unaware of the event and the Russian government’s hostile switch. McNamara wrote, “Reflecting their isolation from timely and accurate information, officials of the Czecho-Slovak National Council and General Mikhail Diterikhs, Masaryk’s chief of staff, as late as June 6, 1918, still ordered the legionnaires to observe ‘complete neutrality in Russian affairs’ and to reach agreements with local Soviets to move their trains along.” (p. 223)

A good deal of McNamara’s narrative is consumed with describing everyone’s lack of knowledge about events along the Trans-Siberian railway. Feeding on their ignorance, the French and British American governments came up with fanciful and contradictory plans for the Czecho-Slovak Legionnaires, who were hungry,

cold, ill-equipped in virtually every way, and just anxious to leave the accursed country.

The governments' schemes varied across time. Originally, the French desperately wanted the legionnaires shipped to fight on the Western Front. After Russia withdrew from the war, the Allies feared that Germany would seize supplies that the Allies had stored at the ports of Murmansk and Archangel in the far northwest. Some officials entertained fantastic dreams of sending the legionnaires to guard the supplies, several thousand miles from where they were in Siberia. Other officials were seized with the equally ludicrous notion of having the legionnaires cross the length of Russia to open an "Eastern Front" to draw German troops away from the Western Front.

After western leaders awakened to the threat that a communist government posed to their capitalist systems, some began to see potential in the Czecho-Slovak Legions helping to overthrow the Bolsheviks. In August 1918, according to McNamara, the French Ministry of War ordered the legionnaires to join with the White Army under the command of General Alexander Kolchak.

United States officials were also not entirely immune from contemplating unworkable schemes for the legionnaires, but mostly they stuck with the plan of evacuating them from their desperate plight. In a paragraph toward the end of his book, McNamara summarized the situation:

By the end of July 1918 a few things were clear—the Soviet regime and the Western Allies saw each other as implacable enemies, Moscow did not control even most of Russia, and the Czecho-Slovak Legion appeared to be the strongest armed force between Berlin and Tokyo. All of this further encouraged the Allies to flex their muscles in and around Russia. The legionnaires were asked to oppose hundreds of thousands of Hungarian and German POWs who were thought—incorrectly—to be fighting for Berlin and Vienna. In fact, the POWs were fighting in support of the Soviet regime in Moscow. As the exile movement made gains toward an independent Czechoslovakia and an Allied victory on the Western Front started to look possible, the legionnaires began to ask why they remained fighting anyone in Russia. (p. 257)

One consequence of their remaining was the transformation of the ineffective Red Guard into the powerful Red Army. McNamara wrote:

On May 29, mere days after the Czecho-Slovak revolt [the legionnaires' retaliation in Chelyabinsk] was

launched, Moscow introduced compulsory military service. Fifteen mobilization drives were organized through August 1918, which inducted 540,123 men and 17,700 noncommissioned officers. By the end of June, Moscow deployed fifty thousand men across what it called the Czecho-Slovak front, but they were as yet no match for the legionnaires. (p. 276)

By August 1918, the Red Army was ready to confront the legionnaires, and Trotsky personally led an attack against them spearheaded by his armored train. Readers who saw the movie, *Dr. Zhivago*, may recall a stunning scene when the Bolshevik commander, Strelnikov, dismounted from the movie's armored train. Trotsky's real train was similar, and McNamara describes it at some length. By that time, the Red Army had emerged as a major force, and it had better arms and supplies than the legionnaires. That summer, President Wilson ordered a contingent of U.S. troops to help them but only to facilitate their retreat and evacuation.

The Czecho-Slovak Legionnaires struggled on for another year, fighting Red Russians and former Austro-Hungarian POWs (Germans, Magyars, other Czechs and Slovaks) in support of a White Russian general foisted upon them. Not until February 1920, according to McNamara, did the United States arrange for ships to evacuate the legionnaires from Vladivostok. They did not arrive until June, and the last ships departed in September, carrying "56,459 legionnaires (53,455 non-commissioned officers and soldiers and 3,004 officers and military officials); 6,714 Czech and Slovak civilians, including émigrés and former POWs who had not joined the legion; 2,433 wives and children, including a contingent of Russian brides of legionnaires and former POWs; and 1,935 foreigners whom the Czecho-Slovak National Council had agreed to transport on behalf of London and Washington." (p. 325)

This inglorious end to the legionnaires' campaign should be separated from their glorious accomplishments. McNamara tells how American newspapers paraded the victories of the Czecho-Slovak Legion across their pages, enthraling Americans who knew nothing about Czechs and Slovaks, those odd Slavic people from a decayed empire. Crowds cheered as Masaryk demanded Czech and Slovak independence from Austria-Hungary. McNamara quotes him as saying, "My plan had been to get the army to France in 1918 and to bring it into action there in 1919. It never reached France, but we had an army and it made itself felt. That was the main thing." (p. 322)

Dreams of a Great Small Nation does more than

relate the exploits of the Czecho-Slovak Legion in Siberia. It also tells the backstory of the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and of the course of the Russian revolution. Readers of this review now know that the Red Army arose to combat the threat of the legionnaires. Readers of the book will learn that the legionnaires' advance on Yekaterinburg, where the tsar and his family were held, prompted swift execution of the imperial family to keep the tsar from falling in the hands of anti-Bolshevik forces.

Readers will also find intriguing surprises, such as learning that Gutzon Borglum, son of Danish-American immigrants and sculptor of Mount Rushmore, helped put Masaryk's original Czecho-Slovak Declaration of Independence, into good English. Or learning that Jaroslav Hašek, author of the popular sardonic novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk* and *His Fortunes in the World War*, joined the Austro-Hungarian army, was captured by Russians, joined the *družina* to fight against the Austro-Hungarians, then joined the Czecho-Slovak Legion, but switched to join the Bolshevik revolutionaries.

McNamara has managed to mold a confusing set of military events into an absorbing read. He scrupulously wrote about the legion as consisting of Czechs and Slovaks instead of calling it the Czech Legion, as so many writers have done. He mentions only in passing that the Czechs and Slovaks also formed a unit in the Italian Army under Italian command. He does not note that it was also called a "legion." Perhaps that's where the Romans come in, and maybe that's the basis of another book.

Note: This book may be purchased through the CGSI at the postage paid price of \$30.00. Order item #40 on Sales Order Form, page 142.

Come hear Kevin McNamara speak at the 2017 Pittsburgh Conference on the Czech-Slovak Legion: Historical Significance! In addition there will be 26 other speakers or moderators and 52 presentations. The site for the Conference is the Hyatt Regency Pittsburgh International Airport Hotel.

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