Review of Kevin McNamara's *Dreams of a Great Small Nation*

This is part of an ongoing series of reviews written by Temple graduate students of new books considering the study of force, diplomacy, and international history. These reviews will be posted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The books you'll see reviewed here are brand new -- they often haven't made it into the pages of major scholarly journals yet, allowing our reviewers to get their say in before the dust has settled. If you would like to participate as a reviewer, or have a book to suggest, please contact Brian McNamara, CENFAD's Thomas J. Davis Fellow, at brian.mcnamara@temple.edu.


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The story is the stuff of legend. From 1918 to 1920, the men of the Czechoslovak Legion, numbering approximately 50,000 to 60,000 and fighting in the name of a country that did not officially exist, traveled across the length of Russia. Their journey took them from the Eastern Front of the First World War to Vladivostok, where several ships then ferried them back to Europe. The Legion was an amalgam force composed of Czechs and Slovaks living in Russia who had served in the Russian army, plus Czech and Slovak deserters and prisoners taken from the Austro-Hungarian military. These men fought as an auxiliary force alongside the Czarist army. In 1918, Russia’s new Bolshevik government granted the Legion permission to attempt to join Allied forces on the Western Front to fight for Czechoslovak independence. Following the route of the Trans-Siberian railroad, the Legion traveled over 5,000 miles. If the length of their journey was not difficult enough, the Legion’s travels took it through the midst of the brutal Russian Civil War. Ironically, the Czechs and Slovaks turned their arms on the Bolsheviks when their agreement for safe passage in principle often did not work out in practice. Despite the epic scale of the Legion’s activities, there is a dearth of historical studies on this organization outside of books written in Czech. Kevin McNamara’s new book on the Legion and the founding of Czechoslovakia gives a remarkable story its much needed due and should stand as the standard English work on the subject for many years.

McNamara treats readers to a masterful chronological narrative of the events leading up to the founding of the Legion and the reasons for its march across Russia. He succinctly and clearly charts the complex events surrounding the break-up of the Habsburg Empire, the motivations of the Czech and Slovak nationalists, and how these tensions between nation and empire played out on the Eastern Front within the Habsburg military, eventually leading to the creation of the Legion. Many of the works on the founding of Czechoslovakia devote only an obligatory page, or sometimes just a paragraph, to the Legion, when in fact it played a central role in the nation’s foundation. The Legion became a major nationalist rallying point, boosting nationalist hopes as well as demonstrating Czech and Slovak virility and the righteousness of the cause of Czechoslovak statehood. McNamara’s book not only sheds light on the Legion but also refocuses the historical narrative surrounding the foundation of Czechoslovakia. McNamara’s work is a straightforward narrative chronicle. Given the lack of historical works on the legion, McNamara’s work focuses on a narrative description of its exploits. McNamara’s principal aim is to show the importance of the Legion’s impact on Czechoslovak statehood and on the Russian Civil War. McNamara also works to integrate the idea of nationhood in the motivations of the Legion and pushes his readers to understand the reasons why members of the Legion saw their idea of a Czechoslovak nation as noble and just.

In terms of sourcework, *Dreams of a Great Small Nation* relies almost entirely on English language secondary sources, and document collections and memoirs translated into English. McNamara’s major non-English source is a five-volume oral history collection of hundreds of personal accounts of former members of the Legion, recorded in Czech. McNamara candidly admits that he did not translate the parts of the collection that he used, rather relying on the translations of an acquaintance. From the work it is unclear if McNamara knows any Czech or Slovak, though given his reliance on outside translation, it is unlikely. *Dreams of a Great Small Nation*, then, is not a work driven by archival ground-pounding. Yet it is uncertain how exactly one could write an archivally-driven history of the Legion, given its peripatetic movement and concomitant lack of official written material, the destruction of records during the Russian Civil War and under Soviet rule, and present lack of access to archives in Russia. With these challenges in mind, McNamara’s reliance on translated first-hand accounts of Legion members seems perfectly reasonable.
There are some issues with the book – particularly McNamara’s apologetic tone regarding the Legion. As a result there is little discussion of the way in which common Russian people perceived the Legion. This perception was not particularly positive, with Russian civilians seeing the Legion as foreign marauders, seizing their food and belongings with little permanent attachment to their surroundings. McNamara also does not discuss the incidents surrounding Admiral Alexander Kolchak with any great detail. Kolchak led a dictatorial and viscerally anti-Bolshevik government centered in Siberia during the Civil War, with which the Legion allied itself at times during its journey east. Advancing Bolshevik forces eventually compelled Kolchak to retreat and the Legion promised him safe passage through a section of the Trans-Siberian railroad that it controlled. The Legion betrayed Kolchak and turned him over to the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, an army allied with the Bolsheviks, who executed him. This incident does not reflect well on the Legion or on McNamara who fails to mention it.

One also wishes that McNamara had done more to integrate a discussion of the Legion’s impact on postwar Czechoslovakia into his conclusion. The Legion acquired near mythical status during this period and served for many Czechoslovak nationalists as both proof and justification of the legitimacy of their cause. It would have been fruitful for McNamara to discuss this role that the Legion played in Czechoslovak national legitimacy after the First World War, and what became of the Legion soldiers after they were finally able to settle in the new country in whose name they had been fighting for so many years. Criticisms aside, given the dearth of books on the Legion in English and indeed in any language besides Czech, McNamara’s book is for now the best available work on the Legion and its exploits. It will be useful for students of the First World War, nationalism in Europe, and for anyone looking for a rousing read.