

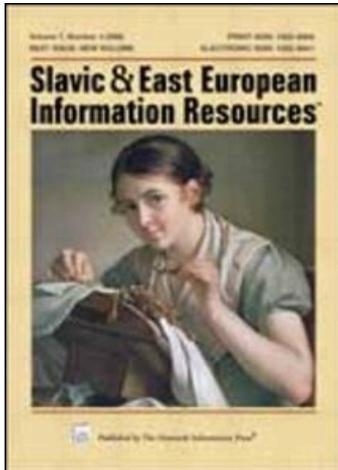
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### "A Dirty Place for Americans to Be": Images of the Russian Civil War in Siberia from the Robert L. Eichelberger Collection at Duke University Libraries

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## **“A Dirty Place for Americans to Be”: Images of the Russian Civil War in Siberia from the Robert L. Eichelberger Collection at Duke University Libraries**

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*The article describes the contents of a substantial and little-known collection of Russian Civil War photographs currently held at the Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. The images come from the personal archive of General Robert L. Eichelberger (1886–1961), Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations Division, and Chief Intelligence Officer with the American Expeditionary Forces in eastern Siberia, 1918–1920. The article analyzes the scholarly research value of this collection, which has been scanned as part of the Duke University Libraries digital collections project called Americans in the Land of Lenin: Documentary Photographs of Early Soviet Russia.*

*KEYWORDS* Documentary photography, photo-postcards, Russian Civil War, Siberia, Robert L. Eichelberger, American Expeditionary Force, digitization, digital collections, Duke University Libraries, Americans in the Land of Lenin collection, library, United States, Russia

The Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library at Duke University holds a series of unique and heretofore little-known photographic images of the Russian Civil War in eastern Siberia.<sup>1</sup> These photos and photo-postcards constitute only a small part of the 50 linear feet of materials (nearly

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**FIGURE 1** Robert L. Eichelberger in Siberia.

30,000 items) from the personal papers of General Robert L. Eichelberger (1886–1961; see Figure 1), which were donated posthumously to Duke University Libraries by his wife, Emma (née Gudger), a native North Carolinian. Eichelberger was a US Army officer and West Point graduate, who is perhaps most famous for commanding the US occupation forces in Japan during World War II.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, most papers in the collection date from or cover that period, and they have served as the primary documentary source base for the sole biography devoted to this “near great” general.<sup>3</sup> However, as his biographer, Paul Chwialkowski, has pointed out, Eichelberger’s first real assignment was as Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations Division, and Chief Intelligence Officer with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in Siberia, which was dispatched to Russia in 1918 by President Woodrow Wilson on a mission that constituted America’s first attempt to use its military for peacekeeping purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Over the course of his two-year tour of duty, Eichelberger oversaw (primarily from his office on Svetlanka Street, in Vladivostok, Russia [Figure 2]) an intelligence network that extended over 5,000 miles into the Ural Mountains. In his official capacity as America's chief intelligence officer in Siberia, he interviewed (frequently over a bottle of vodka) hundreds of Russians, including as he said, "everything from a Baron to a prostitute."<sup>5</sup> The intelligence gathered through his efforts and the reports generated through his examination of the data, allowed his commanding officer, Lieutenant-General William S. Graves (1865–1940), to determine a consistent American policy amidst "competing signals" from both Washington and the Inter-Allied Military Council (Figure 3), the ten-nation committee composed of American, British, French, and Japanese officers that debated, formulated, and tried to implement a coherent Allied policy for Siberia and eastern Russia between 1918 and 1920.<sup>6</sup>

Materials on Eichelberger's participation in the AEF's incursion into Siberia are grouped into two series: the Military Papers Series and the Picture Series. The Military Papers series consists of 4 boxes and includes typed letters, handwritten notes, intelligence summaries, memoranda and reports, leaflets, as well as maps and other oversize materials—such as the "top secret" map in Figure 4, which is one of a series of maps made on tracing paper, recording the changing location of military bases and troop strength of American forces in Siberia along the railroad line linking Vladivostok and the Nikol'sk-Ussuri and Suchan Mines. This map served to illustrate the chief goals of the American Expeditionary Force, which was sent to "guard and



**FIGURE 2** Eichelberger's Headquarters, Svetlanka Street, Vladivostok.



**FIGURE 3** Inter-Allied military council.



**FIGURE 4** AEF base map (bottom right corner).

protect” the military stores at Vladivostok, the Siberian railroad, and the Suchan Mines (which provided the coal for the operation of the railroads)—installations considered by the US government as necessary for the “economic relief” of the Russian people. These same installations, furthermore, were deemed crucial in allowing the US military to carry out the political part of its mission, namely, supporting “any efforts at self-government or self-defense in which the Russians themselves might be willing to accept assistance.”<sup>7</sup> The question, of course, was which one of the various warring factions in the Russian Civil War could be said to have constituted the true representatives of the Russian nation. On this question, the US government was divided, with the State Department arguing for active support of the anti-Bolshevik forces and the White House and War Department arguing for strict neutrality. Needless to say, such conflicting signals made the AEF’s sensitive mission even more difficult.<sup>8</sup>

The Picture Series constitutes the second important collection of sources on Eichelberger’s tour of duty in eastern Siberia, and the one that actually contains the photographs and photo-postcards to which this brief notice is dedicated.<sup>9</sup> This collection includes several hundred photographic images of Siberia, some loose and some pasted into two photo albums. These albums were most likely compiled by Emma Eichelberger from the inscribed photos sent by her husband. The albums contain both official AEF photos (primarily of foreign troops parading down Svetlanka) as well as beautiful photographs of the natural and architectural landscape of Siberia, and include images such as the view of Gold Horn Bay in Figure 5, which Eichelberger inscribed



**FIGURE 5** Golden Horn (Zolotoi Rog) Bay.

as follows: “This really is a remarkable picture—taken at one end of the Zolotoi Rog (Golden Horn) Bay you can see clear down to our Base two miles away. In front by looking carefully you can see one of our transports at our dock. The long shed with the curved roof with a train of cars near it is the YMCA hut.... Our hdqrs. are on the hillside just above the hut.”

The panoramic view of Golden Horn Bay provides an example of the kind of peaceful, exotic, and largely unpopulated vistas of eastern Siberia that Mrs. Eichelberger pasted into the two photo albums devoted to her husband’s tour of duty in Siberia. It also demonstrates that despite its seemingly un-controversial and non-political nature, such photos were nevertheless as implicated in the visual politics of the American intervention in the Russian Civil War as the AEF photos of foreign troops in Vladivostok. For the very fact that the seemingly idyllic and strangely peaceful landscapes in the photo albums omitted any reference to the Goya-esque “horrors of civil war” (such as the ones depicted in the Russian photo-postcard in Figure 6) reflects, I would argue, a colonizer’s perspective: one that saw Siberia (and Russia as a whole) as the unchanging, exotic “Other” that can be captured and opened to History (and the colonial gaze) only by the incursion of Western powers and their superior culture and technology (including their photo equipment).<sup>10</sup> Judging by Eichelberger’s



**FIGURE 6** The horrors of civil war.

correspondence with his wife, this is a perspective that Emma, the daughter of an important colonial administrator, who served as the US Chief Justice of the Canal Zone in Panama, would have understood quite well.<sup>11</sup>

The images that did not wind up pasted into Mrs. Eichelberger's photo albums constitute the second part of the Eichelberger Picture Series. This series includes several hundred black-and-white photographs and photo-postcards, most of which were shot with a small portable personal camera by Eichelberger and his fellow officers over the course of their tour of duty. Unlike the official AEF photos or the panoramic landscapes included in Mrs. Eichelberger's photo albums, the second part of the Picture Series includes much less romanticized images of everyday life in eastern Siberia: for example, a wonderful shot of a gigantic hog next to a women's tailor shop run by a Chinese person named Aniu (Figure 7).



**FIGURE 7** Sow and piglets.

Despite their seemingly more ethnographic nature, however, this second set of photos and photo-postcards is no less ideological than any of the other images in the Eichelberger collection. In fact, although the temptation to treat them as a somehow more authentic representation of the past is very great, it would be a mistake to do so. Instead, I would argue that these photos can be seen as Eichelberger's commentary on the situation in which the American Expeditionary Force in general, and Eichelberger in particular, found himself. And from the start, this situation was very complicated, if not completely untenable. For example, almost as soon as they arrived in eastern Siberia, American troops realized that the most

proximate reason for the White House-initiated incursion, namely, helping the Allies to re-establish an eastern front by providing military assistance to the so-called Czech Legion—a fighting unit consisting of 65,000 soldiers, deserters from the Austro-Hungarian Army and colonists from the Russian Empire, who were supposedly stranded in eastern Russia after the collapse of the Tsarist government and who were being attacked by an “army corps” of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners supposedly released by the Bolsheviks<sup>12</sup>—was a fraud of WMD proportions. In fact, the Czech Legion was more concerned with attacking the Bolsheviks than with “escaping” Russia.<sup>13</sup>

After only a few months on the ground, Eichelberger came to disagree with the assessment of the mission of American troops in Siberia (that is, the idea that guarding the railroads would provide economic relief to the Russian people, ensure domestic stability, and increase the chances for the triumph of democracy in Russia). As early as October 1919, Eichelberger recommended withdrawal of US troops from Russia because, as he wrote, it was “a dirty place for Americans to be.”<sup>14</sup> In the reports that he sent to Washington, Eichelberger argued that the Siberian Railroad was a “military road” only (Figure 8), and that the areas around the railroad were controlled exclusively by Admiral A. V. Kolchak’s (1873–1920) army. Furthermore, he reported that the White forces used the railroad for their periodic “recruiting expeditions”: during these excursions, Kolchak’s troops killed, branded, or tortured any peasant who refused to join their ranks. Needless to say, these



**FIGURE 8** Whites on a train.

punitive expeditions (the results of which can be seen in Figure 9, from Hailar, Manchuria, showing “[w]hat is left of 9 so-called Bolsheviks after [the Cossack Ataman Grigorii] Semenoff [1890–1945] and souvenir-hunters got through with them”) drove the Russian peasants into the ranks of the Bolsheviks—a result that “American troops contributed to” by guarding the railroad that made this “oppression” possible. Eichelberger concluded that the US presence in Siberia provided support to “a rotten, monarchistic”



**FIGURE 9** Skulls of Bolsheviks in Hailar, Manchuria.

government (Kolchak) that “has the sympathy of only a very few of the people.”<sup>15</sup> As he wrote on the back of a photograph from 1919 (Figure 10), the “[t]ypical bunch of Russians are practically all anti-Kolchak in sympathy.” And yet, as this same photo reveals, they were still conscripted to work on the railroad that was being used to oppress them.

In his intelligence reports, he even went so far as to state that the Bolsheviks were “preferable” to the “murderers” and “cut-throats” of the Kolchak regime, who posed and primped in front of his camera, as in the group photo of swaggering Cossack officers in Figure 11. One of Eichelberger’s sources (a certain Petrajetski) identified the officers in the photos as follows: “([f]rom left to right): [1] Esaul Tolstonoga—sent to Kalmykoff by Semionoff as a bond of friendship; [2] Sotnik Chasin—adjutant of the military government of the Ussuri Cossack forces; [3] Esaul Popoff—sent to Kalmykoff by Semionoff as a bond of friendship; [4] Ataman [I. M.] Kall[mil]koff; [5] Perfineff (?)—Commander of the 2nd Ussuri Cossack Regiment, Military Headman; [6–7 unidentified].” At least two Cossack captains (*esauly*) identified by Petrajetski had served under Ataman Semenov and may have been among the cut-throats, murderers, and souvenir-hunters who were responsible for the display of skulls captured by Eichelberger’s personal camera in Manchuria. “There is more chance that the Bolsheviks will alter their principles for the better,” he wrote, “than that this small group of men ... will sincerely try to do good for the people.”<sup>16</sup> As Eichelberger found out, this was a dangerous allegation, not only because



**FIGURE 10** “Typical bunch of Russians”.



**FIGURE 11** Cossack officers.

the Whites were the United States' ostensible allies, but also because of the rumors circulating among the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia to the effect that the American officers would not be allowed to return to the US in the immediate future because they had been "tainted" by communism.<sup>17</sup>

Eichelberger's animosity towards the White Cossack officers with whom he had to serve betrayed an even more general disdain for the Russian people as a whole. Although Eichelberger admitted that the American presence in Siberia was based on faulty premises and had the opposite effect to President Wilson's intentions, he still believed that America's motivations were superior to the selfish interests of the Japanese, British, and French, and that the Russian people (Figure 12) and their leaders should be grateful for the American presence in Siberia, since American troops prevented atrocities by the Japanese and the Whites and resisted Allied attempts to influence internal events in Russia.<sup>18</sup> He was genuinely puzzled that the Russian people could not perceive America's moral superiority to the other Allies, and the Russian people's antagonism toward the American troops made him angry, irritated, and even more racist and sexist than ever. (Two of Eichelberger's favorite expressions were: "That woman would be safe in a lumber camp," and "He's a nice fellow even if he is a Jew."<sup>19</sup>) "All the inhabitants are dirty and smell like billy goats," and the "average place here is so unsanitary and dirty that no white person could live in it." Eichelberger characterized the inhabitants of the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional microcosm of the Russian empire that was the port-city of Vladivostok as a "mongrel crowd"—one that included "too many" Jews, "ugly women,"



**FIGURE 12** Group of Russians.

“Chinks,” and even “niggers.” These groups, in his opinion, made the Russian nation a “hot bed of murder and oriental intrigue.”<sup>20</sup>

To a certain extent, this orientaling discourse about the supposedly-inherent corruption and inferiority of Russian society also found its way into the visual language of some of Eichelberger’s photos, particularly those depicting the diverse peoples of eastern Siberia or their exotic modes of transportation (junks, camels, *droshki*). There are too many examples to reproduce here, but I think Figure 13, of a “Chinese soldier belonging to General Horvats’ army,” i.e., serving in the private army of Lieutenant General Dmitrii L. Horvath, the anti-Bolshevik satrap who ran the Chinese Eastern Railway Company; or Figure 14, of a “Korean beggar,” can serve as examples of the fact that Eichelberger’s photos did much more than merely capture the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional “reality” of life during the Russian Civil War in eastern Siberia. By directing his camera at only certain racial types or social situations, Eichelberger took the opportunity to re-assert the superiority of his own nation, sex, and race, if only in the photos that he took, annotated, and included in the letters that he sent home to his wife. “Nearly every nation in the world is represented here,” he declared in a letter to Mrs. Eichelberger, and the “best of all of course are the Americans and then the Canadians.” He flatly stated: “There is present in this country little of the good, solid blood which characterized the men who settled the United States. ... Few of the men or women seem to possess any of the solid virtues which have made America a great country.”<sup>21</sup> Complaining that “it is



**FIGURE 13** Chinese soldier.

impossible to imagine a more illogical crowd,” he wrote his wife that “we will never get any thanks from that crowd.” He added: “This is the best school in Americanism I have ever seen. ... Any half-American coming over here would be turned into a real patriot because some of the biggest liars and crooks in the world are all assembled here and they are all knocking us.”<sup>22</sup> In effect, if not in intention, Eichelberger’s ability to photograph and thereby to objectify the “Other” allowed him (and other members of the American Expeditionary Force) to do nothing less than snatch a symbolic victory out of the jaws of defeat.

At the end of his dissertation, Chwialkowski noted that of the “251 boxes” in the Eichelberger Collection, particularly important for his study was the general’s “somewhat self-serving” correspondence with his wife, his friends, and his colleagues during World War II. He found other materials in the collection of lesser interest. “The pictures, scrapbooks, albums and



**FIGURE 14** “Korean beggar”.

memorabilia are entertaining,” he noted, “but provide little additional information.”<sup>23</sup> As I have tried to show in this article, while this assessment may have been true for someone writing a study whose focus was “the life and career” of Robert L. Eichelberger, the Siberian photo collection merits more attention than it has received up to now. For it is fair to say that the materials in the Photo Series of the Eichelberger Papers at Duke University Library offer not only a unique visual record of the well-intentioned but ultimately misguided policy of American intervention in the Russian Civil War, but also provide another important primary source about daily life during wartime in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional region on the border of three major twentieth-century powers (Russia, Japan, and China). Just as importantly, by allowing us to trace the process through which “a dirty place for Americans to be” could be transformed into the “best school of Americanism,” Eichelberger’s photos of the Russian Civil War in Siberia offer a unique illustration of the ideological work that modern photography (and modern mass media more broadly) has (and continues) to perform in the articulation of both personal and political identities worldwide. I will avoid the temptation to draw any comparisons between early twentieth-century Siberia and the contemporary situation in Iraq. Instead, I hope that readers of this piece will come away convinced both of the scholarly and research value of this little-known collection; as well as of the need to make this material more widely known and better accessible to scholars of twentieth-century Russian (and, more broadly, Eurasian) history and visual culture.

To that end, the Digital Collections Council of Duke University Libraries has funded a digitization project called *Americans in the Land of Lenin: Documentary Photographs of Early Soviet Russia*.<sup>24</sup> This project is modeled, in part, on the digital collection at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, which was created to highlight its unique holdings of materials on the Siberian AEF's sister organization, the so-called Polar Bear Expedition.<sup>25</sup> Duke University Library's new digital collection includes over 400 images (many featuring English-language captions and other annotations) of the American intervention in eastern Siberia—and thus constitutes one of the largest collections of photographs of the Russian Civil War in the country. *Americans in the Land of Lenin* not only complements the *Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections* at the University of Michigan, but also serves as the first step in the digitization of additional parts of Duke's extensive holdings of twentieth-century Russian visual culture.

## NOTES

1. For a description of this collection, consult the online finding aid entitled "Inventory of the Robert L. Eichelberger Papers, 1728–1998," available on the Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library's Web site at: <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/rbmscl/eichel/inv/>.

2. John F. Shortal, *Forged by Fire: General Robert L. Eichelberger and the Pacific War* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987). Excerpts of Eichelberger's extensive war-time correspondence with his wife were published in Robert L. Eichelberger, *Dear Miss Em: General Eichelberger's War in the Pacific, 1942–1945*, edited by Jay Luvaas (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972).

3. Paul Chwialkowski, *In Caesar's Shadow: The Life of General Robert Eichelberger*, Contributions in Military Studies, 141 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), which devotes an entire chapter to Eichelberger's service in Siberia. This book is a revised version of the biographer's doctoral thesis, entitled "A 'Near Great' General: The Life and Career of Robert L. Eichelberger" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1991). Unless otherwise noted, all of my references to Chwialkowski's work refer to the author's original doctoral dissertation.

4. As Carol Kingsland Willcox Melton, another former Duke doctoral student has argued, this radical new concept in international relations was picked up and developed more fully after World War II by the United Nations. See Carol Kingsland Willcox Melton, "Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918–1920" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1991); published as *Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918–1921* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001).

5. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 32. "Some of the best information I have been able to get here, is when I have let Russians drink about five times to my one and then have them get confidential" (*ibid.*, 43).

6. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 31.

7. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 30.

8. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 33–4.

9. For a discussion of photo-postcards as historical sources, see Paul J. Vanderwood, "The Picture Postcard as Historical Evidence: Veracruz, 1914," *The Americas* 45, no. 2 (October 1988), 201–225; Todd Alden, "And We Lived Where Dusk Had Meaning: Remembering Real Photo Postcards," in *Real Photo Postcards: Unbelievable Images from the Collection of Harvey Tulcensky*, ed. Laetitia Wolff, 6–9 (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005); and Alison Rowley, "Popular Culture and Visual Narratives of Revolution: Russian Postcards, 1905–1922," *Revolutionary Russia* 21, no. 1 (June 2008), 1–31, here 1–2. Many thanks to Prof. Rowley for sharing these references with me.

10. There is an extensive literature on this topic, which was sparked by the work of Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). For a discussion of its applicability to the Russian case, see Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander Martin, eds., *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*, *Kritika* historical studies, 3 (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2006).

11. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 26.
12. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 29.
13. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 36.
14. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 35.
15. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 35.
16. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 35.
17. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 45.
18. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 50.
19. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 52.
20. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 51–2.
21. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 51.
22. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 50.
23. Chwialkowski, "A 'Near Great' General," 418, 421.

24. Duke University Libraries has digitized over 750 photographs of everyday life in the Soviet Union (1919–1921 and 1930) from the papers of both Robert L. Eichelberger and Frank Whitson Fetter. The photographs from the Frank Whitson Fetter Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, document everyday Soviet life in Moscow and Kazan' at the height of Stalin's Great Turn (1930), and therefore provide a natural extension, both chronological and thematic, of the Eichelberger photos of eastern Siberia during the Russian Civil War. The entire collection can be viewed at: <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/esr/>; see also the YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHBKIX-7-QQ>.

25. This was the nickname by which the Archangel intervention of 1918–1919 came to be known among the American troops (many of them from Michigan) involved in the intervention. Like the AEF in Siberia, this group of soldiers was ostensibly sent to northern Russia in order to prevent a German advance and to help re-open the Eastern Front. And like the Siberian AEF, American soldiers found themselves fighting the Bolsheviks for months after the Armistice ended fighting in France. The Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan has collected and digitized manuscripts, photographs, as well as maps and primary printed source materials relating to the American intervention in Northern Russia. The *Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections* site can be accessed at: [http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node\\_id=272&lastnode\\_id=7237](http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node_id=272&lastnode_id=7237).