

‘Where Do We Go from Here:’ The Russian Railway Service Corps in Nagasaki

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By 1917, Nagasaki was years removed from its status as one of Asia’s most active treaty port towns and its Western population had dwindled to 288 – with the missionary community providing the bulk of the total. Of the seventy Americans in town, forty-eight were women and most of these were missionaries. What follows is an account of what happened when more than 300 American servicemen showed up unexpectedly for dinner just before Christmas and stayed for eight months.

First, some background information is necessary to explain why these U.S. Army officers were in Asia and how they became stranded in Nagasaki. With the collapse of the tsarist government in Russia in the spring of 1917, President Woodrow Wilson and other high ranking U.S. government officials developed a strategy that sought to support and stabilize the Provisional Government of Aleksandr Kerensky and prevent the Russian Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky from coming to power and hurting the Allied war effort by carrying out their threat to sue for a separate peace with the Germans. The plan called for sending two different types of American missions to Russia: the so-called Root Mission and two railway missions.

The Root Mission, so-named because it was headed by former Secretary of State Elihu Root, was sent to give moral support to the new Russian regime (recognized by Wilson a week after its formation) and to discover what support Russia needed to carry on as an ally against Germany. Its members included both government officials and business leaders. Among the suggestions made by Root upon the mission’s arrival in June 1917 was the establishment of a propaganda campaign to help bring the Russian people closer to the United States. One way that this was to be accomplished was through the introduction of Y.M.C.A. stations across the country.

The railway missions were more technical ventures aimed at solving Russia’s transportation problems, especially those related to the control and management of the Trans-Siberian Railway. While technical in nature, however, the missions certainly had political implications as well. By offering to protect and improve the railway, American officials hoped to: 1) prevent Japan from dominating the region, 2) guard the Allied stockpiled materials at Vladivostok, 3) provide Russia and the Allies with the means to fight the Germans, and 4) help the new Russian government get food to its people.

There were two separate railway missions, the United States Railway Advisory Commission to Russia and the Russian Railway Service Corps. The former mission, headed by John F. Stevens, arrived at the end of June and spent about fifty days in the country. Its assignment was to conduct a survey of all Russian railways in order to make recommendations regarding improvements in management and technical changes, as well as ascertain existing requirements as to supplies and equipment.

The second railway mission consisted of 316 American Army railway engineers out of St. Paul, MN and Philadelphia, PA under the command of Colonel George Emmerson, the general manager of the Great Northern Railway. It was a military unit with civilian status hired by Kerensky’s Provisional Government for duty along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The Russian Railway Service Corps (R.R.S.C.) left San Francisco on 18 November 1917 aboard the U.S. transport Thomas. By the time the unit arrived in Vladivostok on 14 December, however, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had

come to power and its services were no longer desired. “[The engineers] consequently put back to Nagasaki for food and supplies [arriving 19 December]; their stay which at first they thought would last but for a few days gradually grew into weeks and months until it proved to be eight months before the last contingent of one hundred departed.” Thus began the saga of the R.R.S.C.’s sojourn in Nagasaki.

Thinking that the unit would probably be departing soon, Emmerson initially had the engineers remain on the Thomas anchored in Nagasaki Harbor. With the approach of Christmas, the foreign community feted their visitors with a holiday performance in the chapel at Kwassui, a Methodist mission school for girls. According to G. Ernest Trueman, the director of the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A., the program included music, reading and games and was attended by 130 officers.

Keeping the engineers occupied during their enforced layover was on the minds of everyone. Colonel Emmerson had them take Russian language lessons at the Y.M.C.A. and the Japan Imperial Railway Board offered free rail passage anywhere in the country. Hikes in the Nagasaki area were organized, dances hosted on the Thomas, and the long-abandoned bowling alley of the Nagasaki Club was reopened and cleaned for use by the R.R.S.C.

After three weeks, however, when it became apparent that their stay would indeed be extended, the engineers were billeted at hotels in both Nagasaki and Obama. The R.R.S.C., from the beginning, had been divided into two contingents: operating and erecting. The operating contingent from St. Paul had approximately 240 members. This group was housed in Nagasaki, with the main body of 170 being headquartered at the Nagasaki Hotel, and the remaining members being divided among the Bellevue Hotel, the Cliff House and the Japan Hotel. The erecting contingent of seventy-eight men, all chosen from the staff of the Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia, was housed at the Ikkakuro Hotel in Obama, a small seaport resort town about forty miles away.

Once settled in, the engineers searched for further ways to occupy their time. Days were filled with athletic events, as the community made tennis courts, baseball diamonds and soccer fields available for their use. Quite often the soldiers played baseball games and soccer matches against local teams. The most common opponents were the Nagasaki Higher School of Commerce, the Medical College, and Mitsubishi. One group of engineers even traveled all the way to Yokohama to play in a baseball tournament there. The seats were also taken out of the Y.M.C.A. auditorium, so that it could be used for volleyball, “a game which subsequently became the chief recreational exercise for the whole group, three courts being kept in almost constant use.”

Hundreds of books and magazines were donated for their reading pleasure, visiting lecturers were brought in, and lessons were given in how to eat rice with chopsticks. In other words, the men were bored to death! An example of this was when two men from the erecting contingent in Obama walked the thirty-eight miles to Nagasaki just for something to do.

As a group, the R.R.S.C. engineers were a little older and more likely to be married than the common servicemen who stopped in Nagasaki. This does not mean that they did not crave female companionship; they just sought it in a different fashion. The wives and daughters of local missionaries in particular immediately saw their social calendars filled. Church services, afternoon teas, concerts, benefits and dances became common occurrences.

The R.R.S.C. officers hosted dances at the Nagasaki Hotel and the foreign community reciprocated

by hosting one for them at the Public Hall. A number of the engineers also participated in a benefit to raise money for a piano for the Y.M.C.A. But by far the most popular contribution of the R.R.S.C. to the local community was the performances of their jazz band and minstrels. The local English-language newspaper, the Nagasaki Press, ran a special supplement praising the 15 February 1918 performance at the Y.M.C.A. to benefit the Red Cross. According to the account, both the foreign and Japanese members of the community in attendance (including the governor's wife) had a glorious time at what the newspaper called "one of the most enjoyable [performances] ever presented in Nagasaki and unique of its kind." One of the most popular songs of the evening was "Where Do We Go from Here," which was adapted to fit the special circumstances of the R.R.S.C., as it awaited orders to leave for destinations yet undetermined.

Later in the month, orders finally did come for 110 members of the operating contingent; they were dispatched to Harbin over three days beginning the 27th. Two days prior to their departure, the engineers were entertained by Nagasaki city officials. Assembling at the Nagasaki Hotel, the R.R.S.C. officers marched to a local Japanese restaurant (Fukuya), where they listened to speeches and a wide variety of traditional Japanese music. Lieutenant Colonel Lantry, who was in charge of the unit in Colonel Emmerson's absence, exchanged toasts and calls of banzai with Governor Shimada of Nagasaki. The farewell reception then concluded with a performance of Japanese theater at the Minamiza.

From 27 to 29 February, this first group left by train for Moji, where they then sailed to Vladivostok. During their two months in port, the men had been warmly received by both their Japanese and Western hosts. The remainder of the unit was scheduled to leave soon thereafter, but again this was not to be. Roughly half of the operating contingent remained in Nagasaki and the erecting contingent was still at Obama.

More than a month of sightseeing (a number of officers visited Mt. Aso), dances and athletic events took place before further word was received concerning their travel orders. Finally, because of the uncertain conditions in Russia, the erecting contingent stationed in Obama was ordered back to the United States. Its sole duty was supposed to have been the erection of the engines supplied by its American company (Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia) to the Russian government, but since it was unlikely to be allowed to do this in the foreseeable future, the unit was sent home.

On 2 April 1918, the first twenty-five members departed Nagasaki on the Empress of Japan and they were followed by the remainder of the contingent on the Empress of Asia and the China on 15 April. The group, having spent nearly four months mired in the hinterlands of Obama, left under little fanfare to be reunited with their families in the United States.

This left a little more than one hundred officers of the operating contingent of the R.R.S.C. in Nagasaki. While surely hoping that their situation would be resolved soon, an event occurred which complicated the picture in eastern Russia—and by extension that in Nagasaki as well— even more. In the same month that the erecting force returned home, Czech troops which had deserted the Austrian army in order to fight against the Germans, arrived in Vladivostok. This proved to be a very unsettling factor in a region in which the White Russian forces were already strong and Bolshevik control precarious at best. In late May, the Czechs began an uprising against Soviet forces and a month later they seized control of Vladivostok.

This gave the Allies the excuse they needed to intervene in the affairs of the region and by early

July they had established a protectorate over the city. In what came to be known as the Siberian Intervention, it was agreed that in August the British, Americans and Japanese would send troops to the area. Caught up in all of these new developments were the remaining engineers of the R.R.S.C. in Nagasaki.

Except for six officers who returned home at the end of June due to ill health, the men continued to while away their time playing sports, taking part in American holiday services (there were Memorial Day and the Fourth of July celebrations), and listening to a series of lectures entitled “Things Japanese” conducted by local Western residents. When they finally received their orders to go to Vladivostok in mid-August, it was as part of the first U.S. Expeditionary Force to land in Siberia in compliance with America’s role in the Intervention.

This changed the entire complexion of the R.R.S.C.’s reception in Nagasaki, because even though the United States and Japan were technically partners in the Allied incursion into Siberia, they came in with different objectives and with a great deal of suspicion toward one another. The United States was interested in bringing stability to the region and preventing the spread of communism. Japan, while also interested in checking the Bolsheviki, had its eye on securing territorial gains in the area. Japan refused to comply with a 7,000 troop limit in the region and soon had more than three times that many soldiers there.

Tensions were thus high and troop operations secretive by the time the R.R.S.C. officers readied for reassignment to Vladivostok. This time there would be no lavish farewell reception by Japanese officials. As a matter of fact, the only Japanese visitors were those who in early August burglarized the Nagasaki Hotel where the engineers were staying.

While there was too much troop activity in Nagasaki for it to be said that the Americans snuck out of town, they certainly left under a veil of secrecy. In ordinary times, the English-language newspaper, Nagasaki Press, published the arrivals and departures of U.S. transports, but the following passage appeared in its 13 August issue.

In present circumstances it is perhaps well to inform our readers that, as in the present situation, dates of expected arrival and departure of American army transports – when given – are not strictly reliable, neither can we be expected to give full details regarding their personnel and movements – even when known to us.

This was clearly meant to hide details of troops movements not only from the Russians, but, to some extent, from the Japanese as well, who were in the midst of dispatching their own troops to Siberia at the time.

It did not, however, take too much scrutiny of the newspaper to gain a good idea of the tremendous traffic of American military personnel moving through Nagasaki during this period. The United States sent troops to Vladivostok from both San Francisco and Manila. The latter group passed through Nagasaki on its way to Siberia, and it was with this force that the remaining members of the R.R.S.C. finally reached their destination after an eight-month delay.

On 12 August 1918, the U.S. transports Warren and Crook arrived in Nagasaki from Manila and departed for Vladivostok the following day. Just as they were leaving Nagasaki, the transport Merrit came into port; it too stayed only one day before moving on to Vladivostok. The transport Sherman arrived on the 17th and left on the 19th. Finally, the U.S. transport Liseum came through on 25

August and two days later departed. By that time, the Warren, Crook and Sherman had all returned from Vladivostok for a second run of troops. The U.S. transport Thomas (the original ship of the R.R.S.C.) returned from Vladivostok on 7 September and left for Manila on the 13th. The Warren and Crook followed the same route two weeks later. The result of all of this troop movement was that by September there were 7,000 American troops in Siberia.

Joining the American troops and approximately half of the original R.R.S.C. contingent in Siberia was G. Ernest Trueman, the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. director, who on 17 September left to distribute “comfort” goods to Allied soldiers. This, in a sense, was a cruel twist of Root’s original intention to have the Y.M.C.A. go to Russia to help better relations between the American and Russian people; instead Y.M.C.A. workers were aiding invading armies.

Trueman had high hopes for both his mission (“A wonderful opportunity is before us to serve thousands of soldiers during the winter and thanks to the leading force of God which has given the Association its wonderful organization both at home and abroad, I believe that we shall be able to step in almost immediately fully equipped for the task.”) and that of the R.R.S.C. (“[The engineers] practically hold the key to the transportation problem in Siberia on which depends to a very great extent the success of our army work for the Czechs and other Allied soldiers.”), but neither achieved their desired ends. Trueman was back from Siberia and out of Nagasaki by March 1919 and the R.R.S.C. at best secured mixed results.

According to John White,

Technical as well as other difficulties prevented the railway from running smoothly, even with some of the best American engineering talent supervising the operations. Dispatching was introduced, repair-shop practices revised, train sheets made up for operating officers, and other improvements carried out under the supervision of Colonel Emmerson, later replaced by B.O. Johnson.

But the lack of funding and opposition from Soviet engineers prevented further success. “Engineers, trainmen and mechanics would sometimes work without pay for several months and would frequently leave the service in disgust.” The Soviet engineers, in an effort to validate their own training vis-a-vis that of their American counterparts, often dragged their feet on American proposals.

In the end, American troops were pulled out of Siberia in early 1920 (although some civilian train experts did stay on until later), and the last of the Czechs had been withdrawn by September. This left only the Japanese, who became stuck in the quagmire of a prolonged intervention. They stayed until 1922, when forced to withdraw without having achieved their goals.

The unfortunate members of the Russian Railway Service Corps from the beginning became pawns in one political and military confrontation after another; the result being that many of them spent eight months doing little but whiling away the hours in Nagasaki. Their presence initially brought considerable excitement to the western Japanese seaport town, but by the time of their delayed departure, there was little or no fanfare. Japan and the Western Allies were heading down the path of confrontation over Northeast Asia and right in the middle of the dispute was control of the Trans-Siberian Railway and its extension into Manchuria, the Chinese Eastern Railway.

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