

Gone to Russia To Fight: The RAF In South Russia 1918 - 1928
By John T Smith
Reviewed by Ian Shields
The Russian Civil War of c.1917 - 1928 (dates vary depending on the author) is little understood, researched or written about in this country. Many will be only dimly, if at all aware, that the Russian Revolution was so opposed within the country, and that a civil war raged for so long. Fewer still will be aware of the British (and Allied - French in particular) military involvement, but those that are aware generally confine their understanding and knowledge to the events around Archangel in the North, ignoring the events in the far eastern edges of Russia around Vladivostok or in the South around the Crimea. But the UK was involved in both the North and the South, and in the latter arena the fledgling RAF played a not insignificant, if ultimately unsuccessful, role. It is striking, then, that two books have come out in the past few months that examine, in whole or as part of the book, the RAF's involvement in the southern campaign: Dr Julian Lewis' worthy examination of the life of Samuel 'Kink' Kinkead: Racing Ace (reviewed on the UK Defence Forum by Roger Green ♦ see: <http://www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk/reviews/samuel-kink-kinkead-racing-ace>); to this we can add John Smith's more detailed examination of the RAF's involvement in this southern fight.
What is striking about both books is that, despite little archival evidence on which to base their books, both authors have kept commendably rigidly to the facts and dispelled many of the myths surrounding the campaign. Both authors are critical of the best-known biography that came out of the campaign, M H Aten's Last Train Over Rostov Bridge, although Dr Lewis in particular highlights that the book was written many, many years after the event and at least in part ghost-written, excusing some of the exaggerations; Last Train Over Rostov Bridge remains a good read and does at least capture the spirit of the campaign. There, however, there the similarities between the books end. John Smith's book is certainly well researched, and he draws heavily on what archive, particularly the Squadron and Flight Diaries from the National Archive, are available. But his book lacks any sense of narrative, and is more a procession of facts, set in a rigid month-by-month sequence. The book would certainly have benefitted from many more, and better quality, maps as these are key to understanding the arena, and its vast scale. There is little attempt at analysis (the three-page conclusion hardly counts) and the place of the events in the wider sweep of history remains barely covered. The language employed is staccato, and the result is somewhat dissatisfying and functional.
That said, there are aspects of the book that deserve praise. The photographs, from a variety of sources, are excellent, the research sound, and the topic in some need of a thorough examination. John Smith is to be commended for producing a workmanlike book and for contributing to the wider knowledge of this sad affair. For the wider reader this will be a somewhat unsatisfactory read as the entire history cries out for a wider examination. For the specialist reader this is a valuable addition to the history of that campaign, but that the book is published by the specialist Amberley Publishing says a great deal. John Smith is to be saluted for his efforts, but we await the more definitive history.