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Canada and the Bolshevik Revolution

As government sent troops to return czarist rule, workers and soldiers mutinied for the red cause

THE WORLD MARKED the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in November, an event that gave rise to one of the more unorthodox states in world history, and shaped international and domestic Canadian politics for much of the 20th century. It is worth revisiting how differently Canada's elite reacted to that moment a century ago—in support of military action—compared to rank and file workers and soldiers, who were inspired to push for a similarly radical transformation in class relations at home.

Origins of Canada's intervention in Russia

At the time the Russian Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) on November 7, 1917, Canada was a steadfast ally of Russia. This association reflected family ties between the Russian and British

Vladivostok's Golden Horn Bay, Russia's outpost on the Pacific Ocean and the beachhead of Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War.

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monarchies (Czar Nicholas II and King George V were first cousins) and established economic and military connections. Canadian army officers were stationed in Petrograd, and the British Empire had provided substantial amounts of war *materiel* and financial loans to the Russian state to aid its efforts during the First World War. In the Far East port of Vladivostok, an estimated 700,000 tonnes of rolling stock, ammunition, submarines manufactured in Canada and other such *materiel* was stockpiled on the wharves.

Over eight months in 1917, Russia underwent a rapid transition—from a 300-year-old absolutist monarchy to a provisional government to a radical socialist government headed by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party). The Bolsheviks' decision to repudiate billions of rubles of foreign loans owed to British and French banks, and to enter into a separate peace deal with Germany at Brest-Litovsk (today the Belarusian city of Brest) in March 1918, fractured traditional allegiances. While Canada and its allies never formally declared war, from that point forward Russia was treated as a de facto enemy.

On far-flung fronts surrounding the world's largest state, the Allies made common cause with monarchists and other White Russian forces to limit and reverse the influence of Bolshevism. At the port of Vladivostok in early 1918, Japanese, British and American warships dropped anchor in Golden Horn Bay, deploying marines and then ground forces to occupy the city and topple the local Bolshevik administration. In a coalition war effort with the Czech Legion, White forces and Chinese troops crossed into Russia from nearby Manchuria.

Against this backdrop, the Canadian government of Sir Robert Borden pledged more than 5,000 troops to intervene in Russia's civil war in August 1918. They were split into the following groups:

- ▶ Siberian Expeditionary Force (Vladivostok): 4,200 troops
- ▶ Syren Party (Murmansk): 600 troops
- ▶ Elope Party (Arkhangelsk): 500 troops
- ▶ Dunsterforce (Baku): 40 troops

The government also created a Canadian Siberian Economic Commission, with representatives of the Canadian Pacific Railway and Bank of Montreal, instructed to work with the Allies to re-establish productive industries and commerce in Siberia, and investigate local conditions of transport, agriculture, mining, forestry, fishing and finance, "with a view to the development of Canadian trade." The commission deployed with the advance party of Canadian troops, and in early 1919 the Royal Bank of Canada opened a branch in Vladivostok in a 57-tonne prefabricated building.

Mobilization and munity

In the closing months of 1918, as the war on the Western Front ended, bringing a gruesome close to the slaughter of more than 60,000 Canadians, the government conscripted workers and farmers for battle in the new theatres of war in Russia, relying on dubious legal authority in provisions of the Military Service Act 1917 for "the defence of the realm." Not surprisingly, mobilization of the Siberian Expedition provoked sharp debates in Canada—and triggered a mutiny in Victoria, B.C. the day the soldiers embarked for Russia.

Sections of Canada's working class sympathized strongly with the Russian Revolution. The president of the B.C. Federation of Labour, Joseph Naylor, a socialist coal miner from Cumberland on Vancouver Island, had asked in late

1917: "Is it not high time that the workers of the western world take action similar to that of the Russian Bolsheviks and dispose of their masters as those brave Russians are now doing?"

These feelings intensified in the late stages of the war, as carnage on the battlefields of the Western Front combined with conscription, inflation and state repression to impel a growing number of Canadian workers to view Bolshevism as an effective, logical response to the two-fold scourges of war and capitalism.

As Canada's Siberian Expedition mobilized conscripts and volunteers from every Canadian province, the labour councils of Canada's largest cities (Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal) adopted resolutions sympathizing with the Bolsheviks and demanding "Hands Off Russia." Similar positions were adopted by the United Farmers of Ontario and farmer organizations in Saskatchewan. Even the business-aligned *Globe* newspaper of Toronto called for Canada to cancel the Siberian Expedition in the interests of political stability.

In Victoria, the local labour council and Socialist Party connected directly with conscripts converging on the city's Willows Camp, organizing two large "Hands Off Russia" mass meetings in local theatres attended by an estimated 800 Siberian troops—about a quarter of the force awaiting deployment to Russia.

"Well, things are beginning to look awful black over here," a soldier wrote to his sister-in-law from the Willows Camp. "We are going to be railroaded to Siberia, and we cannot do a thing to help ourselves. They started to dish out our



Canadian soldiers attend a "Hands Off Russia" protest meeting organized by the Victoria Trades and Labour Council and Socialist Party of Canada, December 1918.

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On December 21, 1918, a platoon of French-Canadian troops mutinied in downtown Victoria, B.C. while marching from the Willows Camp to the wharf to deploy for Vladivostok as part of Canada's intervention in the Russian Civil War.

B.C. ARCHIVES



Canadian military map showing the location of Allied, White Russian and Red Army forces, and the Allies' vulnerable line of communication along the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which was subject to dozens of partisan attacks in early 1919.

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clothes to us the first day, and out of 78 of us 77 refused to take them.”

Prime Minister Borden, then in Europe for peace talks following the November 11 armistice, ignored these appeals and advice from his own cabinet to cancel the mission, declaring that Canada had made commitments to certain “well disposed persons in Russia” and that the Siberian Expedition would proceed.

The outcome of this clash of ideological interests was a mutiny in Victoria the day the 259th Battalion (Canadian Rifles) deployed for Russia. At the downtown street corner of Fort and Quadra Streets, a platoon of Quebecois troops refused to march and were prodded at bayonet point down to the wharf. It took 21 hours to get the soldiers aboard the troopship *SS Teesta* before it sailed for Vladivostok—with a dozen ringleaders

Fourteen Canadians are buried at the Marine Cemetery on the outskirts of Vladivostok, forgotten victims of a forgotten war.

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shackled in the ship’s hold, pending court martial proceedings and convictions in Vladivostok for “joining in a mutiny while on active service in His Majesty’s armed forces.”

Doing nothing in Siberia

A great irony of the Siberian Expedition is that Canada went to extraordinary lengths to deploy military force in pursuit of the anti-Bolshevik cause, but less than a month after the main body of troops arrived in Russia, the Canadian government decided to

cancel the expedition and bring the troops home.

This reflected the chaotic state of affairs in Siberia and unreliability of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the Allies’ sole line of communication between the beachhead in Vladivostok and the active front between the Red and White armies, 6,000 kilometres west in the Ural Mountains dividing Asia and Europe. Canada’s commander in Vladivostok, Major-General James Elmsley, provided a frank assessment before the main body of his troops had even reached Vladivostok:

I feel certain that when the time comes for my troops to move west I shall find that the foundation of all military operations, a secure L. of C. (line of communication), is wanting. However anxious we may be to assist a good cause, I would feel that I was



Canadian “tourists” in Vladivostok, 1919. Lacking authorization to proceed “Up Country” to the Siberian interior, the troops occupied their time with guard duty and a range of recreational pursuits.

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breaking faith with my own government if I moved a single unit from Vladivostok under these conditions.

The Borden government reluctantly accepted its commanding officer’s advice, ordering the demobilization of units still in Canada and requisitioning ships to bring the troops already in Russia home. This came with an extravagant price tag demanded by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Service for passage aboard the transpacific ocean liners *Monteagle*, *Empress of Japan* and *Empress of Russia*: \$125 per enlisted man (more than \$1,600 per person in today’s currency) and \$250 for officers travelling first class.

A small contingent of about 50 Canadians were recalled from the Siberian city of Omsk near the Urals, where they had established a base headquarters to aid the forces of White leader Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak in anticipation of the arrival of the main body of Canadians. Another group of Canadians, numbering 200 soldiers, participated in a short-lived inter-allied operation to reclaim the town of Shkotovo near Vladivostok, after Bolshevik-aligned partisan units toppled the local White garrison, liberating a prison and threatening the coal supply for Vladivostok and the railroad.

However, the vast majority of the 4,200 Canadians who served in Vladivostok in 1919 never saw combat, instead occupying time with guard duty and a range of recreational pursuits: boxing, hockey, soccer, hiking and day leave in the centre of Vladivostok, where they visited cinemas, markets

and brothels. More than half of the medical cases at the Canadian military hospital at the Second River barracks were associated with sexually transmitted infections. As one commentator noted, the Canadians were unlikely “tourists” in Vladivostok during one of the most challenging chapters in that city’s history.

Demobilization and class conflict in Canada

The Canadians returned from Vladivostok aboard four ships between April and June 1919, arriving in a country sharply divided along the lines of social class, as general strikes paralyzed production from Victoria, Vancouver and Prince Rupert in the West, to Edmonton, Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg in the Prairies, and as far east as Amherst, Nova Scotia (where Leon Trotsky, commander of the Red Army and Soviet commissar of war in 1919, had been detained by British intelligence for three weeks in a prisoner-of-war camp in April 1917 while travelling from exile in New York back to post-Czarist Russia).

Canadian soldiers on the other military fronts encircling the Soviet state at Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Baku were similarly evacuated after seeing limited combat, as the Red Army and partisan units gained the upper hand over divided Allied and White Russian forces, culminating in Bolshevik victories. In October 1922 the last Allied units evacuated from Vladivostok’s Golden Horn Bay, as units of the Moscow-aligned Far Eastern Republic entered the city limits. The Allied intervention and White Russian challenge to Bolshevik power had ended in failure.

“This expedition was a political error, a military mistake, and a wanton extravagance,” Dr. Henri Sévérin Béland, Member of Parliament for Beauce, told Canada’s House of Commons in June 1919 as the last Canadians returned from Vladivostok and the country erupted in general strikes.

For the next 70 years, hot and cold wars would sever Vladivostok and the Soviet Union from the wider world. Red scares in Canada and other countries sought to contain the ideas of “Bolshevism” and thwart radical labour political action, creating divisions within the political and industrial arms of the Canadian working class that persist today.

Relations between Canada and Russia would not be “normalized” until the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of the neoliberal variant of capitalist rule, which, as Naomi Klein pointed out in the *Shock Doctrine*, was implemented in a particularly ruthless fashion in Russia by western financial institutions in the 1990s.

Today, interests and aspirations that motivated Bolshevism in Russia and Canada in 1917 continue to give rise to social movement mobilizations for equality, solidarity and a more balanced ordering of social and global relations. The lone reminder of Canada’s ill-fated intervention in the Bolshevik Revolution is a monument, on a forested hillside outside Vladivostok, erected prior to the evacuation of the last Canadian units in 1919. **M**