

**From Victoria to Vladivostok**

## STUDIES IN CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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**From Victoria to Vladivostok:  
Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-19**

*Benjamin Isitt*



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*For my family – and for those who speak truth to power*

*So we grow up thinking there were no struggles to engage in,  
no obstacles to be overcome.*

*We suppose now that the new text books will tell children  
that the world was set free in 1914-1918 – with no hint that  
autocracy is not yet out of the saddle, no suggestion that  
there are other fields to be won.*

– “HISTORY TEACHING ALL WRONG,”  
SEMI-WEEKLY TRIBUNE (VICTORIA),  
22 SEPTEMBER 1919

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## Preface

CANADA'S WEST COAST and the Russian Far East often seem worlds apart. Separated by barriers of language, culture, geography, and political economy, their trajectories rarely cross in the public mind. However, for a few months in 1918-19, the histories of Canada and Russia coincided: Canada deployed 4,200 troops to engage an amorphous opponent – Bolshevism – part of an undeclared four-front war that included thirteen Allied countries, half a million White Russian fighters, and the anomalous sixty thousand-strong Czecho-Slovak Legion. The Siberian Expedition (or Canadian Expeditionary Force [Siberia] as it was officially known), like campaigns at Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and Baku, was designed to replace the Bolshevik Party of V.I. Lenin with a government more sympathetic to Western interests.<sup>1</sup> As Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, Canada's White ally and supreme dictator of the "All-Russian" government at Omsk, told a Canadian officer in spring 1919: "The principal aim of the campaign is to destroy the Bolshevik armies. After that it would prove an easy matter to restore law and order in the country."<sup>2</sup>

Canada was defeated in Russia. In a strange irony, few of the Canadian soldiers ever reached Siberia, a vast region in the Russian interior far removed from the port of Vladivostok on the Pacific coast (see Map 1). The Bolsheviks retained and consolidated power, cementing Soviet-style Communism as a world force and foreshadowing the hot and cold wars of the twentieth century. The Siberian Expedition was a particularly poignant defeat, coinciding with the first military expedition in Canadian history organized independently of the British military and the country's first foray in the Far East. The failure of Canada and its Allies to wipe out the Soviet Union at its inception helps explain the historiographic black hole. Military history has been inclined towards jingoism, amplifying victories and ignoring losses in marginal theatres of war. The layer of historians who have looked at Allied Intervention have left no mark on how most Canadians remember the First World War. My primary motivation in telling this story is to raise these troubling questions of Canadian policy in 1918-19, to give voice to soldiers and workers who advocated a different course, and to force a rethinking of how the war is remembered.

I arrived at the Siberian Expedition through a circuitous path, by way of an undergraduate paper on Victoria's labour movement during the First World

War. As I read through the records of the Victoria Trades and Labor Council, opposition to the Siberian Expedition became apparent after the armistice of 11 November 1918. Labour entered into a dialogue with soldiers, many of whom were conscripts under the Military Service Act, 1917; large numbers of troops attended protest meetings where labour speakers offered an interpretation starkly different from that of the Canadian government and the military command. Guided by vague sources, I uncovered the Victoria mutiny of 21 December 1918, where French-Canadian conscripts broke from a march before boarding the SS *Teesta* at the point of bayonets. Gradually, I pulled together the diverse pieces of the Siberian puzzle, through military records at Ottawa and a journey across Russia in spring 2008.

A dozen Russian scholars made this a truly memorable and productive trip. In Vladivostok, I was hosted at the Institute of History, Ethnography and Archeology of the Far Eastern Peoples, an affiliate of the Russian Academy of Science. I wish to thank Sergey Vradiy, Boris Mukhachev, Lidia Fetisova, Liudmila Galliamova, Oleg Sergeev, Tamara Troyakova, and Amir Khisamutdinov for sharing their insights into the history of their region. Sergey Ivanov provided stellar interpretive services during rambles around Vladivostok, Churkin, Gornostai, and Shkotovo. In Irkutsk, I met Victor Dyatlov at Irkutsk State University, toured monuments to Kolchak's fall with Vladimir Yurasov, and conversed with Pavel Novikov, a specialist in the civil war period. At Kemerovo, a coal-mining region in the centre of Siberia, I was welcomed into the home of Sergei Pavlovich Zviagin, an expert in the history of White Siberia. Elena Semibratova and Aleksey Ilyasov provided interpretive services. At Omsk, where Canadian and British troops propped up the White government of Admiral Kolchak, I enjoyed a walking tour with Vladimir Shuldyakov and Dennis Plugarev. Tamara Karnagova helped acquaint me with academic contacts in Moscow and Boris Kolonitskii discussed the mechanics of revolution during a visit to the St. Petersburg Institute of History. These scholars, and dozens of other Russians whom I met along the ten thousand-kilometre length of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, provided a glimpse into the warm Russian spirit.

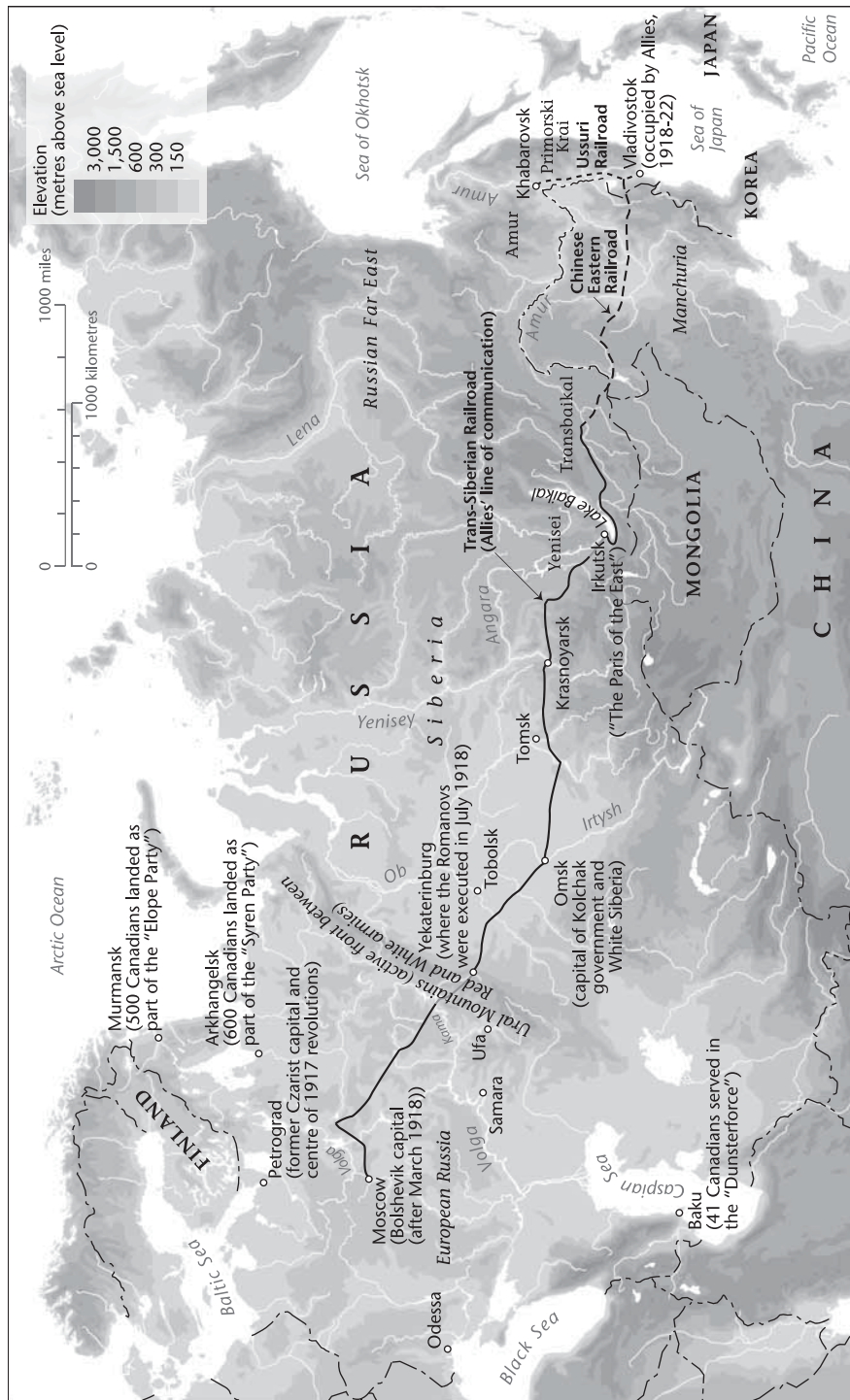
Histories are like building blocks, with one work building off those that precede it. I wish to acknowledge scholars whose research has shone light on the chaotic events in Canada and Russia at the end of the First World War – particularly John Swettenham, Roy MacLaren, and John Skuce. I am also indebted to colleagues who supported this work through its various stages. Eric W. Sager, Phyllis Senese, and Jennifer Evans supervised early research, and a number of colleagues read drafts: Gregory S. Kealey, David Frank, Margaret Conrad, Marc Milner, Foster Griezic, Kirk Niergarth, Janis Thiessen, Lee Windsor, Glen Leonard, Amy O'Reilly, Matthew Baglole, Janet Mullin, Heidi Coombs,

Heather Molyneaux, Patrick Webber, and readers at the *Canadian Historical Review* and UBC Press. Gwen Stephenson provided access to the Stephenson Family Papers and her uncle Edwin's photographs from Siberia; Sidney Rodger, Jim Neis, and Dona Crawford shared their fathers' diaries and photographs; Viateur Beaulieu and Mireille Lagacé provided valuable insight into the service of men from St-Épiphanie, Quebec. Larry Black opened up the records of the Centre for Research on Canadian-Russian Relations, while Norman Pereira, Patricia Polansky, and Jennifer Polk helped connect me with Russian scholars and archivists, including Maxim Yakovenko, who shared original research on the Canadian occupation of Vladivostok. Irina Gavrilova and Mathieu Rioux assisted with translation.

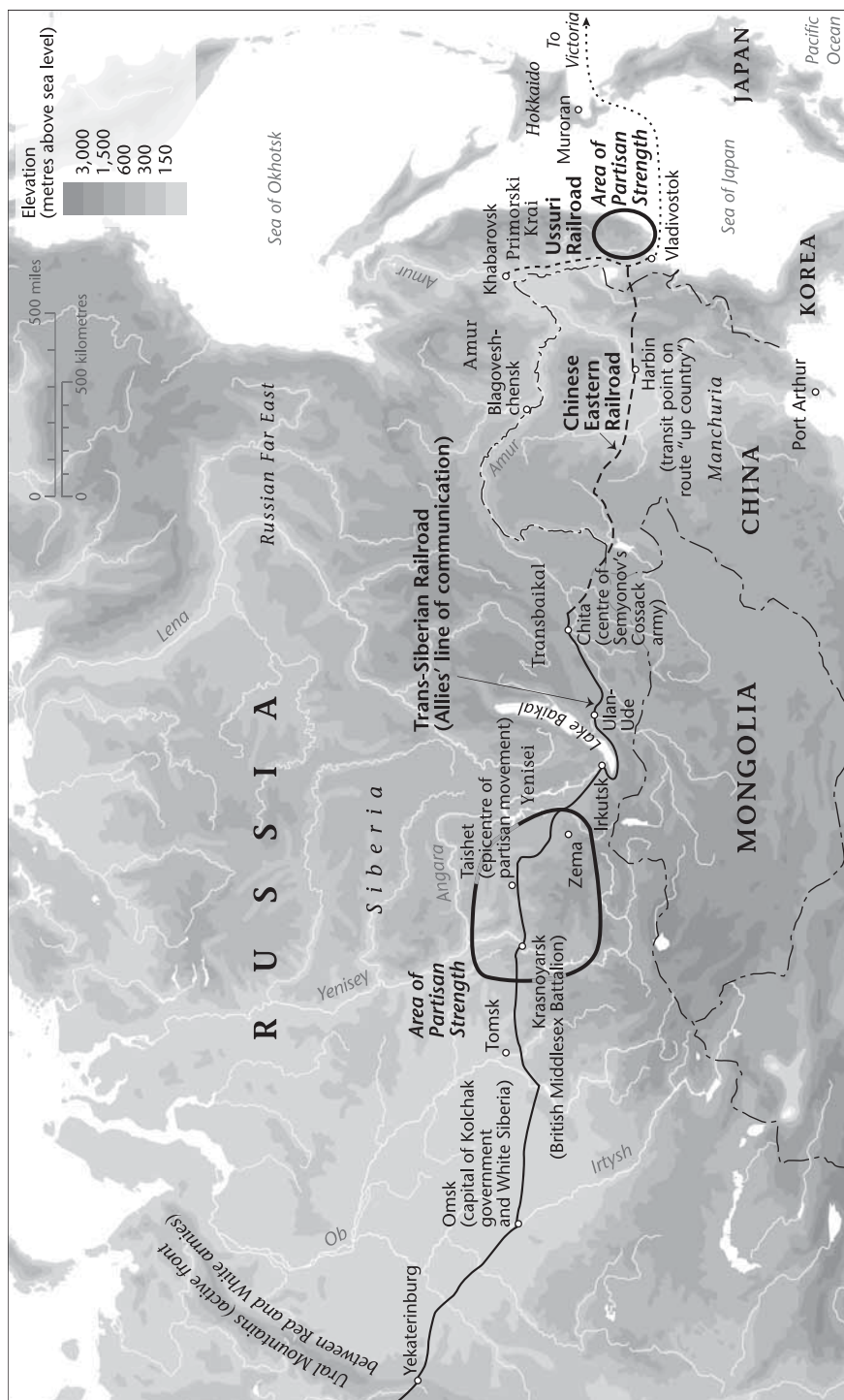
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## Abbreviations

AEF	American Expeditionary Force
AFL	American Federation of Labor
BCFL	British Columbia Federation of Labor
CAMC	Canadian Army Medical Corps
CASC	Canadian Army Service Corps
CAVC	Canadian Army Veterinary Corps
CE	Canadian Engineers
CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
CEFS	Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia)
CGA	Canadian Garrison Artillery
CGS	Chief of General Staff, Ottawa
CMGC	Canadian Machine Gun Corps
COC	Canadian Ordnance Corps
CPOS	Canadian Pacific Ocean Services
CPR	Canadian Pacific Railway
FLP	Federated Labor Party
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
OBU	One Big Union
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RNWMP	Royal North-West Mounted Police
RSDWP	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party
RSDWP(b)	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (Bolshevik)
SPC	Socialist Party of Canada
SR	Socialist Revolutionary Party
TLC	Trades and Labor Congress of Canada
VTLC	Victoria Trades and Labor Council

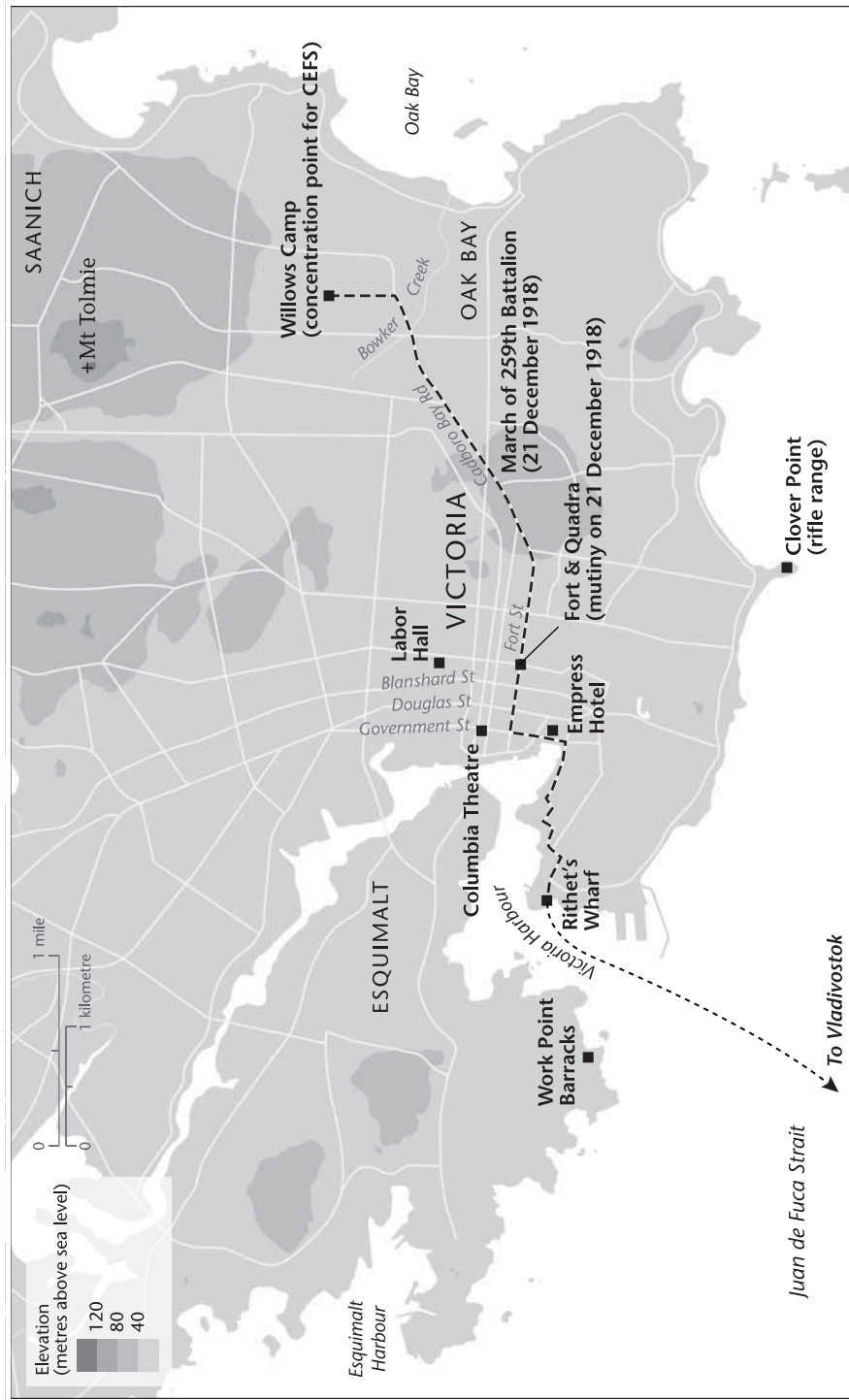


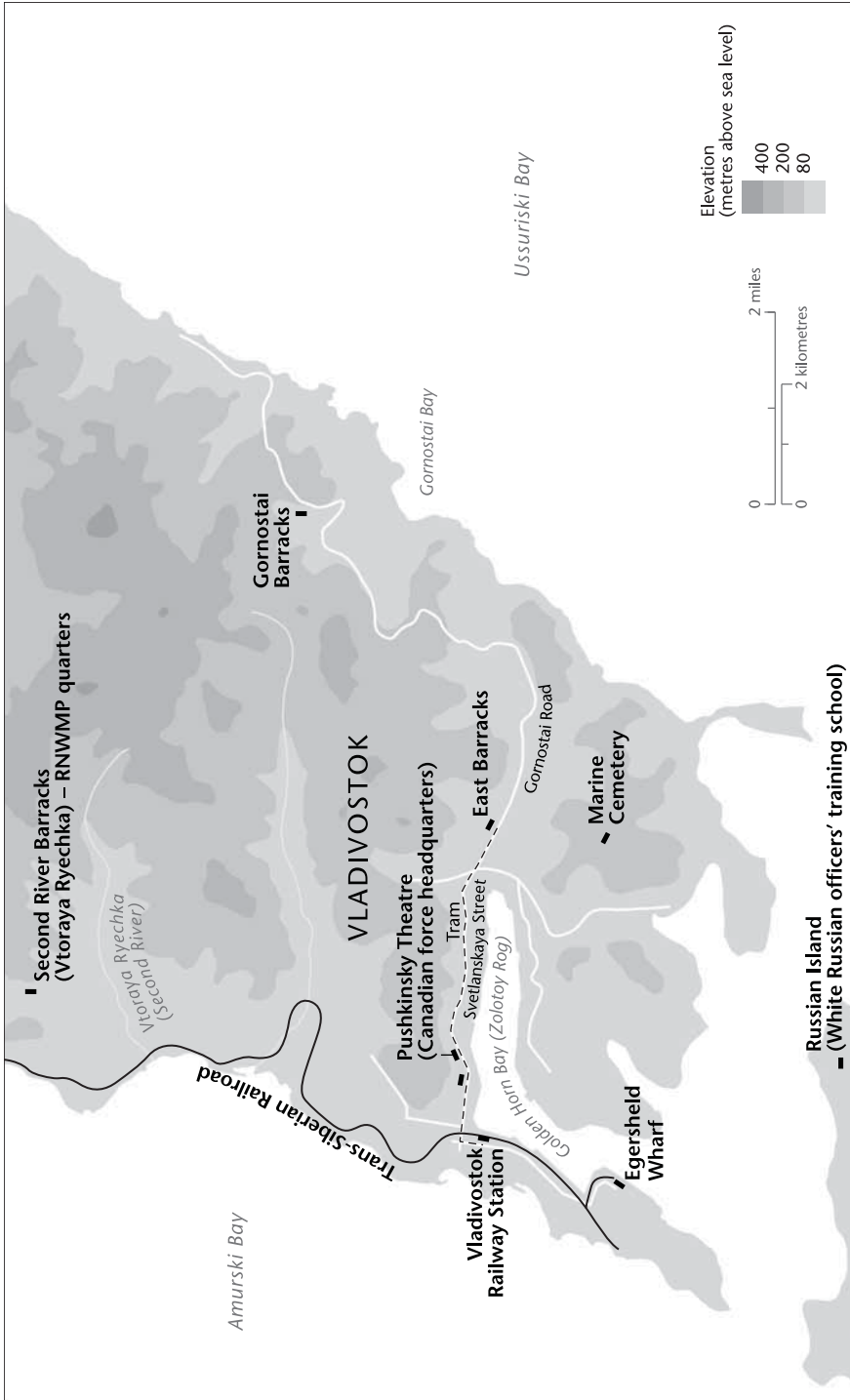




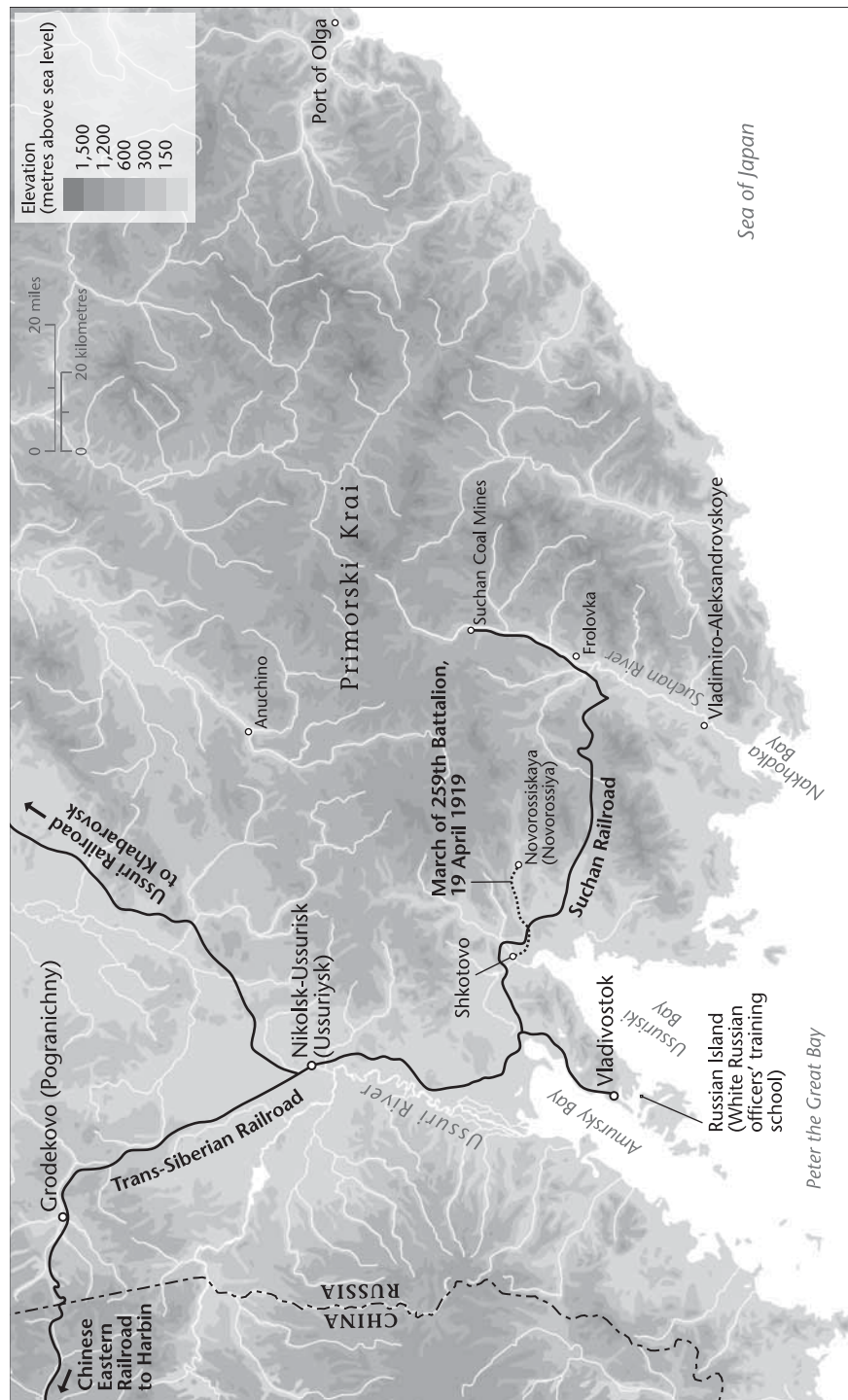
2 Siberia and the Russian Far East, 1918







4 Vladivostok, 1919



**5** Partisan strength around Vladivostok, 1919



**From Victoria to Vladivostok**



## Introduction: Why Siberia?

*They are taking us to Russia,  
As soldiers of the King,  
And if we see a Bolshevik,  
We will shout, "You horrid thing."*<sup>1</sup>

– DAWN FRASER, "THE MUD-RED  
VOLUNTEERS," *SONGS OF SIBERIA AND  
RHYMES OF THE ROAD* (C. 1919)

IT WAS THE SHORTEST day of the year – and the first day of winter – when the soldiers began their six-kilometre march from the Willows Camp to the troopship *Teesta* on Victoria's outer wharves. Saturday, 21 December 1918. The Armistice had been signed six weeks earlier, ending four years of bloody warfare on the Western Front. But peace evaded these men. The troops belonged to the 259th Battalion, 16th Infantry Brigade, Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia) (CEFS). They were bound for Vladivostok, a beachhead of Western interests in Russia's Far East, where Canada and a dozen Allies were opening a new terrain of battle against an amorphous enemy – Bolshevism.

Dissent was palpable in the 259th Battalion. War weariness sapped morale as a wet BC autumn and the outbreak of the Spanish Flu combined with misgivings over the purposes of the Siberian Expedition. Trade-union organizers and socialists had fanned such doubts at protest meetings attended by hundreds of members of the force. Speakers invoked the demand "Hands Off Russia," questioning Allied intervention on the four fronts encircling Russia, while propagandists sold pamphlets entitled *The Soviet at Work* and *The Siberian Expedition*.<sup>2</sup> "We are going to be railroaded to Siberia, and we cannot do a thing to help ourselves," a soldier wrote to his sister in New Westminster. "They started to dish out our clothes to us the first day, and out of 78 of us 77 refused to take them."<sup>3</sup> As a court martial later concluded, "the trouble appears to have started at the date when the men were asked whether they were willing to volunteer for service in Siberia."<sup>4</sup>

Within the 259th Battalion, two-thirds of the troops – many from Quebec – were conscripts, compelled to serve under the Military Service Act, 1917. Questions later arose over the legality of deploying “MSA men,” hinging on whether or not the Siberian Expedition qualified as “the defence of the realm.”<sup>5</sup> Changes in company organization disrupted existing patterns of leadership and authority. “Owing to the requirements of the Record Office the men were marched to the Wharf in Alphabetical order,” the court martial found. “This completely changed the company organization so that the men were not under the command of their own Platoon officers and NCOs. There was one case of an officer who could not speak French being in charge of a platoon of men who could not understand English.”<sup>6</sup>

The troops, 856 enlisted men and forty-two officers under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Albert “Dolly” Swift, proceeded up Fort Street towards downtown Victoria (see Map 3). Midway through the march, at the intersection with Quadra Street, a group of conscripts near the front halted. “There was a plan among them that they would refuse to go,” a trade unionist by the name of Flewin recalled. “There was one man chosen to lead them, but when he struck down one of the officers the rest didn’t give him support.”<sup>7</sup> A lieutenant from Toronto described the events that followed:

the colonel drew his revolver and fired a shot over their heads – in the main street of Victoria – when some more got into line, though there were still a large number who would not, so the other two companies from Ontario were ordered to take off their belts and whip the poor devils into line, and they did it with a will, and we proceeded.<sup>8</sup>

Subdued by canvas belts and revolver fire, most of the rebels fell into line. However, several continued to shout defiantly “Outwards Turn” – proposing a return to the Willows Camp – while others bellowed “*On y va pas à Siberia!*”<sup>9</sup> A guard of honour formed, “fifty men in close formation, with rifles and fixed bayonets on either side of the road,” who escorted the mutinous company (“the French-Canadian company”) to the wharf “at the point of the bayonet, they being far more closely guarded than any group of German prisoners I ever saw.”<sup>10</sup> Twenty hours passed before the last dissenters were herded aboard the *Teesta*. “When we proceeded to our quarters below, the natural feeling was one of indescribable disgust,” Lance-Corporal Erskine Ireland wrote in his diary, “especially when the hammocks were up side by side, as close together as sardines in a tin.”<sup>11</sup> In the ship’s hold, along with twenty-one tons of gear for the YMCA and seventeen hundred tons of ammunition, a dozen ringleaders were detained in cells, the two worst handcuffed together. At 4:15 AM on 22 December 1918,



the 259th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia) set sail for Vladivostok.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Real Story of Intervention**

“Time will reveal some strange things in the great Siberian drama,” the *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, newspaper of the Victoria Trades and Labor Council, declared two days before the mutiny.<sup>13</sup> This forgotten chapter of the First World War presents several challenges of research and interpretation. Straddling military history, working-class history, and the social history of Canada, Quebec, and Russia, this story fits uneasily into any one field. The Canadian experience of war has been temporally, geographically, and thematically bounded by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918.<sup>14</sup> A handful of historians have examined Canada’s intervention in Russia, but these studies underestimate the dissent among the troops and the unique dialogue between conscripts and organized labour.<sup>15</sup> Absent is a serious inquiry of the social movement that emerged within the Canadian working class to force their return home. Within the field of working-class history, domestic expressions of industrial unrest have been privileged over local responses to international events such as the Russian Revolution. No work has focused on Canadian labour’s response to the Siberian Expedition. This topic raises important questions, such as the dual role of soldiers as workers and the way class tensions were manifested within the armed forces, providing fertile ground for expanding our understanding of the working-class experience in Canada.<sup>16</sup> As William Rodney observed in 1968, “the real story of intervention and Canada’s role in it has still to be written.”<sup>17</sup>

As the last guns sounded on the Western Front, more than four thousand Canadian troops assembled at Victoria, New Westminster, and Coquitlam for deployment to Siberia. Born at a meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet in London in July 1918, the CEFS was plagued from the outset by lack of clarity about its aims. A month after the main body of the force arrived in Vladivostok, the order was issued from Ottawa to begin preparations for evacuation. Few troops in the CEFS ever saw direct fighting. Ambivalence in Allied strategy prevented their deployment into the interior of Siberia, “up country” to the Ural Front, where White Russian and Czecho-Slovak troops fought the Red Army. Most of their time was spent training White Russian officers and conducting guard duty and routine security operations around Vladivostok – responding to looting, theft, assault, and murder in the port city. The threat of Bolshevik insurgency and a burgeoning partisan movement precipitated countermeasures by the Canadian command and the deployment of a small number of troops to the village of Shkotovo. An attempt to move a body of troops up the Trans-Siberian

Railroad was thwarted by a strike of Russian rail-workers, while another train carrying the horses and men of the Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP) was wrecked near Irkutsk. By June 1919, all but a handful of troops had returned to Canada.

The Siberian Expedition was part of a larger Allied campaign to alter the outcome of the Russian Revolution and to install a more sympathetic government in Russia. From Murmansk and Arkhangelsk to Baku and Vladivostok, Canadian troops joined soldiers from thirteen countries in a multi-front strategy of encirclement designed to isolate and defeat the Bolshevik regime in Moscow – a “cordon sanitaire,” in the words of Winston Churchill.<sup>18</sup> In Siberia and the Russian Far East, the Canadians backed a succession of White Russian governments, headed by General Dmitri Horvath, Grigori Semyonov, and, finally, Aleksander Kolchak, former admiral of the czar’s Black Sea Fleet, who seized power at Omsk in November 1918. The Armistice on the Western Front liberated Allied forces for battle against the nascent Soviet state. The *British Columbia Federationist* (hereafter cited as *BC Federationist*), newspaper of the BC Federation of Labour, quoted G.W. Tschitcherin, Soviet commissar of foreign affairs, who presented a Bolshevik interpretation of the conflict:

A handful of capitalists who desired to repossess themselves of the factories and banks taken from them on behalf of the people; a handful of landowners who want to take again from the peasants the land they now hold; a handful of generals who again want to teach docility to the workers and peasants with a whip ... have betrayed Russia in the north, in the south, and in the east to foreign imperialist states, by calling foreign bayonets from wherever they could get them.<sup>19</sup>

The failure of Canada and its allies to defeat the Bolsheviks consigned this story to the margins of history, far removed from the heroism of the Canadian Corps in the trenches of France and Flanders.<sup>20</sup>

Dissent among the troops, graphically displayed in the Victoria mutiny of 21 December 1918, provides a compelling window into persistent tensions in Canadian society – tensions that were amplified in the heat of wartime. The historic antagonism between French and English, heightened around the issue of conscription, combined with the political radicalism of British Columbia’s working class. The French-Canadian conscripts who arrived in Victoria were mustered from the districts around Quebec City and Montreal, which had experienced rioting in opposition to the Military Service Act; in the British Columbia capital, they encountered a robust socialist movement that identified with the aims of the Russian Revolution and launched a determined campaign to prevent their deployment to Siberia. In street-corner meetings and in packed auditoriums,

working-class leaders of the Socialist Party of Canada and Federated Labor Party provided a vocal critique that transformed latent discontent among the troops into collective resistance.<sup>21</sup> Both class *and* ethnicity drove the conscripts towards mutiny; neither can sufficiently explain the complex motivations behind an event that military and press censors did their best to conceal at the time. At this junction of social forces – the converging interests of working-class Québécois and BC socialists – a violent standoff erupted in Victoria.

The working-class response to the Siberian Expedition revealed bonds of solidarity that transcended national borders. The First World War had amplified class antagonisms in all belligerent countries as conscription, the high cost of living, profiteering, and censorship aggravated existing tensions between workers, employers, and the state. These tensions intensified after 1917. The class position of Canadian workers provided a framework through which they interpreted the Russian Revolution, which, in turn, provided a framework for understanding Canadian class relations. This reciprocal relationship – between domestic conditions and international events – motivated the Allied decision to embark on the Siberian Expedition and shaped the working-class response. As the *BC Federationist* noted in July 1917:

The Russian revolution has everywhere heartened the foes of present-day society. It has given them a territorial focus, a base of operations, and if the “Reds” overthrow the provisional government of Russia and replace the liberal leaders, Miliukov, Lvov, etc. by chiefs of really crimson hue, we shall see a wave of syndicalist unrest sweep over the whole earth.<sup>22</sup>

This prediction hit home in June 1919, as the last Canadians returned from the Russian Far East. From Victoria to Winnipeg to Amherst, Nova Scotia, workers gravitated behind the idea of One Big Union and the tactic of the general strike. The Russian revolution had provided an interpretive framework, and an example of agency, to challenge the authority of employers and the legitimacy of the state. Controversy over Canada’s Siberian Expedition prefigured foreign policy debates that persisted into the closing decade of the twentieth century.

### **Why Siberia?**

To understand the working-class response, and the growth of discontent among the troops, it is essential to understand the rationale behind the Siberian Expedition. From the beginning, Canada’s aims in Russia were complex, fluid, and confused. Military strategy, international diplomacy, economic opportunity, and ideology influenced the decision of Canada and its allies to intervene in the Russian Civil War.

Militarily, the Siberian Expedition must be understood in the context of Russia's transition from trusted ally to de facto enemy. In March 1917, as unrest mounted in Petrograd and the Romanov three-hundred-year rule neared its end, a group of Canadian military officers toured Russia, meeting with Czar Nicholas II and other Russian leaders. "Russia is now thoroughly supplied with munitions," Victoria's *Daily Times* reported: "The Czar's huge armies are prepared ... industries and transportation are fully organized ... everything is in readiness for a great offensive, simultaneously with a similar move by the Western Allies."<sup>23</sup> Within a week of this optimistic report, the czar abdicated the throne. By November, under V.I. Lenin, the Bolshevik Party had displaced the pro-war provisional government and entered into negotiations with Germany and other belligerent nations, which ultimately removed Russia from the war – and liberated German forces for battle on the Western Front. The Allied Supreme War Council, meeting in London in December 1917, pledged support to those elements in Russia committed to a continuation of war against Germany.<sup>24</sup> The stage was set for Allied intervention.

In a speech to the Canadian Club and the Women's Canadian Club in Victoria's Empress Hotel in September 1918, Newton Rowell, president of the Privy Council, described the loss of Russia as the most "tragic surprise" of the war. The Siberian Expedition was necessary, he said, "to reestablish the Eastern front" and "support the elements and governments of the Russian people, which are battling against German armed force and intrigue."<sup>25</sup> This theme of Germanic influence on the Bolshevik side tapped into public fear of "Hun" aggression and harked back to Lenin's famed passage through Germany in a sealed railcar; it provided justification for opening fronts far removed from Germany and for continuing to fight after Germany's surrender. Allegations of Bolshevik atrocities, including the supposed "nationalization of women," were amplified to bolster public support for the Siberian campaign.<sup>26</sup> A final component of this military rationale was the presence in Siberia of the Czecho-Slovak Legion, an anomalous body of sixty thousand troops that was marooned in Russia from 1917 to 1920 and that, in a desperate bid for national recognition, formed the advance party of the Allied campaign.<sup>27</sup>

Diplomacy also shaped Canadian policy in Russia. The Bolsheviks had inflamed Allied leaders in December 1917 by publishing the terms of the secret treaties, signed by the former czar and dividing the spoils of the German and Ottoman empires between Russia, Britain, France, Italy, Serbia, Romania, and Japan.<sup>28</sup> Canada's political and military leaders sought greater power and independence within the British Empire. As Rowell told the Canadian Club, the achievements of Canadian troops during the war had won for the country "a new place among the nations," obliging Canada to do its part on the world

stage. He informed Parliament that, after refusing a request from the British War Office to send another contingent to France, Canadian leaders felt obliged to provide a brigade for Siberia. Borden underscored this diplomatic motivation in a letter to a sceptical colleague as domestic opposition to the Siberian Expedition mounted: "I think we must go on with this as we have agreed to do so ... [I]t will be of some distinction to have all the British Forces in Siberia under the command of a Canadian Officer."<sup>29</sup> Soviet historian M.I. Svetachev elaborates on this point: "The Canadian bourgeoisie, which became rich during the world war, tried to gain independence, especially in foreign policy. It believed that Canadian participation in the intervention would help to reach this goal."<sup>30</sup> According to Gaddis Smith, the Siberian Expedition was "the initial episode in Canada's struggle for complete control of her foreign policy after World War I."<sup>31</sup>

More significant than diplomacy, however, was the economic motivation. For decades Canadian, American, Japanese, British, and German investors had eyed the resource wealth of Russia's Far East and the region's consumer market. The German-owned Kunst and Albers Company had established a vast retail-wholesale network in the Russian Far East before the war, an enterprise similar to that of the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada. When Russia's provisional government ordered that the firm be sold, a Canadian intelligence officer saw "a wonderful chance for Canada." Trade commissioners had been posted to Petrograd and Omsk in 1916, and a Russian purchasing mission was established in Canada; exports to Russia reached \$16 million, making it the seventh largest market for Canadian goods.<sup>32</sup> In June 1917, Russia's consul-general to Britain, Baron Alphonse Heyking, described Siberia as "the granary of the world" and urged: "Let capitalism come in. It will develop quickly."<sup>33</sup> The Bolshevik Revolution interrupted these efforts to develop the Russian economy along capitalist lines. Rather than welcome foreign investment and trade, the new regime nationalized the assets of Russians and foreigners. "This vast country is in a very precarious position from the standpoint of trade and commerce," Rowell warned. "She needs capital and expert guidance in the work of reconstruction ... [With] more intimate relations the greatest benefit may result both to Canada and Siberia."<sup>34</sup> In October 1918, as Canadian troops were mustered to Victoria, the Privy Council authorized the formation of a Canadian Siberian Economic Commission, including representatives of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the Royal Bank of Canada (the latter opened a branch in Vladivostok in early 1919).<sup>35</sup>

The Allied countries also had a direct financial interest in the defeat of the Lenin regime. An estimated 13 billion rubles in war loans had been repudiated by the Bolsheviks in January 1918.<sup>36</sup> This "caused quite a flutter of alarm" among

“ruling class thieves,” noted the *BC Federationist*, which welcomed the move in the hope that “the entire superstructure of bourgeois flimflam and swindle would crash to the ground.”<sup>37</sup> Against this outstanding debt stood the Imperial Russian Gold Reserve, the largest holdings of the precious metal in the world. Valued at over 1.6 billion gold rubles, one-quarter of this gold had been shipped from Vladivostok to Vancouver in December 1915, June 1916, November 1916, and February 1917 to guarantee British war credits. The gold was then transported on the CPR and stored for several months in a Bank of England vault in Ottawa. The portion remaining in Siberia has its own intriguing story, moving from one train to another, and from town to town, as the czar and an array of White generals retreated eastward.<sup>38</sup> As a military officer told a December 1918 meeting of the Federated Labor Party in Victoria: “We are going to Siberia as far as I know because Britain has loaned a great amount of money to Russia. I don’t know how much, and the Bolsheviki has repudiated the loan money. This is as much ours as anybody’s, and we are going there to get it.”<sup>39</sup>

The final motivation behind the Siberian Expedition was ideological. In all industrialized countries, the events of 1917 amplified divisions between the social classes. As working-class grievances against profiteering and conscription mounted in Canada, with labour demanding the “conscription of wealth,” the Russian Revolution provided a powerful symbol of resistance. Fear of revolution informed Allied policy from the start. An editorial in the *BC Federationist* summed up a growing sentiment among BC workers: “There is no other sign post upon the social horizon pointing the way to peace than the movement which is now typified in the Russian Bolsheviki. Well may rulers and robbers hail its advent with terrified squawks and bourgeois souls quake with terror at its probable triumph. For with that triumph their game of loot and plunder will end.”<sup>40</sup> To radical sections of BC labour, the Bolshevik insurrection was celebrated as a bold response to the twofold scourges of war and capitalism: it provided a framework through which BC workers came to interpret their own class position. Within the Canadian elite, however, the Bolshevik Revolution was received with grave misgivings, viewed as a catalyst to domestic unrest and an example of radical movements that were left unchecked. The *Siberian Sapper*, newspaper of the CEFS, warned that “Bolshevik missionaries are spreading their doctrines in every country in the world ... There is a mad dog running loose among the nations, and it would seem to be the duty of the nations to handle it as mad dogs are usually handled.”<sup>41</sup> This fear of domestic Bolshevism was intensified by statements such as those of Joseph Naylor, president of the BC Federation of Labour and a socialist leader of the Vancouver Island coal miners: “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?”<sup>42</sup>

This complex array of Canadian motives – military, diplomatic, economic, ideological – is reflected in a cryptic letter, received by the Victoria Trades and Labor Council from the deputy minister of militia and defence, Ottawa, “acknowledging a letter from the Council opposing the Siberian expedition”:

The Department does not consider Canada at war with the Russian people, but that they, the Government of Canada, are supporting certain governments in Russia, such as that organized at Omsk and Archangel, which governments are, by the way, quite socialistic. At any rate no aggression is meant by the Dom. Govnt, rather an economic development.<sup>43</sup>

This official statement of Canadian policy, despite its confusing syntax, reveals not only implicit opposition to the spread of socialism but also a clear intent to alleviate labour’s fear that Canada was acting on purely ideological grounds.

### **A More Complete Picture**

The work that follows provides a brigade history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia), immersed in the social and political climate of the years 1917 to 1919. It draws from military and labour sources to reconstruct the experiences of the Canadians who served in the Russian Far East as well as the perceptions of those on the Home Front. The events in Canada and Russia are the subject of heated scholarly controversy, a reflection of the political tension that shaped the course of twentieth-century history. Both partisans and opponents of the Russian Revolution fashioned accounts to suit their purposes – in the immediate aftermath of 1917 and in later historical studies. *From Victoria to Vladivostok* draws from a diverse body of source material to navigate between these conflicting biases, relying heavily on the daily press, which, though oriented towards an elite viewpoint, offers a clarity undiluted by historical hindsight.

Part 1 is entitled “Canada’s Road to Siberia” and consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 examines the backdrop to the Siberian Expedition, mounting domestic problems, and the revolution that removed Russia from the war; Chapter 2 explores events in Vladivostok in 1917; Chapter 3 follows diplomatic manoeuvres on the world stage that culminated in Allied intervention and the “Red Scare”; Chapter 4 details the mobilization of the Siberian Expedition from across Canada and the growth of dissent at the Willows Camp; and Chapter 5 illuminates the Victoria mutiny of 21 December 1918, the day the SS *Teesta* departed for Vladivostok. Part 2 is entitled “To Vladivostok and Back” and takes us across

the Pacific with the troops. Chapter 6 sheds light on the Canadian experience in Vladivostok and the partisan movement that wreaked havoc on the Allied command; Chapter 7 discusses the situation up country and the evacuation of the Canadian forces; and Chapter 8 surveys developments in Siberia and Canada in the aftermath of the Siberian Expedition.

Taken as a whole, *From Victoria to Vladivostok* tells an important story that has long lingered on the margins of Canadian history. To be sure, the Western Front – the locus of battle where sixty-six thousand Canadians perished – deserves attention. However, our understanding of Canada during the First World War is incomplete if we fail to look beyond Western Europe and Armistice Day. The Siberian Expedition is a complex subject that straddles the military, labour, and political history of Canada and Russia. Obscured by press and military censorship in 1918-19, it has been dismissed as a side note to the war (if, indeed, it is mentioned at all). This book strives to correct this imbalance. Working-class history can and should enter into a closer dialogue with military history. The Siberian Expedition offers fertile ground for such an approach, highlighting the interaction of social pressures on the Home Front and military engagement overseas. The pages that follow challenge and complicate prevailing approaches, pointing towards a more complete picture of this unstable moment in Canada's past.



## **PART 1**

# **Canada's Road to Siberia**



## 1917: A Breach in the Allied Front

*If the combined bodies of the dead and wounded were laid head to foot we could form with their bodies a human bracelet around the entire world, with enough bodies left over to line every foot of the Canadian Pacific railroad from Vancouver to Montreal.<sup>1</sup>*

— “THE TRIFLING COST OF THREE YEARS OF WAR,”  
BRITISH COLUMBIA FEDERATIONIST, 19 OCTOBER 1917

ON 10 MARCH 1917, three hundred munitions workers at the Canadian Explosives Ltd. plant on James Island, off Victoria, went on strike. They demanded shorter hours, the six-day work week, safer working and living conditions, and a reduction in the daily food levy charged by the company. The strikers boarded two special trains for the twenty-five-kilometre journey to the BC legislature, where they lobbied the Liberal premier, Harlan Brewster, to advocate on their behalf. The James Island plant, opened in 1913, was a linchpin in the Allied war effort, providing one-twelfth of Britain's TNT during the war. “The manufacture of munitions in unending quantities at the present time is vital to the success of the British armies in the field,” Victoria's *Daily Colonist* reported.<sup>2</sup> While the strike was settled after two weeks, in a compromise brokered by the province, it foreshadowed a growing concern in Canada and the Allied countries: the spectre of labour unrest on the Home Front.<sup>3</sup>

War polarized relations between the classes. Shortages of food and other necessities of life fuelled allegations of hoarding and profiteering by manufacturers and drove up living costs. The Victoria Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) wrote the premier (Conservative William Bowser, who preceded Brewster) in November 1916 pointing to “the impossibility of a man with an average family existing on \$2.25 a day,” and it advised union members to remember Conservative and Liberal neglect in upcoming provincial elections.<sup>4</sup> In February 1917, the council protested “the unnecessary increased cost of food commodities,” which imposed “hardship on the working class and the families of the men away serving the Empire.”<sup>5</sup> Labour's newspaper, the *BC Federationist*, noted that, “if the war lasts six months longer, Dominion Steel, a Canadian company, will finish

the year's business with cash holdings of \$15,000,000."<sup>6</sup> The war was increasingly viewed as benefiting employers to the detriment of workers.

Unrest mounted across the globe. In Cuba, four hundred US Marines landed at Santiago to crush a rebel uprising. "The cane fields and the Union Sugar Mill at San Luis, ten miles north of Santiago, are burning," the *Daily Colonist* reported. Rebel leader and former president José Miguel Gómez was arrested in Havana after a fierce gun battle with US-backed government forces.<sup>7</sup> In Sweden, the king and government were in a state of crisis as the Social Demokraten counted the days to parliamentary rule.<sup>8</sup> In Britain, a strong pacifist current emerged in the Labour Party caucus, forcing the pro-war majority to pull out of a Paris conference of Entente Socialists.<sup>9</sup> In Germany, socialist deputy Herr Hofer warned the Reichstag: "If you insist on carrying on war you must see that the people are adequately fed. Does it not suffice for the government to incur the hatred of the whole world, or does it also want revolution at home?"<sup>10</sup>

Sharp Allied losses on the Western Front intensified social conflict on the Home Front, as voluntary enlistments dried up and pressure mounted for compulsory military service. The British offensive at the Somme River in autumn 1916 left 24,029 Canadians dead or wounded, part of 600,000 Allied casualties that pushed the lines six kilometres to the northeast.<sup>11</sup> Frederick Carne, a twenty-six-year-old Victoria salesman who served as a stretcher-bearer in the 8th Field Ambulance and took a piece of shrapnel to the cheek, recalls "that hell hole called the Somme ... an infernal war every minute of the day":

That preliminary bombardment was something awful, the thousands of shell holes in around the village amply testify. And it is over similar obstacles that every foot of the way back to the Rhine will have to be fought.<sup>12</sup>

When the British halted the offensive, Carne noted: "The question of leave is once more agitating the unit." Back in Victoria, the *Colonist* noted: "Considerable numbers of Canadian soldiers ... are asking for their discharge so that they may return home."<sup>13</sup> A total of 31,358 Canadians were killed or wounded from August to November 1916, while only 26,279 enlisted voluntarily.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Dominion government sought to "keep enough troops in Canada to guard against invasion or insurrection," devoting sixteen thousand troops to the task.<sup>15</sup> An acute troop shortage loomed, prompting Prime Minister Robert Borden to introduce a national-service registration system at the end of 1916, requiring all adult men to register with the state. R.F. Green, MP for Victoria and director of the National Registration Service for Military District 11, informed the VTLC executive that the "failure to answer the questions re National registration would mean fine or imprisonment."<sup>16</sup> Registration, and the prospect of conscription,

drove a wedge between Canadian workers and the state, providing an opening for radical working-class leadership.<sup>17</sup>

Owing to the pattern of colonization on the province's industrial frontier, British Columbia's working class had a tradition of political independence and industrial militancy. The Socialist Party of Canada had elected members to the Legislative Assembly from coal-mining districts at the turn of the century, and radical unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) sunk roots in resource sectors that tended towards industrial, rather than craft, organization.<sup>18</sup> Such trends were manifest prior to the war and were exemplified in a bitter two-year strike involving Vancouver Island miners – a strike that resulted in the military occupation of the coal fields and the arrest and imprisonment of 179 miners. However, according to George Hardy, an IWW organizer in Victoria who later played a prominent role in Britain's Communist Party: "The outbreak of World War to the accompaniment of wholesale treachery in the leading ranks of Labour had a stunning effect on the socialist movement in British Columbia."<sup>19</sup> The collapse of internationalism – which saw European socialists support the war because they believed that German kaiserism was the antithesis of democracy – had parallels in Victoria. In August 1914, an attempt to organize a protest meeting at the Victoria Labour Hall against the summons to the militia was denounced by a VTLC official, who said that labour would "not countenance any attempt to interfere with the garrison."<sup>20</sup>

Wartime conditions moved British Columbia's working class from a position of weakness to a position of strength. Death on the battlefields in Europe, the erosion of living standards at home, and the growing conscription crisis widened the breach between workers, the Dominion government, and conciliatory labour leaders.<sup>21</sup> In January 1917, a delegation from the BC Federation of Labor (BCFL) met with Borden during a visit to the west coast. The prime minister said that conscription was unlikely, but he added: "A man may decide that he will not mortgage his house, but may afterwards have to change his mind."<sup>22</sup> A meeting of labour leaders from Victoria, Vancouver, and New Westminster disagreed on the prospects of mounting an anti-registration campaign "in view of the censorship of the press, mails and telegraph service." However, "spontaneously,"

all the Western Trades Councils, without any common understanding, took action against the registration scheme. Resolutions were passed; mass meetings were held, and the working people advised to ignore the cards, a policy that was followed to a large extent in the larger centres of the province.<sup>23</sup>

In Victoria, labour delegates described registration as "a prelude to conscription" and pledged to "oppose any description of registration until some action is

taken to Nationalize the Industries of the Dominion,” a move Borden said was impossible without Parliament’s consent.<sup>24</sup> A group of Vancouver women in the Pioneer Political Equality League also debated registration, with their president, Mary McConkey, declaring:

The men who were going to the front were endangering their lives not only for the protection of their homes, but also for the protection of capital. This condition made it only fair that there should be a registration and conscription of war profits, and also of wealth.<sup>25</sup>

The war generally, and conscription in particular, fuelled radicalization in working-class ranks. At the BCFL’s 1917 convention, held in Revelstoke in January, a slate of Socialist Party members captured executive positions. President-elect Joseph Naylor was a coal miner from Cumberland on Vancouver Island who had been blacklisted for his role in the 1912-14 strike. Naylor’s friend and ally Albert “Ginger” Goodwin, a union official at the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company smelter in Trail, was elected vice-president for the West Kootenay region. Other Socialists on the new executive included Vancouver union official Victor Midgley, South Wellington miner Walter Head, carpenters’ official Albert Wells, and Joseph Taylor, a Victoria longshoreman.<sup>26</sup> At the convention, Taylor had successfully moved “a vote of non-confidence in the Dominion government” with regard to its registration scheme.<sup>27</sup> Delegates also approved a referendum of affiliated members on a general strike against conscription, which workers endorsed by a three-to-one margin.<sup>28</sup> This dissent arose organically out of wartime conditions in Canada. However, events on the international stage soon caused working-class unrest to be viewed – by both workers and the elite – through the lens of one of Canada’s allies: Russia.

### **The March Revolution**

In March 1917, ties between Canada and Russia were strong. A group of Canadian military officers toured Russia with an Allied delegation, meeting with political and military leaders and visiting the famous health spas in the Caucasian Spur. “Mud and mineral baths there are excellent for rheumatism and kindred complaints, and the climate is mild, like the French Riviera,” the *Daily Colonist* noted: “All expenses will be paid, including the first class accommodation and meals.”<sup>29</sup> The Canadians were hosted in the Caucasus by Duke Aleksander Oldenburg, a confidant of the czar, and later attended meetings with Russian premier Georges K. Lvov, leaders of the Duma, and Czar Nicholas II (a first cousin to British King George V).<sup>30</sup>

This visit coincided with a Russian offensive on the Eastern Front, which the Allies hoped would relieve pressure on their forces in France and Flanders:

Russia is now thoroughly supplied with munitions ... the Czar's huge armies are prepared ... industries and transportation are fully organized ... everything is in readiness for a great offensive, simultaneously with a similar move by the Western Allies.<sup>31</sup>

The Arras campaign loomed on the Western Front, as British forces occupied Baghdad and Russian armies advanced from Hamadan, preparing for an "advance up towards Armenia."<sup>32</sup> Reconnaissance missions on the Russo-Galician and Romanian fronts proceeded, a Russian airship withstood German fire and bombed the town of Balanovichi, and near the Volchek station on the Sarny-Jewel railway, Russian aviators downed a German plane:

On no fewer than five fronts in all – on four fronts in Europe, and one front in Asia – Russia is taking her part in the battle-line, in the closest concert with the Allies ... One powerful Russian contingent is fighting in France, on the Western front. A large and constantly increasing Russian army is helping the Roumanians, and its presence in the war-area will assuredly, before long, turn the scales decisively along the Danube. There is a Russian contingent with General Sarrail's Salonica army ... In the Baltic, the Russian fleet is master of the northern inland sea ...

Not for one moment has Russia flinched. Nothing, indeed, also could be finer, or more inspiring, than the firm, outspoken expression of her determination to see the war through to a completely victorious finish, as voiced by the Emperor Nicholas ..., the Russian Premier, and the Leaders of the Duma, to the Allied delegates now visiting Russia.<sup>33</sup>

However, appearances of strength concealed growing internal strife. Russia's working class, which numbered about 3 percent of the agrarian country's 134 million people, had radicalized since the failed revolt of 1905, when czarist troops killed several hundred protesters outside the Winter Palace in Petrograd.<sup>34</sup> Skilled metalworkers in the capital were the locus of militancy, emboldened by the wartime labour shortage, increased demand for their goods, and an infusion of class-conscious young workers.<sup>35</sup> Embodying the growing radicalism were the *Soviets*, councils of workers', peasants', and soldiers' deputies that had emerged in 1905 and increasingly challenged the authority of the czar and Duma during the war.<sup>36</sup> In February 1917, the *BC Federationist* reported: "Eleven members of the workmen's group of the Central Military and Industrial committee

of Petrograd have been arrested, charged with belonging to revolutionary parties and fomenting a labor movement with the ultimate aim of transforming Russia into a Social-Democratic republic.” The newspaper commented: “the move of the Petrograd workmen does not meet with the approval of either the Russian government or that of the daily press of this glorious capitalist Dominion.” It further noted:

It would indicate a disposition upon the part of at least a section of the Russian workers to act along class lines in a manner that would indeed portend trouble for that class that lives by the art of ruling and robbing. This could not be expected to bring joy to the hearts of rulers and swag gatherers in any land, be it a despotic Russia or a democratic Britain or France.<sup>37</sup>

On International Women’s Day, Thursday, 8 March 1917,<sup>38</sup> five thousand female textile workers went on strike in Petrograd protesting the high cost of food. They were joined by women and children in bread lines, and they marched to the Putilov metalworks, where thirty-six thousand strikers joined them. Demonstrators flooded out of the working-class Vyborg district into the city’s imperial core, their numbers swelling to the hundreds of thousands. Police fired machine guns from rooftops, killing and wounding three hundred, but the czar’s Cossack guards refused orders and joined the protests, as did Petrograd’s 100,000-strong military garrison and reinforcements rushed to the Russian capital. Prisoners were freed from the city’s prisons, one of which was razed to the ground along with the Law Courts and two police stations. The Winter Palace was occupied by revolutionists and declared national property. Mass strikes paralyzed Petrograd and the streetcars stopped running.<sup>39</sup>

Members of the Imperial Duma, or Parliament, struggled to retain control of the Russian state from the ascendant Soviets. A twelve-member provisional committee of the Duma formed, with Prince Lvov as premier and Aleksandr Kerensky (a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party) as justice minister. On 13 March, radicals issued “a most seditious proclamation,” according to the *Colonist*, forcing the provisional committee to consent to elections for a constituent assembly.<sup>40</sup> An armed band of workers, soldiers, and sailors marched through the regal Astoria military hotel, disarming Russian officers and terrifying the Allied officers then in Petrograd.<sup>41</sup> A telegraph from the city reported: “A steady flood of socialist pamphlets has been poured out ... All government buildings are displaying red flags.”<sup>42</sup> The next day, the czar’s train was stopped in the town of Pskoff en route to the capital, and Nicholas II received the following message from the Duma committee:



Unless Your Majesty complies with the moderate element of influence at present exercised by the provisional committee of the Imperial Duma, it will pass wholesale into the hands of the Socialists, who want to see a republic established, but who are unable to institute any kind of an orderly Government, and must inevitably precipitate the country into anarchy within and disaster without.<sup>43</sup>

At midnight, 15 March, Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne on behalf of himself and his hemophiliac son Aleksei, naming his brother Michael as successor.<sup>44</sup> However, on the afternoon of Friday, 16 March 1917, Grand Duke Michael Aleksandrovitch himself abdicated, marking the end of the Romanov dynasty's three-hundred-year rule.<sup>45</sup> The Duma's provisional committee declared Russia a republic and named itself the new government, a move promptly recognized by Great Britain, France, and Italy – and also by the Petrograd Soviet, on the condition that they share power.<sup>46</sup>

Across the globe in Victoria, the daily press reported belatedly and selectively on these developments in Russia. No mention of the Petrograd disturbances appeared until 14 March, and even then the *Colonist* cited only “mild demonstrations,” “small demonstrations by a small portion of the inhabitants ... composed mostly of students and boys” that were “dispersed without violence” by Cossack troops.<sup>47</sup> However, two days later, the newspaper changed its tune, suggesting in a banner headline that the “Russian Revolt Was Expected,” a point reiterated in a story claiming that the “real basis of the revolution” was to weed out German sympathizers in the Russian government and rule out the possibility of the country's signing a separate peace with Germany.<sup>48</sup> The day Nicholas II abdicated the throne, the *Colonist* expressed nothing but optimism for the rapid changes unfolding in Allied Russia:

The Revolution in Russia, culminating in the abdication of the Czar, is the climax of unrest many decades old ... The outcome of the revolution will mean constitutional government in the Empire, an extended process of economic readjustment, and lastly, and what is of highest import to the Entente cause, a rejuvenation of the vast energies which Russia is putting forth to secure peace with victory.<sup>49</sup>

However, after Michael's abdication and the proclamation of the Russian republic, the paper's editorial tone shifted again. The revolution was now blamed on the personal failings of the czar: “The ex-Czar was never a strong man from an intellectual point of view, and instances might easily be recalled when he exhibited a lack of ordinary personal courage.” Nicholas should never have abandoned Petrograd to lead the army at the front, the paper claimed, and

“there was no public animosity towards him up to the time when he foolishly dissolved the Duma.” It was highly probable that order would be fully restored “in a day or two,” the *Colonist* maintained, and that “a stronger and fully united Russia [would] face the Teutonic enemies of civilization.”<sup>50</sup> A new stage of the First World War had begun.

### **Ambivalent Ally**

On 25 March 1917, Leon Trotsky, a Russian intellectual who, like Vladimir Lenin, lived in exile due to his radical activity, boarded the SS *Christianiafjord* in New York for the journey back to Russia. Six days later, during a stop in Halifax, Trotsky, his wife and two young sons, and several associates were detained by British authorities. The Russian revolutionist was transported to the town of Amherst, two hundred kilometres distant, and confined in a military internment camp for twenty-six days.<sup>51</sup> “Here we were subjected to a search such as I did not have to go through even in my confinement in the fortress of Peter and Paul,” claimed Trotsky, who described his detention as “shameful” in a letter to Lvov’s minister of foreign affairs.<sup>52</sup> He opposed efforts by British officers to fingerprint him and developed bonds with the 850 detainees, most of whom were German prisoners-of-war and political internees. When Colonel A. Morris banned meetings midway through his stay, Trotsky collected a petition bearing 530 signatures. When he was escorted out of the camp on 29 April, the prisoners provided a rousing send-off, their makeshift orchestra playing the “Revolutionary March.” Captain F.C. Whiteman, an officer in the camp, would later describe Trotsky as having “quite the most powerful personality of any man [he had] ever met before or since.”<sup>53</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the future Soviet foreign minister and Red Army chief’s detention in Canada remain vague. According to Trotsky, Colonel Morris said that the Russians were detained because they “were dangerous to the present Russian government.”<sup>54</sup> Britain’s ambassador to Russia confirmed this view, implicating Trotsky in a German-financed plot to overthrow the provisional government and suggesting that he had been detained with the consent of that government.<sup>55</sup> Documents later surfaced that pointed to the involvement of a British agent from the MI5 security service, who tracked the Bolshevik’s movements and ordered his arrest at Halifax.<sup>56</sup> Days after Trotsky’s Military Revolutionary Committee seized power in November, the *Halifax Herald* described surveillance of his wife Natalia Sedova and their nine- and twelve-year-old sons in Halifax. “If ever I get back to my own country, I will talk, I will write, I will let my country people know that Canada is not free, that the United States is not free, that there is as much slavery in these countries as there is in Siberia,” Sedova said at the time.<sup>57</sup> Following their release at the end

of April 1917, Trotsky and his family boarded the Danish steamer *Helig Olaf*, sailing to Norway and Finland then travelling overland to Petrograd. Four months later, he was elected president of the Petrograd Soviet and, in November, headed the Military Revolutionary Committee that propelled the Bolsheviks to power. Early in 1918, Trotsky helped to form the Red Army.<sup>58</sup>

In the intervening months, the struggle had intensified between Russia's provisional government and the Soviets, the councils of workers', peasants', and soldiers' deputies that had been resuscitated during the March Revolution and that provided the springboard for the Bolsheviks. In the unstable political environment known as "dual power," debate raged over Russia's involvement in the war. While the provisional government pledged to continue the war against Germany, the Bolsheviks and many workers in the Soviets favoured a separate peace. The government policy of "revolutionary defensism" was predicated on defending the revolution's gains from the menace of kaiserism. In contrast, "revolutionary defeatism" called for soldiers to lay down their arms, fraternize with the enemy, and pave the way for peace at any cost, a position endorsed by Lenin upon his return to Russia from Switzerland in a sealed train in April 1917. In the famous April Theses, the Bolshevik called for the "abolition of the police, the army, the bureaucracy" and declared: "We are for permanent revolution. We will not stop halfway."<sup>59</sup> That month, conflict between the government and the Soviets erupted when a leaked memo revealed the government's intent to "pursue the war to a victorious conclusion."<sup>60</sup> According to William Rosenberg and Diane Koekner, "Direct action had toppled the Czarist regime, and the experience clearly taught Petrograd workers that the streets offered an opportunity to change governmental policies."<sup>61</sup> When the militant arm of the rightist Kadet Party fired on a crowd, killing several workers and injuring dozens, the recently formed Red Guards saw a surge in support. A Petrograd conference of Red Guards at the end of April consisted of ninety delegates representing 170,000 workers.<sup>62</sup>

The April Crisis was settled by an uneasy truce between the government and the Soviets, illuminated by a *BC Federationist* report:

Advices from Petrograd indicate that the governmental crisis is over. A new cabinet has been formed and accepted by representatives of the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' delegates. Six representatives of socialist groups are to sit in the cabinet and share in the government. One of them, A.F. Kerensky, is to assume the war portfolio.<sup>63</sup>

The labour paper reported on huge May Day demonstrations, "the marching of fully a million men and women in various parades in the city of Petrograd,

on May 1st, under the red banner of International Labor, and singing the songs of liberty.”<sup>64</sup> The same newspaper noted that the provisional government had “taken over the entire trade in grain and flour.”<sup>65</sup> However, tension persisted. In June, a Petrograd conference of factory committees voted 73 percent in favour of Soviet power and 400,000 workers rallied behind this demand.<sup>66</sup> Economic hardship combined with discontent over a new Russian offensive on the Eastern Front. Bread, meat, and butter rations were cut by 15 percent, provoking the “July Days” demonstrations, in which Red Guardsmen and armed trucks led throngs of workers and soldiers through Petrograd’s streets, and four hundred demonstrators were killed or wounded by government fire. Bolshevik Party headquarters were ransacked and party officials arrested, amid calls for a reinstatement of the death penalty.<sup>67</sup> Kerensky, who had been appointed minister of war in May, succeeded Lvov as the second prime minister of the provisional government. He appointed former czarist general Lavr Kornilov supreme commander of Russia’s military, oversaw the evacuation of the Romanov family to Tobolsk, Siberia, and confirmed the final break between the moderate and radical arms of the working-class movement: “there can be no other economic order in Russia besides capitalism.”<sup>68</sup>

As Russia lurched towards civil war, there were other ominous signs on the Allies’ horizon. In May, following the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge and the American declaration of war against Germany, fifty-four divisions (one-half of all units) in the French Army mutinied, with twenty thousand soldiers refusing orders to advance.<sup>69</sup> Betraying the fears of other Allied leaders, Borden warned: “If this war should end in defeat, Canada, in all years to come, would be under the shadow of German military domination.”<sup>70</sup> The British War Cabinet was in regular communication with Russia’s top military commander, Kornilov, who asked the Allies to ramp up pressure on the Western Front and proposed shooting troops to restore discipline on the Eastern Front. Several Allied diplomats and military envoys in Russia favoured such an approach. On the night of 17 August 1917, British general Alfred Knox met with Kornilov before leaving Petrograd for London.<sup>71</sup>

In September, desperate Russian leaders endorsed Kornilov’s ill-fated coup. According to historian David Mandel, Kornilov and Kerensky allowed Riga to fall to the Germans in order to discredit Petrograd’s Bolshevik-controlled Soviet and military garrison and to fuel the perception that the capital was vulnerable to attack. Loyal military units suppressed the Bolshevik press and occupied working-class districts, and, on 9 September 1917 (under a previous agreement with Kerensky), Kornilov disbanded the provisional government and placed Petrograd under military rule.<sup>72</sup> However, the general’s reinforcements never

reached the capital. Railway and telegraph workers disrupted lines of communication as trains and rail-lines were sabotaged. Kornilov's defeat paved the way for the Bolshevik victory.

## November

Canada's daily and labour presses offered predictably divergent accounts of events in Russia in autumn 1917, prefiguring later scholarly debates. While the mainstream press equated revolution with anarchy, tyranny, and destruction, labour described it as a natural outgrowth of social conditions, "merely a change from the old to the new."<sup>73</sup> This disparity widened as the Bolshevik Party and Soviets gained strength. Outlying provinces had not seen the same upheavals as Petrograd; however, in October and November these areas experienced an unprecedented strike wave involving 1.5 million workers.<sup>74</sup> The struggle was no longer over wages or material conditions but, in Lenin's words, over who would control whom.<sup>75</sup> Isabel Tirado attributes the Bolsheviks' popularity "to the capacity of its leadership, particularly at the grassroots, to articulate and champion the demands of the radicalized sectors of the working class."<sup>76</sup> By November, thirty-four thousand Petrograd workers belonged to the Red Guards and, at a historic meeting chaired by Trotsky, pledged loyalty to the Soviet. A military revolutionary committee was established, under Trotsky's command, proclaiming authority over the Petrograd garrison. The Kerensky government responded by summoning outside troops, suppressing the Bolshevik press, and raising bridges to the working-class districts in the capital, but the end was near.<sup>77</sup>

On 7 November 1917, the *Colonist* ran the story "Trouble Looms in Petrograd":

PETROGRAD. Nov. 6 – Negotiations between the general staff in the Petrograd district and the military revolution committee of the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates ... has been broken off. The military committee, learning that the military governor during the night had summoned troops in the environs of the capital to Petrograd ordered these troops to disobey the Government. The city is now guarded by loyal troops. The situation is complicated by the action of Premier Kerensky in suspending three Maximalist [Bolshevik] and two Conservative newspapers.

The authorities tonight ordered a disconnection of bridges between the quarters of the city inhabited by the working classes and the centre of the capital ... At this afternoon's preliminary session of the preliminary parliament Premier Kerensky, referring to the Maximalist attempt to seize power and provoke civil war, said amid applause from the right, centre and part of the left: "The people who dare

to raise their hands against the will of the Russian people are at the same time threatening to open the front to Germany.”<sup>78</sup>

The following day, the *Colonist* reported on “Another Russian Crisis”:

Premier Kerensky has at last awakened to the realization that the organization known as the Soldiers’ and Workmen’s Council is subversive of law and order in the country. It is questionable if the repressive measures he has undertaken have come in time. Already a Maximalist revolt is beginning to take shape. Kronstadt apparently is siding with M. [sic] Lenine<sup>79</sup> for a naval guard has taken forcible possession of offices of the official Petrograd Telegraph Agency. This step would be preliminary to preventing any news of what is happening going beyond Petrograd. It is apparent from the occurrences of the past few days, that the Russian capital is once more the scene of an uprising against existing authority, though how far the disaffection goes cannot be estimated.

If the time has not been reached now, its coming is inevitable when the Provisional Government will have to get to grips with the Soviet, and between them they will have to decide which is to have sovereignty in the country ... By virtue of the Revolution Russia has recast her ideas on the war and has practically admitted that the Declarations regarding peace, signed by Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and herself, is no better than a scrap of paper. The other nations of the Entente must regard Russia’s actions from the viewpoint of international honour. When the honour of an Ally is besmirched faith in that Ally must waver and break.<sup>80</sup>

Russia had become an ambivalent ally of Canada. As the *Colonist* lamented: “If General Korniloff’s revolt had been successful it is probable conditions would have been vastly different today. But General Korniloff’s failure has given M. Lenine and his Bolshevik following their second chance.”<sup>81</sup>

On 7 November, Red Guardsmen under the direction of the Petrograd Soviet’s Military Revolutionary Committee wrested control of the Russian capital from the Kerensky government. Bridges spanning the Neva River and Nevsky Prospekt – the city’s main thoroughfare – were seized from government troops, along with key buildings (such as the telegraph). As evening fell, the naval cruiser *Aurora* was unmoored from the Nikolai Bridge and sailed within range of the Winter Palace, where the provisional government ministers had holed up. The Soviet issued an ultimatum demanding their surrender and, after a twenty-minute grace period, laid siege to the imperial landmark. Armed cars pulled in front of the palace gates as cannon from the *Aurora* and the St. Peter and St.

Paul Fortress pummelled the palace from across the Neva. After four hours of fighting, during which the elite Women's Battalion of Death made a last stand against Bolshevism, the ministers surrendered. Kerensky fled the capital. The Soviet ruled Petrograd.<sup>82</sup>

The revolt coincided with the opening of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, where 560 delegates converged on Petrograd. According to the *Colonist*, 250 were Bolshevik, 150 were Socialist Revolutionary (a peasant-based party), 60 were Menshevik, 14 were Menshevik-Internationalist, 6 were National-Socialist, 3 were non-party socialist, and the remainder were independent. A Menshevik resolution to negotiate with the provisional government was defeated. Delegates elected a twenty-one-member executive, consisting of fourteen Bolsheviks, including Lenin and Trotsky, and seven Socialist Revolutionaries. The Military Revolutionary Committee issued a proclamation outlining the program of the new authority:

First, the offer of an immediate democratic peace; Second, the immediate handing over of all large proprietorial lands to the peasants; Third, the transference of all authority to the Council of Soldiers' and Workmen's Delegates; Fourth, the honest convocation of a constituent assembly.<sup>83</sup>

The proclamation included a message for the front, instructing "the revolutionary soldiers to watch the conduct of the men in command. Officers who do not join the accomplished revolution immediately and openly must be arrested at once as enemies." Troops were instructed to prevent "uncertain military detachments" from leaving the front for Petrograd "by force without mercy." Any attempt to prevent the proclamation being read to rank-and-file troops constituted "a great crime against the revolution, and [would] be punished by all the strength of the revolutionary law." The proclamation ended simply: "Soldiers: For the peace, for bread, for land and for the power of the people."<sup>84</sup>

Russia had severed ties with the old regime and had lurched towards an untested model of political, economic, and military power. Back in Victoria, the press reacted harshly. Under the headline "M. Lenine's Coup D'Etat," the *Colonist* called the Bolsheviks "the enthronement of anarchy at Petrograd" and declared:

The new authority in Petrograd, which has secured power by a coup d'état, cannot last, because it is the centralized force of all the disruption which has brought Russia to her present pass. No government among the Allied Powers will recognize the sovereignty of M. Lenine and his followers ...

The latest developments are the most sinister for the Allies since the outbreak of the war. The Leninites are going to enter into negotiations with all the Powers for an armistice. That means they will have pourparlers with the enemy alone, for none of the Allies will recognize their authority ... If the army, as it appears, is supporting the Extremists of Petrograd, Germany can withdraw a score or two score more divisions from her Eastern front and use them as she thinks best. For the time being Russia has ceased to be a factor in the war ...

Since the certainty exists that the Leninites will repudiate all the obligations of their predecessors in office, the Allies have no longer any guarantees for the loans they have made to Russia. Presumably no further aid will be given. In the event of Russia concluding a separate peace with the enemy, the Allies will have to decide jointly on what their course of action will be. If Russia becomes an active friend of Germany and supplies her with foodstuffs and munitions, some drastic measures will have to be adopted.<sup>85</sup>

Russia was now, for all intents and purposes, an enemy of Canada, on a trajectory towards abandoning its military obligations and repudiating \$13 billion rubles in war loans owed to Britain and France. The stage was set for intervention.

### **British Columbia Workers and the Russian Revolution**

For a population weary of compulsory military service and desperate for economic improvement, Bolshevism emerged as a potent alternative to militarism and exploitation. A growing layer of Canadian workers was drawn to the radical tactics of its Russian counterparts, while businesspeople and politicians identified with White Russian forces and sought to quash what they considered to be Canadian incarnations of Bolshevism. "There is not and never was a matter ... which had evoked as much interest among the workers as the situation in Russia is doing at this present moment," declared Joe Taylor, a socialist longshoreman from Victoria and vice-president of the BCFL.<sup>86</sup> Labour unrest in Canada was increasingly viewed – by both workers and the elite – through the lens of the Russian Revolution. These allegiances shaped Canadian responses to the Siberian Expedition and prefigured the contours of the labour upheavals of 1919.<sup>87</sup>

The overthrow of czarism in March 1917 had provoked discussion among BC workers regarding how far the revolution would go – a question that mirrored debates in Russia and struck at the root of Marxist theories of history and the role of the working class as an agent of social change. A week after the czar abdicated the throne, the *BC Federationist* equated the March Revolution with the French Revolution of 1789:



the Russian revolution marks the downfall of autocracy, and the uprising of the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class, to power ... [T]he workers have been used to bring this about, but even so it is distinctly a working class victory in the sense that the triumph of the bourgeoisie over autocracy is but a prelude to the eventual triumph of the working class over its master and exploiter, the capitalist class.<sup>88</sup>

Another article asked: "Were the Russian Revolutionists fighting merely for the privilege of exchanging tyrants? Have they overthrown the Romanoffs for the purpose of putting the Russian Rockefellers and Morgans on their necks?"<sup>89</sup> From the outset, a layer of British Columbia workers believed the March Revolution was "but a prelude" to a more overtly proletarian revolution, anticipating the upheaval of November 1917.

Russian workers were emerging as the vanguard of an international working-class movement, which was distinguished by national variations but shared common responses to wartime privation. "All hail to the Russian people," the *BC Federationist* declared: "They have indeed set the world an example in patriotism that may well be followed by the people of other lands who may be in any manner threatened by the forces of reaction and tyranny." Such "sinister influences" proliferated during wartime, with the common people "called upon to forego their privileges and surrender their liberties in order that the war may be successfully carried on." Liberties that were lost would never be regained without a fight: "When ruling classes want war, then is the time for those over whom their rule is exercised to demand and take, if possible, whatever extension of their liberties they may deem advisable. Either that or refuse to shed any blood." The Russian Revolution was held up as a model to be emulated, a roadmap for peace: "If the German people would but follow the lead of the Russians ... peace would return to Europe forthwith."<sup>90</sup> BC workers were cognizant of the prospect of counter-revolution in Russia. "Let it be hoped that the forces of reaction in Russia will be unable to nullify the gains of the liberty-loving Russian people by means of any counter-revolution," the *BC Federationist* opined. Anticipating the bloody civil war, the newspaper sanctioned the slaughter of reactionary forces: "may all that has been gained be held, even though it necessitates the lopping off of the heads of all the bureaucrats and reactionaries in Russia."<sup>91</sup> While the revolution had been achieved with "very little bloodshed," sections of Canadian workers favoured the spilling of blood to defend its gains.

In spring 1917, as the struggle intensified between the Russian Soviets and the provisional government and the Allies grappled with the French army mutinies and heavy losses on the Western Front, the tensions between Canadian workers and the state intensified. In April, the BCFL released a "Labor Programme" for

the Dominion, which included a radically democratic view of military organization that bore parallels to reforms being implemented by rank-and-file Russian troops on the faltering Eastern Front: "No distinction should be made between officers and men, either in pay or pensions."<sup>92</sup> International Labour Day, 1 May 1917, was celebrated from the coal mines of Vancouver Island to the streets of Petrograd and Vladivostok, demonstrating bonds of solidarity that transcended national borders. In South Wellington, near Nanaimo, coal miners downed tools in a one-day strike that paralyzed the operations of Canadian Collieries Ltd. "I will always look back on that day with joy, as one of the days when the workers made a demonstration of the power that they possess, but never, as a class, use," reflected miners' leader Walter Head.<sup>93</sup> In Petrograd, huge May Day celebrations clogged Nevsky Prospekt: "To the tottering thrones and the trembling capitalists of the world, the marching of fully a million men and women in various parades in the city of Petrograd, on May 1st, under the red banner of International Labor, and singing the songs of liberty, could not have been a pleasing and inspiring spectacle."<sup>94</sup> The *BC Federationist's* banner headline proclaimed: "The Oncoming Tread of the Proletariat Is Now Heard – Increasing Labor Unrest Presages the Collapse of Capitalism."<sup>95</sup>

BC workers closely followed developments in Russia over the course of 1917, contrasting bold social policies with enduring inequality in Canada. When the provisional government nationalized the trade of grain, eliminating "the graft of the speculator," the *BC Federationist* lamented: "The 'graft of the speculator' has not even been threatened here in Canada as yet. He is still perfectly safe to go the limit. The people of Canada are too highly civilized to cut off profit gambling."<sup>96</sup> When the April Crisis forced the shuffling of the provisional government cabinet, with six socialist ministers and Kerensky's promotion to minister of war, the *BC Federationist* celebrated "the advanced intelligence of the Russian working class" with "the heavy representation of the socialist movement in the government":

In no other country in the world can a similar representation be found. It is a distinct challenge to the intelligence of the workers in those countries that have long boasted of democracy and freedom, and whose labor movements have professed to constitute the vanguard of human progress. It is now up to the Russian working class to send cablegrams of cheer and wise counsel to the labor movement of Canada, the United States and other backward lands.<sup>97</sup>

Responding to political tensions in Sweden, the *BC Federationist* postulated that the Russian Revolution had provided "foes of present-day society" with "a territorial focus, a base of operations," anticipating a "wave of syndicalist unrest":

Sweden, Russia's neighbour, is caught first by the revolutionary ground-swell. It is not against this or that political abuse that the Swedish Social-Democrats are raising their heads; it is against the whole fabric of modern society, whose basis is both Sweden's and ours. Russia and Sweden lie geographically far away, but in the more ethereal realm of thought and emotion they may stand closer than we dream. The Russian revolution may be the beginning of great and terrible things. We would do well to prepare against a coming storm.<sup>98</sup>

This prophetic statement foreshadowed the horror of Russia's civil war as well as the industrial strife that paralyzed Canadian cities from Victoria to Winnipeg to Amherst at war's end.

In June 1917, the Military Service Act was introduced in the Canadian Parliament, authorizing compulsory military service and provoking rioting in Quebec.<sup>99</sup> At a protest meeting organized by the Social Democratic Party (an organization that would be deemed "unlawful" in 1918), Victoria workers unanimously endorsed a resolution for a national referendum on conscription. Local labour council delegates also endorsed the conduct of longshoreman Joe Taylor, whose anti-conscription stance had inflamed a Montreal conference intended to drum up support for Borden's war policies.<sup>100</sup> The BCFL conducted its own referendum, polling affiliated workers on whether they favoured a general strike against conscription.<sup>101</sup> At a meeting in Vancouver's Empress Theatre, socialist William Pritchard (who would be jailed for sedition during the Winnipeg General Strike) told a working-class crowd that war was caused by "the desire of capitalists to place their extra wealth in countries where capital has not yet penetrated." He offered a home-grown theory of imperialism to match the views expounded by Lenin from the balcony of Petrograd's Kshesinskaya Mansion and invoked the memory of the Paris Commune of 1871, which saw thirty thousand French workers slaughtered defending an ephemeral workers' republic: "If proletarian Russia becomes strong enough to constitute a menace to militarism, the latter would immediately lay itself out to wipe out that proletariat, as happened in France in the bygone days." As Pritchard reminded his audience: "The army serves not only to act against foreign powers, but has a domestic duty to fulfill. When the police fail the army must be active at times of great strikes, when free labor must be protected. There is a call to war, and to this war the Socialist Party of Canada calls you all, for it is a war for the wiping out of all conditions which make war possible, a war against those who fatten and batten on the bodies of the workers."<sup>102</sup>

Wartime conditions fuelled social strife across the industrialized world, energizing local movements that increasingly looked to Russia as a symbol of peace and working-class emancipation. In August 1917, ten thousand British

workers packed a huge mass meeting at Albert Hall, London, and “gave hearty greetings to the Russian revolutionists.”<sup>103</sup> In Japan, eight hundred kilometres from Vladivostok, a conference of socialists hailed “the Russian revolution as the beginning of a series of revolutions which [would] end in the downfall of capitalism.” A resolution called on the “proletariat of the belligerent countries” to “turn the guns ... at once on the ruling classes of their own respective countries. This is the responsibility of Russian socialists as well as international socialists.”<sup>104</sup> From Vancouver, the *BC Federationist* offered a similar view: “Plainly the peoples of the world must take the affairs of the world out of the hands of the kaisers ... and see whether with these greedy profit-mongers out of the way, the world cannot have permanent peace. And this is what the Russian revolutionists are just now asking themselves and the world.”<sup>105</sup>

Bolshevism gained strength in Russia as conscription amplified tensions between Canadian workers and the state. George Stirling, a socialist from Salmon Arm, British Columbia, and newly appointed Dominion organizer of the Social Democratic Party, linked the fight against conscription with developments in Russia:

Our comrades in Russia have made a stand against imperialism; against the machinations of politicians; against the greed of ambitious potentates; and the heartless profiteering of capitalists. In Italy and France and Great Britain, the power of the Social Democracy is growing so rapidly that its bitterest foes are now mouthing phrases about Liberty and Democracy. In Canada our forces have been disorganized since the outbreak of the war, with the result that our rulers have passed the iniquitous conscription measure in flagrant contempt of the wishes of the majority ... Organization is imperative.<sup>106</sup>

This spirit imbued a special convention of the BCFL, which met in Vancouver over Labour Day weekend in September 1917, to devise means for opposing the Military Service Act. Affiliated workers had voted by a wide margin in favour of a “down tools” policy, empowering the BCFL’s executive to call a general strike against conscription. Of 2,417 ballots cast, 1,841 favoured a strike, with only 576 opposed. The labour convention ratified this policy, empowering the executive to call a strike when the first unwilling conscript was forced into service.<sup>107</sup> Labour’s only position, longshoreman Jack Kavanagh said, was to say to the master class, “If you touch a man of us, we will touch your industries.”<sup>108</sup>

Albert “Ginger” Goodwin, the BCFL’s vice-president from the West Kootenays and business manager of the smelterworkers’ union in the town of Trail, attended the convention and described the war and conscription in class terms, declaring that “conscription meant life or death to the workers.” He pledged to

“do all in his power to prove to the workers that the war was none of their business.” Goodwin believed that “there was a great force of opinion against conscription, and [that] the idea of striking and otherwise opposing it was not confined to Quebec by a long shot.”<sup>109</sup> By November 1917, on the eve of the Bolshevik insurrection, Goodwin wrote a pointed letter to the *BC Federationist*, in which he hoped that capitalism would “fang itself to death”:

What is to become of the present capitalist system of production and distribution? There are signs on the horizon that portend of basic and fundamental changes in the future. Just at what time this is to be, there is no telling, but if the circumstances to which the master class are resorting to are considered it seems as if the end is in sight ... War is simply a part of the process of capitalism ... Whether the capitalist system can survive this cataclysm remains to be seen. It is the hope of the writer that capitalism will fang itself to death, and out of its carcass spring the life of the new age with its blossoms of economic freedom, happiness and joy for the world's workers.<sup>110</sup>

The change occurred far sooner than Goodwin imagined, as the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd before the next issue of the newspaper went to press.

Demonstrating the domestic conditions driving working-class unrest in Canada, fifteen hundred Trail smelterworkers, led by Ginger Goodwin, went on strike on 15 November 1917 against the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company, a CPR subsidiary, demanding the eight-hour workday and union recognition.<sup>111</sup> The smelter produced twenty to fifty tonnes of zinc per day for the Imperial Munitions Board, an essential ingredient for Allied munitions bound for the Western Front.<sup>112</sup> Goodwin's message from Trail was brief and to the point: “Strike on at Trail. Advise all men to keep away.”<sup>113</sup> The strike disrupted “practically all mines” in the Kootenays, but the company and the state had powerful tools to undermine the smelterworkers' union. Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company manager Selwyn Blaylock exercised influence with the local judiciary to remove Goodwin from the picture. The union leader was recalled before the local Exemptions Board and classified “fit for military service,” despite a chronic lung condition. The smelterworkers' strike weakened and was called off after five weeks. Goodwin first fled to Vancouver, then to the wooded hills of Vancouver Island.<sup>114</sup>

Throughout autumn 1917, the breach between radical sections of British Columbia's working class and the Canadian elite widened, as grievances against conscription, profiteering, and the hoarding of foodstuffs mounted. At a meeting of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council, socialist Helena Gutteridge, leader of the garment workers' union, reported: “The cold storage plants were

groaning with piled-up food ... One concern on Water Street has so much butter in storage it was necessary to brace the floors to hold it." Delegates called on Canada's food controller to order the release of food "so there would be enough to eat."<sup>115</sup> In line with a decision at the special September convention, the BCFL fielded eight labour candidates against Borden's Unionist ticket in the Dominion election of December 1917, which was triggered by the prime minister's dissolution of the six-year Parliament.<sup>116</sup> The "Conscription Election," which returned Borden by a wide majority against Laurier's anti-conscription Liberals, confirmed the Military Service Act while revealing schisms in political alignments. The campaign was notable for the selective extension of the franchise to women. The wives, mothers, and sisters of soldiers – those believed most likely to favour Borden's policies – were granted the vote.<sup>117</sup> The BC labour candidates, meanwhile, ran on the pledge "to abolish profit-making."<sup>118</sup> However, the thirty labour candidates across Canada received a paltry 8 percent of the vote in the seats they contested, mirroring the result in British Columbia; Borden's Unionist candidates took all thirteen BC seats.<sup>119</sup> During the campaign, a *BC Federationist* correspondent identified as "A. Rebel" urged support for working-class candidates and linked the election to the political upheaval in Russia: "You can be on one side or the other, there is no room between ... The other side has but to follow the destiny of the Romanoffs, Siberia, and receive a taste of their own philosophy."<sup>120</sup>

The year 1917 closed as BC socialists gravitated towards the Bolsheviks and the Canadian elite grew hostile. "There is no other sign post upon the social horizon pointing the way to peace than the movement which is now typified in the Russian Bolsheviki," the *Federationist* opined: "Well may rulers and robbers hail its advent with terrified squawks and bourgeois souls quake with terror at its probable triumph. For with that triumph their game of loot and plunder will end."<sup>121</sup> A month later, the labour newspaper serialized Lenin's essay *Political Parties in Russia* (a tract banned by the Canadian state six months later).<sup>122</sup> Joseph Naylor, a Cumberland coal miner, friend of Ginger Goodwin, and president of the BCFL, claimed that "clear-thinking socialists [had] all along been convinced that Kerensky was only a tool of ... financial interests" and that the overthrow of the czar had been intended "to oust an autocracy and enshrine a capitalist plutocracy, such as we so loyally uphold here in Canada." Naylor urged Canadian workers to "take action similar to that of the Russian Bolsheviki and dispose of their masters as those brave Russians [were then] doing."<sup>123</sup>

Sympathy for Bolshevism was not confined to manual workers. Dr. W.J. Curry, a Vancouver dentist, ridiculed the contortions of British Columbia's "kept" press:

Our kept press hates and fears the turn the revolution of Russia is now taking ... Well, we remember when Nicholas, "our gallant ally," entered the ring with John Bull and France, to avenge martyred Belgium and crush the brutal Huns ... Then suddenly, the rotten old aristocracy fell to pieces and the *duma* was no more. But it was days after this greatest of social miracles that our press reluctantly recorded the fact ... Kerensky was now the heaven-sent saviour of Russian democracy.

But alas! News came of the regiments deserting to go home, and of peasants firing their landlords and actually taking possession of the land they worked, of industrial workers seizing mills and factories and producing for use instead of dividends for social parasites. This was the last straw. This violated the "sacred rights of property" and if lauded and tolerated in Russia, the workers some day might turn the same trick in Canada or with the great landowners of Britain and the Land of the Free. So the mental guardians of plutocracy grasped at Korniloff ... But alas, Korniloff soon stumbled and fell down and even a move to bring law and order once more to Russia by replacing Nick or placing his uncle upon the throne was hailed with inward satisfaction by our press since anything is better than social democracy and the rule of the common people.

The worst has now happened for Russia ... The extreme rebels, those who would actually conscript land and all social property, and who have abolished titles, are on top and apparently there to stay.<sup>124</sup>

Dr. Curry concluded that Canada's political and financial rulers were "profit-mad and war-mad" and belonged to the "same class" as Russia's deposed elite: "The time has come for the common people of Canada and elsewhere to unite for the purpose of doing to their rulers what the workers of Russia did to theirs – fire them off their backs and establish a real democracy."<sup>125</sup>

Radicalization in British Columbia's working class coincided with renewed attention on independent political action. On the heels of the federal "conscription election," coal miners in Newcastle, near Nanaimo, elected James H. Hawthornthwaite in a provincial by-election in January 1918, while Mary Ellen Smith, a Liberal running as an independent in Vancouver, was elected as the province's first woman legislator.<sup>126</sup> During the campaign, Hawthornthwaite, a prominent socialist politician prior to the war, discussed the "striking beneficial results" of the war in Europe: "Russia has, in a carnival of destruction, got rid of the Romanoff autocracy that for generations foully oppressed the working people of that country."<sup>127</sup> On polling day, Hawthornthwaite defeated his Liberal opponent by a two-to-one margin. "The Bolsheviki triumphs!" proclaimed the *Federationist*.<sup>128</sup> While Hawthornthwaite later broke from radical labour and



condemned the Bolsheviks, he initially celebrated the social changes unfolding in Russia.<sup>129</sup>

Two weeks after Hawthornthwaite's victory, delegates at the BCFL's annual convention voted to form a new political party, the Federated Labor Party of British Columbia (FLP), to "secure industrial legislation for the collective ownership and democratic operation of the means of wealth production."<sup>130</sup> At the party's inaugural meeting, held in the Vancouver Labor Temple on 23 February 1918, Hawthornthwaite declared: "We can abolish capitalism by special acts in the province of British Columbia, in Canada, or any part of the British empire." He predicted:

The day is coming when class rule shall no longer prevail ... when the downfall of capitalism is at hand. The workers the world over are aroused and thinking. They are looking over the world and thinking what is in this war for them, nothing but misery, hunger, want and degradation. But they intend to have no more of that. Listen to the tramp of the revolutionary workers of the world marching to the front. Yes, marching on to war, and marching on to victory, victory for their class.<sup>131</sup>

As FLP branches sprouted around the province, Hawthornthwaite elaborated on the party's socialization objective, lauding the Zapatista movement in Mexico and insisting that, in British Columbia, "we can take over the mills, mines and factories; by paying for them, if necessary, and then operat[ing] them for the common good and giv[ing] to each the product of his or her toil."<sup>132</sup> He warned South Wellington miners of an Allied plot against the Russian workers' republic:

The capitalist press in this country is out-lying each other in vilifying the Bolsheviks, but we cannot believe one word we read. A close observer is forced to the conclusion that the Allies are standing by to allow the Germans to overwhelm Russia and steal from them the fruits of the revolution. The Allies have a majority of three to two in men and two to one in guns and ammunition and yet they do not start the spring offensive, which has been so well advertised and which started much earlier last year. The Russians have large stores of supplies in Vladivostok and Petervolosky, which to all appearances the Japs are about to cut off. So we are forced to the conclusion that the Allies are liberating the Germans on the western front, and allowing them to devastate the Russian workers' republic.<sup>133</sup>

The events of 1917 catapulted the Bolsheviks into the leadership of an international working-class movement. However murky the details, a layer of BC



workers viewed the insurrection of November 1917 as a successful challenge to the twofold scourges of war and capitalism. They drew inspiration from the agency of Russian workers, navigating between the half-truths and distortions of the censored mainstream press. Domestic class relations shaped BC workers' attitudes towards the Russian Revolution in a reciprocal relationship that saw workers (and the elite) view Canadian conditions through a Russian lens. Fearing domestic radicalism, Prime Minister Robert Borden appointed his friend C.H. Cahan, a Montreal lawyer and financier, to investigate the proliferation of Bolshevism in Canada (Cahan's clients included the Canadian Car Company, which had filled munitions contracts for the czar's government).<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, the prime minister entered into high-level talks that resulted in the deployment of Canadian troops to Vladivostok.