

The Forgotten Expedition: Canada's Siberian Expedition through the Globe Newspaper

Assignment #2

HI341

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A source which many historians lean on, including Canadian social historian Benjamin Isitt, is the newspaper. Newspapers afford historians with an insight into the past, to better understand the concepts and issues that were diffuse in society at the time. They are also instrumental for providing context, as they embody the views and perspectives of the members of that particular society. While newspapers can often be thought of as the paragon of historical sources, researchers should take heed in using them to make inferences about the past. Although they are framed in such a way to reflect a national perspective, newspapers are at the prerogative of newsmakers and reflect regional and political interests. The truth the public is getting then depends on their source, from where it comes and by whom it was written. Furthermore, newspapers have the tendency of framing issues and events in an oversimplified fashion. This truth often averts complexity and is made palatable for the public. The Toronto Globe provides significant coverage on the Canadian Siberian Expedition, which is seldom spoken of or remembered in Canadian history. The Russian Revolution in October 1917 had been the causal factor behind intervention into Siberia. The revolution had been a win for the Bolsheviks but a loss for the Allies, as the once powerful and combative Czarist Russia had relented of its war effort on Germany, ceasing the fight on the Eastern Front and bolstering German military strength to the West. There was however great intra-conflict within Russia following the Bolshevik's seizure of power, and the Allies believed a forceful intervention could restore an Eastern Front and put an end to the Bolshevik menace. *The Globe* followed the departure of the 4,200 Canadian troops to Siberia and provided summaries on the status of the intervention. Based off of an examination on the Siberian Expedition through *The Globe*, newspapers, although useful for historical context, should be used cautiously as historical sources as they give a subjective view of society through a regional and political lens and often oversimplify the

issues. While the Expedition is long forgotten, it had significant implications for Canada domestically and on the international stage.

The Canadian Siberian Expedition is virtually unheard of in Canadian military history, as the deployment of Canadian troops from Victoria is largely overshadowed by the Allied victory in the Great War on November 11th 1918. While the expedition is often unspoken of, the discourse surrounding Siberia was quite different in 1918. Among the Simpson's department store advertisements and full page reminders to invest in Canadian War Bonds, columns and articles in *The Globe* newspaper in November 1918 vividly convey the threat of Bolshevism and the need for allied aid in Russia. While it would seem as though Russia had little relevance to Canadians in 1918, the Siberian Expedition must be understood in the context of Great War. Russia had experienced a revolutionary regime change in 1917, removing the allied Czarist government and replacing it with the de facto Bolshevik government, ending the three-hundred-year Romanov reign. Prior to the revolution, Russia had played an instrumental role in combating Germany, but in October 1917 the new Bolshevik government had displaced the pro-war stance of their predecessors and entered into negotiations with Germany; later signing the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in February 1918 ending the battle on the Eastern front.¹ The revolution had been a political game changer, and had antagonized the Allies to a point where a forceful intervention seemed necessary; to prop up their battered Czarist allies and combat bolshevism.

Understanding the reasons behind why the Allies had gone to Siberia are important if we are to begin to understand the larger political implications that resulted from the expedition. Historian Doris Hinson Pieroth articulates that the Allied intervention into Siberia was a tangled and complex affair, as each Allied nation harboured its own "set of motives and objectives as it

¹ Benjamin Isitt, *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-1919*. (Vancouver: UBC Press. 2010), 7.

weighed the decision to intervene”.² Benjamin Isitt contends that military strategy, international diplomacy, economic opportunity and ideology influenced the decision of Canada and its allies to intervene in Russia.³ From a Canadian perspective, sending Canadian units to Siberia from British Columbia seemed attractive and operationally feasible in the British War Office. The British had then made a great effort to persuade Sir Robert Borden that an intervention in Siberia would ease the pressure on Allied troops on the Western Front.⁴ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, professor at the University of Waterloo, contends that had the Russian Revolution not coincided with a difficult period in the Great War, resulting in the loss of the crucial Eastern Front, an Allied military intervention would not have occurred.⁵ Canadian intervention was primarily the result of perceived military necessity, coupled with the notion of political and economic advances. The signing of the armistice with Germany however had changed everything. While the war continued with Germany Borden’s cabinet had been in support of military action in Siberia. This solidarity would however break down after the armistice. Cabinet members expressed the sentiment of their fellow Canadian citizens, “in favour of getting all our men home and at work as soon as possible”.⁶ Larger social and political issues were meanwhile erupting on the Canadian home front. The embarkation of the CEF (Canadian Expeditionary Force) to Siberia on December 1918 had sparked intense agitation. Unrest would grow leading the labour councils in Canada’s largest cities – Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal – to declare against the expedition.⁷

² Stuart Ramsay Tompkins and Doris Hinson Pieroth, *A Canadian’s Road to Russia*. (Alberta: University of Alberta Press. 1989), 332.

³ Isitt, 5.

⁴ Ramsay and Pieroth, 333.

⁵ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Why Siberia? Canadian Foreign Policy and Siberian Intervention, 1918 – 1919*. (Canadian Military Heritage Project. 1998)

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~canmil/siberia/siberia1.htm?cj=1&o_xid=0001091115&o_lid=0001091115

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Isitt, 147.

The Toronto Globe provides a great deal of coverage on Siberia, the status of the CEF, and the fears of Bolshevism from 1917-1919, and demonstrates that newspapers can in fact be useful historical sources. Understanding why Canada ventured on the Allied expedition to Russia requires knowledge of the context at the time. When news of the Russian revolution hit Toronto on November 3rd 1917, Canada knew the Allies would have to bear the greater burden of the war.⁸ *The Globe* gives good historical context on the fears that plagued Toronto, namely the cessation of fighting on the Eastern Front and the burgeoning presence of Bolshevism in Europe. An issue on August 12 1918 outlines the need for an expedition to Siberia: “if it comes, the forces now landing or to be landed at Vladivostok would be the nucleus of a new Allied army to re-establish the Eastern front”.⁹ *The Globe* also gives us an outlook into the society that was deeply imbued with a fear of bolshevism. As the Bolsheviks grew in size and power so did their notoriety. On November 15 1918, Julian Grande of *The Globe* asserts that “Bolshevism is Europe’s peril”.¹⁰ “The fact”, he contends, “is not generally grasped that those who are responsible for the Russian chaos are doing their utmost to extend it to other countries”.¹¹ “The most serious question of the hour in the opinion of some newspapers here”, one Globe columnist writes, “is how far Europe is infected with Bolshevism”.¹² “Newspapers in Sweden, Spain, Holland, and even Norway express apprehension over the spread of the Red Flag movement”.¹³ The virtues of newspapers as historical sources lie in their contextualization. *The Globe* contextualizes the rampant fear of bolshevism over Europe, and grounds us historically, enabling us to understand the thoughts, perceptions and fears that were felt in Toronto. Herein however

⁸ “To-day’s War Summary” *The Globe*, November 3 1917.

⁹ “Canada and Siberia”, *The Globe*, Monday August 12 1918.

¹⁰ “Bolshevism is Europe’s Peril”, *The Globe*, Friday November 15 1918.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Fear Bolshevism Over Germany”, *The Globe*, Thursday November 14 1918.

¹³ *Ibid.*

also lies the biggest downfall in using newspapers as historical sources. *The Globe* makes claims inferring to all of Canada, when in fact it really embodies the sentiments and perspectives of Torontonians and of those who support the Union Government. Readers of *The Globe* would have a very different perspective than readers of the *BC Federationist*. Regional and political differences must be taken into account when consulting newspapers as historical sources and in trying to ascertain the truth the public is getting.

One of the biggest problems in using *The Globe* as a historical source is with the way it frames issues, specifically the Russian Revolution. It had viewed the revolution in an extremely negative light; as anarchical and largely against what was best for Russian society. One *Globe* columnist writes that the Allies are growing weary of the anarchical conditions at Petrograd and that “the only hope lies in the overthrow of the Lenine-Trotsky Government by the uprising of the people of Russia who have not yet made their voices heard”.¹⁴ Meanwhile other regional newspapers and labour movements saw Russian society through a different lens. Canadian Socialist party members had expressed sympathy for the aims and purposes of the Russian Bolshevik and the full acceptance of the principle of Proletarian Dictatorship.¹⁵ The *BC Federationist*, as Isitt points out, heralds: “All hail to the Russian people. 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”.¹⁶ *The Globe* frames the revolution as contrary to what was best for the Russian people, voicing antipathy towards Bolshevism. The *Federationist* on the other hand frames the revolution in favor of the proletariat, equating it to the French Revolution. Isitt contends that *The Globe* along with the rest of the

¹⁴ “Russia Must Keep Its Faith”, *The Globe*, Tuesday November 27 1917

¹⁵ J.M Bumsted, *1919: The Winnipeg General Strike Reconsidered*. (The Beaver: Exploring Canada’s History, June/July 1994), 30.

¹⁶ Isitt, 27.

mainstream media had equated revolution with “anarchy, tyranny, and destruction” while the labour presses described it as an outgrowing of social conditions; merely a change from the old to the new.¹⁷ Readers in Toronto would have been exposed to different news than readers in British Columbia, and herein lies the shortcomings of newspapers. In consulting newspapers as historical sources, readers would be given a subjective view of Canadian society that may not accurately reflect the views and perspectives all Canadians shared.

Just as *the Globe* had examined the Russian Revolution in a certain light, it framed the Siberian Expedition with a similar lens. On August 12 1918 one paper reads: “If the government has decided, as a Cabinet Minister intimates, to send a contingent to join the Siberian expedition, it has taken a step that will be approved by the country. There are national as well as military reasons why Canada should be represented”.¹⁸ *The Globe* places confidence in its claim that such a decision rests well with Canadians and will be ‘approved by the country’. News of embarking on the expedition was hardly met with unanimous enthusiasm on the home front however. Other newspapers including the *Herald* and *The Spector*, Isitt comments, heavily criticized the commercial motivation behind the mission, claiming that outsiders really had no right to interfere, and that the expedition itself was becoming more and more unsatisfactory.¹⁹ While strike and demonstration continued to grow on the home front, the mutiny on December 21 1918 had been the biggest indicator of strong opposition to the Siberian Expedition. Canadians of the 259th Battalion had expressed hostility upon embarking to Siberia. Men fell out of line and refused to comply with commanding officers and were whipped with belts and guarded at bayonet point; later handcuffed and left awaiting trial.²⁰ *The Globe* takes an ambivalent position

¹⁷ Isitt, 23.

¹⁸ “Canada and Siberia”, *The Globe*, Monday August 12 1918.

¹⁹ Isitt, 147.

²⁰ Isitt, 96; 97.

on the apparent mutiny. In an issue on December 25 1918 it comments on the *Hamilton Herald's* publication of 'some disquieting references to the Siberian expedition', namely the allegation that the spirit of the men was mutinous.²¹ *The Globe* comments that *The Herald* is not a scare-monger, and asserts that it must have thought that the sources of its information were trustworthy. Only later in an issue on December 28 1918 did a column read: "it is not very much of tribute... to take part in a faction fight in the heart of Russia, in which this country has no real interest".²²

While readers of the *Globe* had been informed on the Expedition, the newspaper had not exhaustively outlined the reasons why it was necessary for Canadians to go. Trade had been an issue addressed in going, as one issue reads "Canadians are coming to know that Siberia, whose soil, climate and resources are astonishingly similar to those of Canada, holds great trade possibilities for this country".²³ However the primal reason for an Expeditionary Force, as outlined in more than one issue of *the Globe*, was because of allegiance to the British Government. One issue on August 12 1918 read: "It is Canada's duty also to aid in the expedition as a British Dominion, bearing its share of the burdens of war, whose forces are a part of the British army".²⁴ Another issue later on November 30 1918 read:

The decision of the Canadian Government to send forward these troops, notwithstanding the signing of the armistice, was based upon two grounds, namely the desire to carry out in good faith an engagement entered into with the British Government, and an appreciation of the benefits likely to accrue to the British empire as a whole, and to Canada in particular, from the establishment of stable conditions in Siberia.²⁵

Loyalty to the British Government is outlined as a major reason, if not the sole reason, in sending an Expeditionary Force. However, justifying the expedition as being solely based on this

²¹ "A Disturbing Statement", *The Globe*, Wednesday December 25 1918.

²² "The Siberian Expedition", *The Globe*, Saturday December 28 1918

²³ "Siberia Needs Canada's Help", *The Globe*, Wednesday November 13 1918.

²⁴ "Canada and Siberia", *The Globe*, Monday August 12 1918.

²⁵ "Siberian Force to Go Forward", *The Globe*, Saturday November 30 1918

desire is rather oversimplified. *The Globe* presents this major factor to readers when in fact Canada's decision to go forward was far more intricate. Former naval officer and operational sailor Ian C.D. Moffat articulates that Borden had continued to be an outspoken critic of the way the British high command was running the war.²⁶ In seeking the troops they had required, the British had ignored the diplomatic niceties when communicating with Canada.²⁷ Rather than consult Borden or Minister of Militia S.C Mewburn, Britain had laid out the requirements for the Canadian contingent outside of their knowledge, noting that Canadians would be expected to furnish a third infantry battalion if the British withdrew. Moffat asserts that this action from Britain had demonstrated that the British administration still did not recognize the independence of the Canadian government, especially with regards to making its own decisions regarding the use of its own army.²⁸ Borden had been infuriated with Britain, later ordering that "no reply shall be sent to the British Government's message except through me".²⁹ This opposition voiced towards Britain, for their controlling efforts over Canada's foreign policy, was evidence that a Canadian Expeditionary Force was not simply a corollary of British loyalty. Canada had not proceeded to Siberia simply as an act of good faith to the British Government as the *Globe* outlines, but Nicholas Clarke, a reviewer of Isitt's *Victoria to Vladivostok*, contends that the actions of the Canadian government hardly suggest[ed] a subservient dominion, but rather one acting in what it perceived to be its best interests".³⁰

²⁶ Ian Moffat, *Forgotten Battlefields – Canadians In Siberia 1918-1919*. (Canadian Military Journal. 2008) <http://www.journal.dnd.ca/vo8/no3/moffat-eng.asp>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nicholas Clarke, *A Review of Benjamin Isitt's 'From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-1919*. (Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies. 2011) <http://www.canadianmilitaryhistory.ca/a-review-of-benjamin-isitts-from-victoria-to-vladivostok-canadas-siberian-expedition-1917-1919-by-nicholas-clarke/>

Canada's decision to send a CEF reflected its national interests rather than colonial subservience to Britain, and it had showcased through the Expedition, a fundamental shift away from the British dominion towards greater independence. Lackenbauer asserts that Canada was increasingly moving from colonial status to that of a nation. "The net result of the campaign", he comments" and the subsequent withdrawal of Canadian troops may have had important, if not symbolic, connotations for the course of Canadian foreign policy in the postwar world".³¹ Canada had joined Britain in creating a new Siberian Supply Company, hoping to capitalize in trade. Yet alongside its troops the Canadian Department of Trade and Commerce office had closed its doors to Siberia, largely against British recommendation. Taking into account the many strands of external policy, with the desire to participate more fully in military strategy; to exercise direct control over her troops; to expand Canadian overseas markets; and to follow the American agenda against British pressures, Canada had shown its growth and increasing autonomy as a nation.³² Justifying the CEF for reasons of allegiance and loyalty to the British Government is oversimplified and myopic. As a nation Canada had made foreign policy to Siberia for national reasons, and as Clarke outlines, this decision happened to align with its imperial master.³³ *The Globe* however illustrates that loyalty was the prime motivator. And this speaks to the larger problem with using newspapers as historical sources, as oversimplifying Canada's decision to deploy a CEF neglected the larger political and economic reasons for the Expedition. Oversimplifying the CEF however is palatable for readers, and loyalty is credulous. In looking back however and relying on the newspaper to provide the truth behind the CEF, readers would find such an oversimplification to be inaccurate. The public was given only part of

³¹ Lackenbauer, *Why Siberia? Canadian Foreign Policy and Siberian Intervention, 1918 – 1919*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Clarke, *A Review of Benjamin Isitt's 'From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-1919*. (Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies. 2011)

the truth behind Siberia, as in fact foreign policy is far more complicated and complex than newspapers ever convey.

Canadians had returned from Siberia on April 22 1919 to find the country rife with conflict. The Winnipeg General Strike had escalated far beyond the city of Winnipeg, and spanned across the country. Many veterans had joined the strike, siding with Bolshevism and criticizing Canada's military role in Russia. One outspoken protestor, Sam Blumenberg, had heralded that "Bolshevism is the only thing that will emancipate the working class".³⁴ While Canadians in Siberia fought the Bolshevik menace, Canadians at home expressed discontent with their wages and working conditions and reconciled with the very ideology that Canadian troops abroad sought to eradicate. *The Globe* had followed the CEF and trumpeted the need for aid in Russia, and the need to uproot Bolshevism. Though it provided good historical context, the way *the Globe* framed the expedition speaks to the larger problem with using newspapers as historical sources. The *Globe*, along with the mainstream Canadian press, had harshly criticized the revolution while other newspapers like the *BC Federationist* and *The Spector*, as well as labour movements, saw it in a favorable light. Newspapers make news through a subjective lens, reflecting regional or political interests that not all members of society share. In using a newspaper as a historical source readers would then be given a certain perspective of society, and a great deal of caution should be taken in inferring such perspectives to all of society. Furthermore *the Globe* had oversimplified why Canada had ventured to Siberia, attributing it to reasons of allegiance and loyalty to Britain. Though on the surface this appears well based, the CEF reflected Canadian national interests in expanding to overseas markets and participating more fully in military strategy. This again however speaks to the larger problem with newspapers

³⁴ Uduak Idiong, *The Third Force: Returned Soldiers in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919*. (The Manitoba Historical Society, Number 34, 1997)
http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/34/thirdforce.shtml

as they often oversimplify complexity. Loyalty however is an easy concept to understand and would be given more credence in Canadian society. This simplicity with which newspapers frame issues and events should be noted by those who seek to use them as historical sources. Nothing is ever as simple as the newspaper reads, and utilizing them would not provide for an adequate framework to understand events and issues in the past. While the Siberian Expedition is long forgotten, Ian Moffat maintains that its larger implications would be “Soviet antipathy towards the West for the next 70 years”.³⁵ It had set precedent for Canada as a nation bound towards greater independence and recognition internationally.

³⁵ Moffat, *Forgotten Battlefields – Canadians In Siberia 1918-1919*. (Canadian Military Journal. 2008)

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