

# Russian Revolutionaries in the Port of Vancouver, 1917

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On March 15, 1917 Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, abdicated. At first the news stunned the world, but the euphoria of that dramatic moment soon passed as the realization of its significance for Russia and her wartime allies began to impinge upon men and women everywhere.

None were more profoundly affected by the Tsar's action than Russian radicals scattered around the world. For them the end of the Romanov autocracy revived flagging hopes, conjured up visions of a new Russia emerging from the shackles of the past, and precipitated hurried attempts to return to their homeland. Unlike their west European counterparts, Russian socialists had never come to terms with the war. For them the conflict, which they regarded as conclusive proof of capitalism's iniquities, endangered the revolutionary movement in Russia, and further delayed the spread of socialism throughout Europe. Consequently, although the Tsar's abdication caught Russian socialists by surprise, it signified the first successful step towards revolution, as well as a clear signal to return from exile.

Leon Trotsky, who reached the United States in January 1917, and who, at the time of the abdication, was living in the Bronx in New York city, recalls his actions after hearing the news from Russia.

On March 25 I called at the Russian Consulate-General in New York. By that time the regulation portraits of Nicholas II had been removed, but the atmosphere was still of the old Russian police bureau. After the inevitable wrangle, the Consul-General gave instructions that I should have a passport for Russia. Next I visited the British Consulate, filled out the questionnaire forms, and was told that the British authorities would place no obstacles in the way of my return to my native country. It was all plain sailing.<sup>1</sup>

But Trotsky's optimism was premature. On April 3, at Halifax, Nova Scotia, he and his family (his wife Natalya Sedova and two sons aged nine and 11) were summarily removed from the Norwegian freighter

<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, "The Life Story of Trotsky" in *The Observer* (London), September 8, 1929.

s.s. *Christianiafjord*. Trotsky was interned for the rest of the month at a prisoner-of-war camp at Amherst before he was permitted to continue his fateful journey.<sup>2</sup>

Few other returning exiles experienced the sort of treatment accorded Trotsky by Canadian authorities, or travelled under special conditions such as the "sealed train" put at Lenin's disposal by the German government. Most emigrés reached Russia without fanfare, and most, just as anonymously, were submerged in the revolutionary wave which followed the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917.

Nevertheless, after the fall of the Romanov dynasty, British and Dominion authorities carefully monitored the flow of Russian radicals from the United States, for many, like Trotsky, travelled through Canada. Because of difficulties obtaining passage aboard neutral ships, and the dangers of the Atlantic crossing posed by German submarines, some Russians preferred the longer Pacific route. From Vancouver the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company operated regularly scheduled passenger vessels to Yokohama, Japan, where travellers transferred to other lines that carried them to the port of Vladivostok (Lord of the East). Ironically, little more than a year later over 4,000 Canadian troops, part of the Allied intervention forces despatched to Russia in 1918-19, disembarked at the maritime capital. Except for a few enterprising individuals, and a small administrative unit despatched to Omsk, the Canadian expeditionary force never moved from the immediate vicinity of Vladivostok. How many of the returning emigrés got beyond that congested city is open to question for by then the Russian railway system, after almost three years of excessive use, and diminishing maintenance, was on the point of collapse. Negley Farson has epitomized the domestic situation in Russia which greeted the returning exiles.

With its two mouths — Archangel and Vladivostok — choking with the food of war Russia lay like a prostrate Mars, starving to death.<sup>3</sup>

Change, if not revolution, was certain.

The dedication of the returning radicals, the problems they often posed for the authorities, and the lessons that accrued from such contacts, gave Ottawa some indication of the magnitude of the upheaval in Russia. On June 18, 1917 a telegram from the British Consul in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to the Minister of Militia and Defence noted:

<sup>2</sup> For details of Trotsky's arrest and detainment see William Rodney, "Broken Journey: Trotsky in Canada, 1917" in *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXIV, (Winter, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Negley Farson, *The Way of a Transgressor* (New York, 1936), 234.

I have just been informed by [the United States] Federal Department of Justice that a party of Russian anarchists left Pittsburgh on Saturday evening June sixteenth for Russia via Vancouver taking with them as personal baggage a large quantity of anarchist literature and other propaganda which they plan to disseminate upon their arrival in Russia. They also have a small printing press which they will use for printing similar literature. . . . They will sail for Russia on June twenty first. . . .<sup>4</sup>

The following day the Consul confirmed that the Russian party numbered 46, including women.<sup>5</sup> Ottawa in turn notified appropriate officials in Vancouver.

What followed is told in a brief report to Sir Percy Sherwood, Chief Commissioner of Dominion Police, written by M. R. J. Reid of the Immigration Branch, Department of the Interior, in Vancouver. In his letter Reid notes the arrival of the Russian group, that preliminary examination of hand luggage turned up about two dozen booklets and other publications which the official interpreter, S. E. Raymer, declared to be highly inflammatory. The Immigration Officer then ordered a more detailed examination of all luggage belonging to the Russians.

Before the search commenced I asked our interpreter to try to ascertain if any of the persons in the party were carrying arms on their person, and upon this question being asked one man immediately made a bolt for the door, but before getting out was stopped by the Customs Officer and a Savage automatic revolver and a box of cartridges taken from him. Immediately after this uproar arose of which Mr. S. E. Raymer was the centre, and a rush was made upon him and the literature we had already confiscated was forceably taken away from him. . . .

Previous to this the men had informed me that they had no leader among them, but they were all leaders. However, the one most prominent in the uproar was the largest man in the party so I went up to him and lead [sic] him out of the crowd and informed him that if he caused me any more trouble that he would be placed under arrest. He immediately called his followers and they all tried to explain at once in English that they would die sooner than be arrested or give up their literature. They then made a rush and broke through the narrow entrance into the room, forcing back the C.P.R. constables and passed into the baggage room. At this phase of the proceedings I telephoned to Chief of Police [W.] McRae and asked him to send a squad of police to our aid. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The Russians countered that action by demanding to see the Russian

<sup>4</sup> P.A.C. Department of Militia and Defence, HQ file C2051, Vol. I, Pittsburgh, June 18, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Pittsburgh, June 19, 1917.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vancouver, June 22, 1917.

Consul, Constantine Ragosin, who duly arrived with his secretary, a man identified only as Fournier.

At this point, after a brief conversation between Ragosin and the defiant travellers, the situation took an unexpected turn. The Russian Consul announced that if the official interpreter, Raymer, had any thing further to do with the affair, he, Ragosin, would immediately withdraw. His grounds were simple: Raymer was an Austrian, and the Russian party objected to him. Very sensibly Reid, the Immigration Branch representative, agreed, and much of the heat of the moment dissipated.

Nevertheless, the original point at issue, the nature of the literature that was being transported by the returning Russians, remained. Reid confirms what followed.

Mr. Ragosin . . . then assured me that whilst there might be some literature dealing with socialism and anarchism, that nevertheless it had all been printed in London and Petrograd prior to the war, and that in his opinion it was not pro-German, and that the matter should be settled amiably at once. In view of this I asked him if he would furnish me with a letter to that effect, and this he promised to do. . . .<sup>7</sup>

With Ragosin's assurance the Russian party's baggage was allowed to be put aboard the Canadian Pacific vessel *Empress of Japan*, and, ostensibly, the matter was closed.

Reid however, with the careful caution of the civil servant, hoped to delay sailing while he telegraphed Sir Percy Sherwood in Ottawa requesting further instructions about search and possible retention of literature. In his wire he noted that C.P.R. officials, no doubt concerned about the possible implications of any tightening of security arrangements upon future business, strongly advised him not to force the matter because "so many Russians already returned this route without molestation by authorities."<sup>8</sup> But tides are not prone to bureaucratic delay, and before Ottawa responded the *Empress of Japan*, with the dissident Russians and their baggage aboard, sailed for Victoria. Aboard too, was Reid.

During that brief passage between Vancouver and the provincial capital, the encounter between the returning radicals and Canadian officialdom took an ironically comic turn.

The proposition was then made [by Sir Percy Sherwood] that while the vessel was enroute to Victoria that we surreptitiously take the literature from the boxes, and which in reality should not have been classified as baggage, and which was packed in wooden biscuit boxes etc. This was successfully

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

accomplished, and sand substituted in its place. . . . At Victoria the confiscated literature was taken off on the aft part of the ship in sugar bags and laundry bags, this in order not to attract attention.<sup>9</sup>

The *Empress of Japan*, with the 46 unsuspecting Russians, then resumed its trans-Pacific voyage to Yokohama.

The repercussions of the bizarre confrontation at the Vancouver terminal and the surreptitious seizure continued to be felt well after the traveller's departure.

We have confiscated thousands of books and pamphlets and small bound volumes all of which are apparently of a highly socialistic and anarchistic character, and it required a dray to haul them from the dock in Victoria to the boat at Vancouver to this building where they are now being sorted and classified so that an intelligent inventory can be made of same.<sup>10</sup>

As Reid implied, no policy for evaluating or disposing of such seizures had been established. In the Immigration Officer's mind too, the Vancouver encounter raised doubts about the Russian Consul, Constantine Ragosin, who, he felt, had been intimidated by his compatriots. As for the belligerent travellers, Reid was in no doubt about their trustworthiness or what in future should be done about similar groups passing through Canada.

There is no doubt whatever but what this was a very dangerous gang, and in this connection it is also interesting to note that the parcel post service from this port to Russia has been discontinued, and in fact I understand indirectly that the Post Office authorities have been holding up . . . shipment here for some time past. . . . I would respectfully suggest that a search of the person be made by your officers either at Portal, N.D., or on their arrival here, as I understand that some similar small parties have come over the American roads, via Seattle, and later joining the C.P.R. boats at this port.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, he anticipated a continued flow of Russian radicals through Vancouver, and further difficulties with them.

Despite Reid's suggestions Canadian authorities could do little, and indeed did little to impede Russian nationals embarking from Canadian ports. Under Order-in-Council P.C. 2173, August 9, 1917, conditions of travel to countries other than the United States were more carefully specified, but it was not until after the Russian Revolution that the Dominion took any definite action. The reasons for not doing so earlier were specified in a memorandum from Sir Percy Sherwood, to the Assistant Direc-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

tor of Military Intelligence. Written in mid-December 1917, it confirms that the Chief Commissioner had good reason to remember the Vancouver confrontation.

... if Russian subjects are desirous of sailing on our ships and are provided with requisite passports, as was the case with the others to who the Captain [Thwaites of British Intelligence] makes reference, including Trotsky, I do not see how the officials of this government can prevent them from sailing. At my instance great difficulties were put in the way of their sailing in the past at Vancouver, but the Russian representative there threatened International complications, and there was nothing to do but let them go. However, I had the authorities advised in Yokahama of what manner of people they were and I think that had the result of holding them up.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Joseph Pope, Undersecretary of State for External Affairs, was more forthright in his approach to the problem of transient Russians.

Until things [in Russia] are more settled I am refusing to visé Russian passports.<sup>13</sup>

A more realistic position however, was struck by the Superintendent of Immigration, W. Scott, in a letter to Sir Eugene Fiset, the Deputy Minister, Department of Militia and Defence.

The latest information we have is that [Russian] Passports to be valid must have been issued during the present year, and must have a photograph and description of the holder. Great care has been taken to prevent any improper exodus of Russians or others from Canadian ports, and I do not think there is... [likely] to be any strong movement of the Bolsheviks from Canadian ports, unless the present government of Russia makes some arrangement for the issue of Passports, in which case we can scarcely control the movement.<sup>14</sup>

Although his letter indicates how little anyone in Ottawa knew about the dramatic changes then taking place in Russia, Scott's forecast about the number of radicals continuing to filter through Canada proved to be accurate. As the Revolution wound its way, and as Russia withdrew from the war, the numbers passing through the Dominion, correspondingly diminished.

By the end of 1917 the Bolsheviks had concluded a truce with the Central Powers, and negotiations which ultimately led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3, 1918, were well underway. By then

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Ottawa, December 12, 1917.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Ottawa, December 15, 1917.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Ottawa, December 17, 1917.

too, the initial enthusiasm with which exiles of every political shade greeted Nicholas II's abdication had subsided, offset by the welter of confused information and conflicting accounts about the Bolshevik takeover trickling out of Russia. In the Dominion, the government's experiences with returning Russians such as Trotsky and the party which created difficulties in Vancouver, contributed to a growing concern about the renewed activities of socialist political and labour organizations, and foreign language groups. In July 1918 Sir Robert Borden's decision to commit Canada to the Allied Intervention in Russia transformed the situation, for it led to the passage, under the War Measures Act, of an Order-in-Council banning 14 organizations considered to be potentially subversive.<sup>15</sup> That administrative action was soon followed by a weeding out of Russian-speaking Canadians from the expeditionary force recruited for service in Siberia.<sup>16</sup> Both developments were preliminaries to the "Red scare" which followed, paralleling the postwar hysteria generated in the United States by the Palmer raids — so-called after Mitchell Palmer, United States Attorney General.

Ottawa's concern over "Bolshevism," and the fear that revolutionary doctrines emanating from Russia would permeate the Canadian labour force, did not recede until the Winnipeg General Strike (May-June 1919) and the trials which followed, cleared the air. In effect, the Dominion's peripheral involvement in the Russian Revolution, characterized by Trotsky's internment and by the problems raised by other returning radicals, together with the limited service of Canadian troops in Siberia and North Russia, ended with the trial and imprisonment of the Winnipeg strike leaders. On the whole, the price paid for the experience was light. For Russia, revolution meant turning full circle, from a Tsarist to a communist autocracy. For Canada, it merely resulted in amendments to the Criminal Code — notably Section 98, which denied jury trial to those charged with sedition, or considered by the authorities to be "undesirable" — and the Immigration Act.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> P.A.C. N.W. Rowell Papers, Series A, Folder 73, London, July 11, 1918, and Sir Robert Borden Papers, O.C. 519, Ottawa, October 22, 1918. The Order-in-Council, P.C. 2384, was passed on September 27, and was published in the *Canada Gazette (Extra)*, November 27 and December 7, 1918.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Militia and Defence, HQ File C2832, Victoria, B.C., November 18, 1918, and C.G.S. Memorandum, Ottawa, December 4, 1918.

<sup>17</sup> *Revised Statutes of Canada 1927* (Ottawa, 1927), I, 692-694. The Criminal Code amendments came into effect on October 1, 1919. Section 98 remained a source of continued controversy until its repeal by a Liberal government in 1936. For details about the amendments see *Debates of the House of Commons... Second Session, Thirteenth Parliament 1919* (Ottawa, 1919), V, 4135, 4355, 4380, 4660-4661.