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Introduction by Jonathan F. Vance, the University of
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Benjamin Isitt. *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-19.*

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Introduction by Jonathan F. Vance, the University of Western Ontario

For the historian, the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force [CSEF] does not seem to be an especially rewarding subject. Even the most generous must concede that it was essentially a side-show to a side-show: a few thousand troops sent halfway around the world, where they did little more than wait until recalled home. The ideological backdrop is certainly there, for we have the international struggle against Bolshevism or capitalism (depending on your point of view), and the reshaping of the geo-political map after the greatest war in history. But how much of that bigger meaning trickled down to the lowly soldier in Vladivostok, of whatever nationality, who likely knew little of grand politics, and cared less?

In *From Victoria to Vladivostok*, Benjamin Isitt sets out to find the points of connection between those two realities, both in the relations between soldiers and labourers and in the relationship between foreign policy and individual experience. The historiography is not a great deal of help to him in this regard. At the level of foreign policy, the lay of the land is fairly straightforward, and indeed the reviewers conclude that Isitt hasn't strayed far from the conventional story of Canada's involvement in Russia. It came about, they generally concur, as a result of the desire to establish a Canadian economic beachhead in Russia, to crush Bolshevism, and to find a role for the nation in the world. In terms of the third motive, the invitation to send Canadian troops to somewhere *other* than Flanders must have been appealing to Prime Minister Robert Borden. It didn't exactly constitute the kind of consultative role that he had been trying to extort from the British government since early in the war, but it might well have been a down-payment on greater Canadian influence in the postwar world. After all, a good number of countries (many of them in Latin America) would leverage seats at the Versailles conference by declaring war on the Central Powers when Germany was all but beaten – why shouldn't sending a contingent to fight Bolshevism give Canada a leg up in big-power politics after the war?

Beyond that, the Siberian adventure has generated little interest among scholars of any stripe. Military histories give it short shrift, seeing it as a fine example of how *not* to organize an expedition to a distant land, and histories of labour scarcely mention it. There is at least one fine memoir (Stuart Ramsay's *A Canadian's Road to Russia*¹) and a few accounts written by soldiers from other countries, but we know very little about the men who actually made up the CSEF and what they might have thought of their unusual assignment.

Isitt has set himself a formidable task, then. By linking the "mutiny" of members of the CSEF in Victoria to Canada's decision to withdraw from Siberia, he attempts to draw connections between diplomacy at the highest levels, and personal experience at its most basic levels. Was Borden's foreign policy really shifted because a handful of soldiers grumbled about conditions on the way to Vladivostok, and was that grumbling sharpened by contact with labour groups in British Columbia? As the reviewers make clear, the success of this

¹ Stuart Ramsay Tompkins, *A Canadian's Road to Russia: Letters from the Great War Decade*, ed. Doris H. Pieroth (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1989).

argument depends on two quite different elements: a thorough analysis of Canada's external policies as they concerned Russia and the British Empire; and a deep demographic investigation of the men who made up the CSEF. The reviewers have some concerns at both ends of the analytical spectrum. Julie Gilmour notes that, in Isitt's narrative, Borden becomes a kind of cardboard figure whose foreign policy is not examined in any detailed or nuanced fashion. At the same time, Robert Bothwell and Bryan Palmer observe that the mutineers are curiously faceless and anonymous; Isitt hasn't really engaged them individually, preferring to see them as a collectivity, ostensibly with one motivation and one goal. In short, do we really know who these men were? If not, can we really advance opinions as to their motivation?

At root, these four reviews turn on motivation. Whether it be Borden's diplomacy or the CSEF's mutiny, we are left to ponder motivation. Was it pragmatism or ideology? Was the Borden government at all moved by the discontent of Canada's Siberian soldiers, or was their withdrawal simply a recognition that a potentially promising foreign policy opportunity had fizzled out and it was time to cut losses? To consider the micro-history, the reviewers seem to agree that the marriage of labour and military history, while laudable, has not been entirely successful.

As Carol Willcox Melton points out, the Victoria disturbance was not the only violent episode involving Canadian soldiers. The far more serious riots at Kinmel Park in 1919 and sporadic outbreaks of looting and burning at other Canadian camps in Britain provide interesting comparisons. She notes that outside influences apparently played little role in these events – if one discounts the members of Britain criminal class who took advantage of the riots to do a bit of looting on their own. Indeed, the notorious Epsom riot of June 1919 was partly motivated by bad feelings between Canadian soldiers and British ex-soldiers – and this at a time when Whitehall was profoundly concerned that British veterans' organizations such as the National Union of Ex-Servicemen were a front for Bolshevik revolutionaries. One of the elements that the reviewers consider is whether the Victoria disturbance can be given the weight that Isitt wants – or was it simply a bunch of soldiers who were ticked off about bread-and-butter issues like food and discipline?

A military historian who argued that striking workers were pretty much like grumbling soldiers would be on shaky ground; the labour historian who argues the opposite is on equally shaky ground. The military is not like other employers and the army is not like other workplaces; putting on the uniform, even for the most reluctant of conscripts, can have a transformative effect. One of the things it confers is the privilege of complaining – about your officers, your food, your kit, your accommodations, and anything else that comes to mind. For soldiers of the First World War, grumbling – even to the point of having to be herded on board a ship – was almost a recreational activity. Troops can be fractious and uncooperative, but this doesn't necessarily imply any deeper dissent, political or otherwise – for many soldiers, being obstructionist was often enough of an end in itself.

But sometimes their fractiousness does mean more than it seems, and sometimes it can have an impact that is out of all proportion to its scale. Is this one of those instances? Our reviewers weigh in.

Participants:

Dr. Benjamin Isitt is assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. In addition to *From Victoria to Vladivostok*, Isitt is the author of *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948-1972*, forthcoming from University of Toronto Press. A specialist in the history of social movements in the twentieth century, Isitt is now completing a study on the social relations of modern warfare, with particular reference to the role of Canada's soldiers as "migrant workers" and their interactions with insurgent civilian populations in Asia. A second project examines the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on resource frontiers. Isitt can be reached at isitt@interchange.ubc.ca.

Jonathan F. Vance holds the J.B. Smallman Chair in History at the University of Western Ontario. His most recent books are *Unlikely Soldiers: How Two Canadians Fought the Secret War Against Nazi Occupation* (2008), *A History of Canadian Culture* (2009), and *Bamboo Cage: The P.O.W. Diary of Flight Lieutenant Robert Wyse, 1942-1943* (2009). He is currently researching local histories of the First World War.

Robert Bothwell is the Gluskin professor of Canadian history at the University of Toronto, director of the International Relations Program at that university, and a senior fellow of Trinity College. Educated in or at Ottawa public schools, the University of Toronto, and Harvard University, he has worked at the University of Toronto since 1970. He is the author, co-author, and editor of some twenty-odd books, including, most recently, *The Penguin History of Canada* (2006) and *Alliance and Illusion* (2007). He was co-editor of the 2008 edition of *Canada among Nations*.

Julie F. Gilmour is the L.R. Wilson Postdoctoral Research Fellow at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, where she teaches the Department of History. She earned her MA in Soviet History at the University of Chicago and her PhD in Canadian History at the University of Toronto. A monograph based on her thesis is forthcoming from UBC Press entitled "*The Kind of People Canada Wants*": *Canada and the Displaced Persons, 1943-1953*. She is currently researching a book for the Penguin History of Canada Series entitled *Trouble on Main Street: The 1907 Vancouver Race Riots*.

Carol Willcox Melton is Assistant Professor of History at Macon State College. She has a Ph.D. in military history from Duke University and is the author of *Between War and Peace: Woodrow Wilson and the American Expeditionary Force in Siberia, 1918-1920* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001). Her current project focuses on the role of British Home Children in the CEF during the First World War.

Bryan D. Palmer is the Canada Research Chair, Canadian Studies Department, Trent University, and the editor of *Labour/Le Travail*. He received his PhD in History from the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1977 and has published extensively in the fields of social and working-class history. He has published 16 authored or edited books, the last of which was *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*. In 2007 the

first volume of a trilogy on the founder of American Trotskyism appeared, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*. Palmer is currently writing the second volume of this extended project, tentatively titled "James P. Cannon and the American Left Opposition in the Time of Trotsky, 1928-1940."

Bad ideas never go away. True, sometimes they submerge, to be replaced by other bad ideas for a decade or two or three, but like zombies they cannot be killed. One such idea may be called “the romance of the working class.” It was last fashionable in the fifties and sixties of the last century and produced a genre of alternate history in which “the workers” took centre stage in historical narratives in various guises – “the working class”, “organized labour”, and so forth. Written in a mystical neo-Stalinist prose that sometimes mimicked the effusions of the Soviet Politburo, the “working class history” of forty years back was, like the Politburo itself, curiously old-fashioned. Instead of diplomat speaking to diplomat, it was union leader speaking to union leader, their discourse punctuated by commentaries from radical journalists. The events were basically political, and recognizably so. At best, as in standard political history, characters were illuminated, and events given depth and plausibly explained. At worst, as also in much of the standard political history, stick figures caper over the historical landscape, names without substance, trailing ideologies of one kind or another.

Benjamin Isitt has applied this technique to Canada’s Siberian adventure of 1918-1919. The basic facts of the Siberian expedition are well known. Responding to British pleas, the Canadian prime minister, Sir Robert Borden, authorized the dispatch of an infantry brigade with ancillary troops to Vladivostok, Russia’s Pacific port. The motives and even more the justifications for the expedition were mixed, to say the least. The basic idea was to reconstitute the allies’ Eastern Front in the war against Germany. A secondary but still important motive was inter-allied rivalry and distrust -- the Canadian brigade was meant to give Britain a significant presence in a joint allied force in Siberia, in which the Japanese were hugely preponderant in terms of numbers. A third motive, floating between camouflage and fantasy, was to forward Canadian economic interests by encouraging trade and investment in resource-rich and population-scarce Siberia. Finally, there was the desire to suppress Bolshevism in Russia and to strangle the self-styled workers’ state in its cradle.

Nationalists have made something of Borden’s willingness to go along with British imperial schemes. These are well known, especially with regard to Winston Churchill’s detestation of the Bolshevik regime and his frantic efforts to recruit volunteers to go to Russia to suppress communism. Isitt tackles the subject with appropriate clucking about Borden’s failures. He is not entirely effective. A first step would be to get the details right. Isitt confers a knighthood on Churchill some thirty years before he actually got one, misidentifies his position in the British cabinet, and then even manages (p. 107) to get the nomenclature wrong (“lord of the admiralty” instead of “first lord of the admiralty”; Churchill was actually minister of munitions down to January 1919, and secretary of state for war – army minister – thereafter. A second would be to understand what Borden thought about Canada’s constitutional future, and his strong and obvious belief that Canada was best served as a member of the British Empire rather than as an independent nation standing on its own in what he correctly saw as an uncertain and potentially hostile world.

Certainly Borden, like almost everybody else in Canadian (or British or French or American) politics, believed that a world without Bolshevism would be a better world. Like its counterparts elsewhere, the Canadian political class felt an emotion somewhere between dread and disgust when it read or heard the radical and revolutionary rhetoric of “working class” propagandists. Borden had believed that the Great War, now going into its fifth year, would purify and even ennoble Canadian society, but by July 1918 he had begun to think that the war was more like a desperate race to the finish. The campaign of 1919 was in contemplation, and the British Empire was staring into the bottom of its manpower and financial reserves. Russia had already cracked under the strain – would it be another ally’s turn next? Perhaps even Canada’s?

So Isitt is not wrong when he highlights the radical-political aspect of Canadian politics in 1918-1919. Punch-drunk, and incapable of doing anything more than staggering forward in the same direction they had been going for four years, the allied governments were saved by the bell in August-September 1918. The allied armies, with the Canadian Corps prominent among them, finally began to defeat the Germans on the Western Front. On November 11, the Germans signed an armistice that was designed to render them incapable of refusing allied peace terms when these were finally agreed and presented in the spring of 1919.

Technically, the armistice provided only a respite – the allies and Germany were still at war. But the armistice of 1918 was correctly interpreted, at the time and since, as the end of mass hostilities. Not surprisingly, Canada’s conscript troops waiting to embark for Siberia, saw it in that light. Also not surprisingly, some Siberia-bound French-Canadian soldiers (anachronistically called Québécois) declined to go willingly, an event to which Isitt devotes most of his chapter 5.

As mutinies go, it was small beer. The *Canadiens* allowed themselves to be escorted on board ship, a court martial in Vladivostok earnestly looked for culprits, and relatively minor punishments were handed down – to be commuted in short order by higher authority in Ottawa. Isitt solemnly comments (p. 104), “The sentences pronounced on these working-class Québécois youth were designed to have a deterrent effect within [the Siberian force].” To which one can only reply, well, of course, deterrence being one of the functions of any court-and-justice system, even those approved by Robespierre and Lenin.

Isitt claims that the mutineers (though the term seems exaggerated in terms of what actually happened) were motivated by proletarian solidarity, and spurred on by what he calls the “agency” of “British Columbia’s working class” (p. 97). But who were the mutineers? Isitt gives us a bunch of names, clearly francophone, and tells us that the French-Canadians in the battalion in question derived from the Quebec and Montreal military districts (pp. 72-3). He tells us that the mutineers wrote to the Liberal premier of Quebec, Sir Lomer Gouin (unhelpfully identified as “a Montreal lawyer” in the text and as a “politician” in the index), for help. This was hardly the action of revolutionaries, and might indicate how far the soldiers of the Great War were from actual revolutionary sentiments. . But for Isitt it is the symbolism, not the identities, that matters, and there’s an end to it. The conscripts are names, nothing more. What seems to be more important is the “working

class” marching robotically to the beat of Isitt’s historical drum, inspired by class solidarity and the desire to frustrate the machinations of international capitalism.

This is a pity. Isitt has done a great deal of work, represented by a lengthy collection of endnotes, appendices and bibliography (pp. 174-274, in a book of just under 300 pages). Other military historians like John Keegan or Denis Winter have managed, in less space and with more modest scholarly apparatus, to convey the identities and thoughts of the unfortunate soldiers of the Great War. But in Isitt’s work it is not the soldiers who are the subject, but the Working Class, or what he takes to be the Working Class. It is a sterile pursuit of a stale theme.

Any national history that examines both the quirky details of local policy production and the international context in which it is carried out is a welcome addition to international relations scholarship. Benjamin Isitt aims to do this in his book, *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-19*. The experiences of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia) (CEFS) and their ideological allies in Victoria's trade union movement provide Isitt with a way of re-framing Canada's intervention in Russia. This approach moves the mutiny away from "the margins" (10) of Canada's World War One historiography into the center-- if only for a moment.

The strength of this work is in the extensive resource base Isitt has collected on the CEFS brigade. He has painstakingly collected an exceptional body of private materials and publicly held archival sources on the group. The use of private letters throughout the book ties huge international forces with lived experience in a way that draws the reader into these distant events. Readers are thus reminded that in addition to the general war weariness of 1918-9, soldiers were facing outbreaks of the Spanish flu, an international revolutionary climate, class divisions within the brigade, and an endless number of logistical difficulties associated with ambivalence at the highest levels and inherent in a military operation at the end of thousands of kilometres of contested track. Isitt's account of the CEFS' activities and daily life in Siberia, particularly in chapter six, is an important contribution to the wider international literature on the allied intervention in Russia.

From Victoria to Vladivostok opens with a basic account of the revolutionary days in Russia. Isitt's attempt to frame Canadian events in this Russian context is laudable, but readers seeking a broader history of the Russian Revolution will find his account necessarily limited.¹ The integration of Russian and Canadian events is perhaps the most unsatisfying aspect of *From Victoria to Vladivostok* in part because of the merging of rhetoric and motivation that occurs in the labour press and is reproduced without a critical eye in the author's text. For example, the rhetoric of May 1st of worker "solidarity" is reproduced as evidence of a growing trend among Canadian workers to turn towards Russia as a model. "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." (28) And further, emphasizing solidarity over dissent within revolutionary workers' organizations in Petrograd, the *BC Federationist* wrote; "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." (28) It is clear that there were strikes and demonstrations on May 1 and that the rhetoric of class solidarity was central to the way

¹For an example of a broad narrative of the events of the Russian Revolution see Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). For more on Russia and the relationship between the military and revolution, see Josh Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscriptio, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905-1925*, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

these events were framed, but one wonders what other underlying motivations are obscured by this straight reading of the *BC Federationist* which ignored major rifts between organizations in Petrograd, let alone differences between the labour politics of Petrograd and Victoria.

Nevertheless an understanding of background events in Russia is important for Isitt's project: to create a narrative and assessment of the ways in which these events were experienced by Canadian workers and soldiers in British Columbia (B.C.). Isitt's early chapters on the mobilization of troops in B.C. rely heavily on his extensive reading of the socialist newspapers published in Victoria and the Victoria Labour Council Fonds. This reliance on documentation collected by the labour movement and the workers' press is a significant departure from the approach taken by earlier accounts of Canada's intervention that were told from the perspective of state actors in Ottawa.² However, Isitt's brigade account could have benefited from a more complicated assessment of the "high-level diplomacy" (56) particularly in his reading of Prime Minister Borden's behaviour. There are hints at Borden's dilemmas of the time (88, 90), but in general, Borden's role is simplified here becoming a mere place holder for 'state' and 'capital' interests as one of the "Allied Leaders".(62-5)

Readers without a background in the events should read Isitt's work in conjunction with earlier accounts of the politics of the intervention in order to get a more complete picture of the other political forces (national and international) at work. While Isitt mentions the importance of the war against Germany in the rationale behind intervention, (54) nevertheless his account seems to emphasize the influence of "the economic motivation" (7) and ideological considerations.

In response to earlier studies of the Canadian intervention in Russia, Isitt would like to place the Victoria, B.C. mutiny of 21 December 1918 at the center of this story in order to include "the complex interplay of class and national cleavages, and the dual role of soldiers as workers" and to pass a closer eye over the conscription crisis in order to see the "agency, [sic] of British Columbia's working class and simplify the motivations of the Québécois troops themselves."(97) Isitt argues that historians such as Roy MacLaren and John Swettenham are "curt" (ff.4. 219) in their treatment of the mutiny and that this book is intended to fix this imbalance.

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. 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. (3)

² Two such accounts used by the author and often cited on the intervention are Roy MacLaren, *Canadians in Russia, 1918-1919*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976) and John Swettenham, *Allied Intervention in Russia, 1918-1919* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1967).

A few important questions therefore arise from this approach. First, does Isitt convincingly argue here that the mutiny was more than the action of “a small number of French-Canadian troops of the 259th battalion?”(219) Although his narrative of the mutiny is the most exhaustive we have seen and does argue successfully that the labour movement in Victoria supported dissent, the French Canadian influence in the brigade and in the mutiny is inescapable. “Influenced by labour agitation, their morale weakened by poor weather and the Spanish flu, two companies of Québécois conscripts in the CEFS refused to leave Victoria for Vladivostok, and the military authorities used force...to ensure their deployment to Russia.”(101) Here Isitt himself argues for the importance if the centrality of the French-Canadian factor.

Second, is the argument that working class dissent was salient in the decision to call off the expedition convincing? Isitt’s account of the CEFS in Siberia and the complications of organizing an expedition in the Soviet Far East during the civil war is useful. He has demonstrated that it was an ambivalent gesture from the beginning and that successes were few on the ground. Isitt has shown effectively that there was resistance in the B.C. labour movement to the expedition and that it was bound up closely with anti-conscription feelings in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada. Whether the Siberian expedition was the most significant factor in the decision to recall the expedition or the increasingly hostile relationship between labour and the Canadian state remains an open question, but Isitt has succeeded in demonstrating some of the “linkages between military history and working - class history and between domestic and international events.”(170) *From Victoria to Vladivostok* has certainly succeeded in adding another complication to our analysis and this can only be helpful.

Benjamin Isitt's previous works have primarily been in the area of Canadian labor history. In his new book he mines the seam between that discipline and military history during and immediately after the First World War. The Great War was the first war to usher in government direction of labor, along with the widespread conscription of men for the armed forces, beginning in Canada in 1917. Since many Canadians made the transition from worker to soldier against their wills during the last year of the war against the backdrop of the meteoric rise of Bolshevism in Russia, this is a natural, if often ignored, area for scholarship.

In December 1918, only weeks after the armistice in France was concluded, the Canadian government dispatched 4,200 troops to the Russian Far East as part of an Allied effort to “replace the Bolshevik Party of V. I. Lenin with a government more sympathetic to Western interests” (p. xi). Clearly, whether Canada's motives were economic, ideological, or both, the Canadian Expeditionary Force failed in its mission. What is more, it is by no means certain that the CEF ever even seriously tried to influence the chaotic situation in Siberia. Few Canadian troops ever left the port of Valdivostok, where they were mainly occupied in guard duty and occasional humanitarian and police functions. Within a month of the force's arrival in the Far East, discussions were under way within the Canadian government to arrange to return the CEF to Canada. It was withdrawn in April and May of 1919.

In strictly military terms, Isitt portrays the intervention itself as a non-event. Rather than focusing on military aspects of the intervention, Isitt's primary goal in telling the story of the CEF in Siberia is, in his words, “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” (p. xi).

Isitt does not shed any new light on the much debated motives of the various western powers in intervening in Russia. At any rate, since Canada did not intervene in the situation until after the armistice, some of the considerations that may have prompted the other participants to intervene—such as a desire to reopen an eastern front against the Germans—do not apply to the Canadian effort. He does attribute to the Canadian effort the classic capitalist motives of strangling Bolshevism in its cradle and establishing a strong position for Canadian business in the Russian Far East. A related objective he sees is a desire within the Canadian government to establish a new diplomatic position for itself in the postwar world. Specifically, he examines the difficulties of the Canadian government in attempting to establish a foreign policy more independent from Great Britain's while at the same time maintaining its position as a reliable ally.

One area in which Isitt is very successful is in his portrayal of the conditions in Vladivostok and eastern Siberia during the intervention. He traveled to the Russian Far East in 2008 and was able to do what so many of his colleagues in the last century were banned from doing: he went to Vladivostok and studied the area firsthand. Capitalizing on this advantage, he has produced a book that contains excellent maps and illustrations. He

portrays in vivid detail the layout of the city and the topography of that part of Russia, and he gives voice to the soldiers' memorable accounts of the brutal political and social upheaval that they witnessed, but were powerless to influence. Nevertheless, his main focus lies not in Russia but within Canada.

While Canada's influence on affairs in Russia may have been minor, Isitt argues that the conflict over intervention within Canadian society had a far greater effect on Canada itself. This is the real focus of Isitt's work: the interplay between the deteriorating relationship between Canadian workers and the government and the subsequent rising influence of radical working class leaders' opposition to intervention in Russia. This opposition not only influenced the withdrawal of Canadian forces from Siberia, but (according to Isitt) the labor groups' opposition to intervention led to an attempted mutiny among some of the troops embarking for Vladivostok. Many of these men were French-Canadian conscripts who, while being marched through the streets of Victoria, refused to board transports for Siberia. Two companies were ultimately force-marched by the military authorities at bayonet point to the docks and put on board (p. 101). Many of these men had previously attended meetings held by labor groups supporting a "hands off Russia" policy for Canada.

While the actual intervention only lasted six months and Canadian troops were only involved in one small engagement against Bolshevik forces, Isitt maintains that the impact on Canada was far greater. "Within broader Canadian society, the Siberian Expedition brought about censorship of major newspapers such as the *Toronto Globe* and intensified the repression of working-class and socialist parties," he writes. "The widening labour and farmer revolt in Canada was bound up with the government's decision to deploy troops to Russia, which contributed to the general strikes that erupted from Victoria to Winnipeg to Amherst in spring 1919." (p. 170) The episode also revealed and widened social cleavages that would trouble Canada for years to come.

Ultimately Isitt's book is about the influence that some events had on others, and influence is sometimes hard to isolate or document. Isitt shows, for instance, that some Canadian troops resisted embarkation to Siberia. He also notes that some of the soldiers involved had attended nearby labor meetings, where they were encouraged to resist the intervention effort (p. 83). Was this resistance the result of labor agitation, as he argues? Did the troops resist because of what they heard in the meetings, or did they attend the meetings because they were already unhappy for other reasons? After all, a few days before Christmas they found themselves being shipped to Siberia when they had had been drafted, or had even volunteered, to fight a war in Europe that was already over. The outbreak of the Spanish influenza among the men, together with the ethnic divisions within the unit, also played a role in the soldiers' dissatisfaction with developments. A few months later in Wales, there was a much larger mutiny in the CEF 1st Division at Kinmel Park. The ostensible cause of this was frustration over demobilization procedures and transportation shortages that delayed the men's return to Canada. Outside agitation does not seem to have played a role in that mutiny, a fact which raises questions of causation in the Victoria mutiny.

While Isitt raises some important questions, despite his efforts conclusive answers to most of them remain evasive.

Review by Bryan D. Palmer, Trent University

Benjamin Isitt is something of a phenomenon. Not many young scholars, recently graduated from their Ph.D. programs, have published two books in a year, but that is what Isitt is about to do. *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917-1919* will soon be joined by Isitt's forthcoming University of Toronto Press-published *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of the New Left, 1948-1972*, scheduled for release in March 2011. A web site entry on Isitt notes that he has travelled to 49 countries on five continents, establishing contacts and working relations with historians in Europe, North America, and Asia. Somehow he also managed to run for mayor in Victoria, British Columbia in 2002 (he had not yet reached the age of 25) and again in 2005, before completing his doctoral program in 2008. The man exudes energy.

I'm not sure that Isitt leaps tall buildings in a single bound, but it would not surprise me to see him depicted on some blogging site in full flight over Victoria's Empress Hotel in the near future. He might be donning mayoral pendants, his University of New Brunswick gown, or at least an orange NDP sash. For now, we will have to settle for the scholarly equivalent: the call to integrate labour history and military history. "Working class history can and should enter into a closer dialogue with military history," Isitt insists. (10) He is undoubtedly right, although with any such admonition, the proselytizing is easier than the practical delivery. Isitt is also not alone in this suggestion: Desmond Morton did much hard work in the field of labour/military history crossover, David Bercuson argued the same stand as Isitt in the 1980s, and Peter Way has also recently been calling for more such research in the context of British North America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹

Isitt's study of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) to Siberia of 1917-1919 relies on the labour press, mainstream newspapers, government documents, and varied military and working-class archival sources to piece together an understanding of a military undertaking viewed from the perspective of the Canadian working class. That the expeditionary force, which involved some 4200 Canadian soldiers who were sent from Victoria to Vladivostok in order to contain and defeat Bolshevism and, according to some, recover British war loans and secure trade advantages, was overwhelmingly composed of working-class people is undeniable. Discontent among workers with respect to the purpose of the expedition has long been known, the mutinous rebelliousness of some in the ranks – especially conscripted francophones – having been commented on by other historians. Isitt extends the story, and combines it with a fuller exploration of how

¹ See, for instance, Desmond Morton, "Aid to the Civil Power: The Canadian Militia in Support of Social Order, 1867-1914," *Canadian Historical Review*, 51 (1970), 407-425; Peter Way, "Class and the Common Soldier in the Seven Years War," *Labor History*, 44 (December 2003), 455-481; Peter Way, "Memoirs of an Invalid: James Miller and the making of the British-American Empire During the Seven Years War," in Donna Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756-2009* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), esp. 43. David Bercuson raised criticisms of my 1979 book, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* for failing to address the use of largely working-class militias to control working-class strike actions.

extensively the radical wing of the Canadian workers' movement opposed military intervention in Soviet Russia. In putting the two chapters of this labour/military history together in one book-length study, Isitt has produced a helpful study.

The strength of this book is to situate the decision of the Canadian state to outfit and deploy a Siberian expedition within the context of war, revolution, and an international labour upheaval that reached from St. Petersburg metal works to the railway shops of Winnipeg. Isitt is undoubtedly right to stress how decisively cabinet ministers and generals acted to defend capital and property, to thwart Bolshevism at home and abroad: "Regarding this matter of going away,/That a wire had come from Ottawa,/From a man 'higher up' whose word was law."² The fodder in this decidedly ideological project was the working-class soldier:

...I first met Sergeant-majors,
Heard their wild Apache yell;
Midst the Fall in, Fall out, Double, Quick,
We have seen a bit of Hell;
Reveille's at six a.m. the Sergt.-major's cue,
And he starts in plenty,
To tell you what to do.
Clean up, Shine up, they drive you on,
Like any bloody slave,
P.T. Fall in, Fall out again,
Nine seconds left to shave;
And you can't do this, you can't do that,
It's all against the rule.

In battalions and units of hundreds, troops, many of them undoubtedly reluctant and uninspired, were herded on to ships and transported around the world, their job not the 'defence of democracy' that was the rhetorical prop of the era, but the far more prosaic purpose of keeping the world safe for capitalism: "I fought for rights, avenging wrongs that all men might be free./Or, was it just an idle dream? This world's democracy." The grim conditions on board the privately-outfitted ships taking the soldiers to the Sea of Japan are detailed in Isitt's study:

I am sick of this old stew-kitchen, but it is one I can't quit.
Sick of the old Proteslaus, and her cold-faced Chinese crew,
Who morning, noon, and evening, feed us cans and cans of Stew.

Things did not improve when the troops touched down on Russian soil. The drudgery and meaninglessness of much war experience soon registered decisively with the troops, who were stationed near Vladivostok:

²All verse quoted in this review is from Dawn Fraser, *Songs of Siberia and Rhymes of the Road* (Halifax, Eastern Publishing Company, n.d., but copyright 1919).

Mid-night in a Russian City, Mid-night it was cold and damp;
With a spent Pass in my pocket, I was tramping back to Camp.
And I cursed this form of slavery, Army life to me seemed hard;
Morning begging for your freedom, Mid-night sneaking past the guard.

As a social history of the brutalizing conditions that soldiers routinely endure, Isitt's book adds importantly to a growing appreciation of the costs exacted in mobilizing troops and placing them in theatres of conflict that are simultaneously dangerous, depressing, and debilitating. "Felt I was imposed on sadly, just a martyr to the cause."

On the labour side, Isitt's elaboration of radical workers' calls to defend the Soviet accomplishment and challenge and counter Canadian military intervention to contain and crush the 'scourge' of Bolshevism is well done, but it is not exactly news. To be sure, as Isitt claims, no work has been written that addresses directly "Canadian labour's response to the Siberian Expedition," but as the footnotes to this study reveal, this is not to say that the subject has been entirely ignored. Isitt's critical claim that we need a fuller understanding of "the unique dialogue between conscripts and organized labour," (3) is undoubtedly true, but there is not a lot in this study demonstrating that there was indeed a rich exchange between the worker as soldier and the worker as radical advocate of the Russian experiment. Isitt provides too little in the way of a sophisticated microhistory of the conscripts and the volunteers, which would necessarily involve extensive research into the class origins, regional backgrounds, ethnic makeup, and possible collective *mentalité* of the troops. I was intrigued, for instance, by the research possibilities inherent in a 1919 military document entitled "Public Safety – Dismissal of Soldiers for Siberia Who Have Shown Bolshevik Tendencies." This file's size (apparently 20 pages) suggests to me that it may well have listed the dismissed soldiers' names. Tracking them down, telling us something about them, and, if possible, detailing the evidence used to ascertain what constituted Bolshevik tendencies would have enriched Isitt's account immeasurably. Perhaps this was not possible. But if it could be done, it is the tough slogging of deep research; it takes time, and it demands patient excavation of scattered, often tedious, sources. While Isitt's attempt to uncover the nature of a mutiny among the 856 members of the 259th Battalion and other smaller units, scheduled to depart for Vladivostok on 21 December 1918, is fuller than previous histories, it nevertheless remains shadowy in the absence of this kind of meticulous historical digging, which alone can uncover the social origins of dissenting behaviour among soldiers.

To be sure, Isitt confronts an opaque historical record, complicated by wartime censorship. He necessarily looks to conflicting and incomplete reports, many of which come from radical workers' movement sources that had little direct contact with troops and relied on second hand reports filtered through a partisan interpretive sieve. Court martial records seem, from Isitt's use of them, stilted and tilting towards testimonies of officers or statements of men in the docks who were more likely to be speaking 'pardon tales' aimed more at securing a lesser sentence than articulating the oppositional politics of mutiny. In any case, Isitt tells us too little about this evidence and its contradictions, opting instead to

note how meagre is the information that managed to seep through the censor's restrictions into more public sources.

It thus strikes me as a tad uncharitable to claim that past histories have been mired in failure to "extend beyond a superficial reference to French-Canadian anti-militarism," (97) when Isitt's account itself is understandably also quite limited. It refers to upwards of 40 mutineers, but we are not told enough about this distinct minority of rebels. If they indeed acted on radical beliefs there is not a great deal that Isitt has uncovered to establish this convincingly. This claim, which may well be true, rests on bits and pieces of anecdotal evidence, in which the actions and a single ostensible streetcar utterance of one 'ringleader', Rifleman Arthur Roy, loom rather large. Isitt does cite a petition of 300 loyal French Canadians of the 259th Battalion, protesting being sent to Siberia "in an expedition which is not justified and useless for our country," but this document was forwarded to a powerful Liberal lawyer in Quebec to act on, which was hardly the path radical advocates of Bolshevism would have followed. (95, 178) Nor do we know if it was signed by all of these francophone troops or merely sent on their behalf. All of this, while fascinating, does not quite add up to a dialogue among the left and the troops. It only confirms, decisively, that all nine soldiers convicted of mutiny (out of a battalion of roughly 850 men) in Victoria during the aftermath of the 'wilful disobedience' of late December 1918, were French Canadians. Reading Isitt's account, from the labour side, *enhances* our understandings, but it does not resolve the past historiographic dilemmas that Isitt himself has identified.

I can claim no expertise as a military historian, the subject being removed from any research I have done, and distanced, largely, from reading I routinely undertake. That said, if I were to don the dress of a military historian, how might I look at Isitt's account? My first impression is that the CEF, while undoubtedly part of a large project of capitalist containment, was a rather small affair. The Canadian troops, confined to duty near Vladivostok, were actually far removed from Siberia. To be sure, just getting them to the Russian Front was a large enough undertaking, and there is no doubt that transporting over 4,000 men and women to the Allied-occupied Sea of Japan Russian port of Vladivostok was a difficult and trying endeavour. These Canadian troops, however, were dwarfed in number by the vast Japanese army of occupation, which approached 75,000. The lone military operation involving the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Siberia occurred in April 1919, as almost 200 troops were sent to Shkotovo to shore up an Allied force of 1000 and a White Russian contingent of 150. This established body had been attacked by partisans whose intention was to free 700 Bolshevik prisoners. By the time the Canadians arrived, however, it was all over but the shouting, and some subsequent ineptness. The only casualty in the 259th Battalion deployment resulted when a soldier testing his weapon discharged it accidentally, wounding one of the Canadian soldiers. The Japanese General in charge of the Siberian Allied forces threw a party for the Canadians, rewarding their valour with 96 bottles of wine, 18 bottles of whiskey, and three casks of sake.

As Isitt notes, the Canadians in Vladivostok were largely "spectators," and made "the least contribution to the White cause" of all the anti-Bolshevik forces present. "The Bolsheviks were quiet/There were no fights to win or lose." Vladivostok itself was a dismal place, "a backwash of revolution" that was, depending on the source consulted, "about ninety

percent Bolshevik” or, alternatively, “an end-of-the-road haven ... of refugees – White Russians, Poles, Georgians, Chinese and Koreans; aristocracy, bourgeoisie, peasants, and beggars. It was said that one could have a man’s throat cut for a rouble.” (111, 117) Isitt does not discriminate between such divergent assessments, opting for the descriptive quote, most of which accent Vladivostok’s foul and frigid nature. A pall of “dingy savagery” hung over the outpost, which was governed, again depending on the source cited, by barbarian “lawlessness,” or by an underground of Bolshevik partisans. Amidst rumours that, “The whole country has risen in revolt and large Bolshevik irregular forces, indifferently armed, are preparing to attack this detachment,” the Canadian forces nonetheless did not do a great deal. When a belligerent Russian civilian appeared at the Canadian Ordnance shed demanding free gasoline because “the *czar* was dead ... and everything was public property,” the sentry panicked and stabbed the man in the groin. Mostly, the Canadian troops, in the words of one of Isitt’s subtitles, were engaged in “doing nothing.” Constantly drilling, the expeditionary forces avoided official interaction with Russians as much as possible, thus helping to “maintain the good reputation they had.” (118) Furthering this exercise in public relations as an act of discretely keeping out of the public eye, Canadian units were also isolated from the vice-ridden port as much as possible. This effort did not always produce success stories:

We were ‘doing Vladivostock’, you know how fellows will.
And wandering idly round, we came to Kopek Hill;
The so-called sporting section, with red-lights like coals of fire,
The sneaking signals that say, ‘there’s bodys here to hire.’

One wayward lance-corporal was “shot in the penis” by a Russian woman at a Vladivostok brothel. (121) Two other troops came close to death after a visit to a house of ill fame. Consuming massive quantities of vodka, they passed out in the snow, and were fortunate to be discovered by an officer who, with the aid of two comrades, carried the inebriates back to their recovery beds. “In the west when you’re drunk they invite you to stop, or toss you out by the neck,/But they sit with you in this Vodka game right down to your last kopek.” Indeed, syphilis seemed as much of a danger to the troops as combat, and in an appendix listing the cause of death among officers and others of the Siberian Expedition, pneumonia (8), small pox (3), meningitis (2), and accident (2), were the most likely killers. One lieutenant committed suicide, and a sergeant died of exposure. The fourteen Canadians buried at Vladivostok are, as Isitt suggests, “casualties in a muddled geopolitical fight.” (170)

The Siberian Expedition was thus a \$3,000,000 military fiasco. From the vantage point of military history it is possible that it was what Isitt claims historians of Canada have made it out to be by their inattention: “a side note to the war.” (10) Reading Isitt’s account, it is difficult not to think that he may be making more of Canada’s contribution to the Siberian containment of Bolshevism than is warranted. One measure of this is stylistic. There is far too much repetition, including quotes that appear in one chapter appearing later in the text (1/95; 1/96; 2/96; 6/76; 8/93). Isitt regurgitates unnecessarily, and sometimes, perhaps, wrongly. We do not need to hear on page 65 that the killing of draft dodger and radical

Ginger Goodwin by the Dominion Police on Vancouver Island prompted “Canada’s first city-wide general strike” and then read, again, one page later, that on “The day of Goodwin’s funeral, 2 August 1918, Vancouver trade unionists staged the first city-wide general strike in Canada’s history.” To be told this information twice is bad enough, but it is not absolutely clear that the Vancouver strike Isitt refers to was the first city-wide general strike in Canadian history: a case might be made that Hamilton’s generalized work stoppage, waged by the nine-hour movement in 1872, could be accorded this status. The problem of repetition is compounded by Isitt’s cumbersome chapter organization, which takes us back and forth across the two years of his study, in ways that often open up a discussion at one point, only to move off of it, and to then necessarily return to the topic later. This problem even appears as chapters are introduced in the same ways. Thus the Introduction commences: “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 troop ship *Teesta* on Victoria’s outer wharves. Saturday, 21 December 1918.” (1) Ninety-six pages later we are back where we started, with the same day, the same trek, and the same weather. “Departure Day arrived, Saturday, 21 December 1918. It was a cold, crisp day, with the wind blowing from the north. A total of 856 enlisted men in the 259th Battalion and the 20th Machine Gun Company, along with Headquarters Detachment and several smaller units, left the Willows Camp for the six-kilometre march up Fort Street towards the outer wharves and the troopship *SS Testra*.” (96)

As the book winds down, Isitt looks for ways to infuse his narrative with meaning. In the process he sometimes overreaches. Isitt wants to suggest, for instance, that the Canadian Expeditionary Force, as part of the much larger and pervasive Allied intervention in the international capitalist crusade to contain and crush Bolshevism, influenced the future history of Soviet Communism, pushing it in the direction of Stalinism. The problem with this is twofold: Isitt does not thoroughly discuss the nature of Stalinism, which he seems to equate with terrorism and totalitarianism, ignoring the importance of foundational original Bolshevik commitments to revolutionary internationalism versus Stalinist retreats into the programmatic cul-de-sac of socialism in one country; and the CEF (Siberia) history was such a drop-in-the-bucket of containment that it can hardly be cited as conditioning all that much.

Isitt is of course absolutely right that the Allied intervention in Russia in 1917-1919 *as a whole* did indeed pressure developments within the newly established revolutionary state in certain directions. He is also on unimpeachable ground when he insists that Canada followed the lead of its influential imperialist superiors in aligning itself with the undeclared war of containment waged against the Soviet Union. No doubt this fed into the domestic labour warfare that unravelled during the war and immediate post-World War I years, especially in terms of revolutionary sensibilities. Resolutions moved by Socialist Party of Canada members, One Big Union advocates, and even craft unionists affiliated with American Federation of Labor unions, deploring the attacks on the Soviet Union spearheaded by the United States, Great Britain, and other imperialist world powers and championing the dictatorship of the proletariat and workers’ control of industry, were no doubt lent a certain national urgency by the knowledge that Canadian forces were en route to the Soviet Union, engaged in the active suppression of the Bolshevik Revolution. But

such radical statements would have been made had Canada not been so quick to jump into the anti-Soviet fray. The Revolution of 1917 was seen by many in the workers' movement as a beacon of possibility, and the cry for capitalist governments to materially aid, not encircle and starve, the Bolsheviks was emanating from many quarters associated with the left. Labour was profoundly internationalist in 1919. Moreover, class relations in Canada had been worsening for decades, with radicalism and revolutionary perspectives maturing accordingly. The workers' revolt that spread across Canada in the aftermath of World War I was a consequence of this profoundly historical process, situated at the crossroads of many national and international developments. It was influenced by so many factors that attributing much in the way of causality to the CEF (Siberia) seems an exaggeration.

Labour and military historians are, for the most part, different breeds. Isitt wants to traverse the differences. He leans with the labour left, rather than the militaristic right, if I can be allowed a topical dualism. It is important to note, however, that he does lean, and in doing so he demonstrates that there is not only *one* left position any more than there is *one* position on the right. Isitt thus establishes a particular perspective, but it is one that can be challenged, not only from the right, but also from the left. The tendency throughout the book to present descriptive quotes that establish positions opposed to one another is relevant in this regard, and especially so in the conclusions to this study. Isitt seems to want to stake out agnostic ground on who committed the greater terror in Russia during the course of the Civil War, Reds or Whites. A British colonel is cited, claiming that the Bolsheviks were "a disgusting gang of cutthroats," while an American general is quoted as believing that, "the anti-Bolsheviks killed one hundred people in Eastern Siberia to every one killed by the Bolsheviks." (163) Isitt rarely intervenes in such citation, keeping a safe distance from analytic positions that often cry out for more comment.

What is it to be? Which side is one on? The easiest answer to offer up is that war and revolution brutalize, and both apparently equally so. It is not surprising, then, to find that Isitt endorses the social democratic views of Karl Kautsky who, in 1922, deplored the actions of the Soviet regime, which had utilized violence and state trials to suppress internal 'socialist' opponents who had themselves resorted to attacks on the new revolutionary workers' republic. Kautsky suggested that Bolshevik persecution of socialist opponents extended more widely than had prevailed under czarism, a dubious claim, and also that this repression was waged solely against 'opinions', ignoring the background of social revolutionary assassination attempts against Lenin in 1918. Isitt thus casts a plague on all violence, deploring what he refers to as the "slaughter" of Kronstadt by the Red Army, and citing the ruthless suppression of the opposition to the Bolsheviks led by Nestor Makhno. His references buttressing such positions are limited to the highly partisan publications of the fiery Emma Goldman, whose response to the Russian Revolution was early one of disillusionment, and Peter Arshinov, a head of the Confederation of Anarchist Organizations of the Ukraine.

There are, of course, other 'sides' to be told in this history of condemnation of Bolshevik violence in the Civil War era. Arshinov, for instance, owed his liberation from a czarist prison in 1917 to the very Revolution whose leadership he would later assail. The head of the Cheka was killed in his office by an anarchist assassin in 1918. Makhnovist peasant

violence against a Red Army bearing the brunt of Western Front casualties encompassed truly sadistic acts of torture and inhumanity. And Kronstadt, it might be argued, had by 1920 long been denuded of its original revolutionary sailors. Leadership of the strategic fortress had been taken over by a mish-mash of social elements, among them peasants whose commitment was always to private ownership of the land. The Kronstadt rebels of 1920-1921, very much unlike their counterparts in 1917, apparently thought little of sacrificing the Revolution to the invading capitalist navies that could surround and suffocate the first workers' state. If the reluctant Trotsky-led Red Army did not utilize the small 1921 window of opportunity provided by winter's ice to retake the militarily significant naval garrison in the name of proletarian internationalism, it is entirely possible that the workers' state would indeed have succumbed. There is, undeniably, ample evidence that the Bolsheviks clamped down on opponents in the period of war communism, sometimes using violent means to counter violent attack. Stalin was one of the most vociferous advocates of what has come to be called 'Red Terror', and he would later, as is well known and convincingly documented, extend that terror against the entire original corps of Bolshevik leadership. But Stalinist terror could well have been stopped had the revolutionary state of 1917-1921 consolidated on a different basis than Stalin's hardening post-1925 politics of building the 'socialist fatherland' rather than promoting proletarian internationalism. Indeed, an argument can be made that after 1922 Lenin actually toned down considerably both the rhetoric and the repressive apparatus associated with the suppression of dissidents, some of whom had undeniable histories of using armed force against the Bolshevik leadership. The situation, with respect to terror/counter-terror in the years from 1917-1921 is thus far more complicated than is evident in Isitt's summary assertions. Like the history of forgetting the Siberian expedition that Isitt is countering by an insistence that *all of the complexities be researched and recounted*, this is the reality that needs to be grappled with, the difficult politics of choice intruding on our desires to have our political cakes and eat them too.

The value of Isitt's provocative book is that it *does* provoke. Critical readers among military historians will perhaps find its refusal to consider the CEF (Siberia) only in narrow military ways challenging to their core interpretive beings. But the field of military history is indeed changing, and those historians concerned with the social and cultural lives of soldiers will find in Isitt's account much insight and illumination. Most labour historians will be accepting of Isitt's approach, largely because so many in the field accept his progressive, but not necessarily Bolshevik, premises. His conclusions will startle few among students of the working class, because they challenge almost no conventional, if not entirely adequate, wisdoms about the early revolutionary experience in Russia and they reiterate what, after all, is a fairly transparent history of capitalist anti-Bolshevism in the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In calling on historians to look more seriously at military and diplomatic happenings as they are filtered through the experience of working-class people, Isitt nonetheless challenges all who write about the past. He pushes the envelope of inquiry usefully. Whatever their field, historians should find themselves productively provoked by Isitt's study. They should be pushed to address irksome questions of power, how it is used, and what its consequences are in the gritty, too often sordid, unfolding of war and its discontents:

So our esprit de corps is waning
And our pluck and interest too,
The only thing we see to fight,
Is Mud and Spanish Flu;
And we often dreaming wonder,
Will the Quarantine always last;
As we work like Slaves at present
Thinking sadly of the past.

They are taking us to Russia,
As soldiers of the King,
And if we see a Bolshevik,
We will shout, 'You horrid thing.'
Or perhaps we will 'Shun' a dozen times,
And double up our fist;
Then all 'Form Fours' our very best,
And slap him on the wrist.

Author's Response by Benjamin Isitt, University of British Columbia

The Bolshevik Revolution provoked widely divergent responses in Canada and other states in the aftermath of November 1917 – and it has incited political passion and scholarly sparring ever since. Two decades after the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War ended, these passions are still evident in the commentaries of Professors Bothwell and Palmer – from opposite corners of the ring. Bothwell describes my approach to Canada's Siberian Expedition as "sterile" and "neo-Stalinist." Palmer, on the "labour left," judges that my premises are "progressive, but not necessarily Bolshevik." Where these two ideologically charged historians diverge is in their willingness to engage the ideas, subject matter, and interpretive tools deployed in the book. Palmer's review is critical yet constructive; Bothwell's review is dismissive and curt, bearing the imprint of earlier Cold War battles. The chasm of ideology and method may be too wide between us. We are perhaps "different breeds" of historian.

I believe that the Working Class – whether capitalized or not – remains a worthy subject of historical inquiry. The sweep of world history and academia in recent decades has not diluted the value of analyzing historical change in terms of conflict between economic groups and forces in societies. Moreover, the method of working-class history, and "history from below" broadly conceived, provides a vital tool for understanding relations between states, as well as the military affairs of states in relation to working-class movements both foreign and domestic. The Bolshevik Revolution and the Allied Intervention that opposed it are well-suited for this kind of dialogue between working class history, military history, and the history of international relations.

It is not a safe scholarly course, as the limitations identified by the four reviewers duly attest. My training as a historian of the working class introduced me to the topic of Canada's Siberian Expedition a decade ago and it shaped my interpretive lens and research methods in important ways. Building from a foundation in labour and left-wing sources, I embarked on a reconnaissance into the fields of military history, diplomatic history, and Russian history. I may have engaged these fields imperfectly, but I viewed them as essential toward understanding this complex and controversial subject, which has resided on the margins of Canadian historiography since the First World War.

Bothwell's review reveals a lack of openness toward unconventional approaches to Canada's foreign policy. While he is correct to suggest that I should "get the details right," it should be noted that Bothwell conceded the presence of "errors large and small" in his own work in a H-Diplo roundtable in 2008.¹ Certainly, my descriptions of Winston Churchill's role in the British Cabinet and Lomer Gouin's role in Quebec provincial politics should be more precise. But most of Bothwell's critique provides little room for serious engagement. Bothwell urges me to say more about Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden's motivations in deploying troops to Russia and his attitudes toward the British Empire (a point also raised by Professor Gilmour). But this is one of the few aspects of the Siberian

¹ Robert Bothwell, "Author's Response," H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews, Vol. IX, No. 20 (2008), 19 <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-IX-20.pdf>.

Expedition that has received adequate treatment in previous works; Gaddis Smith, John Swettenham, and Roy MacLaren mined the Borden Papers in Ottawa to reasonably good effect.

My research has aimed from the outset to extend debates over the Siberian Expedition and Canada's foreign relations beyond the realm of elite decision-making, into labour halls and barrack rooms on both sides of the Pacific. I attempt to bridge "the near-complete segregation of 'social history' in Canada from 'political history'" (as Bothwell described the problem in the roundtable on his book).² Is the voice of "union leader speaking to union leader... punctuated by commentaries from radical journalists" irrelevant and "neo-Stalinist"? For generations, Borden and Churchill's voices dominated approaches to Canada's military and diplomatic past – a method favoured in Bothwell's own work. This approach told the comfortable and the powerful what they wanted to hear, while ignoring the perspective and experiences of millions of Canadians – as well as important social forces that shaped world history. Cast in this light, an alternative reading seems valid and overdue.

Professor Gilmour's review is more appreciative of my approach, which Gilmour describes as moving beyond "the perspective of state actors in Ottawa." She raises cogent questions over how I chose to structure the book, identifying the sometimes cumbersome "integration of Russian and Canadian events" (a criticism shared by Professor Palmer). As well, Gilmour is fair to suggest that I could profitably dispense with a "straight reading" of the labour press in favour of a more nuanced handling of rhetorical reporting. Regarding the Victoria mutiny of 21 December 1918 and the ethnic background of the soldiers involved, my comments on the prevailing historiography emphasize "*superficial* reference[s] to French-Canadian anti-militarism," rather than suggesting that French-Canadians played no role at all. Indeed, French-Canadians appear to have played the decisive role in an event located at the intersection of class and national cleavages – the product of a unique dialogue between Francophone conscripts and Anglo-Canadian radical workers who organized labour protest meetings in Victoria attended by the troops.

This question of causality in relation to the Victoria mutiny is pursued further in Professor Melton's review. While a number of factors influenced the conscripts' refusal to march to the troopship *Teesta*, I argue that labour agitation transformed latent discontent among the troops (motivated by the armistice, the Spanish Flu, poor camp conditions, and historic French-Canadian antimilitarism) into active and collective resistance. The soldiers who attended the "Hands Off Russia" protest meetings in Victoria theatres encountered debates over the Russian Revolution that had been raging in Canadian labour and left circles since 1917. These protest meetings were not marginal gatherings; they attracted 700 troops, about one-quarter of the soldiers then mobilized to Victoria. As local socialists and trade unionists raised their class-based critique of Canada's military aims in Russia, the discontent of French-Canadian conscripts congealed into mutiny. The Victoria mutiny was

² Bothwell, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-IX-20.pdf>, 19.

related to larger demobilization riots in the British Isles in the spring of 1919, as Melton aptly points out. But I believe there is interpretive value in mining the distinct characteristics of these events and their geopolitical contexts. Two additional criticisms offered by Melton are valid: I could have gone further in linking Canada's confused and complex aims in Siberia to wider historiographic debates over the Allies' motivations in Russia. Finally, it is true that the book raises more questions than it answers definitively, reflecting a paucity of source material and a foray into several diverse fields.

Turning to Professor Palmer's thorough treatment of the book, I am humbled to be commended for my academic energies by a scholar who "writes books faster than [we] can read them" (as a colleague recently noted). However, I have difficulty accepting Palmer's suggestion that I evade "the tough slogging of deep research" in my treatment of the Victoria mutiny. From vague preliminary clues in labour newspapers, I reconstructed the chaotic events that transpired in the streets of Victoria in December 1918, unearthing court martial records in Ottawa and oral testimony from descendents of the soldiers involved. To be sure, further genealogical research into the ethnic and regional backgrounds of the soldiers may shed additional light (a task I continue to pursue as part of a larger project). Palmer astutely observes that I keep an "agnostic" or "safe distance" in weighing the scale of terror committed by Reds and Whites in the civil war. This reflects in part a reluctance to draw conclusions on material outside the scope of the study. But Palmer is correct to suggest that I could be bolder in my assertions and rely less on descriptive quotations that are allowed to stand or fall on their own. Finally, I am glad that Palmer engages the question of "when the revolution failed," a topic that I touch on only tangentially, again in light of the scope of the book.

All four reviewers interrogate my treatment of the relationship between French-Canadian conscripts and Anglo-Canadian workers. This brings us back to Professor Bothwell's review, which suggests that the symbolism, rather than the identity, of the working-class French-Canadians who mutinied in the British Columbia capital matters to me. I cannot agree. To be sure, the symbolism of the mutiny – occurring at the confluence of pro-Bolshevik labour protest by Anglo-Canadian workers and the war weariness and anti-militarism of Francophone conscripts – offers a unique window into this moment of social tension in Canada and the world. But this symbolism is the start rather than the destination of my scholarly interest. In the autumn of 2010, during a national tour to launch *From Victoria to Vladivostok*, I was invited to share this research with the extended families of five soldiers involved in the mutiny, conscripts from the rural Quebec town of St-Épiphane (intriguingly, the *only* veterans of the Siberian Expedition who are commemorated on a war memorial in Canada, to my knowledge). In a packed theatre in the Maison de la Culture in nearby Rivière-de-Loup, I shared this story with the veterans' families, at an event organized by the granddaughter of ringleader Leonce Roy (a farmer who had been captured by Dominion Police while attempting to escape with an ox). Roy's grandson, a retired lieutenant in the Canadian Army, provided translation. Of the seventy Québécois and Québécoise who attended the lecture, half were related to the five conscripts from St-Épiphane. They had never heard about the relatives' experiences before. As one attendee said, "we are learning something about ourselves."

For more than 90 years, the story of Canada's Siberian Expedition was ignored in the country's history books, classrooms, and lecture halls, confined to the realm of family folklore and vague recollections of when dad (or granddad) "went to Russia." Generations of historians turned their collective backs on the experiences of these 4,200 Canadians who deployed from Victoria to Vladivostok in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Perhaps the story clashed with their image of Canada and its role in the world. Perhaps it entailed irksome themes such as imperialism and socialism and rebellion. Perhaps the soldiers' story was too "Working Class." As this story begins to see the light of day, in *From Victoria to Vladivostok* and the accompanying digital archive at www.SiberianExpedition.ca, Cold War-era passions and positions will inevitably resurface. But the practice of "history from below" remains relevant and important – as evidenced by the extraordinary interaction of social movements and international relations in North America and the world today.

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