

## CHAPTER ONE

It was clear Russia was losing badly in its war against Germany. By 1917, disintegration of the Russian state was near. The people's revulsion for the war, massive human slaughter on the battlefields, the desertion of whole regiments in despair, and families starving and freezing on the home front were harbingers for the conditions to come. And Czar Nicholas II, who had taken personal control of the war according to tradition, had become unpopular and powerless.

The First World War led to economic breakdown in Russia. Serious food shortages generated soaring prices, inadequate wages, and growing agitation among the people. In February 1917, a general strike in Petrograd led to the establishment of a very weak provisional government, the first of its kind in Russia. Soon after, the czar issued a manifesto abdicating his throne. This dangerous mix of social and political instability presented an opportunity for tremendous change and the Bolsheviks seized the moment.

Prior to the collapse of the czarist regime, the Bolsheviks, one of two main branches of Russian socialism, were unpopular. Over time, their inflammatory speeches and protests gathered new attention, breeding discontent within the class system. In response, the government imprisoned many Bolsheviks. Some escaped, including their leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Despite its efforts, the provisional government could not assuage the social unrest caused by war, giving new energy to Bolshevism and its ardent leader.

In April 1917, top German generals secretly sent Lenin back into Russia in a sealed railway car. They knew he would work to their benefit by further demoralising the Russian army with anticapitalistic and antiwar rhetoric. But Lenin had his own agenda. From the moment he arrived in Petrograd, he distributed and guided revolutionary propaganda to gain political credibility. Although they were still widely distrusted, the Bolsheviks built new popularity with their platform "bread, peace, and land" and used this support to gain momentum.

Sensing the critical moment, Lenin made his move and the October Revolution was underway. Almost without struggle, the Bolsheviks captured Petrograd. After less than nine months in power, the provisional government was overthrown and Premier Alexander Kerensky was driven into exile.

Before its downfall, the Kerensky government had called for the election of a constituent assembly to decide on a new form of government for Russia. Only 165 of the 730 members, chosen by suffrage of the entire people of Russia, were Bolsheviks, but they were an intimidating minority.

Prior to the assembly's formal opening in January 1918, Bolshevik ruffians murdered two prominent anti-Bolshevik deputies in their beds. Soon

after, Lenin issued a decree dissolving the assembly, which he described as a counter-revolutionary body. To the dismay of Russia's people and politicians, and to the shock of the world, the brutal and ruthless Bolsheviks began their dictatorial regime.

The violence continued with the murder of the czar and his family and the abolishment of "all property rights in the land, treasures of the earth, water, forest and fundamental natural resources." As the situation earned international attention, Bolshevism became perceived as a threat to democracy worldwide.

Many North Americans believed that if radicals were not decisively restrained, revolution would spread to their continent and everything democracy had gained would be lost. A cartoon of the day shows the terrified countries of the world watching while a shark labelled "Bolshevism" menaces their boat from just below the surface of a violent sea. There was a legitimate basis for fear. After all, Marxist philosophy exhorted the workers of the world to seize control of their governments.

The armistice began a period not so much of peace in North America as of social unrest, discord, and fear. American President Woodrow Wilson was seriously ill and confined to the White House, leaving a dangerous lack of leadership at a time of great social and political uncertainty. Many immigrants, commonly referred to as "aliens" by native North Americans, had come to Canada and the United States where they encountered suspicion and distrust, particularly those from Germany, the former enemy, and Russia. Hostility was amplified by the fact that many found jobs at a time when war veterans were unemployed. Differences in custom, culture, and political ideology were not tolerated.

The most frightening manifestation of this growing suspicion and fear was the trampling of individual rights. In the name of patriotism and preservation, principles of fair play and the due process of law were abandoned – the Red Scare had arrived in force.

To the socialist movement and its many active and vocal supporters in North America, the revolution was an inspiration. Bolshevism – renamed Communism in 1918 – capitalised on this growing support and issued a decree appropriating two million rubles for international revolutionary propaganda. In North America, members of radical socialist parties organised provocative meetings filled with fiery speeches and calls to action, striking fear into the hearts of many Americans and Canadians.

In the spirit of revolution, an epidemic of strikes spread from one side of the Atlantic to the other, garnering ample support from the Russian Communist Party. In European countries, radical socialists had tied up a number of cities with general strikes wherein workers from all unions went

out in harmony with one another in an attempt to totally paralyse a city. But such an event – similar to that previously experienced in Petrograd – had never occurred in North America.

In February 1919, about sixty thousand workers joined together in Seattle, Washington to spawn the first general strike in North America, described by Mayor Ole Hanson as a “weapon of revolution.” A plague of strikes followed. In March 1919, there were a total of 175 strikes across the United States. In April, there were 248; in May, 388; in June, 303; in July, 360; and in August, 373. And popular opinion held that Bolsheviks were to blame for them all.

American Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer and the Department of Justice launched harsh retaliatory action against all radicals. But it was not just the authorities that sought to quell the insurgents. Rather, patriots across North America wanted to protect their society and to eliminate the “troublemakers.” They formed organisations, called on government leaders, demanded tougher law enforcement and, when deemed necessary, took the law into their own hands. Reactionary mob violence and indifference to civil liberties swept the continent.

This vigilantism reached its pinnacle in the little town of Centralia, Washington on November 11, 1919. During the Armistice Day parade, a group of legionnaires clashed with the International Workers of the World (Wobblies), a radical socialist organisation. In the conflict, four legionnaires were shot to death. That night a group of patriots broke into the jail, seized and beat a Wobbly, castrated him, and hanged him from a bridge. The man’s grotesque murder was intended to be a lesson to radicals everywhere and is a vivid illustration of the rage felt by so many people during this contentious time.

Following the massacre, eleven Wobblies were put on trial for the murder of the four legionnaires. Because of the intense emotional atmosphere, the trial was moved to Montesano, forty miles from Centralia, but that made little difference. Federal troops were called to maintain order in the town during the trial. The controversial Centralia Massacre, as it has come to be known, resulted in lengthy prison terms for seven of the Wobblies. It was followed by further hysterical mob violence and brutality toward radicals in many other western cities in the United States.

A general intolerance for radical actions and thoughts reached every corner of society. In November 1919, the infamous Palmer Raids, named after the American Attorney-General, were launched across the United States, in which agents from the Department of Justice raided labour temples across the country in search of seditious literature. Tens of thousands of people were arrested, many without warrants, and thousands were deported without the

benefit of legal hearings. Innocent Americans were persecuted without having committed any offence and many were brutally beaten.

North America's second general strike, similar in character to the Seattle strike, developed in Winnipeg, Manitoba on May 15, 1919. Winnipeg, located on the Canadian prairies, was then a city of 160,000 people.

Newspapers around the world filled their pages with exaggerated stories of the Winnipeg General Strike, depicting a city in siege and streets rampant with bloodshed. And when the government made arrests, they described the strike leaders as conspirators, Bolsheviks, and revolutionaries. Was this a second attempt at Communist revolution in North America? In print, it certainly appeared true. Lurid headlines fed an insatiable public appetite for drama. The Red Scare was a mighty slingshot firing panic into an already turbulent sea and the waves would carve a destructive path throughout the western world.

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## CHAPTER TWO

The First World War was more than half over when the Canadian government enacted conscription with the Military Service Bill of June 12, 1917. Later that year, the *Wartime Measures Act* gave the government wide powers to rule by Order-in-Council and the authority to jail conscientious objectors.

In anticipation of the passage of this new and sweeping legislation, two City of Winnipeg aldermen, John Queen and Abe Heaps, organised a meeting to protest compulsory military service. They invited Fred Dixon, a member of the Manitoba legislature, to be a speaker.

The atmosphere at the meeting was explosive. Over one thousand people jammed into the Grand Theatre in downtown Winnipeg for what was for some a final opportunity to protest the impending legislation. Soldiers, many recently returned from the front, occupied the main floor of the theatre. Here and there, women were visible in the loges. Representatives for both sides of the issue were on the platform readying themselves for debate.

Thirty-six-year-old Alderman John Queen was chairman of the meeting. As business manager of the *Western Labor News*, the newspaper published by the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, he was frequently called upon to lead political meetings.