

CANADIANS IN RUSSIA

The Bolshevik Revolution

FOCUSSING ON THE ISSUE

During the First World War, Russia was an ally of Canada, Britain, and France until 1917. Then, a new government took power in Russia and withdrew from the war. Why were Canadian soldiers sent to Russia in 1918–1919?

Political Unrest

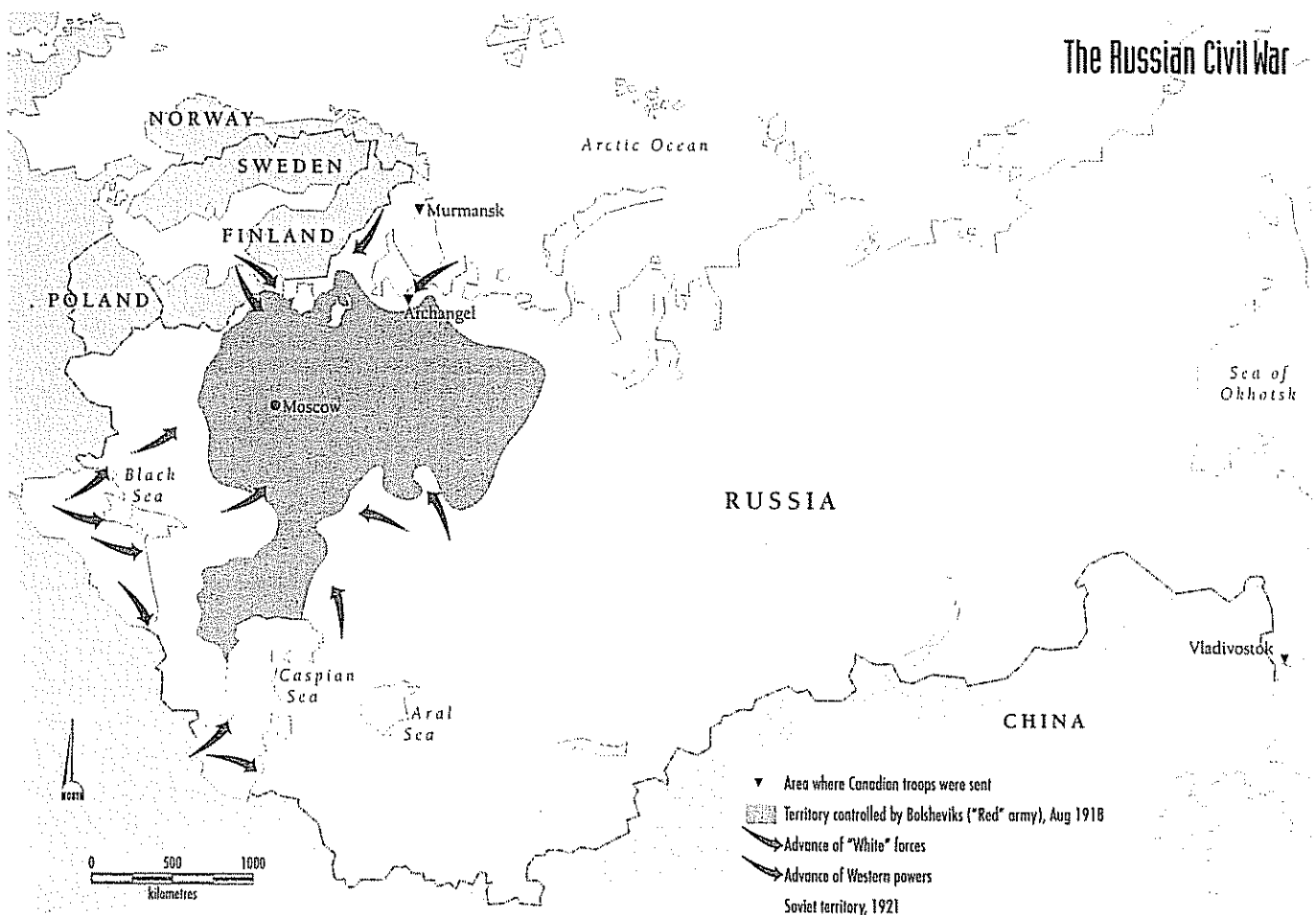
During the First World War, Russia went through a cataclysmic upheaval. The war devastated the country. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed and injured in battles with Germany. Millions of civilians were left homeless and

starving. More people died in Russia during the war than in any other country. Made desperate by the suffering, Russians turned on their political leaders.

The Russian government was a corrupt dictatorship, headed by the tsar and his family. But it was an important partner of the Allies

during the war. By keeping the Germans occupied on their eastern flank, the Russian army prevented the Germans from massing all their forces to overwhelm the Allies in western Europe.

Finally, the misery caused by the war became too much for the Russian people to bear. Early in



1917, a group of reformers seized control of the government, forcing Tsar Nicholas II from his throne in what became known as the February Revolution. The new government, led by Alexander Kerensky, introduced many reforms, but it made the fatal decision to continue the war. When the slaughter of Russian soldiers persisted, there was a second uprising known as the October Revolution. This time a group of **radical socialists**, the **Bolsheviks**, took power. Their leader, Vladimir Lenin, promised the people "peace, land, and bread" and made a separate treaty with Germany, withdrawing Russia from the war.

Intervention

The Bolsheviks hoped to bring peace to Russia so that they could carry out their plans for full-scale political and economic change. It was not to be. Their opponents rallied together, formed an army of their own, and attempted to overthrow the new government. The result was a civil war that lasted four years, pitting the so-called "White" army against the Bolshevik "Red" army.

While these events convulsed Russia, the First World War continued. The Allied powers felt

betrayed by Russia's withdrawal from the conflict. They hoped that the White army would win the civil war and bring Russia back into the war against Germany. More than that, the Allies hated the Bolshevik regime and its radical socialist policies. The Bolsheviks were calling for revolution by working people all over the world. Allied governments, including Canada, feared the influence of Bolshevik ideas in their own countries, where many labour leaders spoke out in support of the "Red" regime in Russia, as well as the disappearance of the monarchy.

In mid-1918, with the world war still raging, the Allies sent a force of soldiers, including a handful of Canadians, to Murmansk in northern Russia. Supposedly, the objective of these troops was simply to take possession of supplies the Allies had been stockpiling there before Russia pulled out of the war. However, the troops remained in northern Russia long after the war with Germany ended in November 1918. It appeared as though the Allies were there to support the White army.

At the other end of Russia, in Vladivostok, another force of Canadian soldiers arrived on a similar mission: to protect supplies that had been sent when Russia was an ally. Once again this force

stayed on after the war ended, although it did not engage in any serious fighting.

In Canada, public opinion turned against the **intervention** in Russia. There seemed to be no pressing reason for Canadian soldiers to be there. The war was over. Most Canadians felt that Canada had no business in Russia's internal conflict. Labour leaders accused the government of waging war against the Bolshevik regime. In the end, Prime Minister Robert Borden gave in to public pressure and brought the Canadian soldiers home.

Canada intervened in Russia in 1918–1919 in response to a request from Britain. The intervention began as part of the strategy of the war. It continued because some Allied leaders wanted to help the White army overthrow the Bolsheviks. In itself, it was a minor incident, but it had important long-term consequences. The Bolsheviks viewed the intervention as a conspiracy by the Allies to drive them from power. When the Bolsheviks won the civil war and secured control of the Russian government, they never forgot this interference. It played an important role in creating the tensions that existed between Russia and the West for most of the century.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Look at the map showing Canadian troops in Russia in 1918. Why do you think Canadian troops went where they did?
2. a) What was the official reason for Canadian involvement in Russia? What did many people suspect was the real reason?
b) What was the long-term impact of the intervention by Western nations in Russia?

KEYWORDS

dictatorship

tsar

radical

socialists

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intervention