

How times change: 53 years ago we fought the Red Army

TOR. STAR OCT 23 1971



SIR ROBERT BORDEN
He spoiled a prophecy

OTTAWA

In 1918 the Canadian prime minister, Sir Robert Borden, said of Russia: "Intimate relations with that rapidly developing country will be a great advantage to Canada in the future."

Then he spoiled the prophetic quality of the whole thing by continuing: "Other nations will make very vigorous and determined efforts to obtain a foothold and our interposition with a small military force would tend to bring Canada into favorable notice by the strongest element in that great community."

And with that, 53 years ago this month, Borden dispatched 5,000 soldiers of the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force across the Pacific to fight the Bolsheviks.

Erased from history

It wasn't a very long, difficult or dangerous war for Canadians. One of our soldiers took time off from shelling the "Bolos" to write that "a gentlemanly conducted campaign of this sort surpasses all other occupations for a young man of normal health and spirits." In less than a

year, the Canadian soldiers were back home and everyone simply wanted to forget about Canada's first post-revolutionary attempt to attract "favorable notice by the strongest element" in the Soviet Union.

And we did forget about it, with a thoroughness that would do credit to an early Marxist historian. Only one book has ever been written about Canada's "invasion" of Russia, by John Swettenham in 1967. As far as this generation of Canadians is concerned, it has been effectively erased from history.

The only point in mentioning it at this inappropriate time, with Premier Kosygin touring the country, is to emphasize the changes in international relations that have occurred since then.

In his opening remarks to the Soviet premier last Monday, Prime

Minister Trudeau said that there is now an extraordinary "fluidity" in world affairs. The power blocs that we have been accustomed to for the past 25 years are becoming fuzzy and wavering in outline, like cells shimmering and pulsating under the microscope in the milliseconds before they divide and multiply. Almost every day brings new contacts across ideological barriers that seemed impassable only a few years ago.

For countries of modest size and influence such as Canada, as the Prime Minister said on Monday, this fluidity presents an opportunity to diversify relations and acquire new friends.

But it is also a time of uncertainty for a country like Canada, as the Soviet government fully appreciates. It isn't only that relations with our traditional friends seem to grow

more difficult day by day. The Russian visit reminds us that we have also lost old enemies and that historically, in the days when Canadian soldiers were fighting communism in Siberia and long before, Canada was protected by its enemies as well as by its friends.

Game changing

This country has always been fortunate in its choice of enemies. When it was dominated by the French, the eventually successful enemy was an expansionist England on the way to creating a global empire. In the 18th and 19th centuries, our enemy to the south twice marched across our borders, ensuring us of the continued interest and support of Great Britain. In our own time, the menace of the Soviet Union has helped to perpetuate close relations with the United States. As long as Canadians can remember, our enemies have assured us of the interest and protection of our friends; and our present state of development indicates that we have been adept at using both.

Now the game is changing at a frightening rate and it is no real

consolation to realize that the changes are along the lines that we have piously advocated for the past 25 years. When President Nixon goes to Peking next spring, he will be following advice that we have been giving him gratuitously for some time. But in fact, despite all our exhortations at the United Nations, the old state of affairs suited us quite well. Particularly in recent years, by keeping a jump ahead of the United States in the approach to countries such as Russia, Cuba and China, we have been able to maintain a "progressive" Canadian image while gaining important economic benefits. And as long as the United States remained antagonistic to these countries, the Americans also found our friendship valuable.

It has been a secure situation for Canada, with many material benefits, but it has also stunted our development as an independent nation. Of course this has been a familiar complaint over the years. Now it appears that events beyond our control are in the process of ending or reducing these dependent bilateral relationships and forcing us to exist

on our own merits in a new world of multilateral relationships. The effects of this on our trade and economic development, our national institutions and our culture can hardly be imagined.

A new hero

If history has prepared us badly in some respects for the more independent role that is now being thrust upon us, our own internal problems over the years have given Canadians a number of useful characteristics. In particular, as many people have often said, we have learned well the arts of compromise. If the 5,000 Canadians who fought the Bolsheviks in Siberia are now unsuitable as Canadian heroes, particularly this week, there may be others we can turn to.

Might I suggest Major H. K. Newcombe? He also went to Russia in 1918 and became, through a series of events too complicated to summarize to the Soviet commander in the rice here, paymaster and field cash-ier in the Caucasus and thus, as far as is known, the only Canadian who saw active service in the Red Army during the Civil War.



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