

SEEING REDS

**The Red Scare of 1918–1919,
Canada's First War on Terror**

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PROLOGUE

The View from the Third Floor

“... the only way to deal with Bolshevism is to hit it and to hit it hard, every time it lifts its ugly head.”

—A.J. Andrews, *Citizens' Committee of 1,000 leader, July 10, 1919*

It is 2:30 on the afternoon of Saturday, June 21, 1919. Lewis Foote is crouched in a window on the third floor of a building on Main Street, north of the intersection with Portage Avenue in downtown Winnipeg. Foote, a forty-six-year-old commercial photographer who has been documenting the life of the city since he and his wife arrived to live here in 1902, has heard there is trouble brewing, and he does not want to miss it. He points his camera across Main at a crowd of people who are milling around an empty street-railway car. The men in the crowd are dressed in dark suits and wear white straw hats, felt fedoras, or soft cloth caps, the costume of the respectable working class. The women, of whom there are only a few, wear stylish hats and long skirts with hems that brush the dusty

street. Everyone seems slightly dressed up, as if they are going to a company picnic.

In fact, in a few minutes they will find themselves in the middle of the most famous riot in Canadian history.

The street-railway tram is tilted at an angle and some of its windows are smashed. The stronger men in the crowd have their hands pressed up against the tram, which they are rocking back and forth, trying to push it over onto its side. They are part of a larger crowd of 5–6,000 marchers, mainly returned veterans of the Great War and their supporters, who are proceeding along Main Street to the Royal Alexandra Hotel where they hope to meet with the federal Minister of Labour, Gideon Robertson, who has come out from Ottawa to try to resolve the crisis. It is day thirty-six of the Winnipeg General Strike, and 30,000 workers are off the job, bringing business in the city to a halt.

It is not by accident that marchers have targeted the street railway. Streetcar service has been a bone of contention since the strike began. Transit workers joined the work stoppage back in May and the trolleys had remained in their barns since that time. But three days ago, management rounded up enough railway men who were willing to defy the strike to resume limited service. The angry veterans want to send a message that the strike will not so easily be broken. When they cannot knock the car off the tracks, they smash the windows and set it on fire in frustration.

Snap. Lewis Foote takes his picture. And almost as if it was his fault, all hell breaks loose. Suddenly the clatter of horses' hooves can be heard. "Here come the bloody soldiers," someone shouts as a troop of red-coated Mounted Police on horseback, armed with clubs, bursts from Portage Avenue onto Main and trots briskly north into the crowd. Defiant marchers pelt the horsemen with rocks,

bricks, bottles—whatever they can find lying on the pavement. The Mounties wheel and come back down Main past City Hall, using their truncheons to drive protestors from the street back onto the sidewalks. Mayor Charles Gray, who has been watching from the roof of City Hall and who has already banned all public parades, descends to the front steps to read the Riot Act ordering the crowd to disperse. At almost this precise moment, gunfire breaks out. A police horse has fallen in the street, taking down its rider, who is being beaten by one of the marchers. The officer in command of the mounted force has ordered his men to shoot into the crowd.

Witnesses report hearing three volleys, one of which is aimed at the people surrounding the streetcar. A tinsmith named Mike Sokolowski dies instantly. He is "shot through the heart while heaving a brick at a policeman," according to Toronto's *Globe* newspaper. (Other sources say the bullet struck him in the head.) Others fall wounded to the ground; one of them, Steve Schezerbanowes, will die from gangrene poisoning. Up in his third-floor perch, still taking photographs, Lewis Foote comes under fire. "Someone was shooting at me from across the street..." he later claims. "Three bullets were fired—one went through the window above my head and the other two struck the building."¹ Foote presumes he is being fired on by a striker, but it is only the police who possess guns that afternoon.

Later generations come to know June 21, 1919 as "Bloody Saturday." (The phrase is thought to have been coined by Fred Dixon, one of the strike's martyrs, who used it to headline his account of the events in the workers' own newspaper, the *Strike Bulletin*. Perhaps Dixon meant it to be a reference to the "Bloody Sunday" of January 1905, when the army of Tsar Nicholas II fired on unarmed demonstrators in Leningrad, killing hundreds of them.) People flee

in a panic to get away from the gunfire, only to run into cordons of special police wearing white armbands and wielding clubs. These “specials” have replaced members of the regular police force who have been fired for failing to sign loyalty oaths. Brawls break out along Main and up the adjacent streets and alleyways. During the melee, the “specials” arrest as many protestors as they can. At the same time, the militia arrives on horse and in motorized transport armed with machine guns and fan out across the downtown, bayonets fixed to their rifles, making further arrests. Authorities take a total of ninety-four people into custody. The armed occupation of the largest city in western Canada lasts long into the night.

Five days later, the Winnipeg General Strike ends.

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“The boil broke in Winnipeg on Saturday,” Senator George Foster wrote in his diary when he heard about the violence. “Some blood was shed but law and order was maintained and probably the issue as to that point was settled for all Canada. It has been an anxious and serious time and is not yet all over.”² Lewis Foote’s photograph, and others he took showing the Mounted Police charging up and down Main Street, captures the moment when, in Foster’s phrase, “the boil broke,” when the violence that had been bubbling just below the surface not only in Winnipeg but in the whole of Canada for the past year burst into the open.

In retrospect it is not surprising that Winnipeg should have been at the eye of the storm. The “Gateway to the West,” home to so many immigrants from Britain and Eastern Europe, was awash with free-thinkers and radical ideas. Theories of social change infused the air like the aroma of spring flowers. Single-taxers, phren-

ologists, social democrats, atheists, feminists, social gospellers, table bumpers, cooperators, syndicalists, Marxists, impossibilists, pacifists, and theosophists: Winnipeg was a potent brew of intoxicating notions about the true nature of mankind and society. If radicalism was going to confront authority anywhere in Canada, it was logical that it be in Winnipeg.

At the same time, the city was not unique. From the coal mines of Cape Breton to the logging camps of Vancouver Island, from the factory floor to the company boardroom, from the House of Commons in Ottawa to the neighbourhood labour hall, Canadians were debating the future. The Great War, though just ended, had already been a transformative event, setting in motion changes that looked to be overturning the old, familiar society. One historian of the period has written that “1919 represented the greatest opportunity for significant social change ever to occur in Canada.”³ Many people who lived through the tumultuous period agreed with Stephen Leacock when he warned that “this is a time such as there never was before.”⁴

Where Canadians disagreed was in the value of that change and who was going to control it. Were the traditional elites going to preserve their positions of influence and authority in the new Canada? Or was an insurgent class of socialist labour leaders and social activists going to transform the country in a radical new image? The larger issue that Senator Foster thought was being settled in Winnipeg was simply this: who would rule Canada? Was it going to be the respectable forces of established authority or the angry voices stirring from below demanding a new social order?