

ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK

In early April 1935 hundreds of dissatisfied, disillusioned men walked out of federally run relief camps throughout British Columbia and descended on Vancouver in a bold attempt to reverse their dead-end lives and bring about some kind of "work for wages" program. No one wanted to deal with the men, least of all Conservative prime minister R. B. Bennett, who believed that the Communist Party of Canada had orchestrated the protest. As the stalemate dragged on week after numbing week, the men decided to go to Ottawa and lay their grievances directly before the government.

An estimated 1,000 On-to-Ottawa trekkers left Vancouver by freight train in early June 1935. No attempt was made to stop them. Police and government authorities confidently assumed that the resolve of the workers on relief would melt away like the snow in the interior mountains. But as the freight train the men were riding gained momentum as it rumbled down the Albertan foothills into the Prairies, so too did the trek. The audacity of the men stirred the imagination of those who had suffered through five terrible years of drought and depressed prices. Here were hundreds of young men headed to Ottawa to tell the country's political leaders that they were not doing enough to help ease the hardship and deprivation of western Canada. The Bennett government, on the other hand, saw only an army of single, homeless, unemployed men who had nothing to lose and might to do anything.

As the trek continued east from Calgary, the Canadian government hurriedly made plans to bring it to an end. Not only had the ranks of the trekkers swollen to 1,500 because of a number of new recruits from Alberta, but hundreds more were expected to join in Winnipeg. The federal government consequently announced that the trek would be stopped at Regina, on the grounds that it was an unlawful movement.

The On-to-Ottawa Trek, numbering an estimated 2,000 men, reached Regina on June 14. Over the next two weeks, the two sides tried unsuccessfully to reach some kind of agreement; a special meeting between the trek leaders and the prime minister, for example, quickly degenerated into a shouting match. With no way out of Regina, the trekkers decided at the end of June to return to the west coast. But Ottawa insisted that the group had to disband on federal terms—namely, go to a nearby hurriedly erected holding facility where the men would be processed. The trek leadership balked at this proposal—they wanted nothing to do with a "concentration camp"—and turned to Jimmy Gardiner's provincial government for assistance on the afternoon of July 1.

Later that evening, while the provincial cabinet met to discuss the trek request, the North-West Mounted Police, with the support of the Regina city police, decided to execute warrants for the trek leaders at a public rally at Market Square. The mounted police could easily have made the arrests at any time during the day, but instead, with clubs and tear gas at the ready, chose to pluck the men from a peaceful fundraising meeting. The raid quickly degenerated into a pitched battle between the police and trekkers and citizens, which spilled over into the streets of downtown Regina. Order was not restored until the early hours of the next day, and only after the police had fired directly into crowds of rioters. The toll was one dead, a good number injured, more than 100 arrested, and thousands of dollars in damage.

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, the Saskatchewan government launched a public inquiry. Three hundred and fifty-nine witnesses provided fifty-three volumes of

testimony and one inescapable conclusion—the police had provoked the violence by trying to arrest the trek leaders at a public rally. But in their two-volume report, the commissioners assigned the blame for the riot to the trekkers, while the police were completely exonerated.

The On-to-Ottawa Trek was a testament to how the Canadian government had so miserably failed the country's single, homeless, unemployed population during the Great Depression. It also underscored how the Canadian government was prepared to use force in the interests of "peace, order, and good government."

Questions:

- 1) Who started the strike that would lead to the On-to-Ottawa Trek and who did the government blame all this on?
- 2) Why did they decide to take their complaints to Ottawa and why didn't authorities attempt to stop them initially?
- 3) Explain what finally caused the government to take action and what justification did they use?
- 4) Explain the events that led up to the riot in Market Square. What was the outcome of this riot?
- 5) Explain how an event such as the On-to-Ottawa trek and Market Square Riot would lead to Bennet losing reelection in 1935.

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