

Mons

By [Guillaume Blondeau](#)

Summary

The city of Mons took on great symbolic importance during the Great War. In both August 1914 and November 1918, the region was the scene of clashes between Commonwealth troops and German soldiers. Mons, the capital of the province of Hainaut, endured occupation for over four years.

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The city of Mons took on great symbolic importance during the Great War. The capital of the province of Hainaut, Mons had about 27,500 inhabitants at the beginning of the war. In 1914, Mons was an administrative center that was home to a great number of legal and judicial authorities. Only a few industries had been developed in the city in contrast to the neighboring region of Borinage that had experienced major economic development, primarily around the extraction of coal. Already a cultural and educational center, the city of Mons also came to be a hub of the coal trade. In August 1914 and November 1918, the region was the scene of clashes between Commonwealth troops and German soldiers. In total, Mons was under [occupation](#) for over four years.

The Battle of Mons: 23 August 1914

The arrival of German troops in [Belgium](#) on the morning of 4 August 1914, forced [Great Britain](#) to join the war. The 70,000 professional soldiers of the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF) were mobilised. Many of them had never experienced the harsh reality of fighting. Although reservists accounted for almost half the men in some units, the British army, which had undergone reform at the turn of the century was, nonetheless, well trained and equipped. Under the agreements concluded between the French and British armed forces, the BEF was to take up a position on the left flank of the French. On 21 August, the British soldiers took up their position on the line along the Mons-Condé canal and the Mons-

Beaumont road. On that day, the British suffered their first casualty: Private [John Parr \(1897-1914\)](#) of the 4th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment. But it was on 23 August, starting at 8:00 in the morning, that the “Battle of Mons” took place. Entrenched behind the insubstantial barrier of the canal, the British troops clashed, for the first time, with 160,000 German soldiers under the command of [Alexander von Kluck \(1846-1934\)](#). The fighting, which had started in Obourg and Nimy, spread west along the entire canal. After heavy fighting, Field Marshal [John French \(1852-1925\)](#), who led the BEF, ordered a retreat to prevent his troops from being surrounded, while, to the east, the French retreated from Charleroi. After two days of fighting (23 and 24 August), the British and German forces had sustained almost equal [losses](#) (according to the most reliable figures: 4,200 for the BEF, versus around 4,900 for the Germans). “The Great Retreat” to the River [Marne](#) lasted twelve days, during which the BEF, driven back by the advancing German troops, covered over 150 miles.

The Legend of the Angels of Mons

On 29 September, the British author [Arthur Machen \(1863-1947\)](#) published a fictional article in the *London Evening News* reporting that during a battle against German soldiers, an English soldier called upon Saint George. With the assistance of archers from the Battle of Agincourt, the British army’s patron saint is said to have put the German army to flight. The story was seized upon by occultists and spiritualists seeking to prove that there had been supernatural intervention during the Battle of Mons. Machen insisted that his story was fictional, but the rumour, which captured the imagination of religious communities and was circulated by the mainstream [press](#), quickly spread through the United Kingdom, then along the [front](#). During the months that followed, numerous articles and [books](#) reported the testimonies of soldiers who participated in the retreat at Mons. The legend took on many forms and inspired many artists.

Occupied Mons

Having had its fortifications dismantled in 1861, Mons was, at the start of the conflict, still a garrison city. When Belgian troops were mobilised, starting on 31 July 1914, all the soldiers in the city left. From 23 August 1914, the Mons barracks were occupied by German troops. The liberal local councillors remained in their posts. They tried to strike a balance between cooperation (by relaying orders of the occupant), and the protection of citizens’ interests throughout the conflict. As an intersection of major [road and rail routes](#), the city was the scene of intense German activity. There were many movements of troops, while the occupying forces requisitioned all administrative buildings. As a result of this unique strategic position, Mons became an important hub in the Carlot-Louis espionage network, as well as

[Edith Cavell's \(1865-1915\)](#) escape network. The people of Mons suffered the same fate as many civilians in occupied Belgium, such as requisitions, difficulties obtaining supplies and restricted freedoms. The [labor deportations](#) hit the male population particularly hard from the end of 1916. About nine percent of the population of Mons was forced to work in [Germany](#) or near the front during the conflict. Initially under the administration of the General Government, the region was incorporated into the [Etappengebiet](#) on 1 January 1917. In the same year, [Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria \(1869-1955\)](#), commander of the German army's Northern Group, and his HQ took up residence in Mons, leading to repeated Allied bombing raids. It was also in Mons that, in November, the German general staff drew up its strategy for 1918. In September and October 1918, the Mons region saw a massive influx of [French refugees](#) (especially from Douai) as a result of the front shifting northwards.

Liberation on 11 November 1918

On 11 November, the city was liberated by the Canadian Expeditionary Force under the command of Lieutenant General [Arthur Currie \(1875-1933\)](#). The Canadian [infantry](#) were accompanied by the 5th Regiment of Irish Lancers. The Irish Lancers had already been in Mons for the battle of August 1914. At 10:58, the Canadian soldier [George Lawrence Price \(1892-1918\)](#) was killed. He is thought to have been the last Commonwealth soldier to be killed during the Great War.

Guillaume Blondeau, Mons Memorial Museum

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External Links

- [Livesay, John Frederick Bligh: Canada's hundred days: with the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons, Aug. 8-Nov. 11, 1918, Toronto 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Mons, 1926 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)

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