

Warfare 1914-1918 (Canada)

By [Dean F. Oliver](#)

Summary

Canada's large-scale contribution to the Great War generated wartime pride and post-war nationalism. The scale of effort and its resulting costs also bred deep social cleavages that marked the country for generations to come. The army, at first consisting mostly of British-born recent immigrants, grew into a massive national endeavour. Well-led by British and Canadian officers, it played a disproportionate role in achieving victory. The architecture of memory in Canada is still dominated by the First World War, from Ottawa's Peace Tower and National War Memorial to smaller community cairns and monuments.

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Introduction

Canadians are still [writing the history](#) of their First World War. Little of the scholarship is linked laterally, in horizontal detail, or in metanarratives that treat the conflict holistically. The quality of research and originality is improving. The extent to which recent scholarship clarifies broad subjects is less certain. A brilliant, intricate mosaic, the history of [Canada's](#) First World War is still best seen as a tableau of largely unassembled pieces.

This article is a modest attempt to integrate key themes and outcomes, home front and battle front that derive from extant and ground-breaking scholarship. It addresses canonical topics such as the competence of the Canadian Corps while posing sharper questions about politics and generalship, social cohesion and economic rupture, many of them spanning civilian and military topics and weaving together varying source materials.

The Eve of War

Canadians followed closely the worsening news from Europe in the summer of 1914, but few predicted the resulting conflict. Despite the prevalence, especially in English Canada, of a martial public culture of boys' adventure books, imperial music, and patriotic imagery, Canada was unprepared when [Britain](#) declared war on 4 August and automatically brought Canada into the conflict.

The country's small population of 8 million had a professional military of just a few thousand, a force dismissed with characteristic bombast by the minister of militia and defence, [Samuel Hughes \(1853-1921\)](#), in 1913 as "bar-room loafers." There was a poorly funded, unevenly trained, but competent militia of around 77,000. Without [conscription](#), there was no large body of citizens with military experience to call to service upon mobilization. Two obsolete warships, a few hundred sailors, no air force, and little heavy industry completed the picture. Two small [submarines](#), secretly purchased by the British Columbia government from a Seattle builder after the original client, Chile, proved unable to pay, arrived at Esquimalt on 5 August and were commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy two days later, doubling the size of the fleet.

There was no domestic consensus on [imperial politics](#). Most Canadians of British ancestry, some 55.5 percent of the population according to the 1911 census, supported the crown. Those of French ancestry, just less than 28 percent of the population and the second largest group by far, were more critical, often ready to defend Canada and its interests at home but not Britain's territories and interests abroad. Immigrant groups with ties to Central Europe, including the 6 percent of the population that was German, had appreciably different views of the [July crisis](#). Many European immigrants, in fact, were still reservists in their home countries and liable to military recall in the event of war.

The historic peace [churches](#) opposed any conflict, imperial or otherwise, while in [rural areas](#) such as western Canada, farming communities that might have supported war could not envisage compulsory service, which would strip them of badly needed labour.

There was also a nasty, complex debate over pre-war naval policy, occasioned by Britain's [naval race](#) with [Germany](#) and the way in which this impacted, and was impacted by, London's continuing responsibility for the defence of Canada's coasts. The question pitted economy-minded Liberals against pro-British Conservatives. French-Canadian autonomists in the province of Quebec, unconvinced of the "*péril Allemand*," opposed most forms of collaboration with the Royal Navy, though financial contributions were more palatable than Canadian ships and Canadian men. They also opposed any form of commitment that might increase the likelihood of Canadians fighting on land in the [empire's](#) wars or encourage the

introduction of compulsory service.

The Liberals' electoral defeat in 1911 came one year after the party's compromise naval bill had created a small national navy on call to London in an emergency. Liberal defeat was due in part to French Canadian dissatisfaction at the extent to which the navy's existence now guaranteed Canadian involvement in imperial struggles. It was also due to the criticism of Anglophile loyalists who insisted that Canada should have done far more than cobble together a "tin-pot navy" in the aftermath of the Dreadnought Crisis and Britain's request to the [dominions for financial assistance](#).

The Conservative counter-effort, led by [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#), introduced in December 1912, was to follow the lead of [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) in offering Britain \$35 million towards the construction of [dreadnoughts](#). The bill passed the House of Commons after the government's extraordinary use of closure to end an opposition filibuster, but died in the Liberal-dominated Senate in 1913.

Mobilization and the First Contingent

In the heady, terrifying days of August 1914, much of this did not matter. As a British colony, the Dominion of Canada did not control its own foreign policy, and Britain's declaration of war meant that Canada too was involved. [Newfoundland](#), or what is now the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, with its population of just under 250,000 was also a separate imperial entity in 1914 and, like Canada, automatically at war.

What each dominion could and did control was the size and nature of its wartime contingents, an exercise of colonial sovereignty that would grow into a substantial inconvenience for authorities in London and at General Headquarters in [France](#). Canada offered shipments of grain, cheese, horses, and other non-military items immediately in early August, but promised a division's worth of [infantry](#), with plans soon announced to raise a second.

At first, recruitment worked like a well-oiled machine. Celebrations, parades, and ad hoc programs of imperial support greeted the outbreak of hostilities across the country. [Newspapers](#) and civic groups outdid one another in public expressions of sympathy for "little [Belgium](#)" and support for London and the other allies, including [Serbia](#). Fears and doubts were muted, if not entirely absent. The 5 August 1914 cover of *The Grain Growers' Guide*, a popular farming journal published in Manitoba, was unusual in querying, in a full front-page item, "The Demon of War," asking readers "Is Canada to be forced blindly and needlessly into this horrible struggle?"

With great [enthusiasm](#) and amidst much confusion, Canadians, especially those born in and recently emigrated from the British Isles, rushed to enlist. Many, and a majority in some battalions, had previous military experience. This compensated somewhat for their speedy assembly, inadequate equipment, and the haphazardness of the early-war training establishment. The [pre-war mobilization plan](#), prepared by the British staff officer [Willoughby Gwatkin \(1859-1925\)](#), chief of the general staff since 1913, was promptly ignored by the excited and energetic Hughes. Calling volunteers to a hastily constructed camp in Valcartier, Quebec, an effort characterized by “improvisation, urgency, and no small degree of melodrama,”¹ Hughes nevertheless succeeded in organizing a 30,000-strong first contingent that sailed to England in a massive armada, protected by British warships, in early fall.

An additional battalion, the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, sailed in the same convoy. Privately raised by [Hamilton Gault \(1882-1958\)](#), a Montreal entrepreneur and veteran of the South African War, the force was recruited in Ottawa, largely from former British professional soldiers, in a mere three weeks and embarked before the end of August. The Patricias were in France before Christmas and on the frontlines, as part of a British brigade, on the night of 6-7 January 1915. In December, the battalion joined the newly formed Canadian Corps.

A Newfoundland volunteer contingent also joined the Canadians on the fall crossing. The so-called “First Five Hundred” of the [Newfoundland Regiment](#), on board the passenger liner and sealing vessel “SS Florizel,” linked up with the Canadians off the Avalon Peninsula in early October. The Newfoundland Regiment did not fight with the Canadians, but as part of a British division throughout the war. It saw action during the ill-fated [Gallipoli campaign](#) against [Turkey](#) and, from 1916, served on the [Western Front](#).

The Canadian Corps

In Canada as elsewhere, the enormity of the war soon affected popular attitudes and [governmental](#) commitments. Overseas, a single division grew into a full corps of four infantry divisions, its military competence growing steadily as the war progressed.

The 1st Division arrived in France in February 1915 to commence a gradual introduction to the trenches under British tutelage. Its first large [battle at Ypres](#), Belgium, in April was a confused, chaotic affair. The division performed well in what became a skilled fighting retreat which saw the first German use of [chlorine gas](#) on the Western Front. The Division sustained 6,000 [casualties](#), including more than 2,000 killed.

There was no comparable event in Canadian history. The entire South African War had

resulted in 270 deaths total, including those from disease. Ypres was followed in May by Festubert with another 2,500 casualties. The following April, there was a costly defeat for the newly arrived 2nd Division at the St. Eloi Craters (1,400 casualties), and in June a grim draw at Mount Sorrel, with another 8,000 killed, wounded, or missing. The “wastage” of trench warfare, illness, and training accidents sent a steady stream of wounded and ill to Britain and discharged men, many of them badly [disabled](#), to Canada.

The country’s military contributions expanded dramatically through the first two years of conflict, spurred by raucous public support for Britain and by the personal commitments of Borden and key members of the Cabinet to a substantial battlefield contribution. There were 59,000 enlistments in 1914, 159,000 in 1915, and 177,000 in 1916, all of them voluntary. A third infantry division was created in late 1915 and a fourth the following spring.

The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), essentially Canada’s army overseas, had as its combat arm from September 1915 the Canadian Corps. Smaller numbers of personnel served with the navy or British forces, notably the Royal Flying Corps or Royal Naval Air Service, with several Canadians elevated to heroic status, including air aces [William “Billy” Bishop \(1894-1956\)](#), [Raymond Collishaw \(1893-1976\)](#), and [William Barker \(1894-1930\)](#). Other Canadians served in units outside the Corps, such as the Canadian Cavalry Brigade or the forestry corps. While many thousands of Canadians in uniform remained in North America, Canada’s First World War experience became largely synonymous with that of the Corps or, more broadly, with the CEF itself. By the war’s end, of 620,000 enlisted Canadians, 425,000 had been sent overseas.

The decision to create a full corps, as opposed to providing individual divisions to higher British formations, entailed additional manpower challenges and the maintenance of a substantial training and support echelon in Britain. The order of battle included [cavalry](#) regiments, heavy [artillery](#) batteries, a [machine gun](#) corps, a service corps, additional medical units and labour companies, transport units, several battalions of railway troops, cyclists, signalers, foresters, and assorted training schools on the continent and in the United Kingdom. Growing casualties led army planners to comb continually through support formations for frontline, mostly infantry, recruits to replace the fallen.

The Corps came to assume a sovereign status in addition to its role as a mere military formation. Reflecting not only Canadian pride in arms, it also embodied a growing sense of [national](#) identity, perhaps even unity, born of the maelstrom of conflict. This sense was very real, to which numerous diaries, [letters](#), and contemporary impressions attest. But it can be, and has ever since been, overstated.

Throughout the war, the Canadian Corps fought within a British field army and imitated its corps system. British generals, [Edwin Alfred Hervey Alderson \(1859-1927\)](#) to May 1916 and [Julian Byng \(1862-1935\)](#) to June 1917, commanded it, upon which a Canadian, [Arthur Currie \(1875-1933\)](#), assumed the reins. Many of its senior officers and staff planners were also British, while British artillery, [aircraft](#), intelligence services, [tanks](#), and other functions worked closely with the Canadians in every battle. As a recent historian has noted, the Corps' key planners at Vimy Ridge, perhaps its most famous battle, included three future British field marshals and chiefs of the Imperial General Staff, [Alan Brooke \(1883-1963\)](#), [John Dill \(1881-1944\)](#), and [Edmund Ironside \(1880-1959\)](#), while seven of the nine heavy artillery groups that supported the Canadian effort there were Royal Artillery.² The Corps grew into an elite striking formation and one increasingly Canadian in its senior ranks, working culture, and corporate identity. However, it emerged from and developed alongside an imperial structure equally busy attempting to learn the lessons of trench warfare in the machine age.

By the later stages of the [Somme campaign](#) in mid-1916, the Canadian Corps included four infantry divisions, with supporting artillery, engineers, and other services. All four fought separately for several weeks at Flers-Courcelette and along the Ancre River heights, suffering a combined loss of more than 24,000. At Vimy Ridge the following April, the four divisions fought together for the first time in an epic, if indecisive, four-day victory that cost 10,600 casualties. Led by Byng, a fact often fudged in present-day anniversary celebrations or Remembrance Day broadcasts, many participants saw Vimy as a turning point in the development of modern Canada, with regiments from coast to coast seizing German positions that had resisted British and French attacks in previous offensives.

Currie and the Politics of War

A pre-war militia gunner, teacher, and real estate investor, Currie, who assumed command in June 1917, would be the Corps' first, last, and only Canadian commander. Byng, his predecessor, had proven a thoughtful, creative commander who instilled an ethic of learning and careful preparation in his command team. Byng was personable, charming, and sufficiently popular that Canadian troops often referred to themselves as the "Byng Boys." Currie, previously one of Byng's division commanders and, before that, a brigadier in Alderson's 1st Division, was a more than able replacement.

A corpulent and unmilitary looking figure, Currie proved a gifted planner, tactician, and logistical organizer. His thorough orchestration of battle, whether "bite and hold" tactics or set-piece attacks on deep defensive positions, was married to a deep faith in the necessity of soldiers at every level understanding the battle plan and their own role in it throughout the action. He understood early on the possibilities of scientific gunnery, counter-battery fire, all-

arms cooperation, battlefield engineering, aircraft, tanks, and other innovations, and was both methodical and flexible in battle, a rare combination.

Uncharismatic, little loved by his men, and subject to the most untimely and awful verbal gaffs, Currie was nevertheless extremely conscious of not wasting lives on pointless operations. Close study of the combat experiences of the British, French, and Germans had convinced him that detailed preparations, creative use of artillery, and close attention to small unit firepower and forward movement could combine to overcome in-depth defensive systems.

Because such planning took time and consumed resources, he was sometimes at odds with his superiors regarding what could and could not be done on the offensive. At Passchendaele in late 1917, he famously predicted 16,000 casualties in order to seize the ridge and a symbolic victory for an embattled [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#), commanding imperial forces in France and Belgium. The Corps succeeded, mechanically advancing in a succession of small, well-supported attacks, but suffering 15,650 casualties in the process.

Currie could fight from within his own trenches, and won a brilliant defensive battle on Hill 70, high ground near Lens, which the Corps seized in August 1917 and then held against more than twenty German counterattacks. But Currie was at his best on the offensive. At peak strength, during 1918's climactic [Hundred Days](#), the Corps under Currie was more than 100,000-strong. One account pronounced it "the shock army of the British Empire."³ Its succession of breakthrough battles in late 1918 at [Amiens](#), the Drocourt-Quéant Line, the Canal du Nord, and the Hindenburg Line were models of late war effectiveness. It also embodied the costliness of [modern war](#) with Canada's highest rate of loss of any period of the conflict. The Corps' successes during the Hundred Days remain Canada's greatest feat of arms in any conflict.

Currie could be a frustrating subordinate, defending what he believed to be the best interests of the Corps against imperial authorities or meddling Canadian politicians, including Sam Hughes, the minister who had initially selected him as a brigade commander. He resisted British advice on a semi-regular basis, and sometimes deliberately played the national card by elevating discussions to political channels. He refused in early 1918 to reduce the number of battalions in Canadian divisions when British formations, in response to a reinforcement crisis, had done so. He argued that it would reduce the Corps' combat effectiveness to no appreciable gain save the creation of more billets for unworthy political officers.

In the war's latter months, this made the Corps essentially a small army in its own right, both numerically and operationally more powerful than imperial equivalents and with sufficient

manpower depth that units could fight and be rotated for longer periods of intense fighting than British formations. Canadian divisions in late 1918 had up to 50 percent more [riflemen](#) than their imperial counterparts, plus additional artillery and machine guns, and hundreds of extra engineers.

The War at Home and Conscription

The growing size of the military, the complexity of wartime demands on home front labour, and incessant overseas casualties challenged Canada's administrative and organizational capacity and had a severe impact on domestic politics.

A peacetime pre-war federal budget of \$200 million based mainly on tariff revenues grew into a sprawling, loosely organized network based on taxation, war loans, and directed economic and social efforts. This included those of the Imperial Munitions Board, created in late 1915 under Toronto industrialist [Joseph Wesley Flavelle \(1858-1939\)](#). By late 1918, Flavelle's factories were producing \$2 million per day in goods and one-third of Britain's shells, a stunning industrial transformation. Inflation nevertheless outpaced wages, creating domestic discontent, especially in the ranks of urban labourers who saw little equality of sacrifice between labour and capital. There were urban-rural splits as well. While wartime work paid better wages, which contributed to a shortage of farm labour, the rising cost of [foodstuffs](#) engendered fierce criticism of agricultural opportunists. Because rural Canadians were perceived as not enlisting in the same numbers as those from the [cities](#), economic disputes were flecked with charges of disloyalty.

Thousands of [women](#), many of them married, joined the paid labour force to do the work of absent men. The return of peace would see the return of pre-war attitudes towards working women, and the return of most to pre-war domestic life and working pursuits, but by then many women had also received the vote. Initially a callous bid for the support of soldiers' female relatives for compulsory service during the 1917 federal election, the federal's government's move to enfranchise the wives, [widows](#), mothers and sister's of soldiers serving overseas nevertheless presaged [women's suffrage](#) generally, a decisive step towards political equality for the sexes.

Recruitment flagged in 1917 to 64,000 men, little more than one-third that of the previous year. Compulsory service for men of military age was introduced that year. After two years of staggering [losses](#), Canada's allies seemed no closer to victory. English-Canadian opinion rounded on French Quebecers for not "doing their bit", but the Canadian-born, regardless of language or region, lagged the British-born in recruiting numbers through most of the war. Nearly half the British-born men of military age resident in Canada in August 1914 had enlisted by the armistice, including two-thirds of the more than 30,000 men in the First

Contingent. Canadian-born men, who were 77 percent of the eligible recruiting pool, enlisted at the rate of just over 11 percent.⁴ By November 1918, the Canadian-born were a bare majority, 51.4 percent of enlistments, a number that included those conscripted under the Military Service Act in the war's final year.

The number of [French-Canadian recruits](#), especially French speakers, remained low throughout the war. In part a reflection of past governance and majority British rule, it also reflected incoherent wartime planning, gross political invective against francophones, and broad cultural insensitivity to the French in Canada. Young men in Nova Scotia or Alberta were often encouraged by family, friends, church, and local authorities to enlist; young men in Quebec were often encouraged not to. Of the CEF's forty-eight frontline infantry battalions, only one, the 22nd Regiment (or "VanDoos" in anglicized pronunciation), was French-speaking. While recruitment statistics are unreliable for certain periods of the war, perhaps 5 percent of Quebec males of military age served in uniform, including English speakers, compared to 14 percent or more in Ontario and the Western provinces.

Having sacrificed domestic unity in order to maintain combat power overseas, the Union government raised nearly 100,000 conscripts, a quarter of whom were with the CEF in France by late 1918. Enlistment figures for 1918 were 156,441, up from 64,000 the previous year. The Corps suffered 46,000 casualties in the last three months of the war, but conscripts helped maintain its fighting strength until the bitter end.

Conclusion

The Canadian Corps, positioned elsewhere in the line, avoided the worst blows of the [German spring offensives](#) in 1918. Largely intact, well-led, and used repeatedly in an offensive role during the Hundred Days, it proved vital to the final defeat of German arms on the Western Front. The cost was unprecedented for Canada: including Newfoundland and Labrador, which joined Canada in 1949, some 69,000 dead and more than 176,000 wounded.

The material and financial costs and dislocations of the war for Canada were staggering, despite wartime full employment. Rampant inflation, [workplace militancy](#), regional disunity, and French-English [tensions](#) were acute and cast long shadows. The war witnessed government intrusion into the lives of Canadians, from [censorship](#) to the [internment](#) of those deemed disloyal from "enemy" countries. The fortunes of Borden's Conservative party, the architects of Union government and conscription, were eviscerated in Quebec for a generation to come. Western political mobilization, born in part of farmer discontent with conscription, became a potent force. Income tax, introduced as a temporary wartime measure, remains, with far greater fiscal purchase, a century later.

Canada's Liberal government entered the Second World War in 1939 with its First World War predecessors in mind. [William Lyon Mackenzie King \(1874-1950\)](#) had been an anti-conscription Member of Parliament who refused to abandon his chief, the aging Sir [Wilfrid Laurier \(1841-1919\)](#), in the vicious, racially tinged politics of 1917. Unemployment insurance, a robust charter for returning veterans, the rudiments of [social welfare](#), and a gradual, solicitous approach to the incendiary subject of conscription were among the hallmarks of King's time in office in the turbulent 1940s. King and his party learned valuable lessons from this experience for the Second World War.

The First World War both divided and united Canada. Grief at the unprecedented loss was accompanied by satisfaction in the war's victory and the increased autonomy Canada had apparently earned within the British Empire. Canada signed the [Treaty of Versailles](#) in 1919 and took its seat in the new [League of Nations](#). It was a country, no longer a colony, a status confirmed in the Statute of Westminster in 1931.

The cultural criticism of the war by a handful of soldier-poets was tempered, indeed overwhelmed, by a mass of [literature](#), popular entertainment, and [commemoration](#) that situated the struggle in a broader narrative of nationalism, empire, and accomplishment. A massive monument to Canadian service and those without known graves in France was unveiled at Vimy Ridge, France, in July 1936. Every town and village sprouted its own cenotaph, commemoratively named school, and streets named for generals, heroes, and battles. In Ottawa, a national war memorial was completed in May 1939, less than four months before the outbreak of another world war.

Dean F. Oliver, Canadian Museum of History

Notes

1. Iarocci, Andrew: Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915, Toronto 2008, p. 17. ↑
2. Granatstein, J.L.: The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918, Don Mills 2014, pp. xii-xiii. ↑
3. Schreiber, Shane B.: Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War, Westport 1997. ↑
4. Granatstein, The Greatest Victory 2014, p. 49. ↑

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External Links

- [Alberta & the Great War, from the Provincial Archives of Alberta \(Flickr\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Canada and the First World War \(Canadian War Museum\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
- [Canada & The South African War, 1899-1902 \(Canadian War Museum\) \(Article\)](#)
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