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# Canada

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**The Dominion of Canada automatically went to war in August 1914 when Britain did. The military effort developed in a helter-skelter manner, casualties were heavy in early battles, and results meager. But the Canadians, eventually a corps of four powerful divisions, played major roles on the battlefield from 1916 onwards and a vital part in the last Hundred Days in 1918. At home, industry and agriculture boomed, but linguistic and regional divisions split the country, not least over conscription. By the Armistice, Canada had suffered heavy losses at the front and was bitterly divided at home.**

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## Introduction

There is a substantial Canadian literature on the Great War, ranging from very competent official histories to soldiers' memoirs, and countless scholarly studies that, a century after the war, touch on

virtually every aspect of the conflict as it affected Canada. This survey looks briefly at Canada's pre-war economy, its military and political events, and the wartime mobilization. The survey then traces the Canadian role overseas, the political and linguistic strife at home culminating in the struggle over conscription, and the postwar effects of the long, costly war.

## Before the War

In 1914, Canada was a [British Dominion](#) with some 8 million inhabitants of diverse origins. Francophone *Canadiens*, making up 28.5 percent of the population, were the majority in Quebec, though those of British origin dominated the economy in Montreal, the financial heart of Canada, and there were substantial numbers of Anglophones in Quebec City and the Eastern Townships. In the rest of the country, Francophones were in the minority, although heavily represented in New Brunswick and Eastern Ontario. There were large immigrant communities across Ontario and the Prairies, many of German or Ukrainian extraction, along with Americans who had emigrated north in search of free land. Still, 54 percent of Canadians were of British origin and thought of themselves as British, part of the [Empire](#), and proud of this.

The economy remained mainly based on staples such as wheat, although agriculture remained almost wholly unmechanised. Butter, cheese, and meat were produced in quantity in Ontario and Quebec and had markets abroad. Lumber and mining were important as well. Industries serving the domestic market had taken root in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg and, to a lesser extent, in smaller towns in Ontario and Quebec. Electrical equipment, automobiles, pulp and paper, and chemicals were thriving sectors. The economy had grown rapidly after 1900, with the gross national product (GNP) more than doubling to \$2.4 billion,<sup>[1]</sup> but at the outbreak of war the country was in recession with rising unemployment that increased in the first months of the conflict. The federal government in Ottawa was small. Its revenues in 1913 were only \$163 million, while its expenditures were \$185 million. The Conservative [government](#) of Prime Minister Sir [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) seemed to be adrift and unpopular. The coming of war in August would change everything.

## Going to War

The war that began in August 1914 found Canada unprepared in every respect. The professional army of some 3,100 was devoted to training the militia of 59,000 officers and men; both the regulars and the militia were ill-trained and ill-equipped, though the budget of the Department of Militia and Defence was \$11 million, double what it had been a few years earlier. The Canadian Naval Service, created in 1910 by the Liberal government of Sir [Wilfrid Laurier \(1841-1919\)](#) in the midst of sharp controversy, consisted of two obsolete ships acquired from [Britain](#). In opposition, the Conservatives had proposed giving \$35 million to Britain to build three [dreadnoughts](#), a project they tried to implement while in power. This hotly contested measure died when rejected by the Liberal majority in the Senate. The navy was thus almost completed unprepared for war. There was no air force, though some Canadians had recently experimented with prototype [aircraft](#).

But unprepared or not, Canada was at war. As a Dominion, Canada did not control its foreign policy, and Britain's declaration of war committed Canada to the fight. Canada's government could decide on the nature and scope of its contribution to the conflict, but the reality was that Canadian ports, shipping, and civilians abroad at once became legitimate targets. Not that there was any doubt that most Canadians wanted the Dominion to participate. German colonial and naval ambitions had been watched with concern for years, and now, with war screaming from every newspaper headline, Canadians' major concern seemed to be that their soldiers might not make it overseas before the victorious British and French troops staged their triumphal parade through Berlin, likely at Christmas time.

With great speed and amidst much confusion, Militia minister Sam Hughes (1853-1921) tossed away the mobilisation [plans](#) that had existed since 1910 and directed militia unit commanders to send men to Valcartier, Quebec, where a camp was to be constructed to prepare a contingent for overseas service. Some 35,000 men assembled there in late August and September while contractors scrambled to create tent lines, training areas, and [rifle](#) ranges. Meanwhile, manufacturers selected by Hughes from among Conservative businessmen scurried to produce uniforms and boots and to purchase horses for the officers and cavalry, and the [artillery](#)'s guns. The equipment for a division was somehow cobbled together. The soldiers received the Ross rifle as their primary [weapon](#). Made in Canada, the Ross was a fine target-shooting rifle, but it would prove prone to jamming in the field. The rifle, along with much of the initially issued [equipment](#), would be scrapped overseas. Nonetheless, the contingent of 32,655 mostly untrained men was dispatched to undergo training in England early in the autumn, a feat hailed in Canada as a miracle created by the energetic, unstable Hughes.

It was a miracle, but the seeds of major problems had been sown. A Militia colonel himself, Hughes believed that citizen soldiers by definition were better than professionals. The one regular [infantry](#) battalion was actually posted to Bermuda, releasing a British regiment for the front. Inexplicably, however, Hughes had ignored sending the militia regiments overseas when organizing the division, and instead cobbled together units on a rough geographical basis. Lieutenant Alex Thomson (1888-1917) of Port Credit, Ontario, wrote that his newly-created 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion had men from the 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Grenadiers from Toronto, the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment from Hamilton, the 12<sup>th</sup> York Rangers, the 19<sup>th</sup> from St Catharines, the 34<sup>th</sup> from Whitby, the 35<sup>th</sup> from Barrie, the 36<sup>th</sup> from Peel, and the 44<sup>th</sup> from Welland, Ontario. Each company in the 7<sup>th</sup> would have three officers, he said, to be selected "from about ten so some of us are going to get it in the neck... Col Sam Hughes is expected at any time to select the officers..."<sup>[2]</sup> Officers lobbied the minister for positions, with more senior officers, sometimes experts in playing patronage politics, jostling for brigade commands.

All this was an early indication that the organization of the overseas force and [recruiting](#) at home were disorganised. And because Hughes, an Orangeman, had scorn for Catholics and *Canadiens*, the French-speaking volunteers at Valcartier numbered only 1,235 and were scattered through the infantry battalions. Moreover, while more than two-thirds of the officers were Canadian-born, over 60

percent of the men assembled at Valcartier were recent immigrants from Britain, an indication that war fever was strongest among the British-born. Private [William Peden \(1879-1916\)](#) recalled that the makeup of his 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was "mostly of men of Old Country extraction, many of whom... had seen service with the British army in India and South Africa, and some with the Royal Navy. The others," he went on, "had no previous military experience, but they had one thing in common, all were young and [seized of]... the opportunity of visiting their home-land and of seeing again, the parents and relatives they had left behind, when emigrating to Canada."<sup>[3]</sup> The British-born felt the call to join the war much more than did the native-born, a generation or more away from Europe. With three centuries in Canada, most French Canadians felt this call not at all, neither from [France](#) nor England.

The tendency of the British-born to enlist in the largest numbers persisted throughout the war, and an extraordinary 48.5 percent of the 470,000-odd British-born men of military age in the Dominion enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). It was not until November 1918 that Canadian-born soldiers made up 51.4 percent of the almost 620,000 that served in the CEF, a figure that included conscripts. Of the 2.82 million eligible Canadian-born males, only 11.3 percent enlisted.<sup>[4]</sup>

Francophone enlistment is very difficult to calculate with any exactitude. Only one infantry battalion, the 22<sup>nd</sup>, was formed by *Canadiens* and served at the front. Most Francophone volunteers came from the Montreal area, though Quebec City, western Quebec and Eastern Ontario provided significant numbers. Precision is difficult to establish since attestation papers did not require volunteers to indicate their mother tongue. Though *Canadiens* made up nearly three in ten of the Canadian population, they represented under 4 percent of Canadian volunteers. Less than 5 percent of Quebec males of military age served in infantry battalions, compared to 14-15 percent in the west and Ontario. Moreover, at least half of Quebec's recruits were English-speaking Canadians and many French-Canadian volunteers came from outside Quebec.<sup>[5]</sup> It is very likely that at most 50,000 Francophones—under 8 percent of the CEF—put on a military uniform, a number that included the conscripts enlisted in 1918.

## The Army in England and Flanders, 1914-1916

Landing in Plymouth in mid-October, the Canadian soldiers entrained for Salisbury Plain where unending rain turned their training and living areas into a sea of mud. Tents flooded, men and horses were miserable and sick, the Canadian-made boots fell apart, and very little training could be accomplished. Trying to ease matters, Britain's War Office billeted many troops in nearby villages, which predictably increased drunkenness and cases of venereal disease. "There seems to be about half this contingent bums," one soldier griped in a letter home to Canada. "They think of nothing but drinking and getting into all the trouble they can."<sup>[6]</sup>

The Canadians struggled through the worst weather in generations. It rained 89 of the 123 days the Canadian Division was at Salisbury. The artillery could not fire its guns until January 1915, and the

officers knew little of conditions at the front. But at least the Canadian Division had its organization sorted out. A British officer, Lieutenant-General [Edwin Alderson \(1859-1927\)](#), took over command. Under him were three brigades of infantry, each with four battalions. There were three artillery brigades of 16 guns, and the requisite units of engineers, signallers, and supplies and transport. The Division's establishment was fixed at 610 officers and 17,263 other ranks, with the remainder of the contingent designated as reinforcements. The [cavalry](#) regiments and the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery formed the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, separate from the division. Finally, in late February, the division crossed the English Channel to France and became part of the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF).

In late April 1915, after some seasoning with British units, the Canadian Division experienced its first major action in the [Ypres](#) salient in [Belgium](#). There it sustained some 6,000 casualties, including more than 2,000 killed, in holding off German troops who employed chlorine gas for the first time on the [Western Front](#). Such staggering [losses](#) in a single engagement lasting a few days were almost inconceivable to Canadians at home. In putting down the Northwest Rebellion in 1885, Canadian troops had suffered a handful of casualties—only eight killed at the Battle of Batoche, for example; in the South African War, 529 Canadians were killed and wounded over almost three years. One participant at Ypres, Major [John McCrae \(1873-1918\)](#), a doctor serving with an artillery brigade, wrote to a friend that “In one 30 hours we fired 3600 rounds; and at one time our brigade had only seven guns able to fire; two of these smoked at every joint and were too hot to touch with the unprotected hand.”<sup>[7]</sup> A few days before he wrote this letter, McCrae had scribbled “In Flanders Fields,” the iconic poem of the Great War. The long casualty lists represented the harsh reality of total war, losses made barely tolerable by the acclaim the Canadians received for preventing a German breakthrough.

The Canadian Division, its ranks once more restored to full strength by reinforcements from England, moved into France as part of General [Douglas Haig's \(1861-1928\)](#) British First Army. The Division attacked at Festubert on 17 May and repeatedly tried to take ground against strong opposition over the next week. Little was achieved, Haig was not pleased, and there were almost 2,500 casualties. There was scant time for a respite, however, as the Canadians again went into action at Givenchy in mid-June. This attack, better planned and supported, nonetheless failed to succeed. Losses again were heavy, with one battalion losing 366 killed and wounded, including 20 officers.

If there was not many men left from the original members of the Canadian Division, new formations were taking shape. In Canada, recruiting continued and contingents proceeded to England. The Second Canadian Division, formed in May 1915, was followed by the third in December 1915, and the fourth in April 1916. If that suggests an orderly progression, it should not. Recruiting in Canada was a shambles. The CEF raised 262 infantry battalions, most officered by local notables with little military experience, and a host of mounted regiments and specialised units ranging from railway troops to engineering companies and general hospitals. Once arriving in England, if they were not

included in the four divisions, most of the infantry units were broken up. The men were sent to the field as reinforcements, the officers and senior non-commissioned officers were reduced in rank if they agreed and sent to the front, and the others drew rations and pay uselessly in Britain or returned to Canada.

The blame for the chaos rested with Sir Sam Hughes, the Militia minister, who sent his uniformed cronies to England to “manage” matters. Not until Prime Minister Borden fired Hughes in November 1916 could order begin to be restored. The task fell to General Richard Ernest William Turner (1871-1961). V. C. Turner had not been a success as a field commander, but he brought order to the training, organisation, and dispatch of reinforcements to France and Flanders.

At the front, the Canadian Corps, initially made up of two divisions, came into being under Alderson’s command in September 1915 and took up position near Ypres. Its first major actions did not occur until April 1916, in the confused struggle for the huge mine craters at St Eloi. In appalling conditions, the men struggled to fight and survive. Their headquarters frequently did not even know where the front was, so greatly had six huge mine explosions altered the landscape. Little of consequence resulted except that casualties were heavy on both sides, with the Second Canadian Division losing 1,373 officers and men, and that the craters changed hands frequently. Perhaps the main result of the St Eloi battle was that General Alderson was sacked as Corps commander and replaced by Lieutenant-General Julian Byng (1862-1935), a British cavalry officer. Byng had no experience with Canadian troops—“Why am I sent to the Canadians?,” he asked. “I don’t know a Canadian?”<sup>[8]</sup>—but after watching his new command perform in another costly battle at Mount Sorrel at the beginning of June where German artillery destroyed two battalions (and killed the Third Division’s commander), Byng took hold of and began to shape the Canadian Corps. Byng was no remote figure. He visited the troops, inspired them, and projected confidence. He ordered the remaining Ross rifles to be scrapped. That alone endeared Byng to the troops. Before long, the Canadians began to call themselves the “Byng Boys,” and their élan grew. Their officers’ regard for Byng grew as he resisted political meddling from Ottawa and London. The Corps, he said, “was too good to be led by politicians and dollar magnates.”<sup>[9]</sup>

But now the Corps was for it on the [Somme](#). The battle began on 1 July 1916, and on the first day the Newfoundland Regiment, formed from men of the British colony off the Canadian Atlantic coast and fighting as part of a British division, was all but wiped out at Beaumont Hamel. The Canadian Corps fortunately was spared the initial struggles, but it was thrown into the charnel house in mid-September. The Second Division fought a long, gruelling battle at Courcellette (with the introduction of tanks and a creeping barrage indicating how the war was changing), and three Canadian divisions gained 3,000 yards, a big advance in the brutal slogging match. The Canadians continued the struggle for six weeks, with the newly arrived Fourth Division finally taking Regina Trench, a key objective, on 18 November. The futile Somme battles had cost the Canadians more than 24,000 casualties.

By the end of 1916, more than 400,000 Canadians had enlisted, an astonishing number for a small

country. In France, the 100,000-strong Canadian Corps entered a period of recuperation and began to prepare for an assault on Vimy Ridge.

## The Home Front

Ottawa began the war by putting the War Measures Act on the statute books. The Act gave the federal government sweeping emergency powers for use during war, invasion, or apprehended insurrection. It also allowed the federal government to intrude on provincial areas of jurisdiction during the emergency period. Under the Act, almost 9,000 German and Austrian immigrant aliens (the latter including Ukrainians then under the Austro-Hungarian Empire) were interned during the war. There was virtually no opposition to this measure at the time of its passage.

The government in Ottawa also worked hard to control information reaching the public. A chief censor directed the flow of military news to the media, while overseas the military controlled journalists' access to the front and what they wrote. In all, more than 250 publications were suppressed, some permanently. Most were from the [United States](#), neutral until April 1917, while the vast majority of others were from the domestic ethnic media. Fears of the spread of Bolshevism increased [censorship](#) in 1918, and at times Ottawa blocked news freely published in Britain. The British, closer to the front, apparently could be told news that might upset Canadians.

No one tried to censor economic news. Substantial unemployment existed in Canada before the war began, and the interruption in trade caused by the war increased it. But within a year, the enlistment of men in the army and the increase in wartime manufacturing eased matters. Canadian factories geared up for war with some difficulty. Orders for artillery shells began in late 1914 from the Shell Committee created by Militia minister Hughes who rewarded his friends with contracts. But Canadian industry could not yet produce technically sophisticated armaments, and few orders were met. By November 1915, confusion in the country's 250 war plants was such that Borden replaced Hughes's committee with the Imperial Munitions Board (IMB), a British agency controlling orders from London, and secured Sir [Joseph Flavelle \(1858-1939\)](#), a Toronto meat packer and industrialist, to direct the operation. The efficient Flavelle built national factories, negotiated with the labour unions that were growing in strength, and produced \$2 million a day in war goods by late 1918. By then, 289,000 workers were manufacturing a third of Britain's shells and had built 2,600 training aircraft and 103 ships. Thousands of [women](#) worked in the munitions factories, while others moved into virtually every kind of work as men went into uniform, including driving streetcars. The war began the industrialization of Canada and accelerated the emancipation of women.

The factories and the demands of the army soon created a labour shortage and sparked a movement of men and women from rural areas into the factories of the cities. This left farmers, their crops as important for the war effort as munitions, without the manpower needed to plant or harvest. Rapid inflation that pushed up the price of food added to the country's misery, leading city dwellers to curse the farmers for their supposed greed and alleged unwillingness to enlist in the army.

At the same time, there was fury in English Canada at the perceived reluctance of *Canadiens* to enlist. There was no doubt that volunteers were few, but there were reasons for this. The army operated in English, for one; Quebec was more rural than most of the other provinces, its people married earlier, were less healthy, had no sentimental attachment to Britain (or France), and had deep historic and current resentment at their treatment by the federal and some provincial governments. And, Francophones noted, the Canadian-born across the entire country were far slower to enlist than the British-born. This was true enough.

Despite the intense commitment to the industrial and agricultural war effort, military manpower became the key national issue. By the beginning of 1917, volunteers were scarce and casualties enormous. The Borden government had earlier promised there would be no compulsion, but after the prime minister returned from an overseas visit in May, he announced that conscription was necessary to keep the Canadian Corps up to strength. At least 100,000 men would be needed.

His decision produced extraordinary tumult and change across Canada. Borden set out to form a coalition, a Union government, to impose compulsory service. The idea was rejected by Liberal leader Laurier, but the passage of the Military Service Act, and additional legislation shortly after, led individual federal and provincial Liberals to hurry to join the Union. There were two key measures: the Military Voters Act that allowed serving soldiers to vote in their home ridings or, if they could not name one, where the government needed their votes; and the Wartime Elections Act that took the franchise away from recent immigrants from enemy countries and gave the vote to female relatives of soldiers. The Liberals screamed skullduggery, while the Conservatives shrugged and suggested these measures merely rewarded the patriotic. In addition, a few weeks before the election, the government told farmers they would not be called up for service.

This unprecedented electoral gerrymandering virtually guaranteed—and duly delivered—a sweeping victory for the Union government in the December 1917 election. English-speaking Canada had exerted its power by voting massively for the Union government and compulsion; [French Canadians](#) had voted with almost total unanimity against Borden and for the Liberals, but they could elect members only in constituencies that were French-speaking. Despite riots in Quebec, conscription thus was put into effect, raised the required men, and kept the Corps up to strength through to the Armistice.<sup>[10]</sup> But conscription left a terrible scar on French-English relations, and the removal of exemptions from farmers—a measure implemented during the panic caused by the German offensives in spring 1918—embittered rural voters. The electoral maltreatment of recent immigrants similarly infuriated those citizens.<sup>[11]</sup> Recruitment had been mismanaged and conscription ruthlessly implemented by a government determined to do its part in winning the war—and staying in power. But at the same time, the government struggled to pay its bills.

When Canada went to war in August 1914, the government did not know it faced a long war, and it had no idea how to finance such a conflict. No government anywhere knew the costs of [total war](#). The federal administration was small, its budget and revenues were tiny, and taxation scarcely existed (most revenue came from tariffs). Initially, Ottawa expected London to pay the war's costs



and, moreover, anticipated that British investors would continue putting money into Canada to finance corporate expansion and development. These hopes were dashed within months. The cost to Britain of financing a total war was huge and the country was soon beyond its resources. Before long, London was seeking loans in the United States, and soon, so was Canada. In the summer of 1915, Ottawa—for the first time—turned to New York for a loan of \$40 million in one- and two-year notes at 5 and 5.25 percent. This was a historic event. At the same time, Britain was pressing Ottawa to carry more of the war's costs, and, in 1916, Canada agreed to pay the bills of the IMB.

The government had not wanted to raise funds through taxation and had doubts about its ability to raise much through domestic war loans. But necessity made its demands. The government introduced a business profits tax in 1916, a federal income tax in 1917 and, much to its surprise, found most of its war finance from domestic borrowing. The government also inflated the currency and stood by while prices increased and wages lagged behind. The near-revolutionary unrest across Canada in 1919 had much to do with the government's failure to manage inflation.

But the main problem for Ottawa was finding the US dollars it needed to finance the imports of steel, coal, and machine tools from the United States that were necessary to keep war factories in operation. This became critical in the late spring of 1917 when a financially-strapped London declared it could no longer pay for munitions and food from Canada. The choice for Ottawa thus was clear: give the British the goods free of charge or close munitions factories and hurt farmers' markets. This was blackmail in an election year but it worked, and Canada agreed to put up \$25 million a month to cover the exports to Britain, provided that London could provide \$15 million (US) to Canada each month. The more Canada did to help Britain with war materiel, in effect, the greater the trade deficit with the United States became; only regular infusions of American dollars could keep this deficit down. The British reluctantly agreed, squeezed more loans out of the United States to which they were already hugely indebted, and helped secure Canada the unique right to place a private loan in New York. The war saw Canada anxious to aid Britain, but the financial strain began the process of switching Canada from London to New York as the engine of its financial system.

The change was evident and permanent. In 1914, US foreign investment in Canada was 23 and British investment 72 percent; in 1918, the figures were 36 and 60 percent. By 1922, US investment exceeded British for the first time. Imports showed a similar pattern. In 1901, Canada's imports from the UK were \$42 million and from the US \$110 million. By 1918, however, imports from the south were ten times those from Britain. The First World War sped the transition from one financial empire to the other.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **The Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919**

In January 1917, many formations in the BEF sent officers to study the French army's tactics that developed in the huge battles at Verdun. The Canadians sent several officers, including Major-General Arthur Currie (1875-1933), the commander of the First Division. A militiaman from British Columbia, Currie had gone overseas in command of a brigade, and had taken over the division when

the Corps formed. Currie had learned on the job, impressed his superiors, and led his division with success. His report on Verdun, pointing to the need for good planning, troop rehearsals, the provision of maps and air photos down to platoon level, tactical changes in the infantry, and creeping artillery barrages became the new doctrine for the Canadian Corps.

Byng remained in command, and his key staff officers were almost all British. Few Canadians yet had the capacity to plan large operations, but they were learning. For Vimy, Byng had put his four divisions, to fight together for the first time, through rigorous training. The plan to attack the heavily defended ridge near Arras, a feature that looked out over the Douai Plain, a German-held area to the east that encompassed the coal mines at Lens, had been in preparation since the previous November. It was at last ready to go on Easter Monday. It was one part of a large BEF offensive intended to draw away German reserves and allow the French to launch their offensive a week later.

The attack began with a huge artillery barrage, including much [gas](#) (which the Canadian Corps regularly and heavily employed). It was, wrote an infantry officer, “the most wonderful artillery barrage ever known in the history of the world,” an overstatement for sure, but the Canadian and British guns stunned the defenders and knocked out most of their artillery batteries with counter-battery fire. The troops moved forward, taking the objectives one after the other, though casualties were heavy. Except on the Fourth Division’s front, the battle was effectively over before nightfall; the Fourth, tasked with capturing the high points on the ridge, took its objectives by 12 April.

The BEF’s assaults on the Arras front had had small success. The taking of Vimy Ridge was the one glowing exception. The victory received plaudits in the Allied media, with the Canadians basking in the praise. To them, despite more than ten thousand [casualties](#), Vimy was a glorious victory, a gain of 4,500 yards and an indication that the Corps was now a first-class formation, “the finest troops on earth,” one soldier boasted.<sup>[13]</sup> That might even have been true, but Vimy did almost nothing to win the war. There was no breakthrough; no cavalry striking at the enemy’s rear. The German lines moved east a few miles, and the war went on as before.

General Byng, promoted to command the British Third Army, recommended that Arthur Currie succeed him, and Currie, now knighted and a lieutenant-general, took over the Corps on 9 June 1917. His first major operation took place on the outskirts of Lens at a feature dubbed Hill 70. His superiors had wanted him to seize the town, but Currie argued that Hill 70, a feature the Germans had to hold, was a better objective if the Canadians could take it, fortify it, and smash the enemy counter-attacks. Persuaded, the high command gave Currie his head, and, in August, Hill 70 fell to a determined assault. After the initial assault on August 15. After the initial attack, three days of fierce fighting followed, the Corps stopping repeated enemy assaults.<sup>[14]</sup> The Canadians had 5,400 casualties in the first phase, although fighting continued to the 25<sup>th</sup>, with more losses. The Germans suffered even worse; a rare time that attackers inflicted heavier [casualties](#) than they suffered. The Corps’ reputation as elite troops continued to grow.

This reputation—and the huge casualties inflicted on the BEF—forced the Canadians into the

struggle for Passchendaele at the end of October 1917. Currie had reconnoitred the ground: “Battlefield looks bad, no salvaging has been done, and very few of the dead buried.” The Canadian general told Sir Douglas Haig that he did not want to fight there. If he had to do so, he said, it would cost 16,000 casualties; if he was ordered to take the Corps there he wanted more time to prepare and rehearse. “I carried my protest to the extreme limit,” Currie wrote later, “... which I believe would have resulted in my being sent home had I been other than the Canadian Corps commander.” Haig ordered Currie to make the attack, but he agreed to give him the time and additional artillery he wanted.<sup>[15]</sup>

By 26 October, the Corps was ready, its guns on the firmest platforms possible in the sea of mud that was the battlefield. The Third and Fourth Divisions were the first to attack, the men wallowing “to their deaths in the slime and blood-soaked mud,” one officer wrote. Battalions lost up to three-quarters of their numbers; the total casualties were 2,500 after three days with only a small gain. The Canadians tried again on 30 October, moving the line forward at the cost of 2,300 more killed and wounded. Finally, on November 6, a rapid assault moved so fast that the enemy gunfire fell behind the attackers, and the Canadians had the ruins of Passchendaele. The fighting continued for another week and the cost of this worthless victory was almost exactly the number predicted by Currie. In Britain some months later, Prime Minister Borden told David Lloyd George (1863-1945) that “if there is ever a repetition of Passchendaele, not a Canadian soldier will leave the shore of Canada so long as the Canadian people entrust the Government of my country to my hands.”<sup>[16]</sup>

The Canadian Corps would spend most of the next eight months around Vimy Ridge. It was not attacked during the [German offensives](#) of spring and summer 1918, though some of the Canadian divisions were detached from the Corps to plug holes in the line and the Canadian pilots in the Royal Air Force participated fully. Instead, the Corps devoted itself to training in open [warfare](#). The chance to put its training into practice came in August and during the subsequent Hundred Days campaign.

On 8 August, the Canadians, alongside British, Australian, and French troops, spearheaded an attack at Amiens. Brought south from the Vimy region in great secrecy, the Canadian advance cut through the German defences, moving forward a dozen kilometres. [Tanks](#) and infantry fought together, and the Royal Air Force provided effective cover in what was genuinely combined arms warfare. The “black day of the German army,” General [Erich Ludendorff's \(1865-1937\)](#) famous lament, summed it up, but after a few days the attack ground to a halt as the Germans rushed reinforcements.

Moved north to Arras in late August, the Canadian Corps led the British First Army's assault as it moved on the Drocourt-Quéant Line, a major defensive barrier. The casualties were terrible, as the infantry, using fire and movement tactics, grappled with the Germans' concrete machine gun bunkers. One battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel [Cyrus Peck \(1871-1956\)](#), led his men “walking in the open, under fire, his kilt riddled and spare holster shot through, calmly reorganizing his men....” A member of parliament since the 1917 election, Peck won the Victoria Cross, and the Canadians broke the Drocourt-Quéant Line.

The next obstacle was the incomplete Canal du Nord, heavily defended on its east bank as the Germans sought to hold Cambrai, their last major road and rail centre in northern France. This was to be Currie's greatest battle, the Canadian developing a daring plan to funnel his four divisions through a narrow dry portion of the canal and then to fan them out. If the Germans could bring their guns and gas to bear on the troops before zero hour, the effort could turn into a debacle. But, despite pressure from his superiors worried about its daring nature, Currie insisted the plan would work, and it did. With heavy fighting and substantial losses, the Canadian infantry made it across the canal, and bridges were quickly erected by Currie's engineers to get reinforcements and supplies across. There were continuing losses and what Currie described as "the bitterest fighting we have ever experienced" as the troops pushed toward Cambrai, taking the burning city on 8-9 October. The Germans now were in full retreat.

Why had the Canadians become "the shock troops of the British Army"? First, there were enough reinforcements, most but not all of whom were conscripts. Currie's battalions were kept near full strength, and his brigades had four battalions, not three as did British ones. He had more guns, more trucks, and more engineers than British formations, and his four divisions stayed together and fought together. All this mattered, as did the simple fact that Currie and his senior commanders were very capable. So too were the soldiers, men who had learned how to fight, to use their weapons effectively, and to work together.

The war was now in its final days. The Canadians took Valenciennes, a battle won by a single brigade after one of the heaviest artillery concentrations of the war. Then spearhead formations followed the retreating enemy as it fled east, posting machine gunners to force the pursuers to deploy and delay their advance. By 10 November, with rumours of an armistice gaining force, the Canadians were at Mons—the town where the British had first faced the Germans in August 1914. The fighting ceased at 1100 hours on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. Canada's Hundred Days had cost almost 45,000 killed and wounded, some 20 percent of all Canadian wartime casualties, but the country had played a disproportionate role in the Allied victory.<sup>[17]</sup>

## After the War

There was not much jubilation at the front. The Canadian soldiers had lost too many friends, and now they simply wanted to go home. First, there was [occupation](#) duty in Germany. Two divisions marched through Belgium and over the Rhine to take up positions in Bonn and Cologne. Efforts were underway to marshal shipping to return the troops to Canada but there many competing demands, and the Canadians were restless. There were sit-down strikes in Belgium and major riots in England, and suddenly shipping was found. The soldiers returned to a nation that seemed very different.

The government in Ottawa was tired. Its leader, Sir Robert Borden, was overseas much of the time and worn out when he was home. His soldiers' efforts had won Canada a seat at the [Versailles](#) peace conference and some increased autonomy in the Empire. Promises of benefits and pensions

had been made but were never enough to satisfy expectations; nor did the promises of farmlands for veterans work out for most. There were unhappy returned men on every street corner, and jobs were scarce, most seemingly filled by “slackers” and immigrants. Inflation had raised the cost of goods, and housing was scarce in the cities. As the GNP dropped and war factories shut down, Canada did not seem to be a land fit for heroes. Thus, when a general strike erupted in Winnipeg in May 1919, most but not all veterans lined up against the strikers, and the government cracked down hard. The troops and police went to work, strike leaders faced deportation, and Winnipeg’s workers succumbed. Other strikes met the same fate; a government that feared Bolshevism reacted with force.

General Currie and his officers had hoped to see Canada maintain a professional military, but there was no interest in this in government. The war had created a large national debt, there were huge budget deficits, and no one wanted to see funds “wasted” on the military. The Royal Canadian Navy shrank, the Canadian Air Force was tiny, and the Militia, less than popular among the veterans, returned to its pre-war condition. The tiny Permanent Force resumed desultory training of the “Saturday night soldiers”. Even national memorials received limited attention. Not until 1936 was Canada’s overseas monument to its wartime dead completed atop Vimy Ridge. The national war memorial in Ottawa would not be dedicated until 1939.

On the political front, the most significant post-war event was the selection by a national convention of William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874-1950) as leader of the Liberal Party. Sir Wilfrid Laurier had died in February 1919, and King, a minister in Laurier’s government and the author of *Industry and Humanity*, a book that few read but one that established the author’s credibility as a progressive who could deal with the social unrest in Canada, was chosen as leader in August. This turned out to be an inspired choice. King had remained loyal to Laurier in the 1917 election, and this won him substantial support in Quebec. He devoted himself to winning the farmers, most now supporting the new Progressive Party, back to his side.

King’s way to and in power was made easier when the government’s parliamentary caucus, the Union government fragmenting, selected Arthur Meighen (1874-1960) as leader in 1920. A superb speaker, the able Meighen was the architect of the conscription bill, a key advocate of the Winnipeg crackdown, and a supporter of a high tariff. Those attributes appealed to Conservative stalwarts but not to all voters. King would form the government in 1921 and hold power for 22 years from 1921 to 1948, when he finally stepped down. Post-war Canada was to be Liberal, if not necessarily very liberal.

## Conclusion

The Great War had cost the Dominion of Canada 61,122 dead and some 173,000 wounded. From its largely amateur and confused beginnings, the Canadian Corps had become one of the best formations in the BEF. It was hard-hitting, well-led, and larger than other Imperial units. At home, Canadian industry produced over a billion dollars in war materiel and the agricultural sector grew and

exported huge amounts of food. Unquestionably, Canadians had done great things at home and at the front, but the deep divisions between the French- and English-speaking, the strain between urban dwellers and farmers, and the growing labour militancy meant that Canadians were more divided at war's end than at its onset.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Ankli, Robert: A Note on Canadian GNP Estimates, 1900-25, in: *Canadian Historical Review* 62/1 (1981), pp. 59-64. There were no official GNP estimates at this time.
2. ↑ Granatstein, J.L. / Hillmer, Norman (eds.): *Battle Lines. Eyewitness Accounts from Canada's Military History*, Toronto 2004, p. 106.
3. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
4. ↑ Holt, Richard: *Filling the Ranks. Recruiting, Training and Reinforcements in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918* (thesis), University of Western Ontario 2011, p. 283. This dissertation has been published as *Filling the Ranks. Manpower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*, Montreal 2017.
5. ↑ Durflinger, Serge: *French Canada and Recruitment during the First World War*, issued by Canadian War Museum, online: <http://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/dispatches/french-canada-and-recruitment-during-the-first-world-war/> (retrieved: 8 February 2018).
6. ↑ Granatstein, J.L.: *The Greatest Victory. Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918*, Toronto 2014, p. 54.
7. ↑ Granatstein / Hillmer, *Battle Lines* 2004, p. 121.
8. ↑ Williams, Jeffery: *Byng of Vimy. General and Governor-General*, London 2015, p. 115.
9. ↑ Cook, Tim: *At the Sharp End. Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914-16*, Toronto 2007; Granatstein: *Greatest Victory* 2014, p. 68.
10. ↑ See Granatstein, J.L. / Hitsman, J. M.: *Broken Promises. A History of Conscription in Canada*, Toronto 1977; Dennis, Patrick: *Reluctant Warriors. Canadian Conscripts and the Great War*, Vancouver 2017.
11. ↑ On the election see Dutil, Patrice / MacKenzie, D.: *Embattled Nation. Canada's Wartime Election of 1917*, Toronto 2017; English, John: *The Decline of Politics. The Conservatives and the Party System 1901-20*, Toronto 1977, Chapters 7-10.
12. ↑ On war finance see Granatstein, J.L.: *How Britain's Weakness Forced Canada into the Arms of the United States*, Toronto 1989, Chapter 1.
13. ↑ Cook, Tim: *Shock Troops. Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918*, Toronto 2008, p. 147.
14. ↑ Delaney, D. E. / Durflinger, S. (eds.): *Capturing Hill 70. Canada's Forgotten Battle of the First World War*, Vancouver 2016, *passim*.

15. † Granatstein, J.L.: *Canada's Army. Waging War and Keeping the Peace*, Toronto 2002, pp. 122-123.
16. † *Ibid.*, p. 124.
17. † Granatstein: *Greatest Victory* 2014, *passim*.

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