Canada and the First World War

Aedan Helmer, Ottawa Sun - August 2, 2014

“We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie

In Flander’s fields.”

- Lt. Col. John McCrae

One hundred years later, the First World War may be defined more by what was lost than by what was gained.

It was called The War to End All Wars, but as history demonstrates, the gears of war were already in motion before the ink had dried on the Treaty of Versailles.

Borders drawn and redrawn, the disenfranchised would only sire a new breed of hate that would explode so spectacularly just two decades later, and while the seeds of the Second World War were sown, countless conflicts between nations, and deep-seated resentments between cultures have their roots in The Great War.

Europe lay decimated, its fertile landscape turned into a pockmarked wasteland where martyrs lay strewn amid the barbed wire, the shell shrapnel and stray machine gun bullets on the bloody battlefields of No Man’s Land, a landscape scarred by

the mud-soaked, rat-infested trenches where soldiers wallowed in their misery.

The atrocities — history's first chemical warfare, genocides obscured by the fog of war, 10 million soldiers cut down by enemies who, prior to the outbreak of war, may have been neighbours.

Another 20 million civilians slaughtered. Countless others shell-shocked and broken in body and mind as the world around them was forever changed.

Empires that sought world domination instead collapsed, and with that, the shattered civility and nobility of the European aristocracy, while elsewhere, war-weary peasants took up arms not against enemy battalions, but to overthrow their own imperialist commanders in bloody revolt.

But across the Atlantic, to a burgeoning agricultural Canada of only 8 million, barely 50 years removed from Confederation, we gained — at such steep cost — our nationhood.

History books depict the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as the catalyst for war on a continent that had become a "powder keg" waiting for just such a spark. But news of the murder of an otherwise obscure heir to a faraway throne didn't even make the front pages back home in Canada.

"Unlike the Second World War, the First World War is harder to get our head around 100 years later," says Tim Cook, one of Canada's leading historians on the conflict, and the author of five books on the topic.

"The war against Hitler, we know why that had to be fought, the people at the time knew why it had to be fought ... The First World War is a little harder to figure out, but it is a critical part of our history."

The war left an indelible legacy on Canada — a national identity was forged on the battlefield, and on the home front, progressive ideals were accelerated, while ugly divisions within our own borders threatened to tear the country apart.

Our first war heroes were celebrated — the legends of Billy Bishop and Sir Arthur Currie among them — and for a country that had no professional army in 1914, the Canadian shock troops soon forged a reputation as a ferocious fighting force at Ypres, Vimy, Hill 70 and Passchendaele.

On the homefront, the slow-burning suffragette movement suddenly became reality, as women rushed to fill the white-collar jobs their husbands had left behind, while others filled the Allies' cannons with shells shaped in Canadian munitions factories, with the right to vote dangled as the reward.

But as the war dragged on — some were convinced the conflict would end before the Canadians even set foot on foreign soil — measures turned desperate, the Conscription Crisis of 1917 forced men into the fray against their will, and long-festering divisions burst to the surface.

When Britain declared war on Aug. 4, 1914, all of her colonies and dominions rushed to take up arms, and it wasn't difficult to convince Canadians — a vast majority still fiercely loyal to the Crown — to enlist.

"This was a war that had to be fought — we would stand by Britain — and the first to enlist were largely British immigrants who had come to Canada in the past few years," says Cook, with hundreds of thousands enlisting "for King and country, for patriotism, out of expectations of adventure, for masculinity, and many simply out of naiveté."

While he would later be dismissed in disgrace, historians credit Sir Sam Hughes, minister of defence responsible for carrying out Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden's "cause of honour," as instrumental in rallying the first wave of troops.

Camp Valcartier was an empty field on Aug. 4, says Canadian War Museum historian Melanie Morin-Pelletier, but in a few short weeks, it becomes a fully-functioning training ground teeming with some 33,000 recruits.

When they set sail for Salisbury in October in the largest convoy ever to cross the Atlantic in 30 warships, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II is rumoured to remark, "They will go back in 30 rowboats."

In the early days of training, Hughes' impression of Canada's standing army — as "a bunch of bar room loafers" — is reinforced by tales of drunken carousing on the streets of London, but a few short months later, four battle-ready Canadian infantry divisions land on the shores of France.

No amount of training can prepare them, though, for the horrors they will face upon reaching the Western Front.

Marching to Ypres in April, 1915, the Canadian troops get their first look at home for the next four years — dirty dugout trenches where soldiers huddle amid incessant machine gun fire, shells exploding overhead, and orders to charge "over the top" sending comrades into oblivion.

"Imagine Hell in its worst form. You may have a slight idea what it was like," writes Sgt. William Miller in a letter home.

Hell's fury materializes in a new, ghastly form on April 22, when, in a break in the bombardment, an ominous cloud 6 km wide is carried on the prevailing wind, smothering soldiers and pooling in the very trenches that offered protection from

artillery fire.

“Faces flecked with blood and froth ... men would fall down under the feet of the mob, and roll about like mad dogs in their death agonies,” writes Col. E.W.B. Morrison.

The Canadians become witness — and fall victim — to history’s first poison gas attack.

“We fight and make this heroic stand at Ypres, but we lose 6,000 men, killed, wounded or taken prisoner, and that’s a terrible shock,” Cook recounts.

“That was a real turning point, because you could see how the country could have pulled back and said, ‘This is not worth it,’ but instead, there was a very strong push for enlistments around 1915, and there is a sense that this is a crusade for liberal values and democracy.

“That goes on well into 1916, where tens of thousands of Canadians are enlisting each month. But at some point, and especially after The Somme (where 24,000 Canadians are among the one million casualties sent to slaughter), the cost is so terrible that people begin to question how much?

“How much more blood and treasure will we pour into this war?”

While one of the provisions of the War Measures Act allowed for heavy censorship — of the media and of letters sent home from the front — “It was very hard to hide casualties,” says War Museum assistant historian Nic Clarke.

But the tides of war are turning, and with casualties mounting by the day, the Allies need a final push in the campaign to “Berlin or bust.”

Borden, wrestling with his conscience, and with increasingly-divisive opposition in Parliament led by Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Henri Bourassa, calls an election for Oct. 1917.

There is only one issue at stake: conscription.

“There’s no denying that when the (recruitment) numbers begin to dry up, that we go through a gut-wrenching process,” says Cook. “Conscription is one of the most divisive events in our history, and it nearly tears the country apart. And it’s not just English vs. French, it’s farmers vs. city-dwellers, the ruling class vs. the labouring class. So while we’re forever changed during the war through the nation-building process, it also very nearly destroys the country at the same time.”

Conscription drives a wedge between English and French-Canada that lingered for generations — "You could still say it's still there," says Cook, "the scars of the Great War."

Through some clever, but hotly-contested electioneering, Borden's union government brings conscription into law in the new year, and by April 1918, no able-bodied man is exempt.

Riots rage in Quebec City, where the war is seen not as a nation-building event, says Cook, "but as an English majority imposing itself on the French minority, snatching their sons from the farms and factories, and sending them off to fight in a war that, at that point, many French-Canadians believed had already gone on too long, with no end in sight, and that this was really not Canada's war — a very different view than in English Canada."

But as Morin-Pelletier points out, discord and dissent is not limited to Quebec.

With Canadian farms already feeding the war effort as the Allies' second-largest exporter of wheat and grain, "They already felt their contribution was significant," she says, recalling accounts of 4,000 prairie farmers marching on Ottawa in protest.

Conscription is only the beginning of government intervention on the lives of its citizens.

Cook describes the prewar federal government as "a pretty weak and pathetic institution that basically just delivers the mail."

By 1917, the war is costing a million dollars a day. Britain is already financially stretched. The Americans — neutral until April 1917 — float a number of high-interest loans and "put our feet to the fire," says Cook, as the country begins to move away from the British Empire and into the North American economic sphere that will dominate the remainder of the century.

"So, of course, there is the question of how do you pay for the war, and that's where income tax comes in," says Cook.

"And perhaps the greatest unknown legacy is the care of veterans in a federally-funded medical system. Would we be so bold to say that the health care system — that we cherish so much, and that defines us as Canadians — comes out of the First World War? It becomes a different thing (much later with Medicare), but we did have to care for tens of thousands of veterans wounded in body, in mind and in spirit."

It’s all part of the indelible imprint the First World War left on Canada.

“Income tax, our changing relationship with Britain, the creation of new heroes, the divisiveness of conscription, as well as the 60,000 dead, which is a terrible legacy. And that’s why the First World War continues to resonate,” says Cook.

“John McCrae, two minutes of silence, Remembrance Day, the thousands of memorials across the country in every city, town and village. The Peace Tower, the Vimy Memorial.

“All of these signs and symbols of the First World War become incorporated from World War II and Korea and our peacekeeping missions, but they are all grounded in the First World War.

It is an even quite unlike any other in our history, and that’s why, 100 years later, it continues to have a hold on so many Canadians.”

NOTE: This article contains invaluable contributions from the Canadian War Museum, and includes excerpts from soldiers’ letters as compiled in Tim Cook’s At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting The Great War (2007, Viking Canada).