From Vimy to Versailles (1917-1919)
1917: The Pivotal Year?

“The seal upon Canadian nationhood has been sealed by the war.”
- newspaper after Vimy Ridge
  → birth of a nation?

Conscription – political and cultural division
→ did the Great War entrench two nationalisms in Canada? (French/English)
The Knights of the Air

Billy Bishop
Life in the Trenches
Duties

Sentry duty

“Over the top”
Hell on Earth

psychological and physical strains
Cold, wet...

Severe case of trench foot
Vermin (rats, lice)…
Disease rampant...
...the sights and smell of death everywhere...
… not to mention the enemy!
How to break the deadlock?

No Man’s Land (1917)
Theories of victory

Search for “open” warfare – how to break out of endless cycle of trench warfare?

- Breakthrough attack – punch a hole and roam
  → problem? – HOLDING ON!

- Attrition – wear the buggers down
  → reality: extremely costly

BEF attack doctrine evolves throughout the war;
Canadian attack doctrine evolves at a faster pace
Innovation

- militia (rather than professional) soldiers
  those who remained learned war
  nature of Canadian Corps

Key developments:
1. Flexible formation in place of waves
2. Development of specialization
3. Coordinating attacks with artillery
Arthur Currie

* Best example of innovation
* Lessons learned through early mistakes and observing others
* a “national” commander
* Canada’s best general ever?
Specific Innovations

Keys to Currie’s success:

- artillery preparation (shells, not lives)
- Importance of specialized assault teams
- Fire and movement
- Careful preparation and communications with ranks
- Limited objectives; bite and hold
- Know when attack has ended, and end it!
Vimy Ridge (9 April 1917)
Careful planning

Sir Julian Byng in command of Corps, but Currie involved in attack planning

* arty fire plan
* tunnels
* intelligence
* repeat exercises by everyone on full-scale replica of battlefield
* preparatory bombardment
Spoils of victory

4,000 German prisoners

Douai Plain from Vimy
Victory … but heavy losses

Vimy
10,600 casualties
3,600 dead
Canada’s Coming of Age?

“Birth of a nation”? OR

Did casualties contribute to a crisis that cost Canada national unity?

Canadian casualties occurred continuously but they soared to peaks during major battles, particularly in 1917. There was a relative lull during the first half of 1918, but the heaviest losses of the war came during the “Last Hundred Days.”
Borden to London

The push for recognition … realized!

David Lloyd George and “continuous consultation”

Imperial War Cabinet
Canada learning, discussing, and involved in decision-making
Imperial War Council
(April 1917)

RESOLUTION IX: dominions to be recognized “as autonomous nations of an imperial Commonwealth”

Borden’s dream coming true? … But at what price?
May 1917: “We Need More Men”

* Britain desperate for men
* Canadian Corps drained by Vimy
  * 20,000 casualties
  * But only 3000 new recruits in April/May /17

* Borden becomes convinced of need for conscription
Conscription
The Unionists

end to partisanship?

Borden asks Laurier to form Coalition Gov’t to bring in conscription – Laurier refuses

Some prominent English Canadian Liberals eventually join Union Gov’t
Laurier’s Logic

Laurier (1917):

“Now if I were to waiver, to hesitate or flinch, I would simply hand over Quebec to the extremists. I would lose the respect of the people whom I thus addressed and would deserve it.”

Source: Neatby, Laurier and a Liberal Quebec, p. 224.
1917 Election

Military Service Act – bill introducing conscription after election

→ opponents of conscription:
  - French Canada
  - Farmers
  - Pacifists

The Government choosing the voters:

Military Voters Act – all soldiers can vote

Wartime Elections Act
ENFRANCHISED WOMEN!

Women of Canada enfranchised for the purposes of the pending federal election are:

First—Nurses serving overseas with the Canadian or the Imperial forces.

Second—Next-of-kin of soldiers and nurses, living or dead, who are serving or have served during the present war overseas with the Canadian or the Imperial forces, and of sailors, living or dead, who have served or are serving during the present war with the fleet, either in Canadian or other waters.

The kinship must be of blood, and of the degree of wife, mother, sister or daughter. Half-sisters are regarded as full sisters under the Act and are entitled to the same franchise privileges.

All the relatives of the degrees enumerated may claim the franchise, and none others.

Women to vote must be of the full age of 21 years, British subjects by birth or naturalization and must be resident in Canada one year and in the electoral division three months. They must have their names on the voters’ list. This list will be posted in each electoral division December 2.

Next-of-kin, see that your names are listed.

But to VOTE you must REGISTER.

It is your immediate duty, and very simple. Go to your nearest registration office and have your name put on the list. The local Unionist Committee will tell you where. DO IT NOW.

REGISTER FIRST—THEN VOTE—FOR THE BOYS AT THE FRONT.

VOTE UNION
SAVE CANADA

Some women relatives of soldiers overseas
... while other groups

* “aliens” naturalized after 1902

* conscientious objectors
A Canada Divided

“plebescite on conscription”

**UNION** - 153 seats
3/65 Quebec, 18/28 Maritimes,
74/82 Ontario, 55/57 West

**LAURIER LIBERALS** - 82 seats
but 62/65 in Quebec

* the triumph of British Canadian nationalism!?
Halifax Explosion (1917)
The Conscripts head overseas

Jan 1918 – the first conscripts head overseas (24K total)

Military Service Act – a liberal law?
94% claim exemption
87% of these received exemption

Military usefulness? Political consequences clear
– legacy of anger in Quebec
Passchendaele (Fall 1917)

cruel ordeal in a muddy quagmire

15,654 Cdn battle casualties
The Tide Turns

Canadian Corps – Currie now in command; insists the Corps be kept together

Spring 1918 – German offensive – within 68 km of Paris, but the gamble fails

AMIENS – August 1918
The Canadians and Australians lead the assault
Cdn innovation and strength
“The Black Day of the German Army” (Ludendorff)
The Last Hundred Days

“Shock Army of the British Empire”

Cdn Casualties 46,000
Kilometres occupied 130
Cities/town liberated 228
Prisoners captured 32,000

Total Cdn Casualties of WWI:
600,000 of the 8M who fought
60,000 dead

Canadians enter Cambrai, 1918
Winning Respect on the field…

“Sir” Arthur Currie knighted on the battlefield by King George V (1918)
... and Off

Canadians at Versailles (1919)

Canada earns separate signature on the Peace Treaty

Member of the League of Nations

*Is the Great War the birth of Canada as an “autonomous” nation on the international stage?*
The Troops Return…
... with uncertainty and apprehensions

demobilization horrible sense of disrespect?
Influenza Epidemic (1918-19)

The Spanish Flu – nearly 50,000 Cdn dead
Leads to the creation of Dept of Health
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Changes in Labour

1918 – Trades and Labour Congress → western delegates break ranks

1918 – Western Labour Congress – call for creation of ONE BIG UNION (OBU) – syndicalism; single industrial union

But before OBU calls founding convention, a general strike breaks out in Winnipeg
“Bloody Saturday,” 21 June 1919

1 dead, many wounded
Canada

“Sacrifice” (Sims, 1918)
The Canadian Nation?

Union Govt and the imposition of national vision
→ uncompromising, English Cdn vision

Did it lead to an independent Canada? Was conscription the cost of Canadian nationhood? Or did it represent the politics of racism and division?

An end to possibility for a true, Canadian national identity across ethno-linguistic lines?
A New World

Arthur Meighen

Laurier’s funeral, 1919