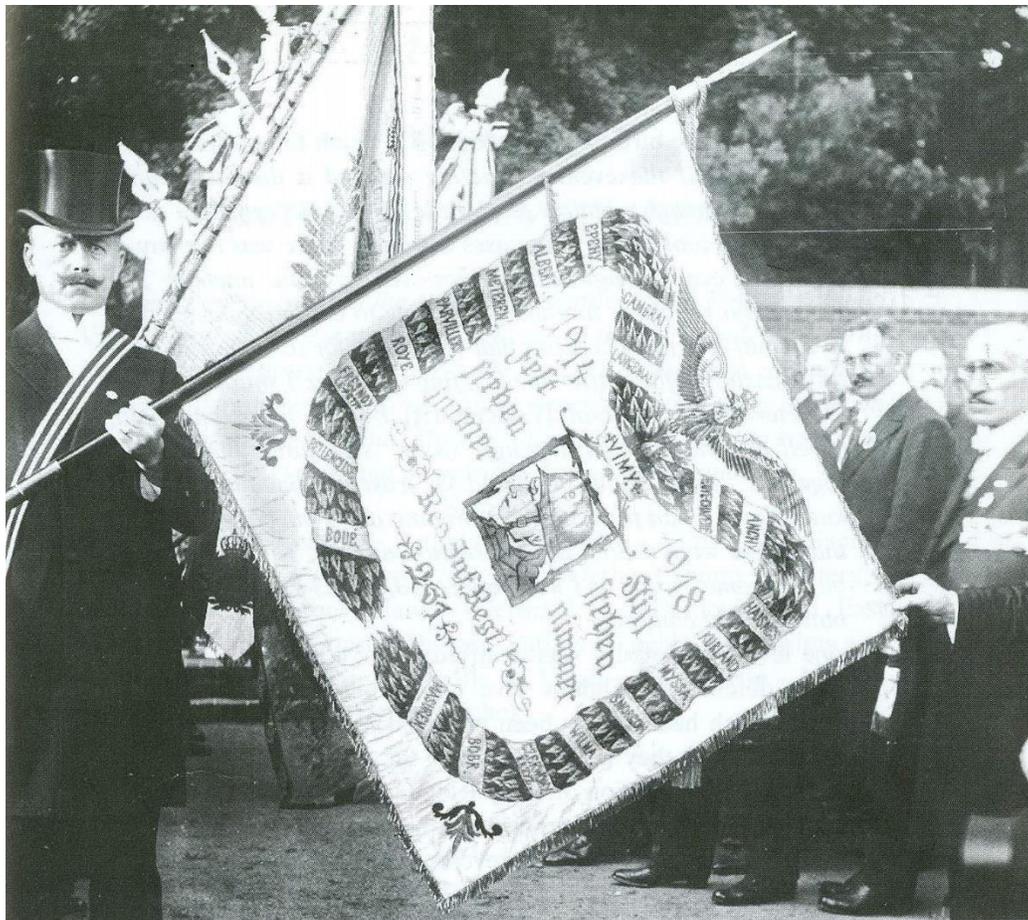


Vimy 2017: Both Sides of the Ridge

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Regimental Banner RIR 261 at the unveiling of the regimental war memorial in Berlin, 17 August 1922. Note the name 'Vimy' in pride of place. The motto translates as 'Always stand fast; never stand still'.

Source: Reprinted with permission. Nigel Cave and Colonel Jack Sheldon, *The Battle for Vimy Ridge 1917* (Barnsley, UK: Pen& Sword Books Ltd., 2007).

A faded black and white photograph dated 17 August 1922 shows a group of men standing proudly beside the banner of their wartime unit. They are veterans, their dress formal and gaze solemn. Prominently embroidered onto the flag are battle honours, with 'Vimy' given pride of place. But the site of this gathering was not Toronto or Winnipeg, nor was the unit Canadian. Rather, the photograph was taken in Berlin on 17 August 1922, at the dedication of the war memorial to the 261st Reserve Infantry Regiment of the Imperial German Army. This simple anecdote serves to remind us that the battle still has the capacity to surprise us, not the least the view from the other side of the ridge. Although the engagement, spread over four days in early April 1917, was not a pivotal point in the course of the war, it marked a notable step forward in the evolution of British Empire attack doctrine on the Western Front. Indeed, the techniques first implemented there, and in the Battle of Arras of which it was a part, would be applied with even greater success a year later during The Hundred Days. For Canada, of course, Vimy had far greater significance, not only to contemporaries but in the decades since the war. The siting of Canada's principal Great War memorial on the ridge's apex, Hill 145, reflects the central role the battle has played in explaining how a nation was 'forged in fire.' Cloaked in myth, the Battle of Vimy Ridge calls out for a dispassionate re-examination of events now a century past.

The importance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in the broader context of Great War military history is straightforward. It was an unquestioned victory for British Empire forces in a year marked for the most part by disheartening setbacks, and in the process vindicated the new 'bite-and-hold' attack doctrine that had emerged from the bitter lessons of the Somme in 1916. For the Canadian Corps, it had a profound impact on the collective spirit of officers and men, and marked the beginning of a string of victories that would solidify the Corps' reputation as a premier fighting force. Ironically, while the British Empire saw Vimy as a notable victory, for Germany it was seen, at worst, as a minor setback, its adverse consequences quite easily contained.

As important (and clear) as the battle's decisive outcome was for Canada's soldiery, its impact on the Canadian home front was murkier. The Anglo-Canadian majority had gone to war willingly in 1914, even if, as a British colony, Canada had not had the right to declare war in its own right. During the next two and half years, Canadians had persevered, despite having to make enormous collective sacrifices and bear enormous individual pain.

By 1917, the focus was on enlistment, or rather the lack of it. For the British Canadian majority, the problem was obvious – French Canadians’ manifest failure to do their duty. The figures for French Canada, and especially the heartland of Quebec, were indeed dismal, but we can at least understand the factors which discouraged French Canadians from volunteering for a ‘British war.’ Canadians of British descent had provided about 90 percent of the men who were serving overseas, an admirable record on the surface, but fully half of these were British immigrants. Little wonder German soldiers saw their ‘Canadian’ opponents at Vimy as *Englische Soldaten*.

Those who believed the cause was worth dying for had already enlisted by 1917. Faith could not be broken with these heroes, and loved ones believed it was high time others served, even if they had to be compelled. In a bitterly contested election, a temporary fusion of Conservatives and most English-speaking Liberals campaigned under Prime Minister Borden’s Unionist banner for vigorous prosecution of the war, and its corollary, conscription for overseas service. Opposed were the vast majority of French Canadians and most ‘new Canadians’- the polite phrase for continental European immigrants. Neither group felt an emotional attachment to Anglo-Canadians’ ‘mother country’, and hence viewed Canada’s war commitment more dispassionately. Among Anglo-Canadians, a significant minority – mostly farmers and urban working men – also opposed compulsory service, even if they generally supported the war itself.

On 9 April 1917, an army which had not even existed 33 months earlier stormed Vimy Ridge in the most successful attack of its size mounted by British Empire forces up till that time. A mere 64 days later, the Military Service Act – overseas conscription – was tabled in the House of Commons. In a sincere – but vain – hope that the country might somehow hold together, Borden promised that the actual conscripting would be delayed until the electorate had spoken. There was plenty of sincerity, conviction and, unfortunately, moral certainty on both sides, with a predictable result - the campaign started badly and got steadily meaner in spirit. In the end, the Unionists carried the day, with 57% of the popular vote and an overwhelming parliamentary majority. Yet the franchise had been shamelessly manipulated, disfranchising most immigrants from enemy countries, and even more blatantly, enfranchising close female relatives of serving or deceased soldiers, the vast majority of whom, given enlistment demographics, were of British descent. In light of these measures and the fevered

propaganda inundating Anglo-Canadian voters, the election result was actually remarkably close.

French Canadians were not the only community to have their loyalty questioned in 1917. German-Canadians were viciously pilloried for their supposed allegiance to the Kaiser, while the 'crimes' which made most Ukrainian-Canadians suspect were being poor and having Austria-Hungary stamped on their immigration documents. The so-called 'enemy aliens' became a problem during the war not because they were disloyal but because nativist Anglo-Canadians became terrified of 'the enemy within.'

The war was fought by the peoples of the Western democracies for many reasons, but not the least, as British propagandists phrased it, to build a home fit for heroes – a society which would be more economically and socially fair for all and thus serve as a worthy memorial to the war's sacrifices. Ottawa's reluctant acceptance of its responsibility for disabled veterans and the families of the deceased proved a modest, if lonely, exception to its general inaction on reform. However, the lot of the mostly working class families of serving soldiers speaks volumes, dependent as they were for assistance on the handouts of a charity, the Patriotic Fund. By 1917 crowds at patriotic rallies – working and middle class alike - called for not just the conscription of men but the conscription of wealth, or in the fiery slogan of the day, Canadians should either fight or pay. Cynicism about war profiteering and the erosion of family incomes by spiralling inflation hung over the country like a pall.

Unquestionably, 1917 was marked by nobility of Canadian sacrifice. But the extent to which there was a point to the sacrifice - that it was in our 'national interest' – was questioned by substantial numbers of Canadians, and not just those outside the dominant British-Canadian community. The war experience of these dissenters was as valid as that of the patriots and imperialists. While there is no question that Anglo-Canadians, regardless of their other divisions, experienced a collective 'national' awakening whereby many began to feel at least as Canadian as British, this homegrown identity fell short of accommodating most French Canadians' aspirations.

The home front war experience, no more clearly than during the tumultuous year of 1917, left Canada itself a casualty. The history of our soon-to-be sovereign dominion would be emblazoned with accounts of valour and sacrifice, with Vimy Ridge holding pride of place. But the war had cost Canada a lot more than its collective

innocence. On the home front, as in France and Belgium, it was attritional warfare. But unlike the experience of the Canadian Corps 'over there,' many of these battles were not victories.

In the decades following the war, these grim home front realities were largely subsumed, at least among the British-Canadian majority, within a more uplifting construct, the idea that the nobility of Canada's suffering, with Vimy Ridge the centerpiece, had transformed colony into nation. Given the alternatives, this was perhaps understandable, but it distorted (and still distorts) the reality of what happened in April 1917 and its true impact on Canada. While it can be argued that the 'Vimy myth' has been and is a relatively harmless self-deception, it wrought considerable damage on the writing of Canadian military history. In particular, the Canadian Corps' success was consistently attributed to Canadian exceptionalism, and Vimy and other battlefield achievements were repeatedly called upon to do 'heavy lifting for nationalism.' The result was unfortunate, for most accounts were more laudatory than analytical. While the current generation of Canadian military historians have undone much of the damage, the former perspective remains the bane of popular history, as book store shelves or the output of the mass media and internet will readily attest.

A century has passed since the Canadian Corps stormed Vimy Ridge. The intention of *Vimy 2017: From Both Sides of the Ridge* was to deepen our understanding of what really happened there, to dispel the many myths surrounding the battle, especially those gripping Canadians, and to remind historians and members of the public alike that there were, indeed, two sides of the ridge, two armies whose soldiers fought and died there, two societies from which those soldiers were drawn, and two sets of historical memories and consequences. As the various papers that follow attest, the superb scholarship on display at the conference went far toward achieving this goal.