

12. Reflections on Vimy and World War I: March 27-31

Less than two weeks from now, on April 9, it will be the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy. This signals victory in the First World War for the Canadian divisions fighting in the army of the British Empire is regarded by many as marking a crucial step in the shaping of our country's sense of distinct nationhood. I have seen the monument on Vimy Ridge commemorating the victory and the sacrifice only in photographs, and many times have gone back to them, for the memorial is truly awesome and, as I see it, unique in impressing upon the viewer an overwhelming sense of both pride and mourning. I hope to be able to travel there myself one day. However, over the years I have also come to view it in the context of the entire World War.

Unlike World War II, the First World War was not in my ken as a child in the Netherlands. Stories of the former I heard constantly from my parents and opa and oma, for they had lived through the brutal German occupation of the country, and later I also encountered them in my own reading. The monument, in my home town of Zwolle, to the mostly civilian war dead, which, because of the Nazi holocaust of the Dutch Jews, numbered well over a hundred thousand, was both simple and eloquent in its beautiful park-like setting and always made a deep impression on me whenever I passed it. World War I, on the other hand, was only a date. While Belgium was ruthlessly invaded and occupied by the German Army at the beginning of the war, Holland managed to preserve its neutrality thanks to a last-hour revision of Germany's strategic Schlieffen Plan. The Dutch army was mobilized for the entire duration of the war; there was severe hardship because of food shortages—due mostly to the British naval blockage of Germany—and even, for a while in 1917, civil unrest, when a socialist take-over of the government seemed imminent, but the country held together, and Holland was spared the horrifying destruction and carnage suffered by other countries.

I became first aware of the huge impact the First World War made on Canada on November 11, Remembrance Day, of 1959. This was at the commemoration ceremonies at the war cenotaph in Wallaceburg, Ontario. I was in grade ten then of the Wallaceburg District High School, in my third month of being a student there. Being in the cadets—there was no military conscription at all later on, though—was obligatory for all male students in grade nine and ten. So on the morning of that day all of us cadets marched to the cenotaph, where we found a large number of veterans of the two World Wars already lined up in two distinct formations. The veterans of the Second World War, now mostly in their thirties and forties, were no big surprise to me: most of them had probably fought in the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945, and I could truly, albeit silently, hail them as such. But who were the gentlemen in the other large formation, they, too, all wearing their be-medalled ceremonial blazers, who were obviously a generation older? I made the connection almost instantaneously: veterans of the First World War—of which I knew very little at that time. They were almost as numerous as the veterans of World War II. Their number, of course, was to dwindle gradually over the next decades and come to a complete end in the early 2000's.

Their dwindling number was vividly impressed on me in the Remembrance Day

ceremonies I attended about a quarter of a century later in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. There was the usual laying of wreaths at the town cenotaph, but the preceding, longer-lasting ceremonies were held in University Hall (the great assembly hall of Acadia University where the annual Convocation took place). There were the usual short speeches, but for me a truly moving observance unfolded when an elderly gentleman—obviously a veteran of World War I and well into his eighties but still upright and spry-looking—slowly and solemnly read a long list of the names of all the soldiers from in and around Wolfville who had fallen in the two World Wars. His voice, as I recall, at times quavered a little but always remained perfectly clear when the names he read were of those who had made the supreme sacrifice in the earlier World War; he must have known many of them; they had been his comrades. When I attended the same ceremonies a few years later he was no longer there.

Over the few past decades I have usually watched on television the Remembrance Day ceremonies at the war cenotaph in Ottawa, and I am always struck by the large turnout of the general public. In fact—and many have observed the same—turnouts seem larger than they were a generation ago. World War I veterans are no longer with us, veterans of the Second World War are very few in number, well into their nineties now. The veterans are at present are those of the Korean War—and even they are well into their eighties now—and of the United Nations- and NATO-sponsored peace-keeping or limited-war operations (e.g. Cyprus, Bosnia, Central Africa, and Afghanistan) to which Canada has made major contributions since the Suez Crisis of 1956. The number of soldiers and related military personnel, male and female, who have lost their lives there is far, far smaller. As do many others, I often wonder if Canadians of the present generation would be willing to make the enormous sacrifices of lives lost in the two World Wars; the number of those killed, and not to forget those seriously injured, often maimed for life, was particularly horrendous in the First World War: 62,000 killed out of a population of less than nine millions. Other nations, on both sides of the conflict, suffered far greater losses: whole generations of men completely cut down in the prime of their lives. This fact more than anything else explains the pervasive pacifism which held whole nations in its grip during the twenties and the thirties.

My first meaningful encounter with the First World War through reading came when I was still a student at Wallaceburg High. As a grade thirteen student I was allowed to take out from the school library Erich Maria Remarque's semi-autobiographical novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, certainly the most famous and most read work of anti-war literature to emerge from this war or perhaps from any war. (It was because the novel had an episode of 'sex' that only those in grade thirteen had the privilege of being permitted to read it—that was the early sixties for you.) Many years later I was able to watch on video the superb movie Hollywood made out of it in 1930. It was not until the eighties, though, that my reading and viewing began to increase exponentially. Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, first published in 1961—and I learned, a favourite read of President John F. Kennedy which steered him towards his exemplarily measured handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis—came first and was followed a few years later by Pierre Berton's *Vimy*. His compelling, vivid account of

the Battle of Vimy Ridge launched me into ever more reading: a long stream of historiographical works covering the War in general or specific episodes such as Ypres, Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele, the fighting on the Eastern (German-Russian) front, and the final decisive battles on the Western front which took place in the summer and fall of 1918, as well as books filled with extracts from soldiers' correspondence and diaries and, last but not least, the deeply moving poetry—nearly all of it British—some of them wrote. All of this was rounded out by many movies and documentaries most of which I watched in video format. I don't claim to be an expert on the subject but I have learned a lot.

Towards the end of his book, Berton asks the question whether the victory at Vimy and the pride and the strong sense of nationhood it instilled at the time into the Canadian people were worth all the slaughter and the suffering, 6000 killed and thousands more seriously injured, even maimed for life: his answer in the last sentence is a decisive “no.” This question, of course, must be applied to the entire war, especially to the war on the Western front, where millions of soldiers died, although we must also take into account the entire war, where the total number of combatant dead amounted to nine millions, and added to this must be several million civilian deaths—think, above all, of the Armenian genocide. This overall question should be broken down into a number of subsidiary ones, of which I'll identify three and try to answer them briefly. First of all, was war inevitable? In other words, with the right moves and diplomacy on the part of the Great Powers could World War I have been prevented? Secondly, was total victory the only option for the Western allies? Finally, what about war guilt? In other words, was the Peace Treaty of Versailles right in placing the entire responsibility for the war on Germany?

From my reading of Tuchman and Margaret MacMillan's recent, *The War That Ended Peace*, my answer to the first question must be a guarded “yes.” Germany, France, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were certainly bracing for eventual war, each for its own reasons: Germany out of fear for encirclement by France and Russia, the latter two having joined themselves into an alliance in the 1890's; France from a spirit of revenge over its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, as a result of which it had to cede Alsace-Lorraine to a now unified German Empire; Russia out of fear for the growing might of the German Empire on its western border—for this reason alone, autocratic, tsarist Russia had allied itself with democratic, republican France—Austria out of its overriding desire to crush once and for all the small but militant nation of Serbia notorious for its pan-Slavic aspirations. All four deceived themselves into believing that when war could come it would be quick and decisive. Tuchman and Macmillan do a great job in their detailed and astute account of the several weeks of miscalculations, diplomatic bungling, and aggressive moves after the assassination of archduke Franz-Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo leading up to the outbreak of total war in early August 1914. Especially notable among these was Kaiser Wilhelm's so-called “blank cheque” to Austria-Hungary, which amounted to a go-ahead for the latter to attack Serbia, and the Russian move in late July to total mobilization, which both France and Britain (the latter initially thinking it could stay out of the war) might have stopped by making it abundantly clear to Russia they could and

would not support this bad and soon-to-be calamitous overreaction to Austria's declaration of war on Serbia—but this, of course, is only a “might.”

By the end of 1916 there was a stalemate on the Western front. The armies of France and the British Empire, on one side, and those of Germany, on the other, were dug into their trenches and bastions stretching for more than 500 kilometres from a narrow strip of Belgium next to the North Sea to the Jura Mountains of Switzerland. The Somme offensive, launched mainly by British forces on July the first, had been a slaughterhouse—twenty thousand British soldiers dead on that one day— with no significant gains for the allies; a regiment from Newfoundland was almost entirely wiped out. The Germans had held their defensive lines, but the bloodletting in their ranks, too, had been terrible. Their attempt throughout that year to take Verdun from the French had failed, costing them almost a hundred thousand lives, although the French had suffered even greater losses. For both sides it seemed that inflicting a total defeat on the enemy had become impossible. Not surprisingly, therefore, there were peace feelers coming from both sides by the end of that year, but they were feeble and failed. Germany held the stronger card and therefore was willing to accept an armistice that would still leave her armies standing far into Belgium and France. Understandably, this was completely unacceptable to the Western allies. Perhaps even more important, the conviction had hardened on both sides that, with the enormous sacrifices made, these should not be cast aside for the sake of an unacceptable armistice and eventual peace. Thus peace never had a chance. An armistice would not come until November 11 of 1918 when the Western allies, joined now by the might of the United States, had beaten back the German forces to such a degree that an invasion of Germany itself was imminent.

The third question is that of war guilt. Were the victorious Western allies right in heaping all of this on the shoulders of a defeated Germany, which was forced to pay incalculably huge reparations? In my judgment, Germany did indeed deserve a major share of the blame, but not all. Russia, which took no part in the negotiations since, under its new Bolshevik-revolutionary government, it had signed a separate, draconian peace with Germany in February 1918 and was now fighting a bitter civil war, was completely out of the picture. I would argue, though, that tsarist Russia, which regarded itself as the protector of all the Slavic peoples, had shown a fatal lack of judgment when, in response to Austria's declaration of war on Serbia, it had moved to total mobilization. A considerable portion of the blame must also be assigned to the Austria-Hungary: its punishment came in the form of a complete dismemberment which was virtually completed by the time the Peace Treaty was signed in June 1919. Finally, the full, official reckoning with the Ottoman Empire, which had been reduced by 1918 to the boundaries of today's Turkey, did not come until after the Treaty of Versailles in two separate treaties.

The totality of war guilt heaped upon Germany did indeed fly into the face of the actual facts. Reparations by Germany were in order but not of the magnitude stipulated by the Western allies, who were thus sowing the seeds of another world war.

A final thought. I have pointed to the spirit of both pride and mourning which has

animated our Remembrance Day commemorations since the end of the First World War. Over and above this, there is, I believe, also a spirit of sheer awe that past generations, especially the one of World War I, were willing to accept such enormous sacrifices. Such willingness is clearly not present in the generation of today. The sacrifices made by Canada since 1945 pale in comparison with those of the two World Wars, above all the First. A call for much greater than we willing to accept now, except perhaps, for the actual, immediate defence of our own country, would go unheeded.

Postscript: April 9

Today is the exact date of the anniversary. The commemoration ceremonies and the many thousands who have gathered at the monument, as I am able to watch them on television, are an impressive sight. Yesterday, and out of curiosity, I googled for photos of the monument of the Battle of Stalingrad. I had seen it before, but I needed to refresh my memory. Such a contrast! The Russian monument is a colossal statue—taller than the New York's Statue of Liberty—of an, as it were, Amazonian woman wielding an enormous sword: "*The Motherland is Calling.*" In the foreground, you see a much smaller but still awe-inspiring statue, emerging out of its rock-mass, of Soviet hero-man wielding a machine gun. It is altogether the triumphalism of victory in war in the defence of the Motherland. The monument at Vimy breathes the quiet of a nation's awe and mourning over the enormous sacrifice made, with the two pylons reaching into the sky like two hands raised upwards in a consummate longing and prayer for peace.