

World War I and Lessons for Contemporary Policy on War and Peace
Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, ON
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What experience and history teach is this — that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.
-G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History

The Group of 78 and Project Ploughshares are holding a conference to reflect, on the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, on whether and how policy-makers, diplomats, civil society and the armed forces today can help reduce the incidence of armed conflict and reinforce the foundations of a more stable, peaceful world.

Writing a year ago in *The Telegraph*, the eminent UK historian of World War I Hew Strachan remarked that “The centenary of the First World War must not be Remembrance Sunday writ large...If it simply reworks the familiar themes of remembrance, it will be repetitive, sterile and possibly even boring...We also need to recognise the degree to which this war shaped our thinking about all war: our notions of when it is right to fight and when not, of warfare as simultaneously necessary and wasteful”¹.

World War I has a special significance in Canadian history. Together, Canada and Newfoundland (not yet part of Confederation during World War I) lost over 68,000 soldiers in the war—more than in all other wars together, before or after World War I. Over 152,000 were wounded. Total casualties amounted to over 2.7 percent of the Canadian population at the time. World War I was a watershed in our country’s history. It was a stepping stone to Canada’s complete independence from Britain. Because of the valour of Canadian troops at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele some see the war as a defining event in Canada’s self-identity. But the conscription crisis was also a watershed in the fraught relationship between French and English Canada, a legacy which remains with us today.

Of course, the legacy of the “Great War” goes far beyond Canada, beyond the number of dead and wounded, and its traumatic impact on society at that time. The world of the 21st century is still struggling with the consequences of decisions made at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, including redrawn boundaries in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere. World War I and its aftermath changed the way war is prosecuted and the manner in which peace initiatives are undertaken. For all these reasons, as Strachan puts it so well, it is imperative to go beyond acts of remembrance, as important as those are.

Indeed, there can be no greater tribute to those who suffered and died than reflecting on the experiences of those involved in the war, from key decision-makers to the infantry in the trenches, to try to learn from those experiences, and particularly to avoid their mistakes. Our aim should be to make better decisions today on matters of war and peace. To prevent armed conflict, or to reduce its incidence. To strengthen the tools of diplomacy and peace-building. To inhibit the innovation of increasingly destructive weaponry, and reduce stockpiles of such weaponry wherever they exist. In short, to help build a more secure, stable, just and peaceful world.

¹ *The Telegraph*, 11 January 2013

Unquestionably, the world of 2014 is profoundly different from that of 1914, because the nature of war and peace in the 21st century has radically changed. The devastation of a nuclear conflict could far surpass anything ever experienced in past warfare. We are faced with new challenges and opportunities, both for war and peace, that simply did not exist a century ago, and we cannot expect to find applicable lessons in the wars of the 20th century for resolving many of today's current or potential crises.

Yet, as a recent editorial in *The Economist* put it, there are troubling parallels between the worlds of a century ago and today. There is a shifting global balance between a declining hegemon (Britain then, the U.S. now) and new emerging powers (Germany then, China now). There is an accelerating international arms race (today, including nuclear proliferation). There is a region which is riven with strife and instability whose problems the major powers seem unwilling or unable to resolve (the Balkans then, the Middle East now). But, as *The Economist* aptly suggested, perhaps the most troubling parallel is complacency. War in 1914 was widely anticipated to be so destructive that it was considered extremely unlikely².

The aim of the Group of 78 and Project Ploughshares in convening a conference on the centenary of World War I is to bring together historians and others—from civil society, the diplomatic and military communities—to reflect on the experiences of the “Great War”. Historians will illuminate the discussion with the events preceding, during and following the war. Others will seek to draw parallels and divergences between the world of a century ago and that of today. In some ways World War I, despite its horrors and devastation, also helped to improve the world (for example, through the spread of democracy, and the spread of multilateral organizations culminating in the UN), so it is important to recognize these achievements.

The conference will focus on the following themes:

- Efforts to prevent war up to 1914
- Technological innovation in WWI
- Canada's decision to go to war and its consequences
- Canadian civil society and WWI
- War on the home front
- Ending the war, and the failure of peace
- The emergence of multilateral diplomacy to deal with war and peace
- Lessons from WWI for the long war on terror

While much of the conference will be focused on Canada's role and Canadian perspectives, this will be book-ended by more general and global themes. The conference will feature up to three keynote speakers, and up to seven panels. Each panel will be opened by a perspective from a historian and followed by perspectives from civil society and the diplomatic and military communities. The non-historians will draw out implications or insights for war and peace in our own time. There will be opportunity for the audience to participate in the discussion. The organizers are particularly committed to engaging youth in the conference.

² 21 December 2013