

WW I and the struggle for democracy in Canada



The Great War's legacy can be found not on the killing fields of Flanders, but back on the home front

ABOVE: A crowd gathers in Victoria Park during the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. *Manitoba Archives, Foote Collection*

By Jamie Swift

A peace conference at a war museum? That sounds like one of those droll oxymorons, my favourite being “industrial park.”

This past September, however, I participated in a peace conference on World War I held at the Canadian War Museum. (When that museum was being planned, there was a concerted but unsuccessful push for it to be a War and Peace Museum.) The event was organized by the Group of 78, an Ottawa organization that promotes peace and justice in foreign policy, and Project Ploughshares.

The international conference had a “lessons learned” focus. The idea was to remember those 16 million killed and uncountable numbers wounded in what was called—at least until 1939—“The Great War.” But the organizers also decided that the best way of commemorating that titanic disaster is to reflect on ways of promoting peace a hundred years on.

“There can be no greater tribute to those who suffered and died,” they explained, “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.”

Of course, today’s world is far different from that of the Great Power competition that gave rise to WW I.

Yet the patriotic jingoism that fuelled

the Great War is still with us, as are global rivalries and a never-ending race for resources and markets. And in 1914 warfare had already been modernized, industrialized so that mass, long-distance killing was the terrifying order of the day.

Long before drone warfare and cluster munitions, Vasily Grossman described “the usual smell of the front line—a cross between that of a morgue and that of a blacksmith.” Grossman survived World War II and was one of the last century’s foremost war correspondents. He witnessed the horror of Stalingrad, the battle that tilted the war in favour of the Allies.

The horrors of war may have changed in the 21st century. Yet horrors they remain, that much is certain. One part of the Ottawa conference asked, how did World War I change Canada? Which legacies of change remain with us, having altered the face of our country?

Defined by war?

I became interested in issues around Canada and war in 2006 when Canada shifted to a counterinsurgency mission in Kandahar, Afghanistan. At the same time, it was becoming obvious that peacekeeping—once a linchpin of English Canadian self-identity—was on the wane. My curiosity increased as Canada’s failed military mission in Afghanistan unfolded. The Conservative Government, elected just before the shift to Kandahar, would quickly undertake a concerted “warrior nation” rebranding effort.

Part of this effort to reshape Canada’s



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(or at least English Canada's) self-image involves picking up on—and amplifying—the theme of “a nation forged in fire.” According to this telling, World War I was not a futile holocaust. It was Canada's war of independence. The *birth of a nation*. I have a Royal Canadian Legion ball cap that proclaims just that, along with the word VIMY in big, bold, gold letters. This myth-symbol complex, promoted as Canada's Official Story, focuses on war as our country's defining centrepiece.

Standing at the War Museum a hundred years after the start of that war, Prime Minister Harper (2014) claimed that the devastating battles that followed are a source of “deep national pride.” Stephen Harper glorified the war. “Canada as a truly independent country was forged in the fires of the First World War.”

My friend and co-author, historian Ian McKay, calls this the “Big Bang” Theory of Canadian History. According to the warrior nation creation myth, nations need wars to define their identities.

World War I certainly did change Canada. Some 66,000 were killed, with countless others spiritually and physically maimed. The WW I conference at the War Museum discussed how Canadians on the home front were spurred to political action in ways that altered the country forever.

The role of civil society in this transformation is a story rather different from the dignity-of-arms-and-martial-sacrifice narrative. These familiar tales tell us very little about the causes and consequences of the Great War—the lessons we can learn from the tragedy. Rather, they tell us what we should *feel*

about the war.

One hundred years ago

Let's consider Canada as it was in 1914.

Our country was a profoundly undemocratic place. The majority of people lacked even basic democratic rights. Women were barred from voting. Aboriginal people and other non-whites were similarly disenfranchised. As historian David Tough explains, “Elections were the privilege of a white and male minority.”¹

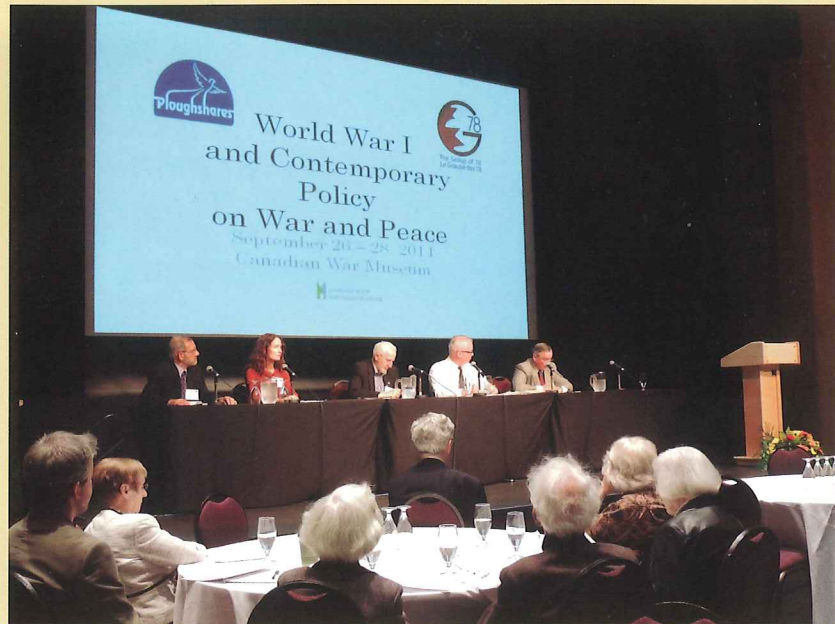
WW I Canada was also fractured by inequality in the distribution of its fabulous bounty of natural wealth. Pro-business governments kept taxes low. Public services—especially to help the most vulnerable—were rudimentary at best. Indeed, public provision scarcely even existed, as an ethic of individualism held that it was up to the poor to look after themselves, with churches and private charities struggling to fill the gaps.



RIGHT: This portrait of staunch anti-militarist Agnes Macphail was taken in 1939.

World War I and Lessons for Contemporary Policy on War and Peace

Canadian War Museum
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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 worked together to organize this conference in Ottawa in September. The goal was to bring together historians and commentators from civil society and the academic, diplomatic, and military communities to consider the “Great War” in relation to issues of contemporary international peace and security.

What can we learn from World War I to prevent armed conflict in our day, strengthen the tools of diplomacy and peacebuilding, inhibit the innovation of increasingly destructive weaponry, and reduce the stockpiles of costly weaponry?

The conference focused on efforts to prevent war up to 1914, technological innovation in WW I, Canada’s decision to go to war and its consequences for Canadian civil society, and ending the war and the failure of the peace.

World War I has a special significance in Canadian history. Together, Canada and Newfoundland (not yet part of Confederation) lost more than 68,000 soldiers—more than in all other wars combined, before or after World War I. More than 152,000 were wounded. Total casualties amounted to 2.7 per cent of the Canadian population at the time.

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.

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. For example, the devastation of a nuclear conflict would far surpass anything ever experienced in past warfare. However, as we mark the 100th anniversary of WW I over the next four years, remembrance should include a rededication to actually learning lessons from this conflict to prevent war in our day and build sustainable peace where conflict has spun out of control into armed violence.

The Group of 78 will publish a report of the conference proceedings early in 2015.

Despite repression of Aboriginal people from Batoche in 1885 to Oka in 1990, imperial misadventures from the Boer War and WW I to Kandahar, some Canadians really do believe that the military is always on the side of freedom and democracy.

The main source of Ottawa's income was the tariff, widely despised in the agricultural west. Farmers knew it benefitted central Canadian manufacturers. Banks and railways were particular targets of populist resentment. Laissez-faire ideology was so strong that nickel from Sudbury was still making its way to Germany in 1916.

Although immigration policy tended to favour people from the British Isles, vital hinterland industries like mining and forest products relied on cheap labour from eastern and central Europe. State policy discriminated against those trying to form unions, further institutionalizing inequality.

In the Canada of 1914 the privileges of the affluent trumped the needs of the majority.

But democracy—both political *and* economic—is hardly static. It ebbs and flows. In 1990 the civil society-led Velvet Revolution had just won the day. Vaclav Havel, a key author of the demise of state socialism and first president of non-Stalinist postwar Czechoslovakia, addressed the United States Congress. U.S. politicians were basking in the aftermath of the Cold War's end. The Czech essayist, poet, and philosopher warned the Washington politicians that full democracy is “no more than an ideal.” He told the surprised lawmakers that “you, too, are merely approaching democracy.”

When the Great War broke out, social movements—civil society, if

you will—were challenging the status quo, promoting democracy. Feminists were attacking institutionalized gender inequality and the gross unfairness of being denied basic voting rights. Workers' movements were organizing for better wages and working conditions. Farmer-populists were gaining strength.

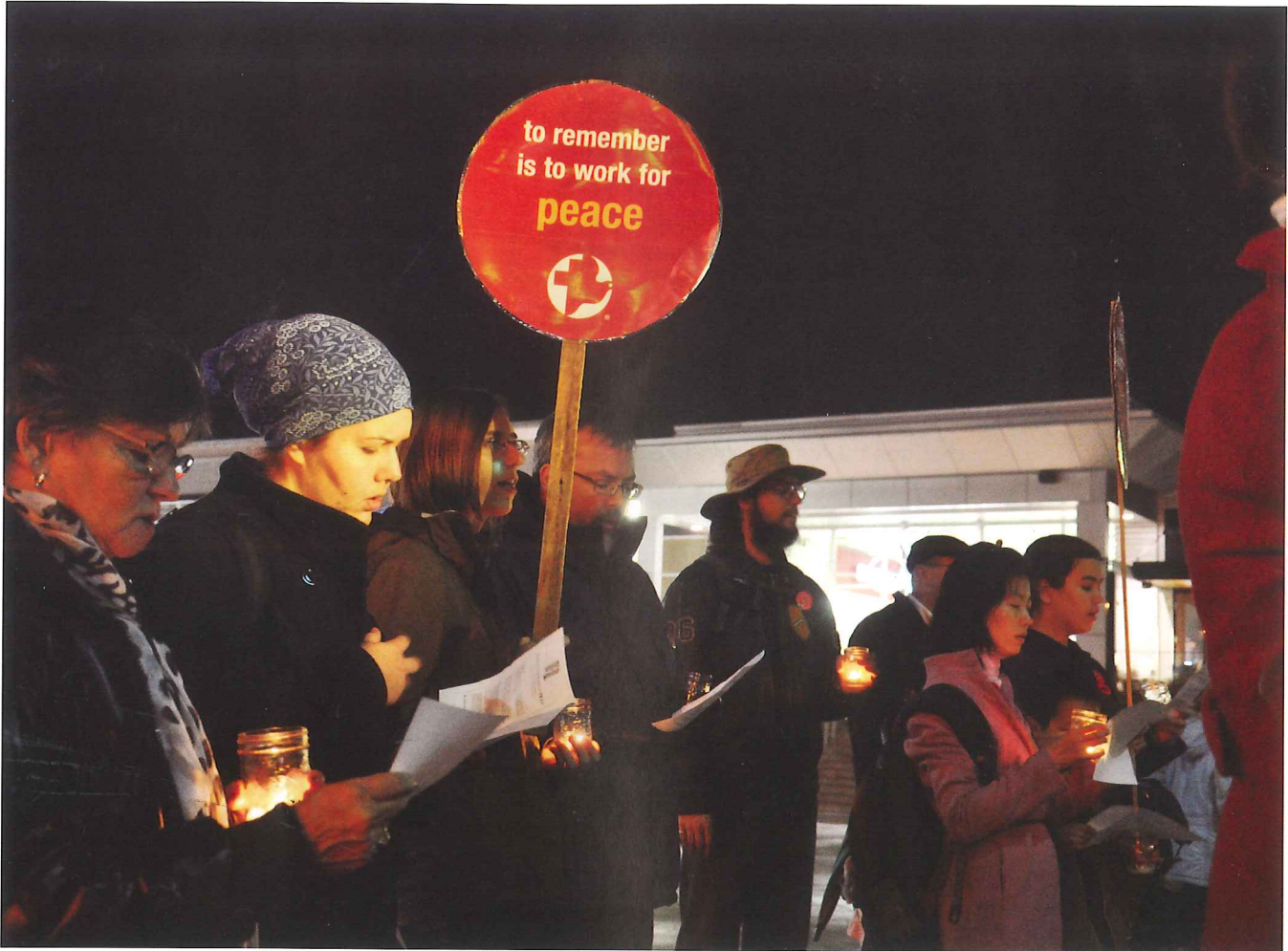
These movements were to make major gains as a result of the war. In this way, the Great War *was*, in part, the birth of a nation. But hardly in the sense of the patriotic “war of independence” story told by ball caps and leading politicians.

The birth of a nation

The main critique of the birth-of-a-nation story is that the war—and particularly the conscription crisis—fractured Canada along linguistic lines. And it certainly did just that.

By the spring of 1917 the Conservative government of Robert Borden was moving quickly toward conscription. It knew it had to erode widespread opposition to war profiteering articulated by a growing chorus of voices calling for “conscription of wealth.” So the Borden government brought in a limited Income War Tax. A weak tax, it was essentially a political gesture. Nonetheless, it was Canada's first income tax, a foot in the door for fiscal fairness.

Then there was the infamous 1917 election. Conscription was the ballot issue. Borden's government gave women—or some women—the vote. But “enemy aliens” were simultaneously



ABOVE: A candlelight vigil, co-sponsored by Project Ploughshares and Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, was held in the town square in Waterloo, Ont., on Remembrance Day.

disenfranchised. This sleazy manoeuvre based women's voting rights on what someone else (a male relative in the military) was doing. But, like the income tax, it was a foot in the door for democracy. A step toward Vaclav Havel's understanding of democracy as something for which we must struggle.

On the angry farmer front, just before the 1917 election the Borden government exempted farm workers from conscription. But within a few months of gaining its pro-conscription majority, the government betrayed the farmers with an Order in Council making them subject to conscription. Canada's formal political structure—two dominant

parties in English Canada—would change permanently. David Tough describes the “conscription-fuelled growth of farmer and labour parties.”

The immediate postwar period revealed profound shifts in the political landscape. Ontario elected a farmer-labour government under the United Farmers in 1919. Western populism exploded with the rise of the Progressive Party. No one symbolized the postwar changes more than the staunch anti-militarist Agnes Macphail.

The rural Ontario teacher joined the United Farm Women of Ontario and was elected as Canada's first female Member of Parliament. She was the first

president of the Ontario Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (forerunner to today's NDP) and the first woman elected to the Ontario legislature. A pacifist who championed pensions for seniors and radical prison reform, Macphail denounced cadet training in schools for generating a "bombastic" military spirit of "toy soldierism."

Political turbulence in the aftermath of WW I is not usually associated with the fiery Ms. Macphail. It is usually symbolized by the historical milestone that was the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. Worker organizing and resistance to the injustices of unfettered capitalism exploded during and after the war.

Legacy of WW I

This is the democratic—as opposed to the patriotic—legacy of WW I: a gradual broadening of formal democracy; an opening up of the political process; advances for women; and the recognition that the government could and should intervene in the economy in favour of the public good, not just private interests. Social movements animated by the home front injustices rampant during WW I helped to accelerate already existing political momentum that would, eventually, bring more social justice to Canada.

This interpretation challenges the Official Story, the dominant birth-of-

a-nation mythology. A variation of this patriotically correct story has it that we owe our freedoms to military efforts overseas. Despite repression of Aboriginal people from Batoche in 1885 to Oka in 1990, imperial misadventures from the Boer War and WW I to Kandahar, some Canadians really do believe that the military is always on the side of freedom and democracy.

This story performs vital ideological work. As David Tough shows, it shields *militarism from critique*. Yellow ribbons, support-our-troops imperatives define the military as inherently heroic. If we value democracy, the story goes, we should thank the soldiers who sacrificed themselves defending it against an alien threat. And we should support the latest war to which Ottawa dispatches them.

Yet it is clear that the Great War's democratic legacy can be found not on the killing fields of Flanders and battles like Vimy and Passchendaele, but back on the home front. This is where Canadians organized to try to make their country a better, more democratic, more egalitarian place to live.

"How are we to remember the war and those who died in it?" asked veteran Canadian journalist Bob Chodos (2014) just as Ottawa's \$83-million program of war commemoration was starting. "The longest battle of the First World War, the struggle over its meaning, is still not over." □

Note

1. My analysis of the political effects of World War I in Canada relies in part on Tough (2015).

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