

"Birth of a Nation"

The victory at Vimy Ridge was greeted with awe and enthusiasm in Canada, and the battle quickly became a symbol of an awakening Canadian nationalism. One of the prime reasons is that soldiers from every region of Canada — fighting together for the first time as a single assaulting force in the Canadian Corps — had taken the ridge together. As Brigadier-General Alexander Ross would famously say of the battle: ". . . in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation." The triumph at Vimy also led, two months later, to Byng's promotion out of the Corps, and to his replacement by Arthur Currie — the first Canadian commander of the Corps.

Vimy also became emblematic of Canada's overall sacrifices in the First World War — especially its 60,000 war dead — sacrifices that convinced Prime Minister Robert Borden to step out of Britain's shadow and push for separate representation for Canada and the other Dominions at the Paris peace talks after the war.

The sense of national pride and confidence sparked by Vimy was fueled in subsequent decades by the construction of a massive limestone memorial atop Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge, inscribed with the names of the 11,285



Canadians who died in France in the First World War with no known grave.

The soaring white monument, on land given to Canada by France, has drawn pilgrims for nearly a century, perpetuating Vimy's iconic image as the place where Canada came of age.

Vimy Monument
The Vimy Monument atop Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge © Richard Foot

Mythmaking

In recent decades a new generation of scholars has begun to question the iconic status of the battle, arguing that Canadians' understanding of Vimy Ridge is the result of mythmaking.

Vimy was a proud moment for Canada. But in spite of the impressive victory there, the battle was strategically insignificant to the outcome of the war. No massive Allied breakthrough followed either the assault on the ridge or the wider Battle of Arras of which it was a part. As historian Andrew Godefroy writes in *Vimy Ridge, a Canadian Reassessment*, "To the German army the loss of a few kilometres of vital ground meant little in the grand scheme of things." The war would rage on for another 19 months after Vimy, taking the lives of many of the Canadians who had survived and triumphed there. Other Canadian battles, such as the 1918 victory at Amiens, had greater impact on the course of the war, but are far less known.

Some historians have also noted the fact that Vimy wasn't purely a Canadian accomplishment. Not only was Julian Byng, the Canadian Corps commander, a British officer, but so were dozens of other officers in the Corps, including Major Alan Brooke (later Field Marshall, Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the Second World War) who was instrumental in planning the artillery barrages at Vimy. And while most of the infantry that attacked the ridge were Canadian, they would not have been able to go up the slopes of the ridge without the British artillery, engineers and supply units that supported them.

It has also been argued that Vimy was mythologized in Canada because it occurred on Easter Monday, giving the battle religious significance. "Once the battle was identified with the rebirth of Christ," writes historian Jonathan Vance in *A Canadian Reassessment*, "it was only a small step to connect Vimy with the birth of a nation. With the provinces represented by battalions from across the country working together in a painstakingly planned and carefully executed operation, the Canadian Corps became a metaphor for the nation itself."