The war to end all wars

Aedan Helmer, Ottawa Sun - August 2, 2014

Tim Cook is Canada's leading First World War historian, director of research at the Canadian War Museum and adjunct research professor at Carleton University. He has published six award-winning volumes on the topic: No Place to Run (2000), Clio's Warriors (2006), At the Sharp End (2007), Shock Troops (2008), The Madman and the Butcher (2010), and Warlords (2012).

His upcoming book, The Necessary War, is Cook's first full volume chronicling Canada's efforts in the Second World War, and will be released in hardcover in September.

Q: What is the lasting legacy of the First World War on Canada?

A: The war means different things to different people and different nationalities. Canada has used the war to make it into a kind of trial by fire, coming of age event.

We made our reputation during the war as shock troops — as hard-hitting fighting forces — and over time, it is seen as a crucial event in our history ... and it really profoundly changed the country.
It brought in conscription, income tax, women's right to vote, Canada making a name for itself on the world stage through its fighting forces, homegrown heroes like Billy Bishop, Sir Arthur Currie.

They all come together into this momentous event, and the country is really never the same again.

Q: Was it difficult at first to justify sending our troops to a European conflict?

A: The Germans were very much demonized, and the invasion of Belgium, which had been a neutral nation, was quite a shocking event for the British and for Canadians. So it was about liberating the small, democratic countries of Europe that were being occupied, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Britain — they framed this as a war for liberal ideas, for liberalism, a war for democracy.

Those in fact did motivate Canadians, and it wasn't hard to convince them after the second battle of Ypres, after the first gas attack.

Q: How did the evolution of Canada's fighting force happen so quickly?

A: We had almost no professional army before the war, although there were about 60,000 men in the militia, so there was some military training, but they weren't ready for an industrialized war.

We had no machine guns in any great number, and even if we did, the war on the Western Front was so different from the one everyone had planned for, it probably wouldn't have mattered much anyway.

The four Canadian divisions fought together as a small army, learning from the British and the French, and were able to process effectively.

This all culminates in April of 1917 at Vimy, which was an important tactical victory, and it continues at battles at Hill 70 and Passchendaele, and the Hundred Days Campaign, which is a critical phase of the war where the Canadian Corps, now 100,000-strong and commanded by a Canadian, Sir Arthur Currie, deliver victory in a number of critical battles.

That's probably our most important military legacy from the war.

Q: What kinds of contributions are coming from the home front?

A: We were an agricultural power, we were exporting millions of bushels of wheat and oats and grain to the British Empire and basically feeding the Western Armies.

We had no munitions industry at the outbreak of the war, and by 1917, one-quarter of all British shells fired on the Western Front are made in Canadian factories.

Q: At the outset, many believed this would be a short war.

A: There were quite a few warnings that this was going to be a long and costly war.

There was a lot of reporting in newspapers in Europe warning of a coming Armageddon, that this will be armies of millions fighting each other, and that this will not be a short conflict.

Q: There were many conflicting attitudes over the war between English- and French-Canadians.

A: Canada is only 8 million people at the time, it's largely a rural country, and it is a proud piece of the British Empire. Quebec, which makes up about a third of the country's population, has very different ties to Britain for historical reasons, and language and culture dating back to the conquest.

The generally accepted view is that French Canada didn't have the same ties to France as English Canada did to Britain, but I think that view is changing.

A lot of the French-Canadian soldiers were there and proud to be liberating France.

Q: Women gain the right to vote, though only those with direct ties to enlisted soldiers.

A: It was a calculated move to win that critical 1917 election to bring in conscription.

It gives the vote to the mothers and wives of soldiers overseas, and it is thought that 95% of them voted for (Borden's pro-conscription) union government.

(The women's vote) was going to come, the suffragettes and enfranchisement movement had been debated fiercely before the war, but the war certainly is the catalyst for change.

Q: What is the major postwar impact on Canada?

A: During the war, the civil service becomes larger, Canadians expect more government interventions in their lives — the ultimate intervention, of course, is forcing young men to fight against their will through conscription — and that carries over into the postwar years.

We were a small nation with absolutely no international role before the war. The financial relationship changes, where we borrow hundreds of millions of dollars from the United States, and we begin to turn financially away from London and towards Washington, and that's a change that will be completed by the Second World War.

Q: How does the war continue to resonate in Canada 100 years on?

A: We see this war as on the cusp of old wars of empire, fought by kings and monarchies who are all intermarried anyways, but it's also on the cusp of the industrialized warfare of the 20th century, and that fascinates people — the endurance in the trenches on the Western Front, the horrific slaughter, how soldiers coped and endured.

And there are strong genealogical ties — 620,000 enlisted, so there are millions of Canadians today who have a genealogical link, and many millions more who have a link to the union army.