

'Canada forged in the fires of First World War': Stephen Harper marks anniversary of historic conflict

Lee-Anne Goodman, Canadian Press - August 4, 2014



Prime Minister Stephen Harper pauses for a moment after he laid a wreath at the National War Memorial during a ceremony to mark the 100th Anniversary of the First World War, in Ottawa, Monday August 4, 2014.

The Canadian Press/Fred Chartrand

Prime Minister Stephen Harper marked the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War on Monday, crediting the conflict, despite its terrible loss of life, as an essential part of Canada's development as a nation.

"Amid the appalling loss, by any measure, Canada as a truly independent country was forged in the fires of the First World War," Harper told a military crowd gathered at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

Canada's involvement in the war began a century ago when Britain declared war against Germany.

The First World War became a critical turning point for a country not even 50 years old when the conflict erupted in Europe.

The successes of Canadian soldiers on battlefields that included Ypres, Vimy and Passchendaele spurred a deep sense of national pride and a belief that Canada could stand on its own, separate from Britain, on the international stage.

The conflict also saw Canada supporting allies whose sovereignty and very existence were threatened, Harper said, noting that the country still does the same.

"It is why today, we stand once again beside friends and allies whose sovereignty, whose territorial integrity — indeed, whose very freedoms and existence — are still at risk," Harper said in a veiled reference to Canada's tough stands in support of Ukraine and Israel.

"Nothing has changed. For our Canada is still loyal to our friends, unyielding to our foes, honourable in our dealings, and courageous in our undertakings. This remains the character of our country."

Earlier Monday, Harper visited the National War Memorial near Parliament Hill, where he inspected a ceremonial guard and lay a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier.

In all, about 620,000 Canadians enlisted during the First World War and about 419,000 went overseas. About 60,000 would never come home.

"This great conflict on the other side of an ocean need not have involved us," Harper said. "But then, as now, when our friends and the values we share with them are threatened, Canadians do not turn away."

A century later, Harper said, the world still grapples with the dreadful toll of the conflict.

"We have had 100 years to contemplate this war," he said.

John Babcock, pictured in 2008, was Canada's last survivor of the First World War. The veteran died in 2010.

Brian J Gavriloff / Postmedia News

"And yet what it means to live mired in muck and disease, to fight through mud deep enough to drown a man, to lose thousands of lives in a single day, to gain what could be measured in yards ... the sense of these things eludes us still. We can only imagine their fear, their courage."

Harper paid tribute by name to several of the Canadian heroes of the conflict.

"The last survivor of those courageous men and women who went off to war a century ago — John Babcock — passed away in 2010," Harper said.

"But every time that we take a stand to defend the values for which they fought, and for which so many died, we remember their stories in the only way that really matters.

"Justice and freedom; democracy and the rule of law; human rights and human dignity. For a century, these are the things for which our fellow citizens fought. And this is the ground on which we will always take our stand."



Monday's anniversary was also marked in a number of cities across the country.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper, right, takes part in a ceremony to mark the 100th Anniversary of the First World War, in Ottawa, Monday August 4, 2014

The Canadian Press/Fred Chartrand

In Halifax, the start of the war was to be marked by the turning off of lights at significant landmarks.

Lights were to be turned off for one hour beginning at 10 p.m. at sites such as the old town clock on Citadel Hill and on the MacDonald Bridge spanning the city's harbour.

Local residents were also encouraged to turn their own lights off to pay tribute to those who fought.

In St. John's, N.L., an ecumenical service was to be held Monday evening at the Basilica Cathedral of St. John the Baptist to mark the exact moment the British colony's governor in 1914, Walter Davidson, was advised by telegram that Great Britain had declared war on Germany.

Davidson subsequently issued a "call to arms."

Meanwhile, in downtown Toronto, a group of young men dressed in turn-of-the-century newsboy costumes drew curious glances from passersby as they handed out *The Flanders Fields Post*, a fictitious historical newspaper, to draw attention to the anniversary.

One of the newsboys said he was glad for the chance to educate people about Canada's role in the First World War.

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