

Gwynne Dyer: Canada's Entry Into World War I

Gwynne Dyer, Special to National Post - August 6, 2014



Little Strathmore, east of Calgary, was Canada's most patriotic town: Every eligible man joined the army in 1914, except one — and he went as soon as the harvest was over.

Department of Defence

Paris, Ontario, was, in 1914, a Stephen Leacock sort of town: credulous, not too wise in the ways of the world, but enthusiastic and eager to please. It would be wrong to say that the news of the outbreak of war that August struck Paris like a bolt from the blue. That would imply threat. Rather, the war in Europe (not yet the Great War, let alone the First World War) came as a welcome diversion at the end of the summer.

"A crowd began to mill around Grand River Street," Donald A. Smith wrote in *At the Forks of the Grand*. "Prominent citizens trumpeted their considered

opinions. One said: 'The war will be over within three months. The Russians will roll in from the east and the British and French from the west, and they'll meet in Berlin before Christmas.' The crowd vigorously cheered his perspicacity. Then the Citizens' Band formed up in front of the fire hall and began to play martial music."

The French newspaper *Le Temps* saw something deeply poetic in the fact that English Canadian blood would now be shed for France, while French Canadians bled for England

In Montreal, when it was already clear that France, at least, was going to be fighting Germany, huge crowds paraded in the streets waving British and French flags and singing *La Marseillaise* and *Rule Britannia*. When Britain formally declared war on Germany on August 4 (automatically taking Canada with it), thousands of people came out to cheer in Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria. In the other Paris, in France, the newspaper *Le Temps* saw something deeply poetic in the fact that English Canadian blood would now be shed for France, while French Canadians bled for England.

Two weeks later, in the House of Commons in Ottawa, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the former prime minister, stood up and declared: "We are British subjects, and today we are face to face with the consequences which are involved in that proud fact." By then, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden had already offered to send one division (22,500 men) to Europe. It had secretly bought two submarines that had just been built for the Chilean navy, and had placed Canada's two decrepit training cruisers at the disposal of Britain's Royal Navy. Maybe Borden's government could have responded a little less eagerly, but it could not really have stayed out of the war unless it had decided to declare Canada independent then and there. Nobody had that in mind, not even the most ardent of Quebec Nationalists.

Canada was a very different country a century ago: The great majority of its 8-million people were actually of British or French descent, and few English Canadian families had been in the country for more than two or three generations. Nevertheless, sentimental ties are not the same as "vital interests," and there were no practical reasons why Canada's long-term interests depended on the maintenance of British power and prestige (except for the old but fading concern about American expansionism).

However, plenty of short-term interests were in play — many Canadian and British business interests were linked, for example — and in any case Canada was not a fully independent nation in 1914. Henri Bourassa, whose newspaper was the strongest public voice of French Canadian nationalism, would probably have preferred to copy the policy of the United States and declare Canada neutral in the war, but he understood that emotional, commercial and legal factors meant that Canada had to support the Entente powers (Britain, France and Russia). However, he stressed that it should do so "to the measure of its strength, and by appropriate means" — which did not, in his opinion, include sending Canadian troops to Europe.

But it was no use arguing. The national mood, at least in English Canada, would not have stood for anything less than full Canadian military commitment to the war. There was probably not a single person in Canada in August, 1914 (indeed, there were not even very many in Europe) who genuinely understood how the war had come about, but that didn't make any difference.

Although there was a tiny handful of pacifists in Canada, English Canadian popular culture was quite overtly militarist and jingoist. The young had no doubts about the war; nor did most of their elders. In 1914, they were not just English Canadians; they were British Canadians.

But the response of ordinary French Canadians was another story entirely. It was not a question of language or

culture, basically, but simply of geographical perspective — of where people thought they lived in the world. When the call for volunteers went out, recent immigrants from France enlisted just as readily as the most enthusiastic English Canadians: the town of Trochu in Alberta, which had been settled by French ex- cavalrymen in the years before the war, virtually emptied in 1914 as the men went back to fight for their mother country. But French Canada itself had long ago abandoned the delusion that it was part of Europe, and few French Canadians saw any reason to fight in its wars.

Right from the start, there were very big differences in the rate of volunteering: Far more volunteers came from English-speaking areas than French, of course, but also more from the West than the East, and more from the rootless cities, where the newspapers had the greatest influence, than from the settled rural areas. In fact, native-born Canadians of every sort, apart from the very young, the adventurous and the economically desperate, seemed somewhat reluctant to go and fight the Germans.

At the start, too, it was easy to find socially acceptable reasons not to volunteer. In 1914, for example, farmers still needed their children's labour, and since Britain depended heavily on Canadian agricultural products, they could always argue that their sons were more valuable to the war effort at home. And if all else failed, you could pretend you wanted to enlist and then get your mother to write you a note. In the early days of the war, volunteers would be turned away if their wives or mothers wrote a letter proving that their menfolk were needed at home.

The pro-British establishment's fears were correct: A large majority of those who joined the First Contingent were not Canadian-born

Despite all the public oratory and flag waving, the imperialist Montreal Star noted with some dismay on August 10 that only 20% of the volunteers so far were Canadian-born. A month later, the Canadian Military Gazette somewhat peevishly complained that there were 800,000 men eligible for military service in the country, so there should have been hundreds of thousands volunteering. There weren't. In the Toronto area, one regiment, the Mississauga Horse, was said to have only one native Canadian for every six or eight British-born volunteers. Montreal couldn't meet its quota for the First Contingent at all and the difference had to be made up with men from Winnipeg and the West. And the pro-British establishment's fears were correct: A large majority of those who joined the First Contingent were not Canadian-born.

The most extreme case was Alberta, which had been settled almost entirely during the preceding 15 years. In the first year of the war, Alberta contributed 22,325 men to the Canadian army (in addition to 5,600 British, French and Belgian reservists who went back to fight for the Old Country in its own army), out of a total population of less than half a million. From the Edmonton city area alone, 7,000 men enlisted, and the little town of Strathmore, east of Calgary, gained the distinction of being the most patriotic town in Canada. There, every eligible man joined the army in the fall of 1914, except one — and he went as soon as the harvest was over. But then, Strathmore had only been settled nine years before, and most of the settlers were from Britain.

There was, in fact, a fairly consistent pattern in the rate of volunteering in Canada, a curve sloping down from west to east. The longer a region had been settled, the more aware people were of their own separate identity and interests as Canadians, and the less they tended to see Britain's war as their own (however many flags they waved). The split between immigrants and native-born was very noticeable in a town such as Paris, Ontario, where just about half the population was Canadian-born, while the remainder were English immigrants attracted by the booming textile industry there. By mid-1915, the English-born in the town were openly accusing the Canadian-born of being "slackers." One person wrote to the local paper:

"In the present great war for the freedom of our beloved Empire, it behooves us in Canada to spring up from this drowsy slumbering attitude that the Canadian born are assuming towards our Motherland ... What is our little town of Paris doing in its share to win from the uncivilized, barbarous Hun? They, if we are beaten in this war, would come over from the United States and Germany in their millions, to take everything over from a pin to our federal government. If the Germans are victorious, the very first thing they would do would be to take over Canada. . . . They would fill every city, town and village, and hold drunken, debauching orgies."

Excerpted from Canada in the Great Power Game 1914-2014 by Gwynne Dyer. Copyright (c) 2014 Gwynne Dyer. Excerpted by permission of Random House Canada, a division of Random House of Canada Ltd. a Penguin Random House company. All rights reserved.

This page last modified: 09/01/2014 12:58:12
