

History Lecture #21 The Worst Winter

Monday, November 28, 2016 2:32 PM

Sir Arthur Currie

- The Canadian Corps needed a new officer and Arthur Currie was chosen
- He headed to Victoria where he bounced from job to job
- He joined the militia as a part time soldier
- He stole money to cover his financial ruin
 - Possibly faced jail time
 - The war was a savior for him
- In four years he became the most impressive general Canada had ever seen
- After the second battle of Ypres he was promoted to command the first division
 - He was successful and found he was very good at being a general
- He was a fast learner, smart, careful of the lives of his soldiers
- One of his weaknesses was that he had a difficult time connecting with his soldiers and earning the same respect that Bing did
 - They still respected him because he was a great military commander who wanted to preserve soldiers lives
- Curry cared a lot about his appearance



Audio 1



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Passchendaele

- Also known as the third battle of Ypres
- Summed up everything that was wrong with the war
- It still had a purpose
 - That was to deal with German submarines in the war
 - Unless something is done to deal with the submarines the country could starve
- Battle of Passchendaele was to liberate the ports for Britain to be able to feed itself
- The campaign began July 31 1917
- Continuous rain and lots of mud
 - Wettest summer in living memory
 - Water didn't drain it just sat and turned everything to mud
 - It was possible for soldiers to fall into the water puddles and drown
- 32 000 casualties after 3 days with significant land gain
- Passchendaele started with an important purpose but quickly deteriorated to a slogging mess
- The Canadian corps wasn't brought in until the end (October) of the battle to capture Passchendaele
- Once that was captured the battle was over
- The village was critical in wearing down the German army
- The community was virtually erased
- 300 000 Allie casualty
- Passchendaele was first and foremost a human tragedy

Conscription for Canada

- The Passchendaele campaign as it was dragging on highlighted a bad summer for the Allies
- The Russian revolution was already underway so it soon pulled out
- The French army dissolved into mutiny
 - Many soldiers refused to fight as they lost faith in generals and politicians
 - France was still in the war but it will not be involved in any attacks
- In Canada the volunteers were very little by late 1916-1917
 - Fewer and fewer men came to join the infantry for obvious reasons
 - Many full employment jobs with a lot more money than being a soldier
 - Casualty rate was discouraging
 - Men enlisted in safer parts of the army - the medical corps
 - There was also very few men who could meet the physical requirements
 - Specialist battalions were created to encourage men to enlist
 - The army had to lower their physical standards
 - By 1916 the army accepted anyone regardless of health and physical characteristics
 - They pulled people out of prison, no longer cared about good moral citizens
 - Enlisted older people too - Oldest person was 63
 - Underage soldiers became a real problem
 - Soldiers were as young as 10 years old
 - All of this wasn't enough
- Conscription became essential
- There was a perception that French Canada was not providing as much soldiers and effort as the rest of the country
- The government avoided this issue for years
 - Borden went and visited soldiers in hospitals in Europe
 - This moved Borden as he thought by not conscripting soldiers there will be more injuries and there is an obligation to reinforced units fully

- He has his ministers draft the Military Service Act of 1917
 - The goal was to conscript 100 000 soldiers
- The upcoming election against Borden and Laurier became about loyalty
 - Propaganda
- If you wore the uniform you could vote
 - This created many soldiers who were loyal to the unionist cause
 - Obviously they won a solid majority
 - Borden's government won the ability to run the war as they wanted
 - Conscript
- The Wartime Elections Act
 - Three provisions to fix the election and tilt it towards the unionists
 - Obviously a violation of democracy but at the time this didn't bother people

Halifax, 6 December 1917 The Winter of our Discontent

- Halifax was an important port at the time
 - It was the North American Base for the British Convoy
- A normal day turned abnormal
- A Norwegian ship was going from the Netherlands to New York
 - The Norwegian ship hit the side of the Mont Bland which was headed towards Europe full of explosives
 - The ship burned
 - Then the cargo exploded
 - Largest man made explosion ever seen
 - Shockwave was felt 300 miles away
 - The city was leveled instantly
 - 200 000 people were killed outright
 - 10 000 injured
 - 100's of people were blinded for life
- The explosion is comparable to the war on the front
- The following day a blizzard hit Halifax
- The winter of 1917 was the lowest point of the War for the Allies
 - Explosion, blizzard, election, coal shortage, little soldier enlistment,
- People were doubtful that the allies were going to last long in order for the Americans to join



Audio 1

Themes

- Passchendaele
 - Pointlessness of war
- Inhumanity and pointlessness of conscription
- Desperation
- Loyalty to Canada
 - And what it means if you didn't support the conscription