

History Lecture #17 Westerners

Monday, November 14, 2016 2:30 PM

Grand Strategy

- Battle of Tannenberg
- Battle of Masurian Lakes
- Generals actually cared about the death toll as they were trying to win the war without losing too many people
- The big question was where should the war be won
 - The Westerners believed the war could only be won on the western front
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- Douglas Haig
 - He was the commander in chief of the western front
 - He was philosophically attached to the western front
 - This was the most important front everything else was a side show
 - All that mattered was getting the Germans out of France and Belgium
 - He led the expeditionary front
- William Robertson
 - He was in line for Haig's job
 - He enlisted as a private
 - He became the Chief of the Imperial General
- The greatest accusation made about these people was that they only cared about the westerners
- The Canadian troops fought as part of the British army
 - Our generals fought below Haig
 - We were westerners by default



Audio 1

Audio recording started: 2:42 PM Monday, November 14, 2016

The 2nd Battle of Ypres

- The 2nd battle of Ypres took place in April 1915
- Canadians were last moved there to defend the territory around the city
- The city needed to be defended even though it was very difficult and dangerous
- The German gas attack occurred on the 22nd of April 1915
 - All those divisions who were attacked seized to exist
 - Allies had to defend two sides at once with half the number of people
 - This was a success for the Germans
 - All they had to do was continue to push south and cut off the allied troops and Ypres would be captured and perhaps the war would be won
 - All that stood in the way was a Canadian division
- The Canadians and British fought against the Germans over several days and were able to stabilize the line and wear out the Germans
- Historians wonder how a small not really trained Canadian division could win against a much better German army
 - Some would argue that they were too poorly trained and so they stood their ground and fought because they didn't know what was happening or what to do
 - Others would say they were trained too well and they stood their ground as it was common sense
- The most convincing explanation comes from Alden Nowlan in his poem "Ypres: 1915"
 - But I know that they stood there.. Held a line..
 - They were not prepared to abandon the situation and would rather die
 - And many did

The Somme

- A year later...
- Ypres was a defensive battle but Somme was more offensive so it captured the ideology of the Westerners
- The only reason offensive failed was because of size
 - So all you had to do was making them bigger
 - This was Haig's strategy throughout the war (make the offensive bigger)
- Haig had at his disposal a completely new army
- Lord Kitchner
 - He predicted WWI would be a long war
 - He was the British Minister of War
 - He created and led the New Army
 - They were all volunteers well trained and enthusiastic
- The New Army was the best army
- They were sent to action in July 1916
- The Somme a catastrophe
 - 60 000 lost on the first day
 - The entire population of London was lost on a single day in 1916
 - This single biggest casualty lost in British History
- The Canadians were brought into the campaign in December to capture Courcellette
- They were able to do this eventually
- This battle exemplified the failures of WWI
- The battle lasted 5 months from July to September
 - What they were supposed to take in 12 hours took 5 months
- The failure of the Somme should have motivated a certain degree of soul searching
 - This didn't happen
 - The westerners weren't deterred by the failure of the Somme
 - Once again they thought the problem was size
- April 1917 the offensive was supposed to be a French operation
- Canada was given the task of capturing Vimy Ridge

Vimy Ridge

- Vimy ridge is a nation building story

Vimy Ridge is a nation building story

- First by this time there were four Canadian divisions on the western front
 - These four divisions are acting together as a single corps
 - This was our first experimentation as a force of arms
 - Corps-Divisions-Brigades-Battalions
 - 1-4-3-4
- Britain and France tried and failed to capture Vimy Ridge
 - We were given a task that "founding nations" failed at
- It was Easter weekend
 - Resurrection symbolizes the birth of a nation
- Canadian nation was born in Vimy Ridge
- There are some things about the nation building mythology that go against this ideal Vimy Ridge victory
 - First it wasn't a complete Canadian victory, this battle wouldn't be won without the French and British and the Canadian army was lead by a British general
- Julian Byng was the general that lead the Canadian Core
 - Byng was a man of great energy and was a great disciplinarian
 - He spent a lot of time with his soldiers
 - As a result they developed great respect and love for him
 - He had no interest in fame or moving up the ranks
 - He was an innovator
 - He made the Canadian core unique, a product of flexibility and creative thinking
 - Byng was very big on making mock battlefields
 - He thought it was important to tell the soldiers what the generals were doing
 - He made sure that everyone knew what he was doing
 - He gave soldiers maps so everyone involved knew what was happening
 - He gave more power to people in lower ranks
- Canadians achieved this success at the cost of 10 000 lives
 - In the grand scheme this was a success 10 000 is a lot of people but in the context of the first world war this was "minor"
- In the grand scheme of things Vimy didn't really matter, it was meaningless
- The Canadian victory also wouldn't have been possible without the British
- Its impact is emotional and nationalistic but not really important for the War

Themes

- Inability for change /try something different
- Nationalism