

1917: the worst year in Canadian history

The Halifax explosion was just the knockout punch. Body blows included First World War casualty figures, a conscription crisis and a bitter election

J.D.M. STEWART

The Globe and Mail – Thursday December 6, 2007

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20071206.wcoexplosion06/BNStory/specialComment/>

Was 1917 the worst year in Canadian history? It would be a challenge to argue against it.

Ninety years ago today, during the height of the First World War, the city of Halifax was destroyed when the Belgian relief vessel Imo collided with the French munitions ship Mont Blanc in Halifax harbour.

The resulting fire led to the largest man-made explosion in history until the detonation of the atom bomb in 1945, and left more than 1,600 dead and 9,000 wounded in a city of only 50,000 inhabitants.

To make matters worse, a blizzard struck the next day, heaping more havoc on the shattered city.

"All this happened in the twinkling of an eye; and in its suddenness and extent the disaster surpassed anything experienced in France or Belgium," reflected prime minister Robert Borden in his memoirs.

But the Halifax explosion was just the knockout punch in a year in which Canada sustained a staggering flurry of body blows. Indeed, it can easily be argued that 1917 was the worst year in the history of the Dominion.

Not only was this the year of the terrible explosion commemorated today, 1917 also featured some of the worst casualty figures for Canada during the First World War, a divisive conscription policy, and the bitterest election in Canadian history.

While it is true there were significant triumphs for Canada in 1917 at places such as Vimy Ridge, the costs sustained there and elsewhere led directly to the need for the conscription of men, an issue that opened a deep fissure in national unity.

"It has in it the seeds of discord and disunion," Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier said of conscription. The policy was highly unpopular in Quebec and prompted many in English Canada to lash out at Laurier's home province.

"It is certainly not the intention of English Canada to stand idly by and see itself bled white of men in order that the Québec shirker may sidestep his responsibilities," said Saturday Night magazine.

A federal election ensued in late 1917 in what would be the most divisive campaign in Canada's past. The vote pitted Borden's Unionists - a combination of his Conservatives and a smattering of pro-conscription Liberals - against Laurier's remaining Grits. And while the campaign ended eight days before Christmas, you would not know it from the mud that was flying.

"On both sides of this sad and sordid domestic quarrel it was the extremists who made the most noise and did the most damage," wrote historian Roger Graham.

Even before the vote, there were more signs that 1917 was to go down in history for all the wrong reasons. The Borden government's Wartime Elections Act disenfranchised citizens who had been born in enemy countries if they had been naturalized after 1902. On the other hand, it shamelessly gave the vote to women, but only to those who had brothers, husbands or fathers serving in the military.

Borden's Unionists won the election, but the damage was already done to the country.

Away from the world at war, there were other troubling occurrences to drag 1917 into infamy. Canadian artist Tom Thomson died on Canoe Lake under circumstances that remain a mystery to this day; income tax was further entrenched as part of the business of government, making it more obvious that it was not ever going to be the promised "temporary measure"; and labour unrest was mounting as strikes increased dramatically.

And, in a augury of things to come, the Seattle Metropolitans became the first American-based team to win the Stanley Cup when they defeated the Montreal Canadiens.

Why does it all matter 90 years later? When The Globe itself considered the year in its New Year's editorial of 1918, it was not surprised to see that 1917 had been "strewn with unforeseen disasters and shattered hopes and prophecies." The trials of 1917 remind us all of the fragility and unpredictability of life.

Some of the forces that can turn against us are of our own making; others are beyond our control. In either case, patience, effort, fortitude and understanding are needed to overcome the adversity.

Plus, considering our history is instructive. When Canadians look back at 1917 and mull over tragedies such as the Halifax explosion and the political turmoil of that year, it is comforting to know that, after reaching such a nadir, the nation can respond, marshal its resources and demonstrate an impressive resilience to forge a better country.

J.D.M. Stewart teaches Canadian history at the Bishop Strachan School in Toronto