VIMY RIDGE MONUMENT: PART OF CANADIAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

JEREMY DIAMOND

Jeremy Diamond is the executive director of The Vimy Foundation and has spearheading efforts to create the state-of-the-art Vimy Education Centre in France, set for completion in April 2017, the 100th anniversary of the Battle Wof Vimy Ridge. He was formerly the managing director at Historica Canada.

Vimy Ridge has long been considered Canada's most recognizable First World War battle. Waged from April 9-12, 1917, it was the first unreserved success of the Canadian Corps during the war; the first time Canadians fought side by side as one force during the bloody four-year conflict; and the first time a nation succeeded in taking the tactically important Ridge from the Germans. Vimy Ridge also represents the moment when the leadership of the Corps and the new styles of organization were born and would later become the signature Canadian battle style for the remainder of the war.

The numbers are still staggering. More than 170,000 combatants (the majority of whom were part of the Canadian Corps); more than 10,000 casualties; 3,598 killed; four Victoria Crosses. Many believe that out of the battle came a new sense of nationhood for a young country. As First World War Brigadier-General A.E. Ross opined after the battle, "In those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation."

But Vimy was more than just a memorable victory. Unlike much of our past, it has not been relegated to the dustbin of history. I would argue it is now a significant part of Canada's cultural identity, akin to the railway or Confederation — and with the upcoming centennial of the battle only 18 months away, the 1917 assault on Vimy Ridge is poised to become one of the best-known and appreciated events in Canadian history.

While the battle was recognized in its time as a significant victory for the Allies — and by extension for Canada — as evidenced by front-page coverage in American newspapers, it is the Vimy Memorial that has become an enduring symbol of honour and sacrifice for Canadians.

Designed by Canadian sculptor and architect Walter Seymour Allward, the Memorial stands on Hill 145, overlooking the Canadian battlefield of 1917, one of the points of the fiercest fighting. According to Veterans Affairs Canada, the custodians of the National Historic Site located in Northern France, the Memorial on Vimy Ridge "does more than mark the site of the great Canadian victory of the First World War. It stands as a tribute to all who served their country in battle and risked or gave their lives in that four-year struggle." And according to the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission, Allward's creation is a "memorial to no man, but a memorial to a nation."

In 1922, the site was chosen to form a memorial park commemorating the more than 11,000 Canadians missing in France. (Those missing in Belgium were already listed on the Menin Gate). Many Canadians don't realize this, but when you step foot on these hallowed grounds at Vimy, you are on Canadian soil, the land having been gifted from France to Canada.

The Vimy Memorial was meant from its inception to represent the Canadian experience as a whole; it was a place for the living to remember the human cost of war, and for the missing dead to be memorialized. Unveiled in 1936 to international fanfare, the new Vimy Memorial represented one of the few openly triumphant post-war moments for those remembering the war; the ceremony was simultaneously sombre and celebratory, and dignitaries from around the world attended. More than 50,000 people, including 6,000 Canadian veterans (and widows of those who were killed) attended the unveiling.

Nearly 100 years after the battle and 80 years after its unveiling, it is this monument, and its tribute to whole — and not the individual — that plays a central role in our cultural identity.

In 2012, the Bank of Canada, with the support of the Vimy Foundation, released the new design for the $20 banknote. They chose the theme of Canadian military contribution and sacrifice for the redesigned artwork and selected the Vimy Memorial as a universal symbol of Canada's military sacrifices. As a monument to the missing, the Memorial also symbolizes the idea of anonymous sacrifice and the contributions of a group of people.

A year later, the Government of Canada unveiled the new "ePassport", which dedicates two pages of artwork to the famous Vimy Memorial, featuring the two pillars (designed by Allward to symbolize France and Canada) and the saddened figure of the "Canada Bereft" statue (also known as "Mother Canada") mourning her dead, while facing out to the dawn of a new day. Flanked in the passport by images of other unifying cultural touchstones, such as Pier 21, the Last Spike and Confederation, the Vimy Memorial is an example of what unites us as a country. It pays tribute to the first time all four Canadian divisions fought together, under largely Canadian command, and stands as a symbol of the sacrifices made by what was then a very new and small nation on the world stage.

It is indicative of the place Vimy holds in our collective narrative that it was selected as one of the major events of Canada's First World War history to be included in the Discover Canada citizenship guide and as a question for those taking the citizenship exam. The guide notes that many who fought

at Vimy felt like they were seeing the formation of their country as they advanced. That the battle was successful went a long way to solidifying the image of the tough, resourceful but ultimately humble Canadian "citizen soldier."

The most poignant way the Vimy Memorial plays a role in our cultural history is in the design of Canada's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa. Based on Allward's empty sarcophagus at Vimy, which was topped with a Brodie helmet, sword and olive branches — symbolizing peace, victory and death — the Unknown Soldier represents Canadian war dead and is left deliberately anonymous. Both the sarcophagus at Vimy and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were conceived to symbolize human sacrifice without honouring a specific person. The idea of the Unknown Soldier arose at the end of the war and has become a powerful symbol of the universality of the wartime experience. At the Vimy Foundation, we aim to preserve and promote Canada's First World War legacy, as symbolized by the victory at Vimy Ridge. We consider Vimy a milestone where Canada came of age and was then recognized on the world stage.