

Canadians in Battle

Learning objectives

- Students will learn about Vimy Ridge and connect it to Canada on the home front.
- Students will gain a greater understanding of combat in the First World War and the measures taken to transport and train soldiers.
- Students will identify how geography affected the success, failure and number of casualties of each encounter.

Time required

70-90 minutes

Grades

7-12

Materials

- tiled map: *A Nation Takes Shape*
- Vimy Ridge article (Appendix 8)
- division comparison sheet (Appendix 8)
- regiment cards (Appendix 8)
- string or coloured pencils (five colours)

Set-up

Print the tiled map and arrange your classroom to accommodate its size. Make copies of the division comparison sheet for each student and provide enough regiment cards for each group to work comfortably together (four copies per group).

Links to Canadian National Standards for Geography

Essential element 1:

The world in spatial terms

- map types
- major cities of the provinces, Canada and the world
- map projections for specific applications

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Introduction

Introduce the battle of Vimy Ridge to your students by either reading the summary or providing them with a copy. Afterwards, summarize the article by asking students why Vimy was a defining moment for Canada.

Explain that each regiment that participated in Vimy Ridge was from a different part of Canada and, for the first time, all Canadian divisions fought together, uniting men from across the country.

Have students explore the journey of each division by dividing your class into five groups and distributing a different division information card to each. Ensure all students have a copy of the comparison chart. Have students read the information provided and the column connected to their regiment. Once each group has completed their portion of the chart, have each group select one speaker to present their information to the class. During each presentation, ensure that all students are completing their chart.

Development

Assemble the tiled map. Ask students to locate the city where their regiment was from on the map and determine how the recruits would have made their way to the Valcartier training camp in Quebec and from there to Europe.

Have them describe what geographical changes soldiers would have noticed on their journey. For instance, soldiers travelling from British Columbia to Quebec would travel through the mountains, the Prairies, the Canadian Shield, etc. Have students imagine they are a recruit from their division's town and brainstorm what each would see.

Use coloured string or pencils to highlight their journey on the map.

Conclusion

Explain to students that the First World War connected Canadians like never before. Men from Montreal were training with men from British Columbia, Saskatchewan, aboriginal communities and Atlantic Canada. Ask students what a young recruit from Montreal would learn from a recruit who travelled from a different part of Canada.

Individually, have students create a 10-day journal about their trek to the training camp and their encounters with other recruits across Canada. Have them share their thoughts about the Canadian landscape and how they felt about the other recruits and participating in the war.

If time permits, divide students into pairs and have each pair share their journey with the rest of the class. Ensure students submit their journal entry at the end of class.

Essential element 2:**Places and regions**

- factors that influence people's perception of places and regions
- changes in places and regions over time
- how culture affects places and regions
- political and historical characteristics of regions

Essential element 4:**Human systems**

- patterns of culture in Canada and the world
- regional development in Canada and the world
- transportation and communications networks in Canada and the world

Extend your geographic thinking

Explain that the location of the Vimy Ridge battle was strategically chosen because it is on an escarpment. The ridge on the western side rises gradually, while the ridge on the eastern side has a steep drop. Have students consider how Vimy Ridge's physical landscape helped Canada win this battle. Have students research tactics that were used to accommodate this landscape from both sides and share their findings with the class.



Battle of Vimy Ridge

Many historians and writers consider the Canadian victory at Vimy a defining moment for Canada, when the country emerged from under the shadow of Great Britain and felt capable of greatness. Canadian troops also earned a reputation as formidable and effective because of the stunning success. However it was a victory at a terrible cost, with more than 10,500 soldiers killed and wounded.

The Canadian Corps was ordered to seize Vimy Ridge in April 1917. Situated in northern France, the heavily fortified seven-kilometre ridge held a commanding view over the Allied lines. The Canadians would assault over an open graveyard, as previous French attacks had failed with over 100,000 casualties.

To capture this difficult position, Canadian forces carefully planned and rehearsed their attack. The infantry were given specialist roles as machine-gunners, rifle-men and grenade-throwers to provide greater flexibility and firepower in battle. These same soldiers underwent weeks of training behind the lines, using models to represent the battlefield and new maps crafted from aerial photographs to guide their way. To bring men safely forward for the assault, engineers dug deep tunnels beneath the battlefield. Despite this training and preparation, the key to victory was a devastating artillery barrage that not only isolated enemy trenches, but provided a moving wall of high explosives and shrapnel to force the Germans to stay in their deep dugouts and away from their machine-guns.

“Chaps, you shall go over exactly like a railroad train, on time, or you shall be annihilated,” warned Julian Byng, commander of the Canadian Corps.

Attacking together for the first time, the four Canadian divisions stormed the ridge at 5:30 a.m. on

April 9, 1917. More than 15,000 Canadian infantry overran the Germans all along the front. Incredible bravery and discipline allowed the infantry to keep moving forward under heavy fire, even when their officers were killed. There were countless acts of sacrifice, as Canadians single-handedly charged machine-gun nests or forced the surrender of Germans in protective dugouts. Hill 145, the highest and most important feature of the Ridge and where the Vimy monument now stands, was captured in a frontal bayonet charge

against German machine-gun positions. Three more days of costly battle delivered final victory. The Canadian operation was an important success, even if the larger British and French offensive, of which it had been a part, had failed. But it was victory at a heavy cost: 3,598 Canadians were killed and another 7,000 wounded.

The capture of Vimy was more than just an important battlefield victory. For the first time, all four Canadian divisions attacked together: soldiers from all regions of Canada were at the battle. Brigadier-General A.E. Ross declared after the war, “in those few minutes [at Vimy] I witnessed the birth of a nation.”

Vimy became a symbol for the sacrifice of the young Dominion of Canada. In 1922, the French government ceded to Canada in perpetuity Vimy Ridge and the land surrounding it. The gleaming white marble and haunting sculptures of the Vimy Memorial, unveiled in 1936, stand as a terrible and poignant reminder of the 11,285 Canadian soldiers killed in France who have no known graves.

—Adapted from Library and Archives Canada
bac-lac.gc.ca

*Vimy became
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sacrifice of the young
Dominion of Canada.*



COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Nova Scotia Highlanders

The Nova Scotia Highlanders produced various battalions during the First World War, including the 17th, 25th, 106th, 193rd and 246th. The regiment, based in Truro, N.S., drew men from throughout the province.

The various battalions were often used to replace troops from existing battalions overseas. The men gathered in Truro and travelled by train to CFB Valcartier before sailing to England for further training. Once overseas, they filled out existing battalions that had lost soldiers to injuries, illness or death. The soldiers filled a division that fought at Vimy Ridge and other major engagements during the First World War.





Royal 22nd Regiment

The Royal 22nd Regiment, known as the Van Doos, fought at Vimy Ridge and many other battles with the 2nd Canadian Division during the First World War.

During the first wave of recruitment, English and French soldiers were mixed. When a second division was made, it was decided to keep together troops that had already been training with each other in hometown battalions. The Royal 22nd Regiment, the first predominantly French regiment, was created from local Quebec battalions.

The more than 1,000 Van Doos sailed to Europe from Quebec City in May 1915 with the 2nd Canadian Division, and were in France by September 1915.





COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Royal Montreal Regiment

The 13th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the Royal Montreal Regiment (RMR), fought with the 1st Canadian Division at Vimy Ridge, among many other battles.

This regiment traces its roots to August 1914, when three Montreal militias joined forces in Westmount, a borough of Montreal, Que. More than 1,000 soldiers from the RMR arrived in Europe in October 1914 with the rest of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Within six months of forming, parts of the regiment were already at battle on the Western Front.

The regiment drilled at the Westmount Armoury and then boarded trains bound for Valcartier for further training, before boarding ships bound for England with the rest of the first wave of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.





COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Royal Winnipeg Rifles

The Royal Winnipeg Rifles were formed in 1883 and raised many battalions for the First World War. The most famous was the 8th Battalion, which fought with the 1st Canadian Division.

Before the 8th Battalion sailed for Europe on October 1, 1914, they recruited men from Brandon, Man., and Winnipeg, as well as from towns in western Ontario such as Kenora and Port Arthur (now part of Thunder Bay). The soldiers trained at the Minto Armouries in Winnipeg before travelling by rail to Valcartier and then to England by ship.

Five soldiers from the battalion were awarded the military's highest honour, the Victoria Cross. Three of them, Frederick William Hall, Leo Clarke and Robert Shankland, were from same block on Pine Street in Winnipeg, later renamed Valour Road in their honour.





COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

British Columbia Regiment: Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles

The Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles regiment spawned various battalions during the First World War. The 7th and 29th battalions fought throughout the war.

The 7th Battalion travelled across Canada from Vancouver to CFB Valcartier to embark on ships bound for England, and arrived in October 1914. The 29th Battalion, also known as Tobin's Tigers after its first commanding officer, followed the same path months later in May 1915. Both fought at Vimy Ridge, and Robert Hill Hanna of the 29th Battalion was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1917.





DIVISION COMPARISON SHEET

Using the information provided on the regiment cards and from your classmates, compare and contrast key regiments that participated in Vimy Ridge.

REGIMENT	WHERE IN CANADA ARE THEY FROM?	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (training location, colour of badge)