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"We Germans...are British Subjects"

The First World War and the Curious Case of Berlin, Ontario, Canada

William J. Campbell

When news of the outbreak of war in Europe reached Canada in 1914, most of the Dominion's population embraced the call-to-arms. The nation stood "Loyal and Steady" Toronto's *Daily News* proudly announced, "united from ocean to ocean."¹ Canadians, Prime Minister Robert Borden insisted, would not sit idly by as Kaiser Wilhelm's army lay ruin to Europe. Borden's prediction did not unfold as smoothly as envisioned. The country may have entered the First World War without hesitation, but by 1918 wartime policies had opened wide political fissures, particularly between many French- and English-speaking Canadians. Nevertheless, according to the dominant narrative, expressions of nationalism during the First World War helped shape a nation and arguably define a new era in Canadian history.²

Interestingly, some of the loudest voices of support for the war effort were from the largely German population of Berlin, Ontario. With the advent of war, the third largest ethnic group in the Dominion of Canada may have "found themselves in an especially delicate position [given] their adopted country declared war on their country of origin," but the official message resonating from Berlin suggested otherwise.³ In fact, at first glance the community's response to news of war mirrored that of many towns

Abstract: In 1914 when news of war erupted in Canada, some of the loudest voices of support rang from the largely German population of Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario. But, far from being unflinchingly united behind the Allied war effort, the responses of the community appear considerably more pragmatic. As this article argues, Berliners addressed local and national pressure by either meeting the wartime status quo, or by attempting to subtly evade demands that threatened to undermine or target German culture and community cohesion. In the end, local events and discreet displays of anti-conformity in Berlin during the First World War suggests the patriotic sentiment resonating from Waterloo County comments more on a community struggling to avoid persecution as it does a population clamouring to make sacrifices in the name of King, Country, and Empire.

and cities across the Canada. But, far from being united behind the Allied war effort, Berliners' appear to have been considerably more pragmatic.

By taking into consideration anti-German sentiment as expressed primarily in local newspapers and by military officials, the present article seeks to add another shade to the Anglophone-Francophone dichromatic depictions of the country's reaction to the events of the First World War. To be sure, many Berliners sought to project a public image of themselves and others as being loyal advocates of the British

Empire, and thus the Canadian war effort. But, such a response by Berliners should hardly be classed as contributing to the maintenance of a strong imperial identity in Canada, nor should it be lumped in with nationalistic sentiment that developed in rejection of British imperialism. To be sure, the First World War played a pivotal role in the development of what Carl Berger suggests was the imperial-minded form of nationalism in English-Canada, and the anti-imperial sentiment that erupted over the issue of conscription that solidified French-Canadian nationalism in Québec.⁴ That being said, it is clear that most Berliners responded to the call-to-arms practically, and with a firm understanding of the precarious situation that had quickly enveloped them. Berliners were not duped by propaganda, emboldened to protest by ethnic or territorial pride, nor did they volunteer in droves to willingly fight for God, King and Empire.⁵ Most Berliners addressed local and national pressure by either accommodating to wartime circumstances, or by attempting to subtly evade demands that threatened to undermine or target German culture and community cohesion. In the end, local events in Berlin, including discreet displays of anti-conformity, suggest the patriotic sentiment resonating from Waterloo County reflected more a community struggling to avoid persecution

than a population clamouring to make sacrifices in the name of King, Country, and Empire.

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Waterloo County, one of the most densely wooded sections in North America in the eighteenth century, was located in the middle of Neutral and Mississauga territory. Following the American Revolution, the region underwent a dramatic transformation. What would come to be Waterloo County was a section of the 1784 land cession given to Haudenosaunee “Loyalists” and other British allied First Nations at the request of Thayendanegea, or Joseph Brant. After the Crown and the local Mississaugas agreed on terms, a tract of land was designated for the migrating Haudenosaunee that followed Brant north. Stretching

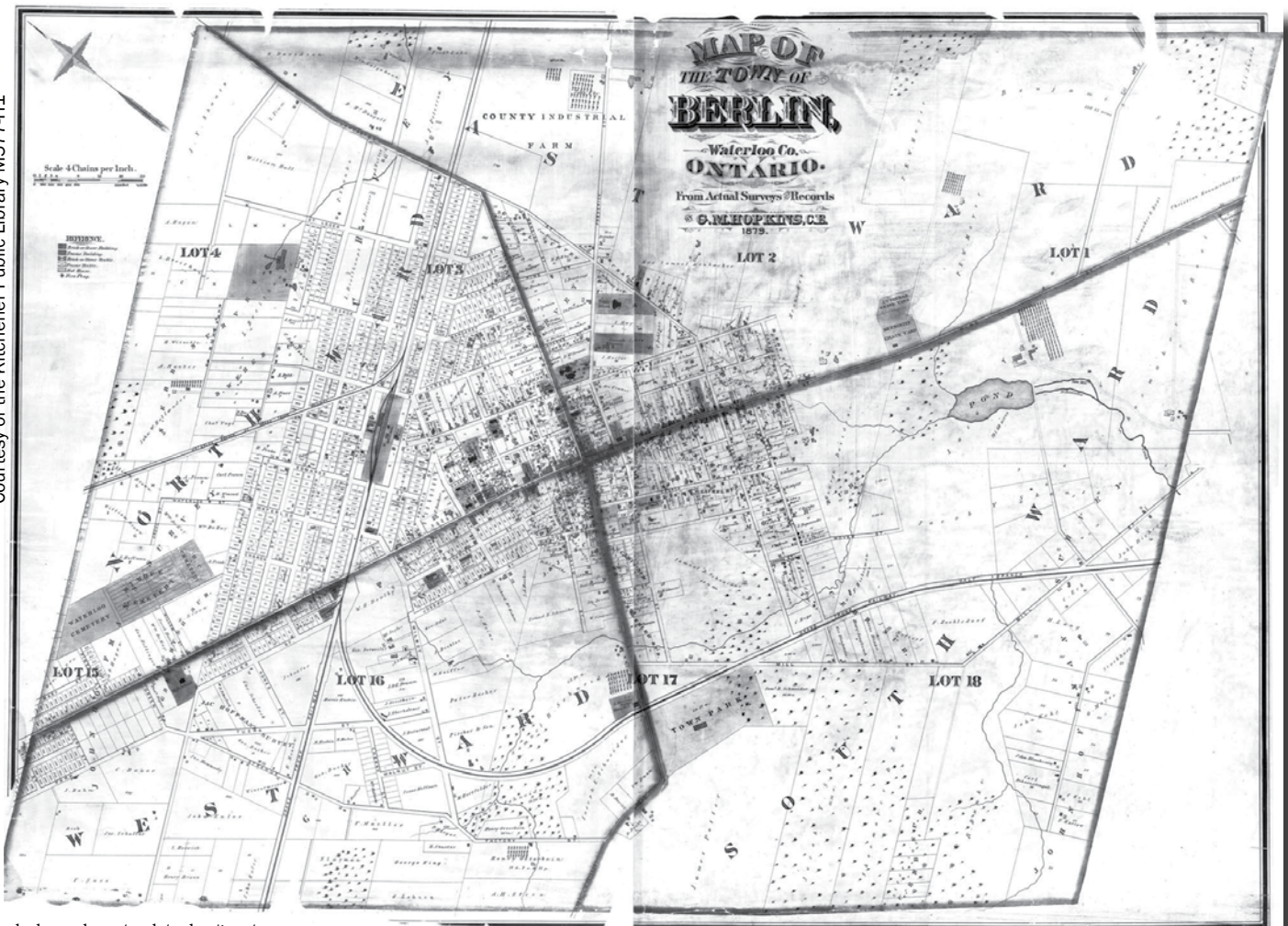
from Lake Erie to the Elora falls, the Haldimand Tract, as it was called, included the lands six miles on each side of the Grand River. Not long after gaining title to the land, Brant and the relocated Haudenosaunee Grand Council sold most of the upper section of the tract to Euroamerican speculators, who, in turn, sold the land to refugee immigrants.⁶

As early as 1799 Pennsylvania Mennonites from Franklin County began settling the northern limits of the Haldimand Tract, including Block Two, the future location of Berlin, Ontario. Pacifist immigrants, tired of “excessive taxation, [and] long years of compulsory military service,” fled the United States for British Canada during the 50 years that followed the American Revolution.⁷ In 1805 a company formed in Pennsylvania purchased

60,000 acres (240 square kilometres), most of Waterloo Township. In 1806, Benjamin Eby, a Mennonite preacher, purchased land consisting of a large part of what would later become the village of Berlin. By the 1820s, European Germans and Pennsylvania “Dutch” immigrants shaped the area’s cultural landscape. Within 30 years the surrounding towns of Galt, Preston, and Hespeler all competed with Berlin for industrial dominance in the area. In fact, the 1853 search for a location for the county seat led to a rivalry among the towns. But when a local merchant donated a small parcel of land for the construction of a county courthouse, Berlin clinched the race.⁸

Through the latter half of the nineteenth century, and with the help of the Grand Trunk Railway, the town of Berlin became an industrial hub in

A map of Berlin, Ontario as it appeared in 1879.



Courtesy of the Kitchener Public Library M577-H1



The city of Berlin as it appeared in 1912. The industrial nature of the core is visible in this photograph. In the foreground is the main line of the Grand Trunk Railway. The Berlin train station is on the left side of the photograph.

southern Ontario. The population grew with the arrival of Irish, Scots, and Welsh immigrants. Inhabitants with a German background, however, remained in the vast majority. In 1900 as many as 70 percent of the city's population claimed direct German heritage; the same percentage of school children still studied German as their optional subject. Then in 1912, the town, widely regarded as "Canada's German capital," became a city.⁹ As William Rowley Chadwick remarked, even as the first shots of the Great War were heard, Berlin was as "hard-working, religious, law-abiding, and confident a city as any in the Dominion...and there was no reason to believe that the future would be any different."¹⁰ By 1917, Berlin was no longer Berlin, in name or reputation.

As late as January 1914 many of Berlin's 16,000 inhabitants felt secure enough as Canadians to celebrate Kaiser Wilhelm's birthday without fear of reprisal. Addressing the hundreds in attendance for the German Emperor's 55th birthday celebrations at the Concordia Club in Waterloo, W.H. Schmalz noted:

We Germans, even if we are also Canadians, remember this occasion from year to year in order to

demonstrate our love and respect for a monarch of whom the world may be proud. We are British subjects... but while we proclaim this truth, I might add, to ourselves, we are also prepared to continue to cultivate our beautiful German customs.¹¹

When Europe plummeted towards war in the summer of 1914, public celebration of German traditions and royal family members became increasingly problematic. Not long after reporting Britain, Germany, and France made "strenuous" efforts to avoid a general war, on 3 August 1914 the *News-Record* declared "War to the Death has come to Europe."¹² Two days later, newspapers across Canada announced the official declarations of war.

With expectations that the war would be a short and decisive one, over by the new year, many Canadians actually welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their importance to the Allied war effort and to reaffirm their Dominion's allegiance to the Crown. While scholars continue to lock horns over the extent to which the war maintained or diminished Canadian identification with the British Empire and as imperial subjects, few deny the growth of different forms of nationalism. As early as the turn

of the century, perhaps as best exemplified by Henri Bourassa and his followers, many Canadians began to express national pride by pressing for greater autonomy from the British Empire – especially during times of conflict. That being said, at the onset of the First World War the nationalism expressed by most English-speaking Canadians lay firmly entrenched within a larger imperial framework. As both British subjects and Canadian citizens, for most Canadians there was only one response to news of war in Europe.¹³

Initially, the message from Berlin, Ontario, appeared to be no different. In an address to the House of Commons, W.G. Weichel, the Conservative member for Waterloo North, whose parents had both been born in Germany, praised the "illustrious men of the British Empire," and announced "that the people of German origin in this country are loyal to their king, loyal to the Empire... [and consider themselves] fortunate to live under the protection of the Union Jack."¹⁴ The *Berliner Journal*, a German language weekly, echoed that sentiment. In addition to pointing out to second and third generation Berliners that they, and their families, had enjoyed protection and freedom under the

Union Jack, the editors reminded newly arrived German immigrants of the loyalty oath they swore upon entering the country. It might be natural for some to sympathize with the “old fatherland,” the readers were told, but do not “allow yourselves to be driven to demonstrations of any kind, avoid arguments... be silent, bear this difficult time with dignity and show that you are true Germans, grateful to the country that accommodated you.”¹⁵ Community leader Professor F.V. Riechthorf declared “I am a native German and former soldier... My loyalty is to the British flag... let our response to the Empire be immediate and sufficient!”¹⁶ Immediate it was. Historian Nikolas Gardner relates that on the evening after Britain declared war members of “C” Squadron of the 24th Grey’s Horse paraded through Victoria Park. Apparently, Berlin was becoming British.¹⁷

For the next two months, local news reports confirmed the solid commitment of Berliners to the war effort. There should be “no difference of opinion in Canada” the conservative *Daily Telegraph* declared, “as to the duty of the Dominion in the present crisis... true patriotism calls for a united front and united action.”¹⁸ Cries for a unified response were followed by calls for pledges for the Volunteer and Patriotic funds. The *Berlin News-Record*, although not as “pro-British” as the *Daily Telegraph*, as one critic suggested, nevertheless published headlines with strong imperial language. “Ontario Teuton[s]” would not shirk, the paper announced, from proving their loyalty.¹⁹ By early October, Berliners had not only generated over \$90,000 in war fund contributions, but the local press also proudly reported on the departure of the volunteers for military service: “Many a mother’s eyes were dimmed with tears, as they watched their sons leaving home to fight for the Empire, perhaps never to return.”²⁰

The initial surge of volunteers from Waterloo County may not have been predominantly of German ancestry, but it is still doubtful that imperial zeal and love of empire moved most Berliners to tears as they watched their loved ones depart for war. In fact, within weeks of the outbreak of the war in Europe, awkward silences and signs of community apathy could be found just under the surface of the headlines. “Berlin should not be behind other cities in answering the call to arms,” a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* suggested. Until “peace had been declared or the crisis is over,” another observer questioned, should the Union Jack not be hoisted on all the public buildings? The editor responded: “why the flag on the Government building has not been raised is unknown... Let Berlin hoist the flag of the British Empire.”²¹ Moreover, the *Daily Telegraph* criticized the city’s band for its “non-appearance” at the send-off of local soldiers, regretting that the “volunteers left without a tangible evidence of good wishes of the citizens of Berlin.”²² These items give the sense of a community caught between the outpouring of nationalism or imperial pride in the region and province, and unresponsiveness, or at least an utter lack of spontaneity among the large parts of the local population. There is ample reason to question the genuineness of the official declarations of ardent support for the British Empire’s cause that came out of Berlin during the First World War.

The atavistic “with us or against us” attitude of most English-Canadian politicians and military leaders did nothing to mitigate or contextualize expressions by them and others of a broad, general anti-German sentiment. This attitude could only have caused distress for many German-Canadians, and certainly did nothing to win adherence to the Entente’s cause.²³ “Be British [and] do

your duty,” aptly named Sergeant-Major Blood warned Berliners shortly following the outbreak of war, “or be despised.”²⁴ Lieutenant Stanley Nelson warned Berliners that “the eyes of Canada,” were on them, adding in a printed address to the country:

You have creatures in your midst who say success to the Kaiser, and to hell with the King; all I can say is, round up this element into the detention camps, for they are unworthy of British citizenship and should be placed where they belong... the showing that the physically fit young men of North Waterloo have made is so rotten that I have heard an outside businessman say to a traveler from a Berlin wholesale house, “I’ll not buy another damned article manufactured in that German town. So you think I’m going to give money to support a pack of Germans? If I did, I’d be as bad as they.”²⁵

The threats did not end with the military officials. Toronto’s *News* and *Globe* oozed xenophobia, at times aimed at Berlin, Ontario. In addition to declaring that there were simply too many Germans in the British Empire, *Globe* editors warned that Berliners must be kept “under close observation [as] their presence may be a source of great danger.” Canadians must not shrink from engaging in any means necessary to preserve national security: “scores of German spies have been arrested... [and there are still] 30,000 of our foes in Canada... No fools mind you, but soldiers born and trained... working in our industries, living in our towns!”²⁶

Louis Jacob Breithaupt, a well-established Berlin leather manufacturer, braced himself each Thursday when updates of war news reached the city. “Seemingly disastrous to the Germans – whose side of the story we do not get,” Breithaupt recorded in his diary.²⁷

In August 1914, during a meeting of the Berlin Minister's Association, Lutheran minister C.R. Tappert publicly questioned the accuracy of the anti-German propaganda. In an act that, according to one observer "was as rash as questioning Holy Writ at the height of the Inquisition," Tappert demanded balanced war reports and refused to contribute to the Patriotic Fund as a matter of conscience.²⁸ His actions sparked an immediate public backlash. Cleared of any wrongdoing after an interrogation by local authorities and a meeting with the Berlin police chief, Tappert nevertheless was the subject of wild speculation and rumour. Following a particularly ugly incident where he was accused of praying for the success of the Kaiser's army from his pulpit, Tappert wrote to A.P. Sherwood, the chief commissioner of the Canadian police in Ottawa.²⁹ Infuriated, the Lutheran minister demanded an apology:

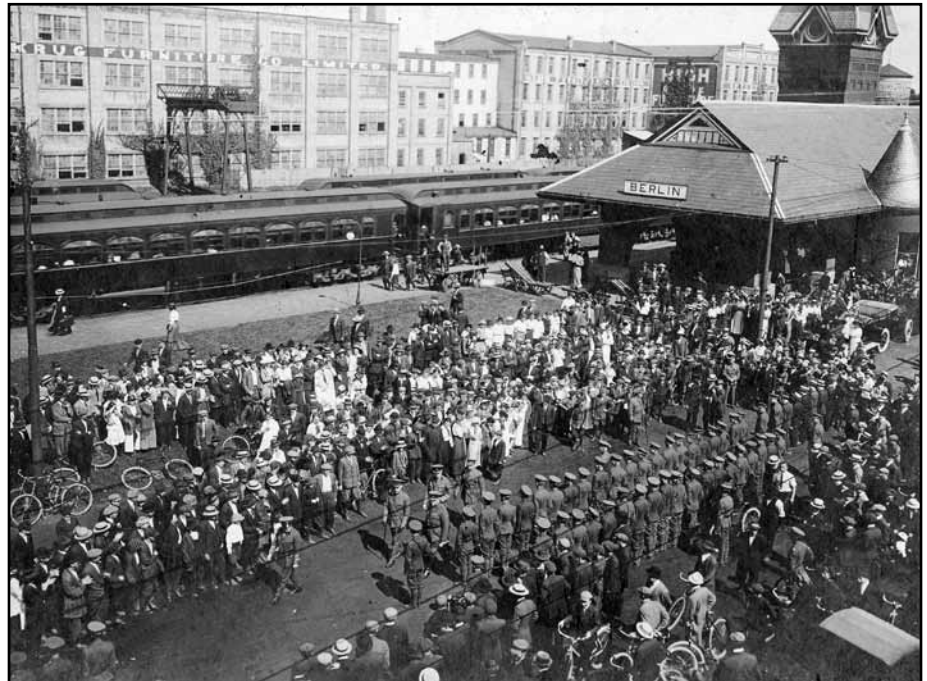
The Germans are a liberty-loving nation and cherish independence of thinking and acting. I would rather sacrifice anything than to bring up my family in a country where a man can be called to the police office for expressing his views at a Ministerial Association or unbraided by an official for having a conscience and acting according to its dictates.³⁰

The minister's defiance may not have been characteristic of the public face of the community he preached to, but as we have seen, signs of uneasiness with the war and anti-German propaganda were evident during the first few months of the conflict.

By early 1915 progress was being made by those that sought to construct a more acceptable image of Berlin. Following Waterloo North representative W.G. Weichel's passionate speech to the House of Commons on 8 February, Prime Minister Borden and opposition



Courtesy of the Kitchener Public Library P2129



Courtesy of the Kitchener Public Library P2133

Top: On the evening that war was declared, the 24th Grey's Horse (pictured here) paraded through Victoria Park demonstrating that at least some elements of Berlin supported the war against Germany.

Above: Sir Sam Hughes, the Canadian minister of militia, arrives in Berlin on 17 September 1915.

leader Wilfrid Laurier commented on the issue of German-Canadians. German appreciation for their homeland, Borden remarked, "has been solely consistent with loyalty to the land of their adoption and the institutions of their Empire."³¹ The

prime minister noted the zeal with which Berliners have "joined in all that appertains to the welfare of the Dominion and of the Empire."³² Laurier, too, weighed in: "All that could be expected from our German fellow-citizens," the Liberal leader



Courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society P1383

Soldiers from the 118th Battalion march through Berlin.

proclaimed, "has been done by them, and well done and cheerfully done." Whether or not either Borden or Laurier had much specific knowledge about what was happening in Waterloo County is unknown. What is known, however, is when war befell Europe in 1914 both men agreed to pledge immediate military support to Britain and the Allied war effort. Both politicians realized the importance of projecting the appearance of a country united.³³

Meanwhile, the movement of Canadian forces from England to the frontlines of France had begun. On 18 April 1915 the war was brought home to Berlin, Ontario, when reports filtered back that one of the city's first volunteers, Allan Smith, had been severely wounded. A week later, the activities and movements of the 1st Canadian Division and the Second Battle of Ypres filled the pages of national and local newspapers. During the last two weeks in April 1915, both the *Daily Telegraph* and *News-Record* proudly reported the valour of the Canadian soldiers at the front. Press reports and editorials indicated that Berliners, like the rest of the country, were publicly celebrating and praising the Canadian

war effort. In commemoration of the Second Battle of Ypres, the *News-Record* featured a poem entitled "For Canada," that concluded: "Would God my pen could you extol/ And with you lie where heroes fall/ For Canada, my Canada." Ostensibly, having buried signs of community apathy towards the war, Berliners, too, embraced the nationalistic fervor that was enveloping society.³⁴

The backlash in Canada against reports of German atrocities in late April 1915 suggests that many Berliners may have had reasons to energetically proclaim loyalty to nation and empire. At approximately 1700 hours on a sunny spring day, German soldiers opened the valves of over 5,000 gas cylinders unleashing a 160-ton cloud of chlorine gas. Not long after the poisonous fumes poured into the Allied trenches at Ypres, French colonial forces in the area most heavily inundated abandoned their positions. The Germans quickly advanced. The adjacent Canadian division filled the gap in the frontline, and held in the face of further intense attacks. They paid a high price. After the smoke had settled, of the approximately 6,000 Canadian casualties – one in

three soldiers – about 2,000 lost their lives in the muddy trenches and fields of Ypres.³⁵

At home, news of the battle provoked an immediate reaction. "The Huns have added poison gas to the slum of their offenses against civilization," Toronto's *Globe* proclaimed.³⁶ Another article documented not only the use of poisonous gas, but also German maltreatment of prisoners of war.³⁷ The Kaiser's soldiers had ruthlessly bayoneted to death wounded Canadians, another article proclaimed, and "no doubt remains that the Germans...have wantonly insulted, beaten and murdered in cold blood."³⁸ Canadian troops, the *Daily News* claimed, gave as good as they got: "revenge was swift...At the point of their bayonets they took only two wretched German prisoners alive."³⁹ In criticizing the German war machine, the newspapers also denounced the whole of the nation. A German's word simply cannot be trusted, one report stated, while another questioned the moral fortitude of "a people" that would sanction the use of poisonous gas.⁴⁰

While the Toronto press left little unsaid in their accounts of the events,

the newspapers in Berlin, Ontario, tended to choose their words more carefully, and did not concentrate on the "barbaric" actions of the Germans. On 24 April 1915, even the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the "French War Office says that the surprise caused by the letting of this deadly gas had no grave consequences."⁴¹ In fact, the *News-Record* added, wounded soldiers "say gas fumes do not kill...they put men to sleep."⁴² Nevertheless, the *Daily Telegraph*, published justification for the use of gas preferred by Dr. B. Dernberg, the former colonial secretary of the German Empire on 27 April 1915, in the midst of the outcry at this new evidence of German awfulness:

When there was published, last November, reports of a French invention for the purpose of asphyxiating the enemies by nauseating gases, the ending of the war in favor of the Allies was predicted "with a great deal of satisfaction" by the Allied Press. But

as soon as the Germans used the same kind of weapon in the battlefield around Ypres, the denunciation of Germany for following the practice of her adversaries has been rampant and the most sort of epithets have been employed.⁴³

It is doubtful that the message in Dernberg's comments escaped the editors of what a previous commentator suggested was Berlin's almost "fanatically pro-British" newspaper.⁴⁴ In fact, the publication of Dernberg's remarks signaled a quiet but growing trend in the press and throughout the community.

Increasingly, disgruntled Berliners began to voice anger over what appeared to be the unfair treatment of the city by the rest of English Canada. One concerned resident wrote to the *News-Record* stating Berliners had no reason to apologize. They "have proven themselves to be just as industrious, just as law-abiding and just as loyal as any other of the citizens of this

country."⁴⁵ He informed readers that City Council had voted to contribute \$10,000 to the Canadian Patriotic Fund. This, together with the \$88,000 voluntarily raised among the residents of Berlin brought the total to just under \$100,000, "or twice as much as any other city in Canada of its size."⁴⁶ Even the editors of the *Berliner Journal*, despite their increasingly conciliatory approach to English Canada, reported that the country had become considerably more anti-German following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in early May 1915. Berliners were only too well aware of well publicized reports of anti-German incidents across the country, and the closing of German clubs throughout Ontario and Quebec.⁴⁷

In late October 1915, when British casualties stood at just under half a million souls, 17 MPs from ridings across Canada pledged the unflinching support of their respective ridings to the King. W.G. Weichel was among them, and he

A military brass band leads the 118th Battalion on a parade through downtown Berlin, circa 1916.

Courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society P.1381



informed Sam Hughes, the minister of militia, that his constituents would be honored to help by raising "as many as one or two battalions." Hughes quickly informed Lieutenant-Colonel H.J. Bowman, the commanding officer of Berlin's militia unit, the 108th Regiment, that Weichel had promised "two full battalions."⁴⁸ When the news broke that Waterloo County promised to raise *two* full battalions, eager recruiters took to the street. On 2 November 1915, the *Daily Telegraph* and *News-Record* both reported the success of an event the previous night, with a procession of troops "swinging through the dusk down King Street on its way to the Star Theatre."⁴⁹ After watching the film *The Ordeal* and listening to the Presbyterian Reverend Marcus Scott's sermon "The Just Cause," onlookers were encouraged to mingle with the soldiers and join up. Interestingly, a letter to the *News-Record* also lamented "whether seeing wrecked men swathed in bandages and plaster moving haltingly onto the platform with the help of canes and crutches was such a great recruiting idea."⁵⁰ The *Berlin Telegraph* commented that the city's inhabitants must do more than watch and listen to demonstrate their commitment to the Allied war effort.⁵¹

Despite the initial reports of recruiting "success," it was soon clear that Waterloo County would have a difficult task raising one, let alone two battalions. The newly christened 118th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force from North Waterloo County may have had a commanding officer, but the battalion was short 1,088 men. Only a dozen volunteers had signed up. As P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Nickolas Gardner suggest, in view of the "the predominantly German population of Waterloo North... the reality [was] that most of the more enthusiastic supporters of the Canadian war effort had already gone overseas by late 1915."⁵² This glaring

reality did not stop eager recruiters and soldiers, "'betwixt and between' military and civilian cultures," from terrorizing the residents of Berlin and Waterloo County.⁵³

Those charged with raising the numbers of recruits for the 118th appointed three main organizers, who in turn formed overseeing committees to target all the communities in the county. Their task was simple: commission a census to document all eligible men, send them letters, visit their homes, and use any means necessary to goad them into joining the war. As Sam Williams, a successful Berlin factory owner and one of the three main organizers, noted, "if there is any place in Canada that cannot afford to fall down in the matter of recruiting...it is North Waterloo."⁵⁴ To make the plan work, Williams argued, local subcommittees must be formed in the villages and towns throughout the County. Weichel, the MP, proclaimed, "it is time for a man to be a man...and to be a good Canadian citizen, one must be a Britisher."⁵⁵ Despite a promising turnout to recruiting rallies following the initial formation of committees, it was not long before support dropped. By the end of December 1915, fewer than 200 recruits sat down in their expansive barracks to enjoy over 260 pounds of cooked Christmas food, Waterloo County was a far cry from meeting the 1,100 men Sam Hughes was expecting. Meanwhile, by year's end, Prime Minister Borden raised the stakes by promising the King that Canada would contribute 300,000 more men to the war.⁵⁶

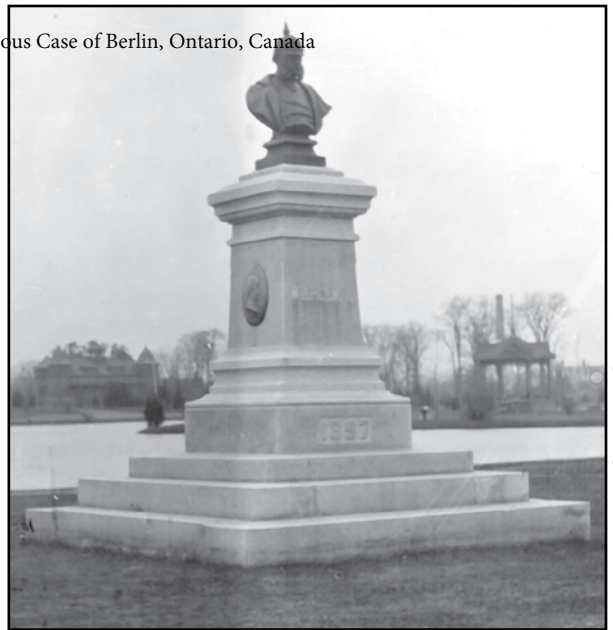
Toronto's *Globe* questioned the loyalty of the city's inhabitants; those people not fulfilling their "duties" as Canadians should be closely monitored.⁵⁷ Excited to action by the "perceived threat posed by the 'enemy' in Berlin," military recruiters and soldiers increasingly took to the streets. Gripped by fear of reprisal, many Berliners watched as soldiers

bullied and bloodied local residents in broad daylight. Store windows displaying German goods were smashed, and businesses and clubs looted. Perhaps in the most brazen act of 1916, recruiters forcefully removed Reverend Tappert from his home and beat him senseless for allegedly speaking out against the war. Another target was the bronze bust of Kaiser Wilhelm I that had been erected as a peace memorial in Berlin's Victoria Park in 1897, and had already been the victim of vandalism.⁵⁸

In August 1914, the bust had been torn down and tossed into the park's lake. Three youths were quickly apprehended after one of them succumbed to a guilty conscience, and the statue recovered. Two years later, the bust was again vandalized, and thrown into the lake. After being recovered and restored a second time, it went missing once again – this time forever. Perhaps not coincidentally, the final disappearance of the bust from Victoria Park in 1916 took place at the same time as the pillaging of the Concordia Club by members of 118th Battalion, who looted the club's own bust of the Kaiser and burned it together with other stolen items in a bonfire on the streets of Berlin. "Are the vandals never to be apprehended," wrote one concerned citizen in a letter published in the *News-Record*.⁵⁹ With no sign of official action a number Berliners called for a community gathering at Victoria Park to scour the area for the park's missing bust, an object of local heritage and pride. It is unclear how many people responded, but the call action shows the unwillingness of the city's inhabitants to turn a blind eye to criminal acts as the local authorities seemed to do.⁶⁰

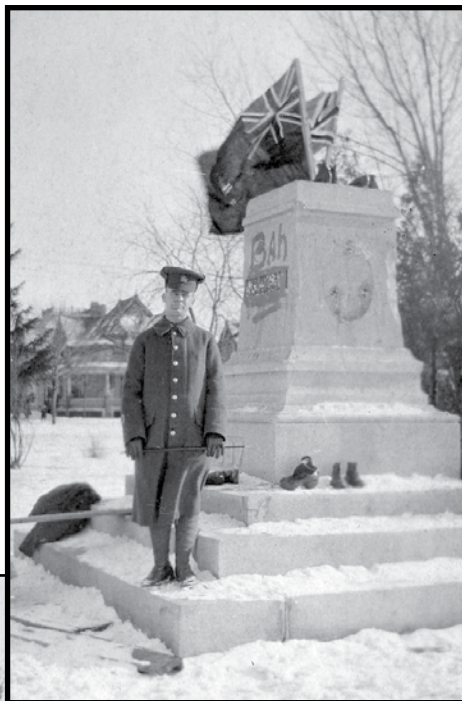
In 1916 Berliners also lost another symbol of cultural pride – the city's name. The Berlin Board of Trade proposed the change of a name that had an unpatriotic ring, and hurt local business.⁶¹ Despite the

Courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society P628



Courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library

Courtesy of the Kitchener Public Library P9754



A bust of Kaiser Wilhelm I was unveiled in Berlin, Ontario's Victoria Park in 1897 as the "Peace of 1871 Memorial." It would become a lightning rod for anti-German sentiments following the outbreak of war with Germany in 1914.

Clockwise from top left:

Victoria Park Berlin as it appeared at the turn of the century. The pedestal with the Kaiser's bust is prominently located at the edge of the Victoria Park pond;

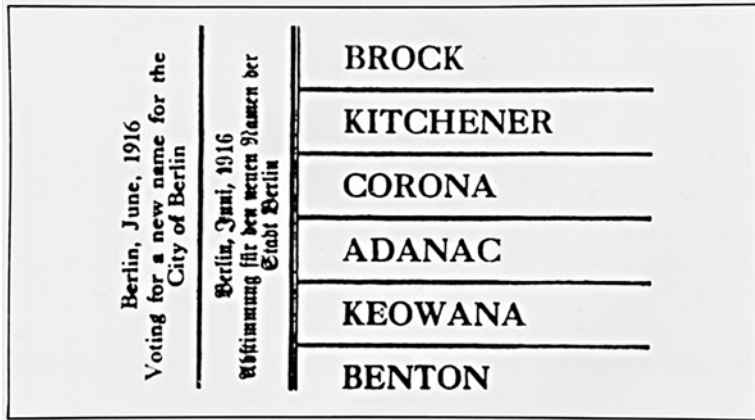
A close-up of the bust circa 1905;

The bust shown being fished out of Victoria Park pond after it was torn down and thrown in the water in August 1914;

A Canadian soldier, likely from the 118th Battalion, stands beside the Kaiser's pedestal after it was again vandalized in 1916. The missing bust has been replaced by a few Canadian flags, a metal relief from the side of the pedestal has been pried off, and the Kaiser's name has been painted out and the word "Bah" painted above it. The meaning of the many pairs of boots left on the monument is not known.

Courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society P361





The ballot presented to voters in Berlin to choose a new name for the city.

referendum 2,000 Berliners signed and sent a petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to stop the name change. "Our citizens who are opposed to the change of name are just as loyal to the British Empire, and more loyal to the city in which they live and prosper," argued one Berliner, "than the most violent agitator who tries to change its name and injure its reputation."⁶⁴ The message is revealing. Despite the unwillingness of the provincial government to derail the process, the petition underscores the tempered discontent and anxieties of a predominantly German community during the First World War in Ontario, Canada.

Incidents in Berlin, now Kitchener, Ontario, soon took a backseat to much larger questions, as the human costs of a brutal war began to tear at the seams of the nation. As Canadian death counts mounted following the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and Vimy Ridge in April 1917, Prime Minister Borden

Berlin City Council's willingness to hold a referendum to choose a new name, the contest that was organized to compile potential names met with little success. Not only did most Berliners express little interest, but those determined to alter the city's name could not agree on an acceptable substitute. That changed in June 1916, shortly after news arrived that Britain's war minister, Lord Kitchener, long celebrated as the Empire's greatest soldier, had been lost when the cruiser in which he was travelling on a mission to Russia was destroyed by a German mine. Before the year's end Berlin became Kitchener, "to

demonstrate the loyalty to the British Empire of the city's ethnic German population."⁶² But, like the imperialist-laden language found in the local newspaper headlines, there is more to the story.

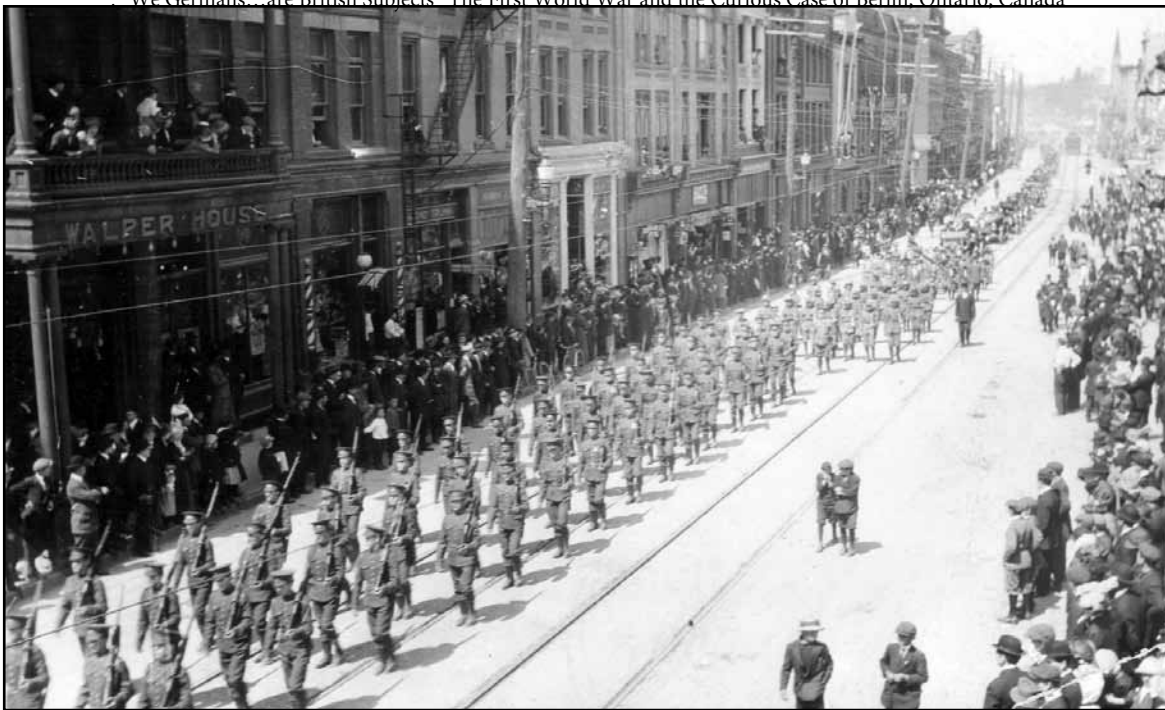
The name change did not have the support of the wider community. Unable to openly oppose the change without fear of reprisal, many Berliners stayed home. Of approximately 10,000 voters, only 892 people went to the polling stations – and of those, of whom a mere 346 voted for the name Kitchener, hardly evidence of a grassroots push to publicly affirm community loyalty.⁶³ Even more telling, following the

A group portrait of "C" Company (North Waterloo), 118th Battalion circa 1916.



Courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library

Courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library



A postcard of Canadian soldiers, likely from the 118th Battalion, parading down King Street in Kitchener. Taken at the corner of King and Queen Streets. The Walper House Hotel and the Grand Trunk Railway office are on the left. Crowds line the sidewalk and a balcony of the hotel. Note the street lamps, the Union Jack flag and the barber pole.

realized his previous pledge of 500,000 soldiers (in a country of only eight million) would not be met without resort to compulsory service. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the Liberal opposition in Parliament, stood firm against conscription, reflecting the convictions of his large French Canadian constituency, but Borden had the support of many English speaking Liberals in pushing the Military Service Act through Parliament in August 1917. Laurier refused Borden's invitation to join the government to prosecute the war effort. The prime minister therefore created a "Union" government that included pro-conscription Liberals in preparation for a general election in December 1917. In the controversial "Wartime Elections Act" passed in September 1917, the government extended the vote to all military personnel, regardless of age and their qualifications for citizenship, and to all close female relatives of soldiers, while simultaneously barring conscientious objectors and

all immigrants from enemy countries naturalized in Canada after 1902, a disqualification that included many Berliners.

By late 1917 more and more of the city's residents were willing to express dissatisfaction with the Borden administration. When in November 1917 the prime minister visited Berlin to rally support for the Military Service Act and his unionist government, some of those gathered in the crowd attempted to shout him down. Soon silenced by fellow onlookers, the disgruntled citizens did reveal popular regional sentiment that was expressed in a less confrontational, but arguably more effective way. During the federal elections in December 1917, loyal Kitchenerites and the other constituents of Waterloo North defeated Weichel, the incumbent Conservative who stood for the new Unionist government, and elected a Liberal, William D. Euler – an outspoken opponent of conscription.⁶⁵

* * * * *

By the New Year, ethnic, religious, class and occupational differences divided the country. Accordingly, historians have argued, what became known as the conscription crisis under the new Union government of Prime Minister Robert Borden illustrated variations of nationalistic responses in Canada to the First World War.⁶⁶ While Canadians struggled with the implementation of conscription, events in Europe turned in favour of the Allies. The Australian-Canadian led offensive at Amiens in August 1918 signalled the beginning of the end for Germany. Within on three months, the fighting would be over.

Despite an isolated and failed attempt in 1933 to establish a National Socialist organization in the newly named Kitchener, Ontario, by the time Hitler invaded Poland few Canadians called the city's loyalty into question. In fact, most scholars agree that within only a couple of decades following the end of the First World War, Germans across Canada,

Berliners included, “had been assimilated.”⁶⁷ Apparently, like many ethnic enclaves across the country, Berlin’s mid-century transition from a community in question to one welcomed into the Canadian fold had much to do with a broadening of national identity. That being said, given the experiences of many Berliners during the First World War, inquiries into the development of variations of Canadian identity and nationalism (outside of the dominant Anglo-Franco dichotomist narrative) should not overlook subtle and discreet displays of anti-conformity in communities throughout Canada. At the very least, the curious case of Berlin, Ontario during the First World War exposes the complicated underbelly of a city and community struggling to maintain a culture and identity during a time of unobstructed hostility.

Notes

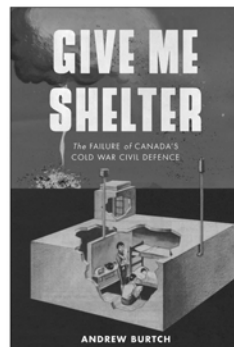
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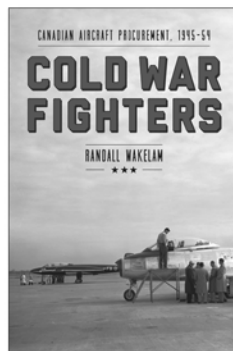


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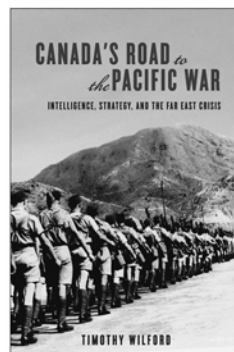
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