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Review of "Montreal at War: 1914-1918" by Terry Copp with Alexander Maavara

Caroline D'Amours

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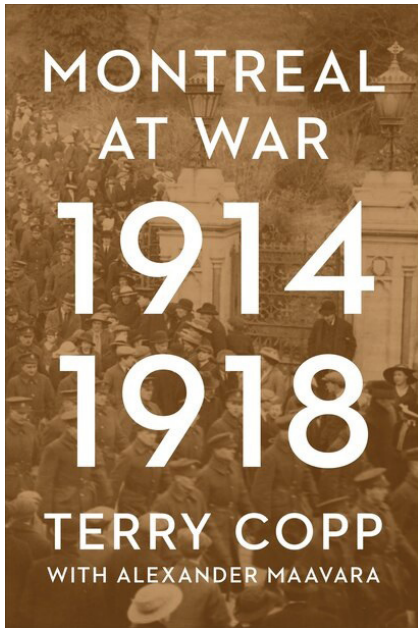
Terry Copp with Alexander Maavara. *Montreal at War: 1914-1918*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. 272.

With *Montreal at War*, military historian Terry Copp returns to his first love: the social history of his native city. Supported by the research of former graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University, Alexander Maavara, Copp attempts to understand the impact of the First World War on Montreal, a clear parentage with his earlier work, particularly his book *Anatomy of Poverty* published in 1974.¹ In this short volume, Copp succeeds in showing the challenges faced by the citizens, soldiers and veterans of Canada's metropolis, and how they responded to them.

The approach adopted in *Montreal at War* challenges a number of preconceptions. Firstly, by looking at the war experience through the eyes of Montrealers rather than from a retrospective point of view, Copp shows that the war, despite its all-encompassing nature, was only one challenge among many for Canadians on the home front. Poverty, public health problems and inflation attracted as much public attention as war-related events such as the correspondence between Captain Talbot Papineau and the French-Canadian nationalist Henri Bourassa. The author also corrects the perception that French-speaking Montrealers were largely against Canada's participation in the war and were reluctant to enlist. By reducing Bourassa's impact and the influence of the Ontario Regulation 17 issue to more accurate proportions, Copp presents a more nuanced view of the French-Canadian response to the First World War. Like all other groups of Montrealers, Francophones supported the war effort in the early years of the conflict. It was only with the introduction of conscription in 1917 that this support weakened considerably and turned into genuine opposition. According to Copp, voluntary enlistment among Francophones also followed national trends, remaining high until the summer of 1916 and then falling proportionally.

Organised chronologically, *Montreal at War* follows the different phases of the war. The first chapter provides an economic, social, cultural and political portrait of the Montreal community in 1914. Copp also shows that, despite the multicultural nature of the Canadian metropolis, the French-speaking community and low-income workers

¹ Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal 1897-1929* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974).



made up the vast majority of the population on the eve of the conflict. Chapter 2 focuses on the outbreak of the war, the various reactions to its prospect, and the challenge to secure recruits for active service. Chapter 3 analyses the press coverage of the Canadian troops' involvement in the Second Battle of Ypres and Festubert in 1915 and its impact on Montrealers' state of mind. Chapter 4 covers the recruiting campaign following these two costly battles and the problems encountered by French-language battalions as well as the voluntary work organised by the city's upper- and middle-class women in support of the war effort. Chapter 5 focuses on Montreal's contribution to the four

Canadian divisions at the battle of St. Eloi Craters, Mount Sorrel and the major offensive in the Somme Valley in 1916 and the impact of the long list of casualties printed in the city's newspapers. Chapter 6 covers the only major labour action of 1917, the divisive conscription debate and the following election. The final chapter analyzes the last year of the war, covering the actual introduction of conscription, the Quebec riots, and the challenges for the military police to enforce this measure as well as the final operations of the war such as the German offensive and the Hundred Days. Throughout the book, Copp skilfully links the fighting overseas to the Montreal home front and the mutual impact of these two theatres of war. Additionally, an accompanying website provides online supplementary materials, including newspapers, speech transcripts, letters, casualty lists and photographs to facilitate further research and study on this important topic.

In terms of methodology, the use of French and English sources provides a more balanced view of the participation of these two respective communities in Montreal. In particular, the attention given to the coverage provided by *La Presse*, an independent daily newspaper with an audience ten times larger than that of *Le Devoir*, allows for a more adequate interpretation of Bourassa's real influence

on the Francophone community, an influence often put forward in other studies of the Canadian home front. However, sometimes, the reader has the feeling that most of the analysis is from the perspective of Montreal's elite society – white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. The extensive exploitation of English-language primary sources might be part of the explanation. Given that Francophones and low-income workers respectively made up 64 per cent and two thirds of Montreal's population at the time, this approach necessarily have a detrimental impact on the reader's understanding of the full experience of these two groups. This impression is exacerbated by the lack of in-depth analysis of a more varied war experience through the eyes of children, women, labourers, as well as religious and ethnic groups. While the book provides the reader with some interesting details about the wartime experience of some of these groups, the work would have benefited from an approach including their wartime experience "from below." This might be partly explained by the book's reliance on analysis of the local press, a press subjected to censorship, which necessarily limits the understanding of the varied wartime experiences of the Montreal community. Although attestation papers, sailing lists, nominal rolls of Montreal-based battalions and government reports make a useful contribution to the analysis, *Montreal at War* could have taken advantage of the rich sources available on site at the City of Montreal's archives, the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec and other local archives.

Still, by exploring the war experience of Montrealers – civilians, soldiers and veterans alike – and their response to the challenges brought by the First World War, *Montreal at War* is a major addition to both Canadian military and urban historiographies. This work will appeal to students and scholars of Canadian military history who wish to understand the war experience through the eyes of Montrealers and the impacts of the conflict on Canada's metropolis. Because of its engaging and compelling writing style, the books might also attract general readers.

CAROLINE D'AMOURS, ROYAL MILITARY COLLEGE OF CANADA