

The Effects of Propaganda on Canadian Society During the First World War
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Propaganda can be defined in a variety of ways, including persuasive propaganda and how it can have different functions with a variety of definitions. Persuasive propaganda is choosing specific descriptive words to create an emotional or cognitive reaction in an audience, desired by the party doing the persuading. This is done by altering a word or idea's descriptive content and creating the effect of changing the targeted group's attitudes.¹ Although there are many other definitions, propaganda being persuasive is the most useful and significant definition in terms of its use in Canada during the First World War. Propaganda during the First World War became a useful way to spread desired news and information to the public, no matter if it was the truth or not, in Canada as well as in enemy territory. Propaganda served as a tactic during war time to support the war effort and rally the public in favor of one central theme or message, which can be seen in Canada as well as overseas in England and Germany throughout the war. In Canada specifically, the use of propaganda became a way to promote nationalism within the country, by encouraging and persuading the public to support the Canadian government and the war effort by enlisting and conscription. Furthermore, this promoted Canadian nationalism through the overarching message of anti-German sentiments and the possibility of enemy aliens in the country, and had a significant effect on censorship throughout the war.

The use of propaganda during the First World War served to encourage recruitment and newspapers saw the beginnings of tension and the chance of the outbreak of war. Newspapers and the media were used to persuade and inform the public, and the possibility of renewal of war was being circulated in London papers, which meant that Canada would be affected with this

¹ Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, Broadview Press, (2013): 7.

new possibility.² Eventually, this was followed by a large-scale propaganda campaign and network in 1917 when the number of recruits started to diminish and the need for conscription, conservation and Victory Bond drives.³ These events were followed by the conscription crisis in 1917, where Sir Wilfrid Laurier questioned and challenged the necessity of the conscription measure, stating instead that the people should be consulted before any measures were put into place.⁴ Having this printed and available to the public signifies how the media was used to promote the government's agenda and persuade the public into following and believing one message or idea over the other, and the extent to which this affected the recruitment and enlistment numbers into the last parts of the war. Another point to be made is how writing helped soldiers on the front with morale and to find ways of justifying their service in order to protect and serve their nation and improve attitudes of being involved in trench warfare.⁵

Propaganda in Canada was used to promote nationalism in the country, develop a strong sense of nationhood among the public, and create support for the war effort. The use of different text, visuals and images were used to spread messages and ideas that were targeted at the public in an effort to compel them to listen and take notice of what the government was promoting, including how the production of food quickly became a way for Canadians to be integrated into the war effort.⁶ The election of 1917 had posters filled with promotions for the Union government in hopes of reaching the attention of those left at home. This called mothers, sisters, and wives of the soldiers overseas, as this was the government's attempt to gain more votes and popularity while portraying the image they care about the soldiers' wellbeing. A poster titled

² "January 24, 1914" *The Calgary Daily Herald (1908-1939)*, Jan 24, 1914: 13.

³ Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War*, University of Alberta, 1996: Introduction.

⁴ Staff Correspondent of *The Globe*, "Sir Wilfrid Asks For Referendum," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, June 19, 1917:1.

⁵ Robert L Nelson, "Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond," *War in History* 17, no. 2 (April 2010): 168.

⁶ Troy Paddock, *World War I and Propaganda, History of Warfare* 94 (2014): 67.

“The Canadian Mother” is a strong example of this, as this emphasizes the importance of the role of women that was introduced during the First World War, and shares the message that Laurier’s Union government that soldiers “would not be deserted.”⁷ Therefore, the role of women became a stronger presence in society, as more opportunities emerged and became more encouraged to work in both private and public spaces. Advertisements and other propaganda media targeted women in Canada who were left behind to increase morale and fill the gap left by the men who enlisted. Questions of “Are You Doing Your Bit? Are you ready to share the burden that will fall upon their shoulders? Are you properly fitted to take his place?” were popular among advertisements that encouraged women to take an active role in society in place of their husbands, brothers, or fathers etc., that went away to war.⁸ This influenced their individual and collective perspectives of the war, and shaped university experiences, political agency, careers, and relationships. Women’s newfound active role in society and idea of female militarism portrayed a type of volunteer soldiering, which attempted to equate women’s work on the domestic front to what the soldiers were doing in the trenches, serving to justify the new visibility of women and the long hours spent away from home working for the war effort.⁹

This narrative is popular in other literature from the time, as L.M. Montgomery’s *Rilla of Ingleside* discusses the First World War and its impacts on the Canadian home front and the role of the women at home. Although the book is fictional, it is based on common experiences that women would have had during the war. In this context, propaganda and the media is used to promote supporting the war effort and the soldiers at the front by strengthening their presence at home and participating in buying war bonds, organizing a Red Cross to be able to send resources

⁷ “The Canadian Mother.”

⁸ Andrea Martin, and Tyyne Petrowski, ““Are You “Doing Your Bit”?: Edith Robertson, Letter-Writing, and Women’s Contributions in First-World-War Winnipeg,” *Manitoba History*, no. 82, (2016): 4.

⁹ Martin, ““Are You “Doing Your Bit”?: 6.

and supplies to the front, introducing a new sense of duty to “the lads of Canada answering so speedily and fearlessly and uncalculatingly to the call of their country.”¹⁰ This was also used as a way for Canadians to be informed of the war effort, as “the coming of the mail [was] the most exciting event of every day” and encouraged women and girls to take a more active role in the home front.¹¹ In this sense, propaganda was used to persuade and inform the public, mainly women left behind of the war effort and what they could do to support the soldiers overseas. It called them to action and their sense of patriotic duty to the country as well as the Commonwealth in a way that promoted a sense of Canadian service and commitment similar to what the men of Canada were responsible for. This type of propaganda was clearly pro-Canadian, and was an attempt to boost morale throughout the war and provide the remaining citizens an opportunity to feel they were supporting their country in the best way possible and make them feel proud of Canada’s war effort and accomplishments throughout the war.

Another definition of propaganda is the manipulation of collective attitudes, with words and visual images creating negative emotions strong enough to justify killing on the battlefield¹². This is a common perception of war time propaganda, in which a nation at war inspires literary works that address the origins of conflict and justifications for fighting, offering a collective experience and memory. In Canada, war time fiction was used to reflect the elements of manipulation, justification, mobilization that can be described as propagandistic. Another example of propagandistic ideals in literature can be found in Ralph Connor’s *The Major*, which shares similar ideals and elements with the Canadian propaganda campaign. This took the form of slogans and phrases of “Your Chums are Fighting... Why Aren’t You?” seen regularly on

¹⁰ Lucy Maude Montgomery, *Rilla of Ingleside*, Cavalier Classics, 1921: 35.

¹¹ Montgomery, 36.

¹² Peter Webb, “‘A Righteous Cause’: War Propaganda and Canadian Fiction, 1915-1921,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 32.

wartime recruitment posters. *The Major* meets these sentiments by appealing directly to potential recruits to cast aside any hesitation or doubts of remaining at home, whether it was pacifism, fear of death or a new career, and to take up the call and become part of the armed forces.¹³ Another example of this is music and how it became popular to be printed in the newspapers, as another way to increase morale and give Canadians something to connect to, such as the song titled “It’s Better to Have Loved and Lost You.”¹⁴ Propaganda used in this way, through media and literature, appealed to the recruits to join the forces, to serve their country and fulfill a sense of patriotic duty, strengthening Canadian patriotism, loyalty, and nationalism.

The First World War in Canada saw the introduction of new attitudes towards foreigners, the possibility of enemy aliens in the country, and anti-German sentiments. Propaganda was used in a way that presented images, visuals, and messages to the public of the importance of protecting Canadian soldiers from the enemy and encouraged attitudes of dislike or hatred toward the Germans, as this was believed it would support the war effort. The media and newspapers began to print and circulate stories of Canadians’ treatment from the Germans, sparking outrage on the domestic homefront. One example of this was a story of a Canadian soldier being crucified with bayonets before being hit by multiple bullets by the Germans, and multiple versions circulated and spread different news about if the soldier was alive or dead. This was followed by posters depicting this scene to be distributed to the public, with a very clear message to “avenge them!”, and draws Canadians in by its message of “every clean-minded Canadian grow hot with rage at each fresh report of the Kaiser's system of savagery”.¹⁵ This is clearly encouraging anti-German mindsets in Canada in effort to increase morale and the war

¹³ Webb, “A Righteous Cause,” 41.

¹⁴ “November 29, 1919,” *The Calgary Daily Herald (1908-1939)*, Nov 29, 1919: 15.

¹⁵ *Calgary Herald*, November 2, 1918.

effort through the purchase of victory bonds. Other events throughout the war follow, such as the tragedy of the Lusitania and again, the significance of propaganda in creating an “us” versus “them” mentality as Canadians were called to enlist for the war effort for all of the soldiers that died from the German sinking of the Lusitania. The example of nurse Edith Cavell sparked further public outrage and Canadian hostility towards Germans during the war, igniting a greater desire to advance Canadian development and accomplishments overseas and the home front.

Propaganda during the First World War impacted censorship and how the media was used, controlling how much information the public had access to about the war, war effort, and governmental affairs, in effort to promote a sense of nationalism among Canadian citizens. During war time, it was recognized that mobilization of men was not sufficient, and there had to be a mobilization of opinion.¹⁶ However, this introduces the question of the extent to which the government should operate its propaganda secretly, and the extent to which it should be done openly. Domestically, there are views that there is nothing to be gained from concealing information and could create a loss of importance of the given information when secrecy is attempted.¹⁷ During the war, censorship became more developed as more measures were needed to prevent the leaking of military information, such as the details of troops departing. This then led to the creation of a chief press censor’s office, and appointed Ernest J. Chambers as the head of the office. This meant Chambers had the authority and the ability to block a source that criticized military policy, promoted disaffection, aided the enemy, or had anything to do with hindering the prosecution and outcome of the war. This affected the media and propaganda in terms of what was allowed to be printed, as Chambers was insistent on portraying to Canadians an image of the war that did not seem to be as negative as it was in reality. This changed how

¹⁶ Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the World War*, 1927: 14.

¹⁷ Laswell, 15.

content in the media was portrayed, as Chambers suppressed 253 published sources and could choose what was suitable material for photographs and movies, theater productions, and gramophone recordings that were directed towards the public view.¹⁸ With the passing of the War Measures Act in 1914, information and news reports were filtered to avoid discouraging recruitment and maintain public morale.¹⁹ This caused hesitation among publishers, as they did not wish to contradict the act, but some felt it was their patriotic role to endorse certain messages and authors, such as Ralph Connor's *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* were nonetheless put through censors where Chambers found descriptions of drunkenness, shell shock and officer carelessness thought to be discreditable to Canadian troops and derogatory to Canadians.²⁰

This went on to later include the authority Chambers held over the telegram companies across Canada to monitor any conversations across their networks and to deliver this information to either himself or a designated agent.²¹ When the war broke out, censorship in Canada operated based off of the relationship with Great Britain, as Canada was still connected to the empire and had designed a censorship strategy where surveillance over international cable and wireless transmissions would take place.²² Despite the press being loyal to Canada and the Great British empire, often newspapers would take advantage of the situation and found that the war and war effort gave a business opportunity. This created a larger public desire to become more interested in learning about the war and various war news and became more eager to buy newspapers in hopes of finding out new information. This eventually led to a Memorandum on the Duties of the Press in War from military authorities to set out rules and regulations about what could be

¹⁸ Jeff Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print: Ernest J. Chambers and Information Control in Canada, 1914-19," *Canadian Historical Review* 3 (1992): 316.

¹⁹ Webb, "A Righteous Cause," 33.

²⁰ Webb, "A Righteous Cause," 33.

²¹ Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print," 319.

²² Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print," 319.

printed in the press. The press became monitored and could only print material that had a “steady and calming effect” and nothing that could possibly be useful to the enemy or that could cause feelings of alarm and despair among the public.²³ This act of censoring the press and the media clearly shows the extent to which censorship played a role in the propaganda during the war, as it was meant to regulate information the public had access to, keep morale up, and maintain a strong sense of Canadian nationalism during the war.

The First World War in Canada used propaganda, images, texts, and various forms of media to share information with the public in an easy and accessible way. Propaganda was the best form of persuading the public and Canadian society into paying attention to what news the government was spreading. Posters were targeted to young men to increase recruitment and enlistment numbers and appealed to their sense of loyalty and patriotic duty to serve their country and support the Canadian war effort. This was supported by appealing to Canadian women as well, and encouraging their involvement and support of the soldiers overseas and at the front by doing their part at home to show their nationalistic desire and participate just like the men were. Various forms of literature were used to spread these ideals, as the use of propaganda began to take over Canadian society. Propaganda was also used heavily during the First World War to promote Canada and create negative sentiments toward the enemy and anti-German attitudes to appeal to Canadians that action was needed. This was done through visuals and simple text that relied on events throughout the war to increase Canadian nationalistic views and the war effort. Propaganda was also used in a way to release information that the government was in control of and wanted Canadians to see, as censorship of the media and propaganda affected a large portion of what Canadians really knew about the war, which affected Canadians’

²³ Keshen, “All the News That Was Fit to Print,” 320.

perspective of the war as they only had access to material that attempted to promote the war.

Therefore, propaganda during the war played a significant role in building a sense of nationalism among Canadians by encouraging recruitment and the ability to rally together in an effort to vanquish the enemy.

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