

Women, War, and Propaganda: Redefining Gender Roles in Canada During World War I

by Caeley Buss, HTST 431

World War I was a transformative event that redefined Canada's national identity, not only through its military contributions, but also through profound societal shifts driven by propaganda. Beyond mobilizing soldiers and resources, Canadian propaganda campaigns reshaped the lives and roles of women on the homefront. These campaigns, emphasizing themes such as food conservation, enlistment, and women's labor, positioned women as indispensable to the war effort, reinforcing their patriotic duty while simultaneously challenging traditional gender norms. Propaganda targeted women as moral and practical leaders of the domestic sphere, urging them to conserve resources, maintain households, and assume responsibilities in public and industrial domains. By intertwining national service with feminine duty, wartime propaganda elevated women's societal roles, framing their contributions as essential to victory. However, these messages also created a paradox, celebrating women's expanded participation while tethering their identities to domestic and patriotic ideals. Canadian wartime propaganda shaped women's roles during the First World War, emphasizing its dual effects: empowering women to step beyond traditional boundaries while reaffirming expectations of sacrifice and loyalty to the nation. Ultimately, these campaigns not only facilitated the war effort but also redefined Canadian societal norms, leaving a lasting legacy on gender roles and the nation's collective identity.

Food Conservation: A Patriotic Duty

Food conservation was a cornerstone of wartime propaganda in Canada, aimed at reducing waste, increasing agricultural output, and encouraging citizens to donate resources for the war effort. Posters such as *"Waste Not—Want Not: Prepare for Winter"* (Figure 1) served as powerful tools in this

campaign.¹ The imagery of two women surrounded by preserved goods and fresh produce reinforced the message that conservation was essential to the collective war effort. The elder woman's gesture, holding up a jar of preserved food, symbolized wisdom and foresight, while the younger woman's attentive stance highlighted the intergenerational transfer of responsibility.



Figure 1

These posters linked food conservation to patriotism by framing it as an act of national service. The language of such propaganda was both instructive and moralistic, urging Canadians to preserve perishable foods and minimize waste for the greater good.² Peter Buitenhuis, in *The Great War of Words*, notes that propaganda campaigns often aimed to foster "a reality embraced and accepted," reflecting citizens' internalization of wartime sacrifices.³ By framing food conservation as an individual's contribution to national success, these campaigns reinforced the idea that every citizen had a role to play in achieving victory.

As Joachim Neander and Randal Marlin emphasize, wartime propaganda was often constructed around vivid and emotionally charged imagery to ensure its believability. They note, "Believability of the stories, and the extent to which they reverberate in the imagination and stimulate horror and revulsion, are what matter for influencing targets."⁴ This tactic applied not only to atrocity narratives, but also to messages aimed at fostering unity and self-sacrifice, such as food conservation campaigns.

The message of food conservation extended beyond Canada, with similar campaigns appearing across Allied nations. For example, the United States Food Administration poster, "*Food—Don't Waste*

¹ The Government of Canada. "Waste Not - Want Not Prepare for Winter: Canada Food Board Sensitive Campaign."

² The Government of Canada. "Waste Not - Want Not Prepare for Winter: Canada Food Board Sensitive Campaign."

³ Peter Buitenhuis, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 152.

⁴ Joachim Neander and Randal Marlin, "Media and Propaganda: The Northcliffe Press and the Corpse Factory Story of World War I," *Global Media Journal Canadian Edition* 3 (2010): 69.

It” (Figure 2), outlined four practical steps to reduce food waste: using less wheat and meat, buying local foods, serving only necessary portions, and utilizing leftovers.⁵ The straightforward design and direct language emphasized the importance of individual action in supporting the war effort.⁶ Although American, this poster reflects themes that resonate with

Canadian propaganda, highlighting the interconnectedness of Allied strategies. As Troy Paddock observes, Canadian food conservation policies were not responding to shortages at home but were directed toward supporting Allied populations and

soldiers overseas, emphasizing the importance of economizing food for the war effort.⁷ By encouraging citizens to adopt frugal practices, such messages tied everyday habits to broader wartime goals, reinforcing the idea that collective sacrifice was essential to victory.⁸ This approach aligns with Canadian efforts, such as posters advocating food preservation, which similarly framed resourcefulness and patriotism as inseparable.⁹ The shared focus on food conservation underscores how Allied nations worked in tandem to address global challenges and foster a unified wartime identity.¹⁰

Figure 3 illustrates how wartime propaganda used visual simplicity to amplify its message. The poster’s clear directive “Save Food for Victory” underscored the urgency of conservation efforts.¹¹ The stark contrast between wasted food and its alternative use for supporting soldiers or allied nations highlighted the moral stakes of these actions. By visually linking domestic habits to global



Figure 2

⁵ The United States Food Administration. “Food - Don’t Waste It.”

⁶ The United States Food Administration. “Food - Don’t Waste It.”

⁷ Troy R. E. Paddock, *World War I and Propaganda* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 88.

⁸ Paddock, *World War I and Propaganda*, 88.

⁹ The Government of Canada. “Waste Not - Want Not Prepare for Winter: Canada Food Board Sensitive Campaign.”

¹⁰ Paddock, *World War I and Propaganda*, 90.

¹¹ The United States Food Administration. “Why Is It Necessary to Eat Less Meat.”

consequences, such materials reinforced a sense of individual accountability in Canada’s contribution to the war effort.¹²

Additionally, Celia Malone Kingsbury’s *For Home and Country* contextualizes food conservation within broader wartime narratives, demonstrating how these efforts were vital to sustaining both the military and the civilian population.¹³ Kingsbury argues that the First World War, while a global conflict, also catalyzed a transformation in the domestic sphere, especially for women. Propaganda campaigns targeted women as essential figures in managing food supplies, shaping their role as both moral and practical pillars of the home front. Women were called upon to preserve food, maintain household resources, and contribute to national well-being through domestic efficiency. This ideological framework positioned women’s domestic roles as vital to the war effort and imbued food conservation with a sense of duty and patriotism.¹⁴



Figure 3

The wartime discourse around food conservation was not merely about reducing waste or increasing output, but also about reinforcing the idea that the home was the first line of defense in a time of national crisis. Kingsbury highlights that during the war, food conservation became a "moral" duty for women—emphasized as a way to contribute to the "greater good" without direct participation in combat.¹⁵ This narrative dovetailed with broader wartime propaganda, which presented women as the moral custodians of the nation’s values, urging them to demonstrate selflessness and sacrifice for the

¹² The United States Food Administration. “Why Is It Necessary to Eat Less Meat.”

¹³ Celia Malone Kingsbury, *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 27.

¹⁴ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 27.

¹⁵ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 27.

collective. By participating in conservation efforts, women not only supported the immediate needs of the war but also fostered a sense of Canadian identity rooted in resourcefulness, frugality, and communal sacrifice.

Moreover, Kingsbury details how the U.S. Food Administration, under Herbert Hoover, championed voluntary compliance in food conservation and enlisted women in its efforts. Hoover's campaign stressed the importance of women in both urban and rural areas, stating that they were "called upon for this service," and were essential to implementing food conservation strategies across the nation.¹⁶ A network of committees, often led by women, was established to facilitate this, resulting in millions of families pledging to reduce food waste, conserve resources, and avoid overconsumption.¹⁷ These campaigns were not just about direct actions like rationing or reducing waste, but also about changing cultural norms surrounding consumption. Through this propaganda, women were depicted as the moral agents who could steer the nation through scarcity and shortage, positioning them as indispensable to the war effort.

Kingsbury also notes that the campaign's success relied on both grassroots involvement and the support of the food industry. Women, through their work in the home, became the "enforcers" of national food policy, reflecting a deep intertwining of domestic duty with national service.¹⁸ Propaganda materials like food rationing advertisements and cookbooks made it clear that reducing food waste was not just a domestic task but a patriotic one. Kingsbury points out that the U.S. Food Administration's partnership with corporations like Crisco and Campbell's Soup helped promote products that aligned with conservation efforts, further embedding the idea of resourcefulness within consumer culture.¹⁹

¹⁶ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 28.

¹⁷ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 28.

¹⁸ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 28.

¹⁹ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 29.

Through these combined efforts, food conservation became not only a practical solution to wartime scarcity, but also a powerful means of reinforcing women's roles in supporting the nation's victory. It solidified the idea that a united home front, led by the moral and practical contributions of women, was central to the success of the war.

Women's Redefined Roles on the Home Front

World War I marked a significant turning point in the societal roles of women, as propaganda campaigns encouraged them to take on responsibilities traditionally held by men. Posters and pamphlets targeted at women emphasized their importance in maintaining the home front, from working in factories to volunteering for war-related causes. The role of women as both producers and preservers of food, as seen in Figure 1, extended to broader responsibilities in the workforce and community.

Propaganda materials often framed women's contributions as essential to national progress and victory. For instance, slogans like "*To the Women of Canada*" (Figure 4) explicitly appealed to women's sense of duty and emotional ties to family and nation.²⁰ This particular poster invoked fear and moral responsibility, suggesting that the safety of their homes and children depended on the success of the war effort.²¹ By linking women's actions to the well-being of the nation, these campaigns elevated their societal roles and underscored their indispensability in wartime Canada.

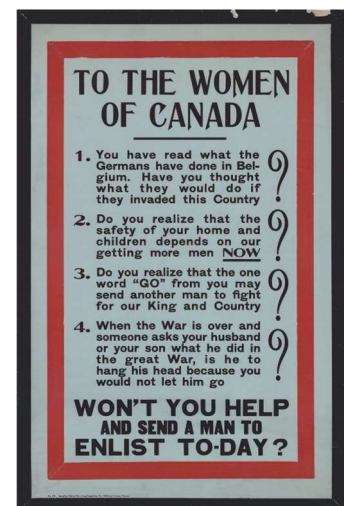


Figure 4

Neander and Marlin provide a relevant critique of how gender roles were manipulated through propaganda, noting that "propaganda often served to create exaggerated narratives or symbols that

²⁰ The Government of Canada. "To the Women of Canada, Enlist Today."

²¹ The Government of Canada. "To the Women of Canada, Enlist Today."

aligned with the interests of those in power, shaping public perceptions while concealing the complexity of reality.”²² This insight highlights how women’s contributions were framed to suit the overarching wartime narrative while maintaining traditional gender expectations.

Eliza Riedi’s article *Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire* provides an insightful analysis of the wartime portrayal of women as symbols of both moral authority and national strength.²³ Riedi notes, “Women’s domestic efforts were not only vital to the war but also represented their unwavering loyalty to empire and nation.”²⁴ This framework reinforced the idea that women’s roles, though evolving during the war, were inherently tied to their responsibility to uphold and promote imperial ideals.

The redefinition of gender roles was further reinforced by materials that depicted women in uniform or performing industrial labor, challenging traditional notions of femininity. For example, Riedi argues that women’s involvement in wartime efforts “broadened the scope of acceptable female behavior while simultaneously reaffirming traditional values of sacrifice and duty.”²⁵ This dual narrative allowed women to take on new roles without completely disrupting pre-war gender expectations.

As the war progressed, women’s role in wartime activities expanded. The Women’s Patriotic League, for instance, organized a variety of relief efforts to support soldiers and civilians alike. The league’s headquarters became “a ceaseless hive of activity,” with volunteers engaging in activities such as sewing garments, packing supplies, and recording names of women in need of work.²⁶ Their work extended beyond domestic spaces, with women in all walks of life participating in knitting campaigns

²² Neander and Marlin, “Media and Propaganda,” 72.

²³ Eliza Riedi, “Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire: The Victoria League, 1901–1914,” *The Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 582.

²⁴ Riedi, “Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire,” 584.

²⁵ Riedi, “Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire,” 585.

²⁶ Ian Hugh Maclean Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 106.

and relief efforts. One volunteer noted, "Not alone are white-haired grandmas at it. Stern ladies with college degrees who scorned such elemental things are hard at work."²⁷ These efforts demonstrated the growing role of women in sustaining the war effort, not just as passive supporters but as active agents contributing to the national cause.

Herbert Hoover, director of the United States Food Administration, orchestrated a massive voluntary food conservation campaign, targeting middle-class women to adopt measures of food control. His strategy emphasized "voluntary action" as a means of depriving those who could afford it, rather than those who had "no margin for sacrifice."²⁸ Women were encouraged to replace wheat with potatoes, a crop more abundant during shortages, leading to the "avoidance of the complete loss of millions of bushels" of potatoes.²⁹ This campaign was so effective that it enlisted over thirteen million homes across the United States.³⁰ The success of this voluntary compliance further illustrates how women's domestic roles were instrumental to wartime efforts.

By positioning women as active participants in the war effort, propaganda campaigns helped to redefine societal expectations and fostered a sense of national pride rooted in shared responsibility. These shifts in gender roles not only supported the immediate needs of the war but also laid the groundwork for future movements toward gender equality in Canada and the United States.

Enlistment Propaganda and the Call to Arms

The recruitment of soldiers was another critical focus of wartime propaganda. Enlistment campaigns relied on emotional appeals and nationalistic rhetoric to persuade men to join the military.

²⁷ Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief*, 107.

²⁸ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 27.

²⁹ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 28.

³⁰ Kingsbury, *For Home and Country*, 29.

Posters such as “Here You Are! Take Your Choice” (Figure 5)³¹ and “Won’t You Help and Send a Man to Enlist To-day?” (Figure 4)³² exemplify the diverse strategies used to encourage enlistment.

In Figure 5, the language is direct and confrontational, presenting enlistment as a moral obligation.³³ By listing various military roles, the poster appealed to men of different backgrounds and skills, leaving “no excuse for not enlisting.” This tactic created social pressure, suggesting that failure to join the military was a dereliction of duty.³⁴ Similarly, Figure 4 appealed to women, urging them to encourage their husbands, brothers, and sons to enlist.³⁵ This approach placed the responsibility for recruitment not only on men but also on their families, particularly women, who were seen as gatekeepers of moral influence.

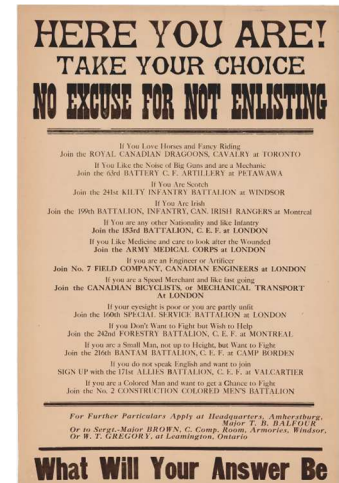


Figure 5

Visual media, including photographs and films, also played a crucial role in recruitment propaganda. Film was embraced as a tool for bringing a message to the masses. With “going to the pictures” becoming widely popular across all levels of society, it was seen as a unique vehicle for mass communication. As the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) noted in a memorandum, film “might indeed almost have been invented for the purpose” of propaganda.³⁶ This sentiment underscores the growing significance of film in shaping public opinion during the war, particularly in terms of recruitment. The CWRO capitalized on the power of cinema to reach diverse audiences, disseminating

³¹ The Government of Canada. “To the Women of Canada, Enlist Today.”

³² The Government of Canada. “Here You Are! Take Your Choice / No Excuse For Not Enlisting... What Will Your Answer Be.”

³³ The Government of Canada. “Here You Are! Take Your Choice / No Excuse For Not Enlisting... What Will Your Answer Be.”

³⁴ The Government of Canada. “Here You Are! Take Your Choice / No Excuse For Not Enlisting... What Will Your Answer Be.”

³⁵ The Government of Canada. “To the Women of Canada, Enlist Today.”

³⁶ Busch, *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association Papers* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 57.

films that depicted Canadian soldiers' bravery and victories, thus helping to distinguish Canada's contribution to the war effort from that of other nations. Through cinema, Canadians were able to witness firsthand the valor and sacrifice of their fellow countrymen, further deepening their connection to the war effort.³⁷

Neander and Marlin's article *Media and Propaganda* provides valuable context for understanding how enlistment campaigns harnessed the power of fear, pride, and moral obligation.³⁸ Peter Buitenhuis also highlights the influence of Theodore Roosevelt and other prominent figures in shaping public opinion during World War I. Roosevelt's use of "apocalyptic language" in his speeches and writings, as well as his advocacy for intervention, mirrors how enlistment propaganda tapped into shared fears and aspirations.³⁹ These campaigns portrayed military service as both a privilege and a responsibility, contributing to a Canadian identity centered on bravery, sacrifice, and loyalty to the British Empire.

The Broader Impact of Wartime Propaganda

Wartime propaganda in Canada was not limited to posters and pamphlets; it permeated all aspects of public life, from newspaper editorials to community events. The Canadian government, military recruiters, women's organizations, and civic groups worked together to disseminate these messages across urban and rural areas, ensuring their widespread impact. These efforts were instrumental in unifying the nation and fostering a collective identity during a time of unprecedented change.

The campaigns surrounding food conservation, women's roles, and enlistment were not only vital to the war effort but also reshaped Canadian societal norms and values. By emphasizing shared

³⁷ Busch, *Canada and the Great War*, 57.

³⁸ Neander and Marlin, "Media and Propaganda," 72.

³⁹ Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words*, 157.

sacrifice, national pride, and collective responsibility, wartime propaganda helped to forge a new sense of Canadian identity. This identity was characterized by resilience, resourcefulness, and a commitment to the greater good—values that continued to shape Canada in the post-war period.

Conclusion

World War I marked a defining moment in Canadian history, with propaganda playing an instrumental role in shaping the nation's identity during and after the conflict. Through targeted campaigns on food conservation, the redefined roles of women, and enlistment, the Canadian government and various civic organizations were able to galvanize the population, creating a collective sense of purpose and national duty. By appealing to citizens' sense of personal responsibility and patriotic duty, these propaganda efforts blurred the lines between the home front and the front lines, emphasizing that every individual had a role to play in the larger war effort. Women, in particular, were positioned as key figures not just in the domestic sphere but as active contributors to the national cause, supporting both the military effort and the broader societal structure through food conservation, factory work, and volunteering.

By linking individual actions—whether saving food, volunteering, or encouraging enlistment—to national success, wartime propaganda connected the domestic with the global, positioning Canada as a key player on the world stage. This collective sense of duty, fostered through emotional and visual appeals, helped define the Canadian identity that emerged from the war—one marked by resilience, resourcefulness, and national pride. The redefined roles of women specifically were not just a temporary wartime shift but laid the foundation for future changes in gender expectations and women's rights.

The legacy of these wartime propaganda campaigns extends far beyond the immediate context of the First World War. By shaping national identity and reinforcing values of collective responsibility,

unity, and sacrifice, the propaganda of this era continued to influence the post-war development of Canadian society. Moreover, the changes in gender roles, especially the increased participation of women in the workforce and public life, would have lasting effects on Canadian culture, politics, and social structures. In conclusion, World War I propaganda played a pivotal role in transforming Canada's national identity. By fostering a sense of shared responsibility through targeted campaigns, the government and civic organizations successfully united the population, reinforcing values of unity, duty, and pride. The war's impact on women's roles, in particular, not only contributed to the immediate war effort but also laid the groundwork for long-term social change. The messages of World War I propaganda remain a powerful testament to how media and imagery can reshape societal norms and influence a nation's identity for generations to come.

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