

Version 1.0 | Last updated 19 November 2019

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Canada)

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This essay organizes its discussion of soldiers' reactions to war into three sections. The first accounts for patterns in the response to the call to arms and circumstances on the home front. The second considers the effects of trench warfare on soldiers' willingness to carry on the fight. The third explores patterns of resistance and refusal on the Western Front, and at the end of the war. The overall argument is that Canadian soldiers' attitudes to war may be placed on a spectrum from acceptance, to resistance, to refusal. Disobedience, resistance to authority, and outright refusal were important features of the Canadian response to military service and trench warfare, but the dominant pattern was consent to going to war and engaging in combat. Soldiers exhibited different attitudes in different contexts, from recruitment through demobilization, but experiences on the Western Front affected attitudes most powerfully. In the trenches, soldiers developed their own culture suited to the unique social and physical environment, and all soldiers were worn down by brutal and terrifying conditions.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Call to Arms](#)
- [3 Acceptance and Endurance](#)
- [4 Resistance and Refusal](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

As a self-governing dominion of [Britain](#), [Canada](#), with a population of about 8 million, was automatically at war on 4 August 1914, but free to determine its own course for mobilization. Voluntary enlistment rates for the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) remained high until about the middle of 1916, leading to the adoption of [conscription](#) in 1917. A total of roughly 620,000 Canadians served in the CEF, which mobilized 425,000 men for service on the [Western Front](#) between early 1915 and the armistice. Canadians were also mobilized as part of the Allied intervention in [Russia](#) in late 1918. Roughly 600 Canadians saw action as part of the larger British effort in the White Sea region of northwestern Russia. The Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force (CSEF) included some 4,000 men. They never engaged in combat, and are perhaps most notable for being the British Empire's representative in the Allied mission in eastern Russia. After the armistice, Canadian forces were stationed in [Belgium](#) and [Germany](#) for several months before their demobilization via camps in southern England and Kinmel Park, in Wales.

This essay organizes its discussion of soldiers' reactions to war into three sections. The first accounts for the broad positive response to the call to arms in civil society, as well as significant patterns of resistance to service. The second considers the effects of trench warfare on soldiers' willingness to carry on the fight. The third explores patterns of resistance and refusal on the Western Front, and at the end of the war. The overall argument is that Canadian [soldiers' attitudes](#) to war may be placed on a spectrum from acceptance, to resistance, to refusal. Disobedience, resistance to authority, and outright refusal were important features of the Canadian response to military service and trench warfare, but the dominant pattern was consent to going to war and engaging in combat. Soldiers exhibited different attitudes in different contexts, from recruitment through demobilization, but experience on the Western Front affected attitudes most powerfully. In the trenches, soldiers developed their own culture suited to the unique social and physical environment, and all soldiers were worn down by brutal and terrifying conditions.

The Call to Arms

One historian has asserted that at the individual level “[n]o single reason for Canadians’ decision to enlist stands out.” While some were “caught up in the excitement of war” and enlisted impulsively, “the desire of young men for adventure cannot be discounted” as a frequently-decisive factor.^[1] Some men bowed to peer pressure to save face, and others signed up out of “self-respect” and to prove “one’s manhood.”^[2] The broad pattern revealed in [letters](#), memoirs and other qualitative sources is that men responded to the war by re-assessing their masculine roles. Enlistees with family responsibilities determined that military duty was greater than their responsibilities as fathers and husbands, or eldest sons supporting widowed mothers. Some likely reached for the uniform as an escape from what felt like burdens, perhaps to embrace a warrior version of [masculinity](#) that the expanding [war culture](#) promoted.

Most of the [research](#) on the response to the war has been part of a larger effort to understand the [nationalism](#) or collective identity of English- and French-Canadians, Canada's largest and second-largest socio-cultural groups, respectively. One important finding has been that British-born immigrants in Canada responded to the call to arms at a higher rate than any other group. Roughly two thirds of the First Contingent were British-born. They constituted about half by the time conscription was adopted in late 1917, at which point about 500,000 men had enlisted. Conscription added about 100,000 men to the CEF and shifted the proportion of British immigrants to roughly 37 percent, a proportion that still exceeded the 12 percent of the Canadian population born in Britain.^[3] British immigrants' direct family ties and personal histories in Britain supported an [imperialist](#) nationalism shared to a degree by Canadian-born English-Canadian volunteers, who often had family ties to Britain too, and were raised in a culture that celebrated the [empire](#) and drew on a British past.

The absence of social and cultural connections to Britain help explain a lower enlistment rate in [French Canada](#), which made up about a third of Canada's overall population, and whose roots in Quebec went back to the 17th century. Another factor discouraging Francophone enlistment was the dominance of English in the pre-war Canadian militia and the CEF, something the eventual creation of Francophone units helped to counteract. Isolationism also received more support in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, and opposition to conscription led to serious civil unrest.^[4] Though interest in serving was lower in Quebec, a recent estimate that 70,000-75,000 French-Canadians served in the CEF, about half of them conscripted, more than doubles earlier approximations. The higher estimate is based on evidence that *Quebecois* (Quebec Francophones, a term not used at the time) volunteered at a higher rate than assumed, and that Francophones from other provinces have been overlooked.^[5]

Historians have made steady progress on the question of the collective response to war service, despite the limited data offered by enlistment records, and the destruction of conscription tribunal records after the war. A major conclusion is that while voluntarism faltered in 1916, and the adoption of conscription created bitter divisions, there was broad interest in military service in Canadian society. One measurement of this interest is the high number of volunteers from an estimated pool of 1.5 million male citizens of military age. By subtracting the third of this total estimated to be at work in essential war industries (which was not an official category), and an estimate for those unfit for service, one historian has argued that there were a little more than 820,000 men eligible for the military.^[6] This estimate may too narrowly define the eligible pool, but regardless of how it is measured, the half-million men who voluntarily enlisted in the CEF is a large proportion of those eligible.

The large proportion of volunteers rejected for failing to meet minimum physical and [health](#) standards (which were generally lowered over time) is further evidence of a positive response to war. The available data makes an exact estimate impossible, but one historian has stated that rejected volunteers "may have numbered well over 100,000, perhaps even 200,000."^[7] One analysis of recruitment data for Toronto suggests this estimate is not too high. It concludes that 45,000 men

signed up to serve before the start of the compulsory draft in October 1917, and that another 30,000 volunteers were denied the opportunity because they were not deemed fit. Together, these volunteers represented 86 percent of the city's eligible men.^[8]

To the large number of successful and unsuccessful volunteers for the CEF, one can add members of racialized minorities, who local officials often rejected. As citizenship was a requirement for enlistment, this issue raised legitimate questions about the eligibility of Asian immigrants, who had been denied equal access to naturalization for decades. Proficiency in English or French, another requirement, may have been a concern as well. Anti-Asian racism was prevalent in Canada, however, and was the major reason for the unequal civil status accorded the small numbers of Japanese, Chinese, and even Sikhs, who, being Indian-born, were British subjects. European immigrants, a far larger minority in the population, had less difficulty volunteering, partly because many were naturalized, but also because the citizenship requirement was unevenly applied, and was in some cases lifted.^[9]

At least two historians have proposed that European immigrants enlisted at a higher rate than Canadian-born English-Canadians, but there has been no full accounting.^[10] One researcher has argued that most of the several thousand Ukrainians who served in the CEF were from allied Russia, while those from enemy Austria-Hungary identified themselves as "Russians, Poles and Bohemians or anglicized their names in order to enlist."^[11] As for Asian-Canadians, historians have found that 222 Japanese-Canadians successfully volunteered,^[12] at least seven Chinese-Canadians managed to enlist, and there were likely fifteen soldiers in the CEF from South Asia.^[13] Racism affected African Canadians' ability to answer the call to arms even more starkly. They were legally citizens, rarely immigrants, and there was no official policy of segregation in the militia, but still, many units turned them away, until a segregated, non-combat battalion was created.^[14] In the end, about 1,200 black Canadians served in the CEF, but there likely could have been more.^[15]

Officials racialized Indigenous volunteers alternately as natural warriors and as unsuitable for service with white men, leaving a patchwork pattern of successful enlistment and rejection in the first years of the war. In total, approximately 4,000 Indigenous men volunteered from communities across the country.^[16] The literature on this topic is in broad agreement that Indigenous volunteers appear to have responded to the opportunity to test their manliness and see more of the world, and in places where waged-work was uncommon, military pay seemed to be attractive. There is also evidence that First Nations leaders responded to the call to arms from the vantage point of their nation's interests, rather than as a duty to Ottawa. This is demonstrated by the criticism of conscription. First Nations leaders pointed out that as the Indian Act made them less than full citizens, with, for example, no right to vote, there could be no basis for the responsibility to fight on the state's behalf, an argument that led to the revision of conscription regulations.^[17]

Interest in war service was clearly high in Canada, but opposition to enlistment also existed at the

outset and continued throughout the war. Quantifying the refusal to serve before conscription, when it became a legal question, is challenging. At the outbreak of the war there were perhaps 26,000 members of Canada's historic peace [churches](#), such as Mennonites and Quakers.^[18] It is unknown what percentage of this potential pool was of military age and actively opposed to enlistment. A small [pacifist](#) movement was active in Canada in 1914, as well as a small radical socialist movement, which opposed going to war for a capitalist-controlled state. Both movements likely included fewer members than any of the peace churches, and Canada offered them no legal support for exemption from service under the 1917 conscription law, the Military Service Act. Exemption as a [conscientious objector](#) was possible under this act only on religious grounds, giving conscientious objection a particular character in Canada. Even so, the number of conscientious objectors in Canada is, according to one historian, likely comparable to the proportional figure for Britain, where 1 percent of enlistees were conscientious objectors.^[19] A broader indication of resistance to war service is the evidence that more than 90 percent of the members of the first draft of conscripts, some 400,000 men by early November 1917, appealed for exemptions.^[20] The evidence suggests, then, that a majority of eligible Canadians responded to the war by volunteering to be soldiers, but that resistance to service was considerable.

As fresh recruits and men awaiting mobilization, a minority of soldiers responded to the war on the home front by targeting German-Canadians and other minorities as unpatriotic shirkers. Berlin, Ontario, had, as the name implied, a large ethnically German community. English-Canadian recruits and their allies blamed this group for the area's enlistment failings, engaged in rough behaviour around town, and dumped a bust of Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941) in a lake. Unsurprisingly, they supported the move made in 1916 to rename the city, with "Kitchener" winning out.^[21] In Calgary in February of 1916, CEF recruits destroyed the interior of a restaurant, where an English-Canadian was supposedly fired in favour of a German. Two other businesses deemed unpatriotic were targeted by the crowd. Several other such incidents occurred across the country during the war.^[22]

When conscription was introduced in 1917 there were returned soldiers in Canada whose activism was another wrinkle in soldiers' responses to the war. As ambulatory convalescents and discharged returnees, a significant number of these men joined [returned soldier associations](#), especially the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA), which described itself as a "win-the-war" organization, championing a renewed, patriotic response to the war.^[23] In many cities, its members campaigned on behalf of [government](#) candidates in the conscription election of December 1917, and in Toronto it condoned returned soldiers' "raiding" of local munitions factories and businesses in the search for supposed shirkers and unpatriotic foreigners. Its national conventions in 1917 and 1918 called for stricter immigration rules to exclude Asians, and, effectively, the conscription of presumed foreigners in Canada to perform war work. Parades and public meetings helped raise awareness of the veterans' anti-alien campaign, whose proposals were debated and rejected in parliament. Lack of progress on the issue supported a rising level of grievance among returnees, who rioted (with

civilians following their lead) in Toronto in August after a story circulated that Greek staff at a café threw out a disabled veteran. GWVA leaders condemned the rioting, but went out of their way to connect the cause the CEF was fighting for overseas with a need to defend the constitutional and cultural essence of British civilization in Canada against foreigners and, as the Red Scare came to the fore, radicals.^[24]

While exhibiting similar attitudes about how they could play a positive role on the home front as regulators of patriotic service, recruits and returned soldiers were worlds apart in terms of their attitudes about the war front. Returnees had experienced it, and that made all the difference.

Acceptance and Endurance

The Canadian contingents sailed to England, where they trained before joining reinforcement drafts to cross the Channel and serve on the Western Front. The camp at Etaples is usually where soldiers began their journey towards the front. Letters, diaries, and memoirs reveal soldiers' intense awareness as they approached the front for the first time, looking for evidence of what it was like and what it would do to them. They typically noted the sound of guns and the movement of people and material behind the lines, while stressing the difficulty of navigating their way in the trenches for the first time. At the front, soldiers found themselves in a unique world. Soldiers contended with innumerable challenges and dangers, from mud, lice, rats, and the filth of dead bodies, to snipers, shelling, [gas](#), and combat. Danger was ever-present, for even in quiet times, snipers and occasional shells found targets, and soldiers needed to guard against trench foot, infection, and accidents.

On the whole, Canadian soldiers adapted to this world successfully, accepting their roles and performing well. Many soldiers focused on survival above gallantry, but the evidence suggests that until their capacity to fight began to drain under the stress of prolonged frontline service, Canadians were concerned with their personal and collective performance, and accepted risk when it seemed to serve the purpose of victory. Historians have drawn similar conclusions about the attitudes of soldiers in other armies, but one unusual aspect of Canada's efforts on the Western Front was the late introduction of conscripts. Despite rejecting the call to arms for several years, conscripts in the CEF responded to the front similarly to volunteers.

The limited research on what one historian has called "reluctant warriors" shows that at least some officers noted that conscripts committed to soldiering during training, as volunteers did, and reacted to the frontlines no differently than volunteers.^[25] In fact, the evidence suggests that the roughly 24,000 who went to the front were notably effective fighters who contributed to the corps' success in the war's final months. These soldiers, representing roughly a quarter of the total number of conscripts, travelled an unlikely path from refusal to acceptance, but it is possible that, for them, conscription was liberating rather than coercive. By compelling their service, the Military Service Act of 1917 may have cancelled obligations that held them back from enlisting despite a desire to volunteer.

Survival at the front depended on luck, but learning the signs of danger and how to stay safe helped keep soldiers alive. Veterans taught newcomers to keep their heads down, to recognize the sound of different shells, and hurry across favourite enemy target areas, such as the intersection of roads or trenches. Some soldiers brought skills and knowledge with them that made them especially valuable. Indigenous soldiers, for example, were in many cases experienced hunters and trappers, skills some of them used to become among the best snipers in any First World War army.^[26]

Of the approximately 4,000 Indigenous soldiers in the CEF, many served in a Pioneer Battalion supplying timber, and most were not snipers. But those that demonstrated the keenness to fight were needed for that role. The most famous was Francis Pegahmagabow (1891-1952), an Anishinaabe from the Wasauksing First Nation near Parry Sound, Ontario. He was awarded three Military Medals for bravery and he fought for four years on the Western Front.^[27] In 1917 he wrote from a hospital in England to the head of the Department of Indian Affairs asking for assistance in reuniting with his unit at the front. Admitting he was suffering psychologically, Pegahmagabow wrote: “For my part I would sooner fight my human enemy while I am trying to fight my spiritual enemy as well. Give them a tap to let me go back to my hunting Fritz in France.”^[28]

Among the themes suggested by the letter is the strong connection most soldiers felt towards their battalion. Even more powerful than unit identity were the bonds soldiers made in their platoon and section, which were the groups common soldiers knew most intimately. Officers’ bonds were strong as well, and usually extended to soldiers they worked closely with. Comradeship was an essential response to the front. Fostered during training, fellow soldiers created strong bonds of trust in the face of extreme danger. For Will Bird (1891-1984), a Nova Scotian who fought in the final two years of the war, the relationships of frontline soldiers gave the war a positive character. His memoir, based on a wartime diary, bears witness to constant companionship and social interaction.^[29]

Comradeship promised support, but also implied peer pressure. Both worked to sustain soldiers’ courage and sense of duty. So did military discipline. Maintaining discipline and avoiding punishment for dereliction of duty or insubordination were fundamental to military service. Religious belief and practices, such as keeping a bible, was a common response for the almost exclusively Christian force. Attitudes about religious formality were divided. Many soldiers hated sermons, but respected chaplains who spent time in the trenches. Soldiers also tended to respect superstitions, by keeping objects and amulets meant to keep them safe, for example, but also by sharing stories about apparitions at the front, such as the story of the Angel (or Angels) of Mons that protected the British Expeditionary Force in late 1914. Will Bird’s story was more personal: his brother, missing in action in 1915 and likely killed, would appear to him in advance of imminent danger, saving him several times.^[30]

Most soldiers appear to have adopted, after initial shocks, a casual attitude to the nearness and unpredictability of death. Normalizing and joking about death revealed an underlying fatalism shared by soldiers on the Western Front.^[31] Though admitting that you had little to no control over whether

you lived or died was not comforting, fatalism at least had the benefit of proposing that the future was already decided and unchangeable, allowing soldiers to continue with their actions at the front. Maintaining connections to family and friends back home, by sending letters and postcards, also helped soldiers cope with their impossible circumstances. Contending with constant danger and witnessing horrors eroded soldiers' capacity for emotion and human connection, eventually deadening their feelings. Letter-writing reminded soldiers that they were loved and sustained their hope of returning home. In fact, the act of writing to oneself, in a proscribed trench diary, was one way soldiers could retain some sense of themselves – or, at least, leave clues to collect later.

The production of [trench newspapers](#), in the CEF and in other armies, was another response to the war that involved writing. Thirty different, often short-lived, papers were produced and written by CEF soldiers near the front. These papers commented on war news sardonically, and shared stories, verse, humour, and cartoons, about the world of the trenches. *The Listening Post* had the highest circulation, at 20,000, and published the cartoons of Hugh Farmer, who contemporaries compared to the famous British cartoonist and First World War soldier, [Bruce Bairnsfather \(1887-1959\)](#).^[32]

Trench newspapers are clear examples of the development of a soldier – or trench – culture at the front. Other distinctive examples of this culture included slang and song, and [trench art](#) created, for example, out of discarded tins or used shell casings.^[33] Soldier culture, or sub-culture, drew on soldiers' home culture, and was informed by interaction with civilians, especially women, in [France](#) and while on leave in England. But it originated in the trenches, travelled with soldiers, and consciously distinguished frontline soldiers from others. While at times an entertainment, and at others a coping strategy, it was also “creative and life-affirming.”^[34] Ultimately, the trench culture of Canadian First World War soldiers functioned as all cultures do: to interpret a natural and social environment, and to articulate meaning from collective experiences and social relations.

Among its important characteristics was that it permitted symbolic resistance to service, especially at the front. In one [Hugh Farmer \(1883-1942\)](#)^[35] cartoon, a soldier joins a behind-the-lines motor unit not because of any experience as a mechanic or chauffeur, but because it will keep him out of the trenches.^[36] Expressing criticism of military hierarchy was another important theme, as the soldier song, “Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire,” demonstrates. The song can be read as a sympathetic account of the effects of mass death on the survivors of a nameless battalion. Each verse answers implied questions about where to find different members of the unit, such as a sergeant, a captain, and the commanding officer. These figures were, alternately, drunk on a canteen floor, hiding in a dugout, on leave, or pinning [medals](#) on their chest. The implied reason was supplied by the whereabouts of “the old battalion,” whose members were “hanging on the old barbed wire.” Read differently, the song was a sharp critique of the incompetence and indifference of officers and non-commissioned officers. A bitterly critical attitude in the lower ranks comes through strongly in a different version of the song, which concluded by stating privates were the ones “hanging on the old barbed wire,” rather than the “old battalion.”^[37]

Resistance and Refusal

Resistance to military discipline and rejection of the front were more than symbolic responses. They were part of a pattern of passive and active resistance to service in which the transformative effects of trench warfare played a central role. At different rates, and with varying effects, the strains of war drained soldiers of their courage, and transformed their personality. Soldiers noticed when comrades developed signs they were losing their nerve, or suffering from “shell shock” or “neurasthenia.” These included bodily and facial ticks, flinching too easily, and becoming withdrawn and uncommunicative. The official estimate of 9,000 cases of shell shock in the CEF, which put about 425,000 men in France and Belgium, is certainly too low.^[38] One historian has recently concluded that “around 16,000 men were diagnosed with some form of nervous illness during the war, representing about 4 percent of those who served overseas, or 10 percent of the non-fatally wounded.” These percentages are comparable to ones for Britain and the other dominions.^[39]

Some soldiers reached their breaking point, often under prolonged artillery bombardment. If they lived, they were taken out of the line in various states of, hopefully, temporary insanity. Others began recklessly exposing themselves to potential harm. One officer said that after their experience on the Somme in 1916 his men were “beginning to show the strain,” and a “great many court wounds, as an honourable way of getting out of the line.”^[40] Anecdotal evidence shows that some men chose suicide, perhaps simply by consistently volunteering for dangerous service, but estimating how many is impossible. Others looked for ways out that would keep them alive, choosing to feign illness or injury. Officially, 729 Canadians were caught taking the riskier approach of inflicting wounds on themselves to get out of the trenches, but how many more actually did this is difficult to know.^[41] Some of the soldiers who contracted sexually transmitted diseases were indeed looking for a respite from the front. The rate of what was called venereal disease was higher in the CEF than any other formation in the empire’s forces, and it was seen as both a punishable offence and a public health matter.^[42]

Another common strategy to avoid time at the front was to extend one’s leave by a few days, or to stay behind the lines when the unit was due for its next tour in the trenches. Being absent without leave (AWOL) was a serious offence, but it implied a soldier intended to be absent temporarily, whereas desertion described the intention to leave permanently. Among the most serious offences in the army, desertion was punishable by execution, and this sentence was carried out on twenty-one of the 202 cases of deserters sentenced to death in the CEF, with the other sentences being commuted.^[43] Two others were executed for murder and one for cowardice.^[44] Some soldiers appear to have accepted execution as a grim necessity, but others did not. In his account of an execution, which he tried to have commuted, Canon Frederick Scott (1861-1944) had difficulty describing the scene after the shooting party had completed its task. Scott lamented the death, but appears to have accepted its necessity for maintaining discipline in the face of the enemy. As he attempted to deliver this message to the men who had done the deed, one “young lad in the firing

party utterly broke down.”^[45]

The military addressed individual acts of refusal or resistance with a system of [justice](#) designed to maintain discipline and help prevent individual disobedience from becoming collective protest and refusal. General problems of discipline became an issue after the Armistice of 11 November 1918, which ended the fighting on the Western Front, but not service in uniform. In late 1918 and early 1919, two of the Canadian Corps’ four divisions served in an army of [occupation](#) in Germany, and the other two were stationed in Belgium. Furthermore, the armistice did not end fighting everywhere.

Earlier in 1918, the Allies opened a new front in Russia, after its revolutionary Bolshevik leadership quit the war upon finalizing the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) of March 1918 with the Central Powers. The peace treaty allowed the Bolsheviks, who came to power in the [October Revolution](#) of 1917, to consolidate their power and concentrate on fighting the [Civil War](#) that began that year and initially involved the Allies. Two artillery batteries of about 600 Canadians mobilized in September 1918 as part of the anti-Bolshevik British force in the White Sea region of northwestern Russia.^[46] They wintered there and according to one historian, the attitude that the armistice should have meant demobilization was so pervasive that “every contingent suffered a mutiny or refusal of duty before spring,” when they began leaving the region.^[47]

At about the same time as Canadian soldiers left Britain for northwestern Russia, the CSEF began mobilizing in Canada. At 4,000 strong it was the empire’s major representative in Allied-controlled Vladivostok until it began demobilization in the spring of 1919, having never engaged the enemy.^[48] Service in this theatre was dreary, and anecdotal evidence suggests there was a high level of resistance to service, as well as outright refusal. Officially, twenty-three members of the CSEF were charged with disobedience and five with desertion. The mission had problems of discipline from the start. In December 1918, at least two groups of recruits refused to board the vessel in Victoria preparing to ship them to Siberia.^[49] The available evidence does not allow for a full picture of this incident, but most of the soldiers were conscripts, and it seems clear that the timing of their departure and destination were additional motivation to balk.^[50]

When the armistice came, soldiers on the Western Front reacted in various ways, from disbelief, to thoughtful silence, to giddy joy. In the weeks that followed, soldiers in several units refused orders to march, demonstrating a changed attitude among soldiers who had accepted harsh conditions and officers’ authority only days earlier. With a ceasefire in effect, exhausted by months of brutal fighting, and beginning to feel the effects of the [flu](#) pandemic, a minority actively objected to marching in full gear, and some were arrested as ringleaders in an effort to reassert discipline.^[51] When the Canadian Corps’ four divisions began their demobilization early in 1919 they joined the sick and injured men and thousands of other CEF soldiers languishing in camps in England waiting for their ship home, where they would be discharged. The relief of surviving the war, and opportunities for leave and off-duty exploring, left many soldiers with experiences they remembered vividly later in their life, not all of them positive. Will Bird’s account of this period touched on time he enjoyed in a

congenial Belgian household, and nighttime wandering through London with his friend and comrade Tommy. Tragedy struck when Tommy died suddenly of influenza, giving Bird, like so many others, one more emotional trial to endure.^[52]

Attitudes about life in the CEF camps in England during this period were universally negative: bad housing, winter weather, poor food, lack of entertainment, and the interminable wait to get home bred grievances that led to at least thirteen riots or significant disturbances. The most serious took place in March 1919 in the Kinmel Park camp in Wales, a massive demobilization centre located near Liverpool, the main embarkation port. Sparked by outrage over yet another announcement of a delayed sailing, groups of soldiers began roaming the camp, stealing supplies and protesting injustice. The active rioters numbered roughly 1,000 soldiers, but it took considerable effort to suppress the unrest. Five men were killed and twenty-three wounded, and twenty-five men were convicted of mutiny.^[53]

Demobilization took place in a world reeling from the devastation of the war, the influenza pandemic that killed millions, and the revolutions it caused, first in Russia, and then in the defeated Central Powers. With class tensions inflamed in Western Europe and North America, officers and civilians worried that the postwar unrest within the CEF was a sign of radicalism in the ranks. In a sense it was, since collective disobedience within the military repudiates the chain of command and fundamentally challenges its structural inequality. However, soldiers overseas at the end of the war were not on the cusp of revolution, and their activism at home after the war was divided between support for militant labour unionism, liberal progressivism, and conservative populism. Soldiers' protests during demobilization were about specific conditions, and expressed a mood of retaliation against the inequities of army life that was sometimes expressed in soldier culture. For example, the song "When this Lousy War is Over" looked forward to freedom from Church parade, abusive non-commissioned officers, and bad food.^[54]

In the long period before the CEF demobilized, soldiers were understandably frustrated that they had to continue subordinating their priorities to officers' privileges and army expectations. The significance of the armistice was not so much that it generated new attitudes, but that it created new circumstances in which soldiers felt more justified in expressing and acting on their attitudes. The Witley Camp riot of 1918 offers an example. As an unidentified participant explained to a journalist on the day he demobilized in Toronto, in December 1918, the riot in the military camp in Witley, England, was a prepared response to peace. It was launched in response to a drummer's call moments after 11:00 am on 11 November in retaliation for rising prices at local shops and canteens, and the injustice of low pay. Soldiers looted civilian-run shops and filled-up "fire buckets" with beer from the wet canteen. The returned soldier called these rioters the day's "millionaire soldiers" and said "we had more fun than enough" the day peace was declared on the Western Front.^[55]

Conclusion

Experiencing war played a role in changing attitudes about war. Extended service at the front usually transformed an attitude of acceptance to one of endurance, and many men broke under the tremendous strain of trench warfare. Service after the armistice was characterized by a pattern of collective refusal and protest that had previously been uncommon. And while pre-war positive attitudes about war persisted after 1918, returned soldiers' disillusionment with peacetime conditions, grief, and trauma, contributed to a legacy of condemning war as a tragedy.

Soldiers generally consented to their service. Disobedience and refusal were the exception. Soldiers maintained their courage at the front because of an understanding among comrades, one that was rooted in masculine pride and self-respect, that they should not let themselves and other comrades down. Duty to oneself and to one's immediate fellows was fundamental to the attitude of endurance, and was supported by a soldier culture that found ways to humanize soldiers on the one hand, and normalize the constant presence of death on the other. Discipline and the threat of punishment played their part in keeping soldiers at their posts, and loyalty to one's unit and the cause were important too.

Canadian soldiers rarely questioned war objectives and their country's interests in a war fought in Europe. These were important factors in the formation of the CEF, however. Attachment to Britain motivated immigrants born there and Canadians with British roots to identify Canada's interests with Britain's. This was much less common in French Quebec. The attitudes of soldiers from other ethnic and racialized communities appear to have mixed imperial and civic nationalism, but personal motivations and an interest in performing a duty of citizenship may have been most important.

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Notes

1. ↑ Cook, Tim: *At the Sharp End. Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1918*, volume 1, Toronto 2007, p. 26.
2. ↑ Morton, Desmond: *When Your Number's up. The Canadian Soldier in the First World War*, Toronto 1993, p. 52.
3. ↑ Sharpe, Chris: *Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918*, in: *Canadian Military History* 24/1 (2015), p. 59. See also: Granatstein, J. L. / Hitsman, J. M.: *Broken Promises. A History of Conscription in Canada*, Toronto 1977, pp. 23-24; Morton, *When Your Number's up* 1993, pp. 277-279.

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Citation

Smith, Nathan: Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Canada) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11433](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11433).

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