The Retention of Identity and Autonomy among Canadian Indigenous Peoples in the First World War

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Introduction

The Great War (1914-1918) erupted in Europe at a time of significant change and hardship for the Indigenous peoples of Canada. In the years leading up to the First World War, Indigenous peoples had been subjected to increasingly aggressive efforts to assimilate them into mainstream settler Canadian society; the residential school system had begun removing Indigenous children from their homes and traditions,[1] and the Department of Indian Affairs had begun managing Indigenous people as wards of the state.[2] In this context, the recruitment of Indigenous people into the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and the participation of Indigenous people in the war effort in general, can be viewed, to a certain extent, as an attempt to further the assimilative process. For example, Indigenous men who joined the CEF were required to learn English[3] and to engage in a regimented European style of warfare that was unfamiliar to them.[4] However, despite the pressure to assimilate, the majority of the 3,500 to 4,000 Indigenous men who joined and fought in the CEF did not lose their traditions, values and identities.[5] . In fact, individuals and groups alike made significant contributions to the war effort while simultaneously retaining their identity, autonomy and agency as Indigenous people. While enlistment and participation in the war effort exerted pressure on Indigenous people to assimilate, most were nevertheless able to express their cultural identities and to retain their autonomy to a large degree. Indigenous people did so during the recruitment and enlistment process, as well as while actively fighting in Europe.

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[1] James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War I*, 11
[2] Richard Holt, *First Nations Soldiers in the Great War*, 145
[3] Dempsey, 26
[4] Dempsey, 50
[5] Robert Talbot, *"It Would Be Best to Leave Us Alone": First Nations Responses to the Canadian War Effort*, 91

Assimilation and Resistance in the Enlistment and Recruitment Process

The pressure on Indigenous people to assimilate and to conform to the government's wishes was prevalent throughout the CEF's enlistment and recruitment process. Indigenous enlistees or recruits were expected to learn English,[6] to don a Western-style uniform, and to follow their commander's orders without question.[7] Indigenous men were expected to cut off their braids,[8] a symbol of pride and tradition for many groups, and to abandon their traditional clothing or symbols. For example, George Strangling Wolf, a member of the Blood tribe, was reprimanded for wearing traditional elk teeth earrings with his uniform.[9] Such policies reflect an implicit agenda of assimilation within the CEF and the Department of Indian Affairs. In fact, Timothy C. Winegard, a professor in the First Nations studies department at the University of Western Ontario, argues that Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, viewed the participation of Indigenous people in the war effort as a clear example of the success of his Department's assimilative efforts.[10] Such a perspective is warranted, given that Scott himself wrote that Indigenous men "will not be content to return to their old Indian mode of life" following the war, due to the increased "contact with the outside world and…civilization."[11] An implicit agenda of assimilation is also evident in the visual propaganda of the time. In one poster advertising the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF), an organization established to support soldiers' families,[12] an Indigenous man is depicted with the caption: "My skin is dark but my heart is white. For I also give to [the] Canadian Patriotic

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[6] Dempsey, 26
[7] Timothy Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*, 120
[8] Mike Mountain Horse, *My People The Bloods*, 141
[9] Mike Mountain Horse, 141
[10] Winegard, 109
[11] Duncan Campbell Scott, *The Canadian Indians and the Great War*, 327-328
[12] Talbot, 92

Fund."[13] While the poster is evidently an attempt by the CPF to shame non-Indigenous people into donating,[14] it nevertheless reflects an attitude of assimilation: that to participate in the war effort, either actively or monetarily, was to adopt and conform to settler Canadian norms and expectations.

Furthermore, when the Department of Militia and Defense began actively recruiting Indigenous men into the CEF in late 1915,[15] the government's recruitment efforts quickly became coercive. Although Campbell Scott discouraged the practice,[16] CEF recruiters were known to publicly pressure individuals and communities to change their minds on enlistment.[17] For example, the chiefs of Manitoulin Island became fearful that they would be deposed by the Department of Indian Affairs if they resisted that they promised to allow their community members to be recruited.[18] However, despite the assimilative pressure and coercion that permeated the CEF's enlistment and recruitment process, Indigenous people were nevertheless able to retain their cultural identities and autonomy. In fact, many enlisted or willingly became recruited because such actions conformed to their own interests, values or goals as Indigenous people.

A common goal for many Indigenous men, especially those from the prairies, was to become a warrior. In many Indigenous tribes, warriors occupied a position of high status and importance within their respective communities; warriors often maintained cultural traditions and led religious ceremonies.[19] Furthermore, warfare was seen by many as a rite of passage into

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[13] Canadian Patriotic Fund, *Moo-Che-We-In-Es' Letter*, 1916
[14] Dempsey, 34-5
[15] Katharine McGowan, *"In the interest of the Indians": the department of Indian affairs, Charles Cooke and the recruitment of native men in southern Ontario for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1916*, Ontario History, 2010
[16] Dempsey, 32
[17] Talbot, 102
[18] Talbot, 104
[19] Dempsey, 47

manhood and a means for achieving honour.[20] James Dempsey, a professor in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, refers to this attitude towards warfare as the "warrior ethic."[21] However, while Dempsey argues that the "warrior ethic" had lost some of its cultural significance to Eastern Canadian Indigenous people due to decades of suppression by religious and government officials, it is evident that many in Eastern Canada still valued their warrior traditions.[22] Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow, a famous Anishinaabe sniper, believed fighting in the war would prove his ability to lead his tribe in the future.[23] Regardless, by 1914, Indigenous men were largely unable to become 'legitimate' warriors as the vast majority had been confined to live on reserves. Joining the CEF and fighting overseas was, however, considered a viable way for a young man to become a warrior. In this way, young men asserted their autonomy and expressed an important element of their Indigenous identity. While Robert Talbot, a professor in the Department of History at the University of Ottawa, disputes the importance of the "warrior ethic" as a motivation for enlistment, arguing that the desire for adventure was a more deciding factor, it stands that becoming a true warrior was certainly an incentive for many. [24] For example, Mike Mountain Horse, a Blood man from Southern Alberta, cites this as one of his motivations for enlisting in the CEF.[25] In his book detailing his wartime experiences, *My People The Bloods*, Mountain Horse wrote that becoming a warrior was "the highest calling in the eyes of the Indian male" and that, by fighting, an Indigenous man became a "valorous defender of his people."[26]

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[20] Eric Story, *"The Awakening Has Come": Canadian First Nations in the Great War Era*, 14-15
[21] Dempsey, 1
[22] Dempsey, 5-6
[23] Story, 15-16
[24] Talbot, 109
[25] Dempsey, 47
[26] Mountain Horse, 106

Similarly, the desire to avenge the death of a brother or other family member also motivated some to enlist. Although far less prevalent or important by the early 20th century, the practice of avenging the murder of a family member by killing a member of the murderer's family (sometimes referred to as "blood revenge") was still relevant to some Indigenous communities.[27]It was certainly important to some in the Blood community in Southern Alberta: Mike Mountain Horse and his brother Joe enlisted in 1916 in order to avenge the death of their younger brother, Albert Mountain Horse.[28] Mike Mountain Horse later reported that the "spirit of revenge" had taken hold of him, a spirit he had inherited from his ancestors.[29] Thus, the decision to enlist in order to avenge the death of a family member was also an expression of Indigenous identity and autonomy.

Indigenous men also enlisted with the hope that they would achieve political change by doing so. Many argued they should be granted greater rights or Canadian citizenship by serving in the CEF.[30] For example, a petition was sent by the Tsimshian of Fort Simpson, British Columbia to Prime Minister Robert Borden in 1917, arguing that they should be given a "say in the making of the laws in Canada" if they were to be conscripted into the CEF.[31] Similarly, numerous Indigenous communities argued that enlistment should lead to their enfranchisement. Indigenous people from across the country—from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to Saddle Lake, Alberta, to Chapleau, Ontario—argued that they should be given the right to vote in exchange for their service.[32] Despite their efforts, enlistment would not lead to the political rights

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[27] Wayne Lee, *Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare*, 702
[28] Mountain Horse, 140-41
[29] Mountain Horse, 140-41
[30] Talbot, 110
[31] Talbot, 107
[32] Winegard, 132-4

that so many desired. Indigenous people with "Indian status" would not receive the right to vote until 1960, forty-two years after the end of the First World War.[33] On the other hand, enlistment was not entirely fruitless for some. Despite being coerced into changing their policy on recruitment, the chiefs of Manitoulin Island still attached conditions onto the enlistment of their peoples. The chiefs insisted that sons be released from duty at harvest time and that a grant of $1,500 be given for seeds and to improve the island's roads.[34] Thus, by pursuing certain goals through enlistment, or by attaching conditions to it, Indigenous peoples asserted a certain degree of autonomy during the largely coercive enlistment and recruitment process.

While many Indigenous people chose to cooperate in some form or another, it is important to acknowledge that others instead chose to resist the government's recruitment efforts. This too can be understood as an expression of identity and autonomy. Many Indigenous communities simply refused to give into the CEF recruiters' coercive tactics. Charles A. Cooke, a prominent recruiter for the Department of Indian Affairs, encountered resistance from numerous communities while travelling across Ontario and Québec in 1915-16.[35] In one case, members of the Six Nations community warned neighbouring communities in advance, in an effort to prevent Cooke from publicly pressuring young Indigenous men to enlist. By the time Cooke arrived in early 1916, all of the eligible men were missing.[36] Similar resistance also manifested when the Federal Government passed the Military Service Act in May 1917, making conscription into the CEF mandatory for all eligible male citizens, initially including Indigenous men.[37] Indigenous people reacted quickly and began protesting the government's decision on the

[33] John F. Leslie, *Indigenous Suffrage*, The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2016
[34] Talbot, 104
[35] McGowan, 2010
[36] Talbot, 102
[37] Dempsey, 36

grounds that they were not full Canadian citizens.[38] Their efforts were ultimately successful, and Indigenous men were exempted from conscription in January 1918. Finally, resistance to enlistment often existed on a more individual basis. Famously, Bumble Bee, a member of the Bloods, enlisted in the CEF but was soon discharged from duty for refusing to cut off his braid. For the Bloods, a man's braid was a symbol of pride and of his ability as a warrior, and for Bumble Bee, retaining his identity and autonomy was far more important than serving in the CEF.[39] Ultimately, in all of these ways, Indigenous people resisted the Canadian government's coercive and assimilative recruitment tactics in an effort to retain their agency and cultural identities.

Assimilation and Resistance at War

While fighting in the trenches of Europe, Indigenous soldiers were subjected to a high degree of assimilative pressure. World War One was, in all respects, a European-style war. All the men who enlisted and fought were placed into a rigid hierarchy of command and were expected to follow orders without hesitation or resistance. Thus, the style of warfare in the Great War was fundamentally different from traditional Indigenous war patterns, which were more individualistic and less regimented.[40] Furthermore, being surrounded by enlisted settlers encouraged assimilation; in an effort to fit in, Indigenous soldiers were known to read English newspapers, play Western games like soccer, and sing traditional English songs.[41]

In spite of the assimilative pressure, Indigenous soldiers still found numerous ways to bring elements of their traditional war-making to the battlefield. Indigenous war-chants, a

[38] Dempsey, 38
[39] Mountain Horse, 141
[40] Dempsey, 50
[41] Story, 20-1

common practice for many Indigenous warriors, were one such element. Indigenous troops were well-known for performing war chants or "whoops" when going into battle.[42] Writing in *My People, The Bloods*, Mike Mountain Horse asserts that his particular war chant was so striking that his "companions assured [him his] war whoops had stopped the war for at least a few seconds."[43] Praying or performing traditional ceremonies before battle were also common practices among Indigenous soldiers. Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow became famous for chewing on twigs before battle and for sporting a traditional medicine-bag, two practices said to ward off death.[44] However, some expressions of identity on the battlefield were more aesthetic in nature. Famously, at the Battle of Amiens, Mike Mountain Horse was able to capture pieces of German artillery, and chose to mark them with symbols of the Blackfoot Confederacy.[45] While it is unclear whether painting symbols on captured weapons was a common practice among the Bloods, such an action was, undeniably, an expression of Mountain Horse's Indigenous identity. By engaging in these behaviours, Indigenous soldiers practiced elements of their traditional war patterns or showcased their Indigeneity on the battlefield; thus, they asserted their identity and autonomy even during combat.

Outside of direct combat, Indigenous soldiers also found ways to express their cultural identities. While surrounded by settler soldiers, many Indigenous soldiers chose to sport traditional garb. Moccasins, a common style of Indigenous footwear, were especially favoured by Indigenous snipers and scouts as they allowed them to move more quietly than the standard-

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[42] Winegard, 113
[43] Mike Mountain Horse, *My People, The Bloods*, 30
[44] Winegard, 113
[45] James Dempsey, *A Warrior's Robe*, Alberta History, 2003

issue boots.[46] There are also reports that some Indigenous soldiers wore headdresses,[47] sacrificing the relative safety of a metal helmet for traditional customs and cultural expression. Others chose to express their identity through their living space. Indigenous soldiers were known to adorn their tents with traditional artifacts, decorations and symbols.[48] In all of these ways, Indigenous troops were able to express their identity and autonomy as Indigenous people while away from the battlefield.

Belonging to an "Indian unit" was yet another way Indigenous soldiers were able to retain their identity and autonomy while serving. In 1915, as the need for new recruits grew, two battalions comprised of predominantly Indigenous soldiers were formed: the 114th Battalion, based in Ontario, and the 107th, based in Manitoba.[49] While the government formed these two "Indian Units" in an effort to encourage recruitment,[50] Indigenous people also had a hand in their formation. Indigenous men from Cape Mudge requested that the Department of Indian Affairs form an "Indian Battalion" because they preferred to fight alongside other Indigenous people.[51] In 1915, the settler Lieutenant Colonel Edwy Baxter formed the 114th Battalion,[52] which was comprised predominantly of men from the Six Nations community in Southern Ontario.[53] The Six Nations Women's Patriotic League embroidered a flag for the 114th and decorated it with Iroquoian symbols; this flag then became a fixture of the battalion and was taken overseas with them in 1916.[54] With its Indigenous members and flag, the 114th Battalion was arguably a literal

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[46] Winegard, 112
[47] Winegard, 121
[48] Winegard, 121
[49] Scott Sheffield, *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives*, 62
[50] Talbot, 100
[51] Department of Indian Affairs. RG10, volume 6766, file 444, microfilm C-8511, http://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c8511/444?r=0&s=3
[52] Winegard, 59
[53] Winegard, 67
[54] Winegard, p. 67-8

embodiment of Indigeneity within the CEF. Similarly, the 107th Battalion was also distinctly Indigenous in character. The 107th, formed by Lieutenant Colonel Glen Campbell, a settler Canadian married to the daughter of Ojibwa chief,[55] was largely comprised of men from the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Cree and the Ojibwa.[56] The symbol of the 107th was the timber wolf, chosen for its significance to numerous Indigenous bands and tribes.[57] Thus, Indigeneity and its expression was an integral part of the 107th Battalion. While neither the 107th nor the 114th were entirely comprised of Indigenous soldiers,[58] and the 114th was later dissolved,[59] the existence of both battalions, as well as the participation of Indigenous people in either, can be understood as an expression of Indigenous identity and autonomy. The representation of Indigenous people was much higher in both battalions than in the rest of the CEF and both battalions incorporated Indigenous cultural elements into their iconography. Furthermore, many Indigenous soldiers requested to be transferred to the 107th or 114th because they felt more comfortable fighting alongside others like them,[60] thereby asserting their autonomy. Finally, and most importantly, being surrounded by fellow Indigenous people arguably enabled many to express their cultural identities more easily than they would have been able to otherwise.

Interestingly, the proficiency of many Indigenous soldiers at combat, specifically scouting and sniping, was also an expression of Indigenous identity. While the relative skill of Indigenous soldiers varied from individual to individual, as with any other ethnic group, Indigenous men were generally considered exceptional soldiers, especially by their enemies.[61]

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[55] Holt, p. 152-3
[56] Winegard, p. 72
[57] Holt, p. 153
[58] Sheffield, p. 62
[59] Story, p. 20
[60] Department of Indian Affairs. RG10, volume 6766, file 444, microfilm C-8511, http://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c8511/444?r=0&s=3
[61] Holt, 143

Captured German communications from the battle of St. Mihiel (1918) reveal that German snipers were instructed to specifically target Indigenous troops as they were considered "greatly superior" to their Canadian counterparts.[62] While Indigenous people occupied a variety of roles within the CEF, many served as snipers or scouts.[63] In fact, the two best snipers in the CEF were Indigenous:[64] Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow is reported to have accumulated 378 kills during his service[65] (although modern historians now dispute this figure[66]), and Corporal Henry "Ducky" Norwest garnered an official 151 kills.[67] Cultural identity likely contributed, at least to some extent, to the proficiency at scouting and sniping that many Indigenous soldiers displayed. At the outbreak of the war in 1914, a large proportion of Indigenous people still subsisted by hunting and trapping for food.[68] These acquired skills translated directly onto the battlefield and enable Indigenous soldiers to excel as scouts and snipers. In this way, the participation of Indigenous soldiers as scouts and snipers can be viewed an expression of their heritage and identity as Indigenous people. However, it must be acknowledged that Indigenous soldiers often lacked agency in their assignments; many were appointed to serve as scouts and snipers due to a racialized perception of Indigenous people and their innate abilities. Many battalion commanders wrongly believed that Indigenous people naturally had better eyesight and night vision, and that they could navigate on instinct.[69] Nevertheless, the historical record suggests that many Indigenous men were skilled at scouting and sniping, due to their civilian experiences rather than

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[62] Winegard, 112
[63] Winegard, 114
[64] Winegard, 114
[65] Fred Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers*, 17
[66] Winegard, 115
[67] Dempsey, 52
[68] Winegard, 114
[69] Winegard, 110

innate abilities, and that many willingly chose to serve in these roles.[70] Indigenous soldiers did express a certain degree of autonomy while serving as scouts and snipers.

Finally, the very act of fighting in the First World War was an expression of identity and autonomy by Indigenous people, namely through the "warrior ethic."[71] As discussed previously, warriors were an important element of many Indigenous communities; warriors were considered to have achieved honour and, accordingly, occupied a position of higher status and importance within their respective communities. Thus, the very act of fighting in the CEF was arguably an expression of cultural identity: the achievement of honour and the perpetuation of a tribe's traditions and social structure.[72] In *My People, The Bloods*, Mike Mountain Horse writes at length about the significance of warriors and warfare to his people, arguing that "the war in Europe proved that the fighting spirit of [his] tribe [had not been] quelched through reservation life."[73] While Talbot challenges the notion that the "warrior ethic" was a deliberate attempt to sustain Indigenous traditions, arguing that Indigenous soldiers "were simply trying to stay alive and sane," it is evident that warfare was nevertheless a culturally important practice for many groups, especially those from the prairie provinces.[74] Fighting in the trenches was arguably an expression of Indigenous identity and autonomy.

Conclusion

Although less overt than the efforts of other government institutions of the time, the CEF and the Department of Indian Affairs nevertheless encouraged—even required—assimilation. It is evident that Duncan Campbell Scott viewed the participation of Indigenous people in the war

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[70] Winegard, 114
[71] Dempsey, 1
[72] Story, 14-15
[73] Mountain Horse, 144
[74] Talbot, 109

effort as evidence of the success of his Department's project of assimilation.[75] However, Scott's perception is not accurate. In reality, the majority of Indigenous people that participated in the war effort did so because participation conformed to their own interests or values. Whether for the sake of honour, to avenge the death of a loved one or to achieve greater political rights at home, Indigenous men fought in the CEF because of a variety of factors that were personally or culturally relevant to them. Furthermore, Indigenous soldiers did not entirely lose their cultural identities or autonomy while fighting in the CEF. Although inundated with assimilative pressure, many chose to engage in traditional war patterns, to enlist with an "Indian unit" or to express their Indigeneity in other ways. Total assimilation was not the end result of the First World War for the CEF's Indigenous soldiers, and history reveals that similar patterns of assimilation and resistance continued after the war's conclusion. The federal government continued to exert control over Indigenous people through assimilative institutions and, in turn, Indigenous people continued to resist these efforts and to retain their identities and autonomy. However, history also demonstrates that participation in the First World War emboldened Indigenous people to pursue greater change. One of the most important outcomes of the First World War for Indigenous people was the formation of the League of Indians of Canada in September, 1919. Formed by Indigenous veterans, the League advocated for greater political rights and strived to create a sense of unity among Indigenous people.[76] This renewed drive for change grew steadily over the coming years and spread across the country. Speaking in front of an Indigenous audience in 1920, the activist Edward Ahenakew declared that "the awakening has come."[77] The awakening

[75] Winegard, p. 109
[76] Story, p. 29-31
[77] Story, 31

that followed the First World War was carried through the rest of the 20th century and, indeed continues to this day.

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