

CHC2D – Canadian History Since World War One
Unit 1 – Lesson #04
Life on the Home Front: Women & the War Effort

Introduction

- Often, Historians focus on battles and soldiers, basically men’s experiences at war.
- Women, however, despite not being allowed into the army, were affected greatly by the war.
- Wives and mothers left behind by their husband soldiers had to support both their families and a nation at war.

Wives and Families of Soldiers

- Were the first group of women impacted by Canada’s involvement in the war.
- While soldiers were off fighting, the Canadian government paid each family \$20.00 as a “separation allowance.”
- This was initially a flat rate and did not change for variables like the # of children in a family.
- Not Enough
- \$20.00 per month was not enough to cover basic living expenses of food, clothing and shelter.
- Local charities began to form to help out the families of soldiers who were short of money.
- One of these charities was the Canadian Patriotic Fund.

Canadian Patriotic Fund

- Was set up and run mainly by educated, middle class women who did not have to worry about money.
- They raised millions of dollars for the charity and even visited the homes of CPF families to make sure that the money was “being spent wisely.”
- Not everyone was happy with these visits.

Supporting a Nation

- As more and more men went off to fight the war, women were needed to fill in for the men who had gone.
- Women volunteered for many jobs and roles to help support the war effort including organizations like the Red Cross.

Women at Work

- Women entered the workforce in many different areas including:
- 1000 worked for the Canadian Air Force
- 2000 enlisted as nurses
- 5000 entered into government jobs
- 30,000 worked in factories producing weapons for the war.
- Overall, 500,000 women entered the workforce to replace the men who had gone off to war.

Munitions Factories

- Canadian factories produced over 60 million artillery shells between 1915 and 1918, 30% of all the shells used by the British Army during the war.
- By 1917 there were 600 factories in Canada producing munitions (weapons and equipment) for the war.
- Most of the employees of these factories were women.

Realities of Work in the Munitions Industry

- Women, who were heavily recruited to join the workforce were not treated equally.
- Women were paid less than a male employee.
- They were not treated very well because most employers assumed that they were “temporary” employees who would be replaced once the soldiers came home.

Reactions to Women Workers

- Many did not approve of women taking jobs traditionally held by men.
- Labour Unions initially fought against the hiring of women to replace male workers.
- Men would often tease or make fun of their new female co-workers.
- In some cases, there was even violence or the sexual abuse of female employees!

Working Conditions

- Munitions factories were dangerous and unhealthy.
- The fumes from the chemicals used to make explosives damaged the lungs and turned the skin of factory workers yellow.
- There were also accidental explosions.
- Childcare for working mothers was not common and many factories did not even provide separate toilets for women!

Rewards

- Women were “rewarded” for their effort to support the war.
- One of the first “rewards” was the ability to vote in Federal Elections.
- Nurses, wives and mothers of soldiers were given the ability to vote by the Wartime Elections Act in 1918.
- Supporting the war effort gave many women new experiences that they would not have had without the war.
- Working in factories, voting and being more independent were all benefits of the war experience for women.
- These benefits, however, did not come without a price as women faced discrimination and danger in the workplace along with the emotional damage of losing a husband, brother or father in the war.

Financing the War Effort

- The War and its demand for food and weapons created huge costs.
- The Federal government in 1914 did not have nearly the capacity to generate revenue as it does today.
- Before 1914, the greatest source of income for the federal government came from customs and excise duties – taxes on imports and specific products like alcohol.

New Revenue Sources

- In order to pay for the increasing costs of the war, the government needed new sources of revenue.
- These new sources of revenue came in the form of direct income taxes and the sale of special government bonds called Victory Bonds.

Direct Income Tax

- Was originally implemented as a temporary measure to offset the cost of war which had reached \$600 million by 1916.
- By comparison, the entire Federal budget for 1913 was slightly less than \$150 million.
- The original tax was 4% on all income above \$3000 per year. Above that amount, a premium was paid based on income.

The Increasing Tax Rate

- \$6000 to \$10,000 – 2%
- \$10,001 to \$20,000 – 5%
- \$20,001 to \$30,000 – 8%
- \$30,001 to \$50,000 – 10%
- \$50,001 to \$100,000 – 15%
- \$100,001 and above – 25%
- These rates were payable only on the amount of income above the amount.

Victory Bonds

- Were a special version of a traditional issue of government bonds – a form of borrowing from individuals.
- The government offers interest on this loan, usually payable after terms of 5, 10, 20 or more years.
- Prior to the war, Canadian bond issues had never sold more than \$5 million.

Canadians Respond

- The first issue of Victory bonds sold \$100 million, double what the government had estimated.
- These bonds paid up to 5.5% on a 20 year term.
- By the end of the war, nearly \$2 billion worth of Victory bonds were sold to Canadians.

Conclusions

- Women were impacted by the war as much or more so than the men who fought it were.
- Women were called on to take care of their families without the help of their husbands.
- Women were also called on to support the war by taking over the jobs left behind by men who went off to war.
- Income taxes and Victory bonds were other major changes for Canadians.