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“The Awakening Has Come”

Canadian First Nations in the Great War Era, 1914–1932

ERIC STORY

Abstract: In the Great War era from 1914 to 1932, the historical literature has cast First Nations peoples as actors without agency, reacting primarily to government policy. This article will demonstrate that government policy had less of an impact on First Nations peoples than scholars have led readers to believe. At the outbreak of war in 1914, First Nations communities' responses to the prospect of enlistment were varied. For those who did enlist, many were attempting to reconnect with the spirit of their ancestors. Once overseas, Indigenous soldiers found themselves in overwhelmingly anglicised environments. Despite these assimilative conditions, they practiced and sustained cultural and martial Indigenous tradition. When they returned home, First Nations veterans breathed new life into Indigenous political organisation. They created the League of Indians of Canada at the end of 1918, agitating for the well-being of First Nations peoples across the country. This article will argue that First Nations individuals and communities utilised the event of the Great War to further both personal and communal interests in a time of great uncertainty and assimilation.

IN A 1919 publication, Duncan Campbell Scott, the Canadian deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, said, “[T]he end of the [First World W]ar should mark the beginning of a new era for [First Nations] wherein they shall play an increasingly honourable and useful part in the history of a country that was once the free and

open hunting ground of their forefathers.”¹ To Scott, First Nations peoples had proven themselves during the Great War from 1914 to 1918.² Over 4,000 of 35,000 Canadian First Nations eligible for military service served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). In other words, at least 35 percent of the First Nations population—roughly equal to the percentage of Euro-Canadian war participants—served during the Great War.³ Following the war, despite the new respect Scott claimed First Nations peoples deserved, government assimilatory policies continued.⁴ Even then, First Nations were able to form one of the first pan-Canadian Indigenous political organisations in the country’s history during the interwar period.⁵ Ontario veteran F.O. Loft (Mohawk) established the League of Indians of Canada at Sault Ste. Marie in September 1919, in order to give voice to First Nations peoples.⁶ Following the initiative of the league, provincial First Nations organisations began to form in the early 1930s.⁷

The historiography of Canadian First Nations soldiers and veterans in the Great War era is one that requires significant expansion. Beginning in 1985, scholars began to write about the “forgotten warriors” of the Great War and also drew attention, for the first

¹ Duncan Campbell Scott, “Canadian Indians and the Great World War,” in *Canada and the Great World War, vol. 3, Guarding the Channel Ports* (Toronto: United Publishers of Canada, 1919), 328.

² Legally “Indians” are considered one of three Aboriginal groups within Canada (the others being the Inuit and Métis). Although this paper focuses on the experiences of soldiers who were defined as “Indians” either by themselves or the Canadian government, it employs the term “First Nation” as a more widely accepted and culturally respectful label.

³ Timothy C. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 6.

⁴ See Lisa Salem-Wiseman, “‘Verily, the white man’s ways were the best’: Duncan Campbell Scott, Native Culture, and Assimilation,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 21, no. 2 (1996), 120–142; Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 28, 41–42 for assimilation policies.

⁵ Although the league is the first pan-Canadian organisation, the first inter-provincial Indigenous political organisation was the General Council of Ontario and Quebec Indians. It was formed in 1870.

⁶ J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relation in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 318–319.

⁷ The one exception would be the Allied Tribes of British Columbia, whom formed in 1915.

time, to the hardships veterans faced in the post-war era.⁸ However, with the exception of James Dempsey's 1999 MA thesis-turned-book on Prairie First Nations military and post-war experiences from 1914 to the 1930s, the Canadian literature on this period remains largely devoid of Indigenous voices.⁹ Writings on the post-war years are particularly barren and too often cast First Nations peoples as actors without agency reacting to, and suffering from, the policies of the Canadian government. Further, scholars have rather unconvincingly attempted to connect the post-war political activism of First Nations with the war experience.¹⁰

⁸ Before 1985, First Nations participation in the First World War was largely ignored. See Scott, "Canadian Indians" for the exception. Semi-autobiographical writings by First Nations, which include mention of the First World War, began to be published in the 1970s. See Mike Mountain Horse, *My People The Bloods* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1979); Edward Ahenakew, *Voices of the Plains Cree*, Ruth M. Buck, ed., 2nd ed. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1995). P. Whitney Lackenbauer and R. Scott Sheffield argue that First Nations Great War soldiers remained "forgotten warriors" until the early 2000s. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and R. Scott Sheffield, "Moving Beyond 'Forgotten': The Historiography on Canadian Native Peoples and the World Wars," in *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), 209–231. For the post-war period, see Fred Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), 27–32; L. James Dempsey, "Problems of Western Canadian Indian War Veterans After World War One," *Native Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (1989), 1–18; Sarah Carter, "'An Infamous Proposal': Prairie Indian Reserve Land and Soldier Settlement After World War I," *Manitoba History* 37 (1999), 9–21.

⁹ L. James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War I* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1999). Dempsey completed his MA thesis in 1987. Timothy Winegard does include a chapter on First Nation soldiers, but his book remains more so about government policy towards First Nations during the war. See Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 110–139 for the chapter on "Indian Soldiers."

¹⁰ Those who have attempted to make this connection often mention it in a sentence or two with little evidence. See Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 72, 79; Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 318–319. The exception is Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 161–164. John Moses does not see a definitive link between Grand River First Nations' participation in the war with the post-war political agitation. He finds a connection, instead, with the early nineteenth century political splintering of two factions within the community, and one of the two factions' goals manifesting itself overseas. John Moses, "The Return of the Native: Six Nations Veterans and the Political Change at the Grand River Reserve, 1917–1924," in *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives*, P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Craig Leslie Mantle, eds. (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), 117–128. Peter Kulchyski completely ignores the influences of the First World War on F.O. Loft and the rise of the League of Indians of Canada, instead connecting the origins of the league with the decline of the Grand General Indian Council of Ontario and Quebec, and the backlash from the Oliver Act of 1918. Peter Kulchyski, "'A Considerable Unrest': F.O. Loft and the League of Indians," *Native Studies Review* 4, no. 1 and 2 (1988), 95–117.

This article addresses these oversights in the historiography of First Nations in the Great War era. First, it outlines First Nations' reactions to the outbreak of war in 1914 and their enlistment. Reconnecting with ancestors and their values appears to be one of the key reasons for First Nations enlistment. Subsequent analysis shifts to the muddy trenches of the Western Front, in which First Nations soldiers lived for four long years, utilizing cultural traditions in order to sustain themselves in such inhumane conditions. The final section will connect their war experiences with political organisation and resistance until 1932. Combined, this period of Indigenous history illustrates how First Nations soldiers consistently used the Great War to further both personal and collective goals of improving the circumstances of their peoples.

ENLISTMENT

"The country went mad!" exclaimed Bert Remington when war was announced in Canada on 4 August 1914.¹¹ From the Pacific coast to the Atlantic, Canadian citizens met the war with enthusiasm and patriotism. Men scrambled to the recruiting booths, hoping to get themselves overseas before the war was over. Initially, however, First Nations were unofficially forbidden from enlisting.¹² When asked about First Nations enlistment, Minister of Militia Sam Hughes said, "While British troops would be proud to be associated with their fellow [First Nations] subjects, ... Germans might refuse to extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare, therefore it is considered ... that they had better remain in Canada to share in the protection of the Dominion."¹³ Despite this unofficial exclusionist policy, recruiting agents often ignored it.

First Nations responses to the outbreak of war were more varied than the rest of Canadian society. For some, such as Mike Mountain Horse (Blackfoot) from Alberta and Ontario's Francis Pegahmagabow (Anishinaabe), enlistment became a way to reconnect with ancestors

¹¹ Quote from Tim Cook, *At The Sharp End: Canadians Fighting in the Great War, 1914-1915*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 21.

¹² Paul W. St. G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (1989), 3-4; Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 41.

¹³ Quote from Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 45.

and carry on their traditions. Following the signing of the treaties in the 1870s and 1880s, many traditional Indigenous values and practices began to fade away as a result of residential schooling, religious re-education and reserve isolation. In his autobiography, Mountain Horse lamented the loss of one of these values in particular: the warrior. To him, the warrior was the “highest calling in the eyes of the Indian male.”¹⁴ In a subsequent chapter, Mountain Horse explained the significance of participating in warfare: “After his first exploit on the war path, the young warrior was considered a finished product of red manhood, a valorous defender of his people.”¹⁵ To Mountain Horse—and according to Blood martial tradition—the experience of war was a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. It was a test of one’s masculinity. Undoubtedly, Mountain Horse’s enlistment was at least in part motivated by a desire to confirm his masculinity as a First Nations man, as well as rekindle some practices and values that were starting to decline.

Francis Pegahmagabow had similar motivations. In Anishinaabe culture, dreams or visions were of utmost importance. According to ethnographer Diamond Jenness, they played an influential role in the shaping of an Anishinaabe person’s life.¹⁶ Usually around adolescence, young Anishinaabe boys were isolated from their families, and put in small huts where they were to have great visions. In many cases, the father would advise his son as to the types of dreams or visions he should seek. If the father had led a successful life—which, it seems, Pegahmagabow’s father had done as chief of the Parry Island First Nation—he would hope the same spirit that visited him would also visit his son and provide him with a blessing and a vision. Pegahmagabow, in a letter written in his later years, described a dream that may very well have been the one he experienced in his adolescence:

A native orphan boy at Shawnanaga ... had often gone to pray and cry by the graves of his dead parents. One time, he fell asleep there. At the dawn the next morning someone said to him, ‘Awake my boy, do not cry anymore, you are now a great person. You have been blessed to

¹⁴ Mountain Horse, *My People The Bloods*, 106.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶ Diamond Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island, Their Social and Religious Life* (Ottawa: 1935), 47.

save your tribes from slavery.’ He kept that to himself. Then another day came an age-old native [who] was about to die. The foster mother was informed by the old age to take good care of the same orphan boy. ‘He has a very special, wonderful blessing. He will save our tribes from slavery when he gets to be a man.’¹⁷

This dream told Pegahmagabow that he was to be a leader of the Parry Island First Nation, just like his father before him. Pegahmagabow’s grandfather had also been a chief of the community, but fought alongside the British during the War of 1812, as well. In order to fulfill the dream’s prophecy, Pegahmagabow believed that enlisting and fighting in a war was a necessary step for him to become a leader.

Other reasons for First Nations enlistment include loyalty to the British Crown through the treaties, the promise of adventure, the chance to escape the boredom of reserve life, and the promise of stable pay.¹⁸ Of all these reasons, no one was more important than any other for the enlistment of a First Nations man. Each person had his own reasons for enlisting, many interconnecting and overlapping.¹⁹ Such is the case with Mountain Horse and Pegahmagabow. The “spirit of revenge” also motivated Mountain Horse to enlist after his brother’s death on the Great War battlefields. This spirit, Mountain Horse claimed, had been inherited from his ancestors.²⁰ Soon after the funeral, Mountain Horse found himself in uniform, a part of the 191st Battalion. As for Pegahmagabow, his determination to enlist could also have been about continuing his family’s longstanding tradition of supporting Britain in times of war.

The ‘outlier’ enlistees—those who had quite different reasons for enlisting—joined up out of personal or communal gain. Mike Foxhead (Blackfoot), for instance, said in a 1917 letter that in enlisting he hoped to “put up a name for the Reserve, so they can say that they have one of their boys over here.”²¹ This response can be interpreted

¹⁷ Quote from a handwritten autobiography of Pegahmagabow. Adrian Hayes, *Pegahmagabow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero* (Huntsville: Fox Meadow Creations, 2003), 16.

¹⁸ Robert J. Talbot, “‘It would be best to leave us alone’: First Nations Responses to the Canadian War Effort, 1914–18,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 45, no. 1 (2011), 108–114.

¹⁹ Cook, *At The Sharp End*, 26.

²⁰ Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 46; Mountain Horse, *My People the Bloods*, 140.

²¹ Quote from Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 49.

in two ways. Either he hoped his service would make people proud of his reserve, or he himself would gain pride among his people. Other First Nations enlistees, according to historian Katharine McGowan, hoped to make “meaningful change for their communities.”²² The Indian Agent for Vancouver, for example, reported that men had asked about the issue of enfranchisement, believing that if they enlisted they would receive the vote. Many First Nations enlistees were hoping to bring about positive change for their communities.²³

One of the more interesting cases was that of Russell Taylor. In an interview in 1977, he spoke of the events leading up to the day of his enlistment. Feelings of loneliness and rejection stemming from his early childhood motivated him to enlist. From when he was about five years old, Taylor’s mother moved him “from different house to different house till [he] was twelve” because his stepfather was not fond of him. When he was twelve years of age, he was given to an elderly First Nations man, who, in turn, ‘traded’ him to the McKinnys family. Although the McKinnys treated Taylor, he claimed, as if he was their own child, he ran away and enlisted.²⁴

The McKinnys gave Taylor a Euro-Canadian lifestyle—a lifestyle in which he felt he did not belong. When his adoptive father said, in jest, that he would be able to join the army before Taylor, Taylor’s feelings of estrangement were triggered. He realized that he was different than his adoptive family. His enlistment, it seems, would give him a sense of belonging—something of which he was deprived throughout his life. Furthermore, when he enlisted, he changed his name. As an illegitimate child, he bore his mother’s name: Blaker. Upon enlistment, he changed it to Taylor: “That was how I come to lose my Blaker’s name ... I went to work and I joined up as Taylor, Russell Taylor.”²⁵ Taylor enlisted in the hope of finding a new identity.

²² 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* 102, no. 1 (2010), 110.

²³ Talbot, “‘It would be best to leave us alone,’” 110. See Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 132–134 for more examples of First Nations individuals and communities asking for enfranchisement because of their contributions to the war effort. Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers*, 20.

²⁴ Russell Taylor, “Russell Taylor #1,” interview by Fay Tilden, 11 November 1977, available at <http://ourspace.uregina.ca:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10294/2262/IH-OA.025.pdf?sequence=1>. The old man asked the McKinnys, while trading with them, if they would like to have Taylor too.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

He found that in the army with his two best friends, Sam Taylor and Bill Johnson who happened to also be First Nations.

Not all First Nations peoples met the war with enthusiasm. Edward Ahenakew of the Sandy Lake Cree Reserve in Saskatchewan, writing in 1923, said that Cree elders rejected their people's participation in the war:

Our Old Men ... did what they could to discourage [enlistment]—not from disloyalty, but because it seemed against nature to them that an Indian should go fight in a distant land and perhaps lay his body to mingle with earth that was not ours. It did not seem even England's quarrel, and much less Canada's. As they understood, England was helping other nations, and not fighting for her own life.²⁶

These words reflect some of the oral testimonies made during the signing of Treaty Six in 1876. Alexander Morris, the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, promised the Treaty Six First Nations that they “would not be asked to fight unless they desired to do so, but if the Queen did call on them to protect their wives and children,” he believed they would.²⁷ But because the war was being fought on foreign soil—and, for that matter, not in the defence of Great Britain—the Cree elders did not feel bound by the treaty agreement. It would be best for the community if their young men did not participate. However, the younger generation did not heed the words of their elders. With or without their support, many young men chose the warpath.²⁸

By 1915, the Department of Indian Affairs had changed its stance on the recruitment of First Nations men. In the previous year, departmental officials had been reluctant to accept Indigenous recruits, ostensibly because of their belief that Germans would not extend the courtesies of civilised warfare to First Nations peoples.²⁹ In late 1915, however, after the staggering losses at the Second Battle of Ypres, the Battle of Festubert and Givenchy that past spring, the CEF needed more men. On 30 October 1915, Prime Minister Robert

²⁶ Ahenakew, *Voices*, 82.

²⁷ Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories including the negotiations on which they were based, and other information relating thereto* (Saskatoon: Fifth Housing Publishing, 1991), 186.

²⁸ Ahenakew, *Voices*, 82.

²⁹ Walker, “Race and Recruitment in World War I,” 4.



Edward Ahenakew, c.1910. [Saskatchewan Archives Board R-B11359]

Borden increased the strength of the CEF to 250,000, and then once again in December to 500,000. Recruitment needed to be bolstered. And so, in November 1915, recruitment on reserves began.³⁰

These recruitment efforts, according to historian Robert Talbot, were met with resistance from First Nations communities.³¹ Charles Cooke, a long-time Indian Affairs employee responsible for the recruitment of the 114th Battalion in Ontario in 1916, encountered ambivalence and, at other times, outright resistance. The Manitoulin Island First Nations, for example, distributed pamphlets in Anishinaabe to the chiefs, telling them to discourage their young men from enlisting when Cooke arrived in April of that year. It appeared to work, as only fifty of 384 Manitoulin Island men enlisted. Mohawk servicemen from Akwesasne on the Ontario/Quebec border also sent letters home in their Indigenous language, warning their brothers of the horrendous nature of life in the trenches, and urged them not to enlist.³² The use

³⁰ Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 56–57.

³¹ Talbot, “It would be best to leave us alone,” 99–107.

³² *Ibid.*, 103. Letters written in Indigenous languages also allowed these soldiers to bypass the censor that greatly restricted the content of the letters that were sent back home.

of Indigenous language by First Nations soldiers became an alternative way to preserve and improve the lives of their peoples.

In the enlistment period, First Nations responses were not unanimous. Previous scholars have attempted to either emphasise the patriotism of First Nations enlistment or their communities' resistance to recruitment.³³ Yet, it seems that exclusivity does not capture the First Nations enlistment and recruitment experience. In some communities—such as the Cree—there was a generational divide in their attitudes towards enlistment. In others, there was outright resistance to recruitment efforts. As for those who did enlist, no one reason adequately captures their decision. Often, the combination of two or three factors brought these men to the recruitment booths.

OVERSEAS

Some 4,000 First Nations people enlisted during the Great War. And the environment in which these soldiers were thrust was clearly one of assimilation. As historian James Walker notes, the Great War was a “white man’s war.”³⁴ The 30,000-man First Canadian Contingent was predominately British-born, totaling over 60 percent of all men.³⁵ First Nations men such as Francis Pegahmagabow, who served with the First Contingent, operated in an overwhelmingly English environment in the early years of 1914 and 1915. Supposed ‘Indian’ battalions were also broken up overseas. Advertised as *the* Indian Battalion, the 114th arrived in England and its men were soon absorbed into various battalions needing reinforcement.³⁶ Other First Nations soldiers saw themselves scattered across the battalions of the CEF.³⁷ Furthermore, and most significantly, Canadian soldiers cultivated a highly-anglicised soldier culture in the trenches. They spoke in a unique, yet English, language, read trench newspapers,

³³ For the former, see McGowan, “In the interest of the Indians,” and Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*. For the latter, see Talbot, “It would be best to leave us alone.”

³⁴ Walker, “Race and Recruitment in World War I,” 5.

³⁵ Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 28–29.

³⁶ Walker, “Race and Recruitment in World War I,” 21.

³⁷ Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 61; Scott, 289.

sang songs, and told jokes.³⁸ This environment brought soldiers together, forging strong bonds that helped them deal with the strain of warfare. Yet for many First Nations soldiers, this environment left them with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Saskatchewan First Nations soldier Abel Watech, for example, wrote in a letter, “Many is the time I wish I was back in my native country.” Mike Mountain Horse too felt the effects of loneliness and cultural assimilation: “I am rather lonely ... I have not talked Blackfoot for over six months.”³⁹ If First Nations soldiers were to participate in this anglicised soldier culture, they had to become more like the white man, or else remain estranged.⁴⁰ Although First Nations peoples had already experienced premeditated and intentional assimilation back home on the reserve, at least they had their families, their traditions, and their culture to which they could turn. The trench environment offered no such comforts. Trench life could be assimilative or isolating, and often times both. Amazingly, First Nations culture was sustained in such conditions.

But before explaining how First Nations martial culture and tradition was sustained in the trenches, it is important to note that these practices were not being revived by these soldiers. Although the treaties had effectively abolished tribal warfare and greatly restricted hunting from the 1880s until the dawn of the Great War, martial tradition was instead practiced in alternative forms. The Blackfoot hosted religious ceremonies, for example, as a means of arousing “courage and enthusiasm for war” among young men.⁴¹ Thus, Indigenous martial tradition was not completely stamped out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was simply altered to fit the realities of First Nations in Canada. The Great War was

³⁸ See Tim Cook, “Fighting Words: Canadian Soldiers’ Slang and Swearing in the Great War,” *War in History* 20, no. 3 (2013): 323–344 for the language that was used; Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadian Fighting the Great War, 1917–1918*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 185–196 for the “soldier culture” that developed, in particular 185–190 for trench newspapers; Tim Cook, “The Singing War: Canadian Soldiers’ Songs of the Great War,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2009), 224–241 for the songs of Canadian soldiers; Tim Cook, “I will meet the world with a smile and a joke’: Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (2013), 48–62 for the jokes of Canadian soldiers.

³⁹ Quotes from Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 60–61.

⁴⁰ This is perhaps best demonstrated in Joseph Boyden’s fictional work *Three Day Road*.

⁴¹ Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 10–11; Colin F. Taylor, *Warriors of the Plains* (New York: Arco Publishing Co., 1975), 45.



Private Tom Longboat (Onondaga, right) receiving a trench newspaper from a young French newspaper boy, June 1917. [Library and Archives Canada A-001479]

no different. Now that they were exposed to open warfare, and living outside of their respective reserves, First Nations soldiers could more easily practice martial tradition as their ancestors had before them.

War “songs” proved to be one of the ways Indigenous culture was sustained during the war. One day, while being strafed in the trenches along the Western Front, Mike Mountain Horse, experiencing “intense” discomfort, “... released [his] pent-up feelings in the rendering of a ... war song.”⁴² In a single instance, Mountain Horse was able to cope with the intense strain of warfare in a highly anglicised environment through Blackfoot tradition. Additionally, the capacity to deliver an original war chant, he would later say, was one of the steps in the maturation of a young First Nations warrior. He had enlisted in the hopes of reconnecting with the spirit of his ancestors. The singing of his own unique war “song” became one of the steps he had to take in order to become a warrior. According to historian Timothy Winegard, there are countless instances of First Nations soldiers “singing” and chanting during battle.⁴³

⁴² Mountain Horse, *My People the Bloods*, 30.

⁴³ Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 113.

First Nations soldiers often utilised traditional customs and beliefs during the war. When Francis Pegahmagabow was at Rossport on Lake Superior in 1914, an old First Nations man gave him a “tiny medicine-bag to protect [him], saying [he] would shortly go into great danger.” Pegahmagabow, after the war, recalled that sometimes the medicine bag was as “hard as a rock, [and] at other times it appeared to contain nothing ... What was really inside I do not know. I wore it in the trenches.”⁴⁴ During times of war, Anishinaabe men used what was called a *wadjigan* to keep them in close contact with their *manidos*—or spiritual guardians. Many Anishinaabe believed that success in war was dependent upon the power of his *manido*.⁴⁵ For Pegahmagabow, this medicine-bag became his *wadjigan*. It gave him spiritual protection, which, in turn, gave him the courage to engage in the horrors of trench warfare.⁴⁶ Yet, it seems Pegahmagabow’s *wadjigan* also held a relationship with his previously-mentioned vision as a young boy. According to Diamond Jenness, “[a *wadjigan*] constantly reminded the Indian of his vision and fortified him in danger and distress.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Pegahmagabow’s *wadjigan* could have served as a coping mechanism of sorts, but it was also a reminder that he was to one day become a leader of the Parry Island people. He had to stay alive if he was to do so.

As witnessed by Mike Mountain Horse, George Strangling Wolf (Blackfoot) from Alberta practiced a ritual during the Great War that “played a prominent part in the life of a warrior.”⁴⁸ During the “dark days of 1917 when the Germans were having things pretty much their own way,” Mountain Horse and a small party stopped along the side of a French road. Some began to pray for the success of their allies, and others for a happy return home to their parents. On his part, George Strangling Wolf inserted a needle into the skin above his knee, lifted it up, and sliced the skin off with his knife. He then held the bloody piece of flesh up to the sun and said, “Help me, Sun, to survive this terrible war, that I may meet my relatives again. With this request, I offer you my body as food.” He then dug a small

⁴⁴ Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island*, 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ John Steckley and Brian Cummins, “Pegahmagabow of Parry Island: From Jenness Informant to Individual,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 25, no. 1 (2005), 40.

⁴⁷ Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island*, 53.

⁴⁸ Mountain Horse, *My People the Bloods*, 74.

hole, and placed the skin inside.⁴⁹ For Strangling Wolf, participating in the Great War allowed him to continue practicing Indigenous martial tradition that had otherwise been outlawed after the signing of the treaties in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps even more importantly, however, Strangling Wolf was able to simultaneously evade the limitations placed on him by the 1876 Indian Act. The self-torture ritual of the Sun Dance ceremony was banned under the provisions of the Indian Act, yet this new trench environment gave Strangling Wolf the freedom to practice it.⁵⁰

In another instance, Francis Pegahmagabow's belief in Indigenous spirits was strengthened during the war. In an interview with ethnographer Diamond Jenness, Pegahmagabow spoke of a severe thunderstorm with terrific winds during the war. According to Jenness, Pegahmagabow "felt the air flap his face as though moved by the wings of a mighty bird. Previously he had not believed the story of a thunderbird, but on this occasion at least it seemed to him that it must be true."⁵¹ Despite living in an environment where English was spoken, Christianity was practiced, and English Canadian culture dominated, Pegahmagabow was able to Indigenize his experience overseas, at least for a moment, when he felt the feathers of the thunderbird upon his face.

Clearly, First Nations soldiers did not assimilate on the battlefields. The geographical change of moving from Canada to France gave Indigenous soldiers the autonomy they needed to continue practicing traditions that were being altered at home. Through the treaties, the 1876 Indian Act and residential schools, First Nations communities were compelled to adopt the ways of Anglo-Canadians. Yet the occupational change to that of a soldier empowered Indigenous peoples because it placed no restrictions on the ways they chose to engage with warfare. For men such as Mountain Horse, Pegahmagabow, and Strangling Wolf, they chose to practice martial tradition as they had been taught by their ancestors. No evidence suggests they were consciously practicing these traditions in an attempt to sustain Indigenous culture in spaces of assimilation. They were simply trying to stay alive and sane, and these practices help them to do so. Nonetheless, each First Nations soldier who practiced such rituals

⁴⁹ Ibid, 74–75.

⁵⁰ Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 19.

⁵¹ Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island*, 37.



Blood Recruits of the 191st Battalion, 1916. On the top row, George Strangling. Wolf is second from right and Mike Foxhead is on the far right. Mike Mountain Horse is on the bottom row, far right. [Glenbow Archives NA-2164-1]

kept the flame of Indigenous culture alive even though it was being doused back home in Canada.

RETURN HOME

Cultural traditions were indeed sustained in the trenches, but it is also evident that participation in the war sparked a renewed sense of entitlement among Indigenous soldiers and communities back home. Those on the home front and in the battlefields commonly discussed the rights to equal treatment and to enfranchisement. Anishinaabe chief George Fisher, in a letter, questioned the British foreign secretary, Edward Grey, about the validity of First Nations fighting in the war if they were not citizens and could not vote.⁵² Private Mark Steinhauer of the Saddle Lake Alberta Cree pondered post-war life, claiming it to be unfair if he did “not get anything of a country we are fighting for.”⁵³ Others such as Francis Pegahmagabow began to feel resentful because of the treatment of First Nations

⁵² Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 133.

⁵³ Quote from Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 72.

peoples in Canada: “Them dogs let them suffer, take the money away from them, and kick them out,” he had written angrily in a letter to Cecil Oldmeadow in April 1918.⁵⁴ As his biographer notes, Pegahmagabow would carry these feelings of resentment back home to Canada after the war.

Disillusionment continued to sink in during the settling of First Nations soldiers after the war. Many had returned with a stronger sense of self-worth and a belief they had fulfilled their duties to Canada. And when they applied for land through the soldier settlement program in the post-war years, it was thought they were receiving well-earned benefits for their sacrifices. Just as in the years preceding the war, this would not be the case. First Nations settlement loans tended to be smaller than their non-Indigenous counterparts. First Nations veterans were given \$1,894 on average, while the median loan for all settlers was over \$4,000. They also tended to receive smaller land plots with poor quality soil, low-grade livestock, and outdated agricultural equipment.⁵⁵ Many complained, including Francis Pegahmagabow. This system only continued to feed the growing disillusionment among First Nations veterans. They felt cheated. They had stood up for their country, and once again, it had let them down. Something had to change.

Pegahmagabow was not the only one moved by his experience in the war. A group of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) from the Grand River community also viewed the war as a springboard to political change back home. In the 1880s, the Six Nations community of the Grand River fractured into two political groups—one supporting democratically inspired, yet non-traditional forms of government, the other siding with the more traditional “Iroquoian Longhouse” form.⁵⁶ Brian Titley argues it is difficult to find differences between the opposing groups, but if there was any divide, it was along religious

⁵⁴ Quote from Hayes, *Pegahmagabow*, 35.

⁵⁵ Robin Jarvis Brownlie, “Work Hard and Be Grateful: Native Soldier Settlers in Ontario after the First World War,” in *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*, Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 184–186.

⁵⁶ Moses, “The Return of the Native,” 119; Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 112; Sally M. Weaver, “The Iroquois: The Grand River Reserve in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, 1875–1945,” in *Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on the First Nations*, Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith, eds. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 233.

lines. The traditionalists were adherents of the longhouse tradition, while the reformers—referred to as the Dehorners—followed the doctrines of Christianity.⁵⁷ The Dehorners also had objections to the hereditary political system, believing that local government should be progressive and held accountable to their people through elections.⁵⁸

By 1894, the divide between these two groups had grown to a point where the Dehorners sent a 212-person petition to Ottawa, demanding the institution of an elected council. Although their demands were denied, they mustered three hundred signatures thirteen years later in 1907, asking for the same political changes. Again, the Department of Indian Affairs refused. Despite their increasing number of supporters, the federal government was not prepared to give in to the demands of the Dehorners. They did not wield enough power for these demands to have weight.

It was not until the twilight years of the Great War that the Dehorners made another plea to the Department of Indian Affairs. After the souring of the Six Nations council's relationship with the federal government near the beginning of the war, the former refused to help with recruitment. The council decided it would only recruit young men if the king specifically requested their help. As news slowly trickled to the war front in Flanders, many of the sons of the former Dehorners became enraged. How could their own community fail to support a cause in which they were willing to give up their lives? And so on 8 August 1917, just before the 107th Battalion fought at Hill 70 near Lens and Vimy, these young men revived the Dehorner movement once more and sent a petition to the Department of Indian Affairs:

We the undersigned soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and members of the Six Nations Indians, of the Grand River, regret very much that circumstances have made it so, we can no longer look on our present council with respect and confidence, and we therefore sign this as an agreement, to do all in our power to rid our nation of the said council, and in its place to establish a government representative of the people, whereby we as Six Nations Indians, in general, may be

⁵⁷ Titley, *A Narrow Vision*, 113.

⁵⁸ Weaver, "The Iroquois," 243.

intelligently represented, and that our public affairs and national spirit may be properly looked after (56 signatures).⁵⁹

The Dehorners believed that governance changes had to be made in their community so that the leadership would be “representative of the people.” According to Sally Weaver, although the signature count was lower and the Department of Indian Affairs again rejected the petition, nationalist zeal and the Dehorners’ claim to the “loyalist cause” during and after the war gave the petition significantly more power.⁶⁰ The government could not ignore the Dehorners’ claims forever.

When the Dehorners returned home, they sent a second petition to Indian Affairs on 1 September 1919, this time pointing to the important sacrifices they had made during the war, and once again asked for a change in the governance system.⁶¹ This time, however, the Six Nations community’s traditionalists had a response. In the early 1920s, Chief Deskaheh (also known as Levi General) led a handful of Six Nations sovereigntists in calls for autonomy from Canada. Deskaheh and his lawyer eventually travelled to Geneva in 1923 to present his case to the League of Nations that the Six Nations should receive independence as a sovereign state and thus a membership to the league.⁶² During Deskaheh’s absence the Dehorners were able to finally help change the Six Nations’ political system. The Department of Indian Affairs was understandably embarrassed by Deskaheh’s presentation to the League of Nations, and the superintendent general was much more open to changing the system to an elected council afterward. After an investigation, the Department of Indian Affairs announced its support for the Dehorner movement. In October 1924, the traditional hereditary council was no more, replaced by an elected council system.⁶³ The reasons for the Department of Indian Affairs’ change of heart are less important than that the Great War had given the Dehorners the confidence and influence within their community to push through reform they believed was necessary for the successful future of their people.

⁵⁹ Moses, “The Return of the Native,” 122.

⁶⁰ Weaver, “The Iroquois,” 247.

⁶¹ Moses, “The Return of the Native,” 123.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 123–126; Titley, *A Narrow Vision*, 114–126.

The Dehorners agitated for local political change in the post-war period. But something much larger was brewing in the immediate post-war years within First Nations communities. The League of Indians of Canada was officially formed in September 1919 at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. According to historian Peter Kulchyski, the league was ultimately the realised vision of one man, Frederick Ogilvie Loft, and the result of the backlash against the 1918 Oliver Act. The Grand Council Meeting of Mohawks in Oshweken agreed that a province-wide—or preferably a nation-wide—organisation was needed to represent First Nations peoples.⁶⁴ Yet Kulchyski's analysis overlooks the words of the founding constitution of the league in December 1918, which attributes the organisation's creation directly to the sacrifices of First Nations peoples during the war:

Not in vain did our young men die in a strange land; not in vain are our Indian bones mingled with the soil of a foreign land for the first time since the world began; not in vain did the Indian father and mothers see their sons march away to face what to them were unknown dangers. The unseen tears of Indian mothers in many isolated reserves have watered the seeds from which may spring those desires and efforts and aspirations which will enable us to reach the stage when we will take our place side by side with the white people, doing our share of productive work and gladly shouldering the responsibility of citizens in this, our country.⁶⁵

The Oliver Act was discussed at the league's September 1919 convention, and it certainly resonated among some local Ontario communities such as the Sarnia group, but it did not provide a universal grievance that linked Canadian First Nations.⁶⁶ The Great War, on the other hand, served as a national rallying point. First Nations had proven their lot.

Many Indigenous soldiers excelled on the battlefield. The top two sniping records of the CEF belong to two First Nations soldiers.

⁶⁴ Kulchyski, "A Considerable Unrest," 99. The Oliver Act was a government act calling for the sale of Ontario First Nations lands.

⁶⁵ Quote from Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 163–164.

⁶⁶ Correspondence, memorandums and newspaper articles regarding the formation of the League of Indians of Canada by Frederick Ogilvie Loft of the Six Nations Band, 1919–1935, "Sarnia Council House," 25 September 1919, RG 10, Vol 3211, File 527, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 787.

The first was Francis Pegahmagabow, who claimed 378 unofficial kills, and the second was Lance Corporal Henry Norwest, a Cree man from Edmonton, who claimed 115 official kills. Because of their exceptional skills, demonstrated between 1914 and 1918, First Nations soldiers were able to gain the respect of Euro-Canadians with whom they fought on the battlefield.⁶⁷ This respect allowed them to participate in sports and pastimes with other soldiers. Additionally, upon demobilisation in 1919, some First Nations combatants became members of veteran organisations back home in Canada.⁶⁸

Upon their return from overseas, Frederick Loft and the League of Indians of Canada capitalised on this newfound respect. Loft “had the opportunity to talk to many Indians all over Canada” while overseas, and realised the “need for some medium through which the scattered tribes might be unified.”⁶⁹ He was an advocate of a pan-Indigenous organisation, and believed in national cooperation because First Nations’ “needs, drawbacks, handicaps and troubles [were] all similar.” Furthermore, he believed in First Nation self-determination, “to lift ourselves up by our own effort to better conditions, morally, socially, politically and industrially.” Loft was also an advocate of cooperation with the federal government.⁷⁰

These ideas were disseminated across Canada. Loft likely sent circulars to “all bands of the west” in late November 1919.⁷¹ They resonated among First Nations leaders. Undoubtedly influenced by these circulars and the third annual meeting of the league at Elphinstone, Manitoba in June 1920, Reverend Edward Ahenakew echoed the sentiments of Loft at the annual meeting of the woman’s auxiliary in Prince Albert on 16 June that same year. In his speech, Ahenakew continued to connect the ascendance of First Nations with their successes on the battlefields: “When death confronts, man stands with man ... The war supplied this opportunity. The

⁶⁷ Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 135–136.

⁶⁸ Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 49; Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers*, 21.

⁶⁹ Ahenakew, *Voices*, 85.

⁷⁰ Correspondence, memorandums and newspaper articles regarding the formation of the League of Indians of Canada by Frederick Ogilvie Loft of the Six Nations Band, 1919–1935, “Letter from F.O. Loft to Sirs and Brethren of Council and People,” 26 November 1919, RG 10, Volume 3211, File 527, LAC, 787.

⁷¹ Correspondence, memorandums and newspaper articles regarding the formation of the League of Indians of Canada by Frederick Ogilvie Loft of the Six Nations Band, 1919–1935, “Letter from F.O. Loft to Brother,” 25 November 1919, RG 10, Volume 3211, File 527, LAC, 787.



Frederick O. Loft, founder of the League of Indians of Canada, c. 1917-1918. [Library and Archives Canada SA-007439]

Indian feels that he has done a man's work and he will never again be content to stand aside."⁷² The Great War had put First Nations shoulder to shoulder with Euro-Canadians in a fight for human rights and dignity. Moved by Loft's idea of a pan-Indigenous organisation, Ahenakew believed that "... a feeling of brotherhood and the need of union has arisen among all the scattered Indian people."⁷³ These feelings of unity had given rise to the League of Indians of Canada, which, according to Ahenakew and in line with Loft, would cooperate with the federal government and British Crown. Most importantly, however, the Great War had fostered a "new spirit" in First Nations peoples. "The awakening has come," declared Ahenakew. First Nations should be given "the full responsibilities and privileges of citizenship."⁷⁴ Although writing much later in 1932, Mike Mountain Horse agreed, seeing First Nations sacrifices in the Great War as "sufficient proof of their right to be called British subjects."⁷⁵

⁷² Edward Ahenakew, "Address Delivered by the Rev. E. Ahenakew: At the Annual Meeting of the Woman's Auxiliary Held in the City of Prince Albert, Sask., on Wednesday, June 16th, 1920," (Battleford: Battleford Press, 1920).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Mountain Horse, *My People the Bloods*, 109.

Despite the fact that by the fourth annual meeting in Alberta there were fifteen hundred delegates in attendance, the league did not last. Peter Kulchyski argues the league's downfall was both a result of Loft's inability to find national leaders in Ontario to replace him when his political activity began to decline in 1924, and the interference of the Department of Indian Affairs. Few people were willing to shoulder Loft's responsibilities as a leader. Additionally, Deputy Superintendent Scott attempted to enfranchise Loft, to remove his status as a First Nations person, and thus eradicate "troublemakers and educated Indians from the ranks as a whole," while also pushing through an amendment to the Indian Act that banned all Indigenous communities from donating to First Nations political organisations in 1927. These measures would have greatly disillusioned many First Nations peoples, and dashed any hopes Loft may have had of finding a new national leader.⁷⁶ However, it seems that the league's fatal flaw was its leader's belief in universal grievances and goals among First Nations across Canada. As early as the first meeting of the league in 1919, there was a clear lack of consensus among delegates as to what goals it would pursue for the future well-being of their people. Edward Ahenakew said later: "I don't suppose that every delegate would agree with what I say are the principal aims. That is why the list we drew up had to be a long one."⁷⁷ The Cape Croker First Nation delegates had argued for enfranchisement.⁷⁸ However, for the Sarnia delegates, the removal of the Oliver Act and the government's fraudulent transactions in regard to First Nations' timber rights had the greatest resonance. Ahenakew, writing in 1923 and by this time a leader of the western First Nations, believed that equality for First Nations would be achieved through improved education and health care. Loft himself said in November 1919 that the second goal of the league was to retain possession of Indigenous lands. In the end, although the lack of Ontario leadership and the interference of the Department of Indian Affairs may have influenced the demise of

⁷⁶ Kulchyski, "A Considerable Unrest," 108–110; Dempsey, *Warriors of the King*, 80–81; Winegard, *For King and Kanata*, 164–165.

⁷⁷ Ahenakew, *Voices*, 85.

⁷⁸ Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, Volume 3211, File 527, 787, Correspondence, memorandums and newspaper articles regarding the formation of the League of Indians of Canada by Frederick Ogilvie Loft of the Six Nations Band, 1919–1935, "Indians Want to Secure Vote."

the league, the competing interests and goals of local and regional delegates had an impact on its downfall, as well.

Still, the league's legacy remained. At a meeting in which veteran Francis Pegahmagabow attended, on 9 June 1921 at Parry Sound, Pegahmagabow became entranced by Frederick Loft and his ideas—particularly the one of pan-Indigenous organisation in Canada. Soon after the meeting, Pegahmagabow attempted to form an alliance between the Parry Island, Shawanaga, Magnetewa and French River First Nations, and, during the final twenty years of his life, according to his biographer, became an “Indian Activist,” fighting for First Nations rights through pan-Indigenous cooperation and agitation.⁷⁹ Additionally, veteran Mike Mountain Horse would become involved in the western movement of the league between 1920 and 1922.⁸⁰ Finally, it seems that the league led directly to the formation of the League of Indians of Western Canada in 1932, which then evolved into Saskatchewanian and Albertan chapters the following year.⁸¹

There is no question that the First Nations experience in the Great War planted the seeds of Indigenous political activism in post-1918 Canada. Many veterans came home with a new identity—that of a warrior. Many of these warrior-veterans became leaders in their communities, and individually began to agitate for community rights. Others such as Loft realised the importance of working together for the larger national Indigenous community, and his ideas resonated throughout Canada. Although the league lost its influence by the mid-1920s, it provided the foundations for regional groups to rise up, and continue the struggle for Indigenous rights into the 1930s.

CONCLUSION

The period from 1914 to 1932 was one of increasing First Nations political activism in Canada. When war was announced on 4 August 1914, the First Nation response was varied, from community to community and individual to individual. Some First Nations

⁷⁹ Hayes, *Pegahmagabow*, 51, 69–83.

⁸⁰ Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 321.

⁸¹ Kulchyski, “‘A Considerable Unrest,’” 100.

enlistees hoped to find their masculinity on the battlefield, while others pinned their hopes on longer-term political changes such as enfranchisement or a better life both for themselves and their communities. During the war, First Nations soldiers retained and relied upon their cultural traditions to sustain them in the trenches and on the battlefields, despite being in an environment arguably even more assimilative than reserve life before the war. Yet the war also saw what Edward Ahenakew referred to as an “awakening” among First Nations soldiers.⁸² Returning soldiers believed they had contributed to the war effort and were deserving of some benefits. When they realised this would not be so, First Nations veterans decided to make changes themselves. Among this group were men such as Frederick Loft, who continued to believe that First Nations participation should be rewarded through enfranchisement, and even self-determination.

This largely untold part of the history of First Nations peoples in Canada places in question the claim that the 1960s saw the “initial stirrings of Indian activism.” Rather, it was as historian Peter Kulchyski argues that these “initial stirrings” were actually the “culmination of at least forty years of intense struggle.”⁸³ This realisation recognises the agency of Canadian First Nations in the ongoing life of political activism in Canada, as opposed to external influences such as the American Indian Movement. Perhaps even more important, this article shows that the often silenced First Nations soldiers and veterans had their own voices and demonstrates they were much more than reactionaries to government policy. First Nations peoples acted the way they did out of the hope of a better life for themselves, and their sons, daughters, mothers and fathers. Ultimately, personal and communal interests drove Indigenous communities during and after the Great War.

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⁸² Ahenakew, “Address.”

⁸³ Kulchyski, 97.

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