

“The Exigencies of the Military Situation Must Be the Primary Consideration”: The First World War, the Department of Indian Affairs, and Indigenous Families

Tim Clarke

On 1 February 1917, then Minister for Militia and Defense (DMD) A.E. Kemp issued a “memorandum regarding the methods of dealing with requests concerning soldiers serving overseas with the Canadian Expeditionary Force” (1917). For the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), this document was inconsequential. Having received petitions from both individuals and communities for the discharge of young Indigenous men and boys enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) with increasing frequency after 1915, the DIA had either dismissed the petitions as unfeasible or forwarded “worthy” petitions to the DMD, acting as a middle-man in the process (McGowan, 2011).¹ Kemp’s memorandum simply reaffirmed the DIA’s practice of

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¹ Robin Jarvis Brownlie, in analyzing postwar applications for enfranchisement, has explained the selective nature of “worthiness,” in the eyes of the DIA. The process, in the case of enfranchisement, saw officials in Ottawa negotiating information from Indian Agents on the ground. Similarly, throughout the

dismissing most protests outright, especially for those men already enlisted and/or overseas. In particular, he implored that “it should . . . be clearly understood that the exigencies of the military situation must be the primary consideration in dealing with such requests” (1917). For Duncan Campbell Scott and the DIA, “the exigencies of the military situation” suited their desires for increased control over Indigenous communities.

One of the areas over which the DIA was able to practice its control mechanisms was the petitioning of Indigenous service in the military and/or receiving of relief by relatives and band members who remained on reserve. Throughout the period of 1914-1918, though with increasing intensity after the first year of the First World War, the DIA controlled information through a three-pillared archetype of communication. It exploited its middle-man role between Indigenous communities and the Canadian state, controlling the flow of information in and out of Indigenous communities, while subjecting petitioners to uncertainty and confusion. In other instances, the DIA would simply defer to the DMD, deflecting its responsibility as a middle-man while still leaving petitioners waiting in vain for information. In doing so, the DIA also forced Indigenous communities to navigate multiple layers of bureaucracy, further obfuscating possible routes for information. Ultimately, through this institutional control of information, what Duncan Campbell Scott referred to as “the beginning of a new era for them wherein they shall play an increasingly honourable and useful part in the history of [Canada]” (1919, p. 272), was restricted to battlefield exploits and positive contributions to the war effort, with little or no reciprocal loyalty to Indigenous communities or contributions to the well-being of soldiers or their families (MacDowell, 2017, p. 249-310; Story, 2015, p. 1-25).

But institutional control did not touch each demographic within Indigenous communities equally. While, due to their inclusion in the military or remote working conditions, young Indigenous men were treated differently by the DIA, women and the elderly left on reserve – often without their primary breadwinners or caregivers (McGowan, 2011, p. 94;103) – were most susceptible to the DIA’s communication

War, while the communication archetype provided for easy dismissal, should the Agent on the ground forward information of a worthy cause, or a watchful eye in Ottawa identify a worthy case, petitioners might find willing advocacy from the DIA (Brownlie, 2006, p. 44-45).

archetype.² Even in cases like the Six Nations, where women contributed heftily to the war effort in similar ways to the non-Indigenous community (Norman, 2012, p. 40-61),³ Indigenous women were subject to racialized discrimination.⁴ Further, as men who were enlisted balanced their identities as “Indian” with their concurrent status as soldiers (MacDowell, 2017, p. 57), it is unsurprising that women left on the reserve had a more static identity as “Indian” – from the perspective of the DIA – and thus felt discrimination more straightforwardly. With the DIA the primary vessel of communication for Indigenous peoples within Canada, women left on reserve had to navigate the DIA’s communication archetype and bureaucracy for any chance at receiving support or advocacy.

The disabled and elderly also felt the effects of the DIA’s communication archetype disproportionately. As historian James Dempsey concluded, the First World War exacerbated previously existing generational divides on reserves, especially as breadwinners and caregivers left for military service (1999, p. 16).⁵ Experience with the communication archetype, however, was not the only way in which older members of Indigenous communities were disempowered by the war effort. Indeed, they had already been stripped of their traditional political power by the recruitment of young men without the sanction of community leaders or the consent of their parents, despite

² Alison Norman has argued, in the case of the Six Nations, that non-Native women were instrumental in helping Indigenous women attempting to aid the war effort in navigating the bureaucracy of both the DIA and their own band Councils (who had refused to cooperate with the war effort without an official request from King George V). This indicates the extent to which women were subjected to extra levels of bureaucracy and discrimination (2010, p. 226).

³ While the comparison to non-Native communities has been made most explicitly in the case of the Six Nations, McGowan also makes reference to the knitting of socks and contributions to Patriotic Funds in the Naas Agency in British Columbia, as well as more generally across Canada (McGowan, 2011, pp. 24-26; 146-147).

⁴ Norman notes that in 1916, after an outbreak of smallpox, Indigenous women’s knitted socks were refused shipment to servicemen, while women’s contributions from the town of Brantford – which had a far worse outbreak – were not subject to the same restriction until much later (2010, p. 189).

⁵ In his study of Prairie communities during the Great War, Dempsey (1999) has argued that the conflict exacerbated already existing generation divides on reserves, meaning the elderly were – like women – were at a greater disadvantage vis-à-vis the DIA than younger, and especially military eligible, community members.

In her study of the Naas Agency in British Columbia, McGowan (2010, p. 49) highlights that younger generations were becoming more attuned to the effects of the Indian Act upon their communities, in ways older generations were not.

pushback and protest (Dempsey, 1999; McGowan, 2010, p. 47-70; McGowan, 2011; Winegard, 2012, p. 18-20). While elderly parents in non-Indigenous communities also faced dire circumstances, receiving lesser levels of support than soldiers with wives and children (Morton, 2004, p. 121), DIA policy targeted elderly Indigenous persons who were more likely to resist its assimilationist programs.

Ultimately, the DIA was the main avenue of communication between Indigenous communities and the Canadian state from its founding in 1876, which expanded to military information throughout the First World War. From 1914-1918, the DMD controlled the ultimate decisions concerning Indigenous soldiers and remained the main line of communication and political advocacy for their families and communities. The DIA capitalised on this opportunity to bolster its institutional power over Indigenous communities, instituting – whether by intention or by happenstance – a communication archetype in the process.

As such, the DIA's control of information through the communication archetype accelerated the decline of political power over decision-making on reserves (Winegard, 2011, p. 32-33; McGowan, 2011, p. 3). It follows, then, that the First World War contributed to the cause of colonialism in Canada. This was not a break in Canadian-Indigenous relations, however; it represented a long-term zero-sum game wherein the advancement of Canadian nationalism and sovereignty – with settler politics and interests taking the forefront – came at the expense of the political power of Indigenous communities. Because the government hoped to advance the ongoing policy of assimilation through the enlistment of young, Indigenous men (Scott, 1919, p. 243-244), it was older generations – especially Indigenous women and elders – who were stripped of their political power during the First World War, even as they strained to offer their support and/or protest of the Canadian war effort. Though expectations of returning soldiers were left largely unfulfilled after the War (Walker, 1989, p. 1-26; Story, 2015, p. 1-25), participation in it did provide some individual power for those who served by offering avenues other than the DIA for information and advocacy. The generational fissures extenuated by the context of war however, hardened structural barriers that restricted the influence of Indigenous communities (Brownlie, 2003, p. 127-130). Unsurprisingly this also came at the same moment as the formation of an emboldened collective nationalism amongst the Euro-Canadian population (Vance,

1997), ingraining the colonial edifice firmly within the Canadian state rather than the British Crown. This negative aspect associated with Canada's "coming of age" has largely gone without report.

Driving this analysis is a representative sample, gleaned from a broader survey, of petitions sent from Indigenous communities to the DIA, and, where possible, their responses, from 1914-1918. Contained in the RG10 Record Group at Library and Archives Canada, these documents are an invaluable source for understanding the Indigenous experience of the First World War from an institutional perspective (and should not, as a result, be read as a substitute for community-derived sources, which better account for regional and community-specific differences).⁶ While the analysis points to a decrease in political power in Indigenous communities resulting from the DIA's control of information, this should not be mistaken for a denial of Indigenous agency throughout the period. Instead, it should be read as an affirmation that Indigenous agency was an active presence to which the DIA had to respond. Overall, while these documents been used extensively in previous studies, especially of the home front,⁷ they have not been used exclusively to examine gendered and age-based discrimination.

The DIA, Indian Agents, and Indigenous Communities at the Outbreak of the First World War

"Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department..."

⁶ Most recently, Talbot has emphasized the variation of responses to the First World War across Canada. Dempsey drove original interest in regionally specific histories, focusing on the Prairies, while community histories by veterans have accented such accounts. McGowan and Lackenbauer, and McGowan, have accounted for differences in the Six Nations community, while McGowan's PhD thesis used a series of case studies to patch together similarities across the country, especially in relations with the DIA. Following McGowan, then, this study is meant to add a gendered angle to that patchwork, while also emphasizing age-based differences in experience as well. (Talbot, 2011, p. 90-120; Lackenbauer and McGowan, 2007, p. 89-116; McGowan, 2011)

⁷ Katherine McGowan's (2011) work stands out in this respect, though other minor histories have also used these documents as well. See, for example, Duhamel and McCrae, 2016, p. 41-46.

– Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent Indian Affairs, 1920

This oft-quoted statement from Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1913 until 1932, offers an adequate distillation of the tone of government policy towards Indigenous peoples from the inception of the Indian Act in 1876 (Brownlie, 2003, p. X; Miller, 2000, p. 103-124).⁸ Assimilation was key to the DIA's mandate, which was created by the 1880 Indian Act (Brownlie, 2003, p. 255), part of a then close to century-long "civilisation" program intended to bring Indigenous communities up to the perceived standards of Euro-Canadian settlers through the promotion of farming, Christianity, and Western-style education that would eventually, as Scott's remark elucidates, lead to their elimination as a distinct subset of the Canadian population (Brownlie, 2003, p. 128). Thus by 1914, Indigenous communities were under the direct governance of the DIA and their local Indian Agent, with traditional governance structures not only altered by government policy but also under outside control. With assimilation and elimination firmly entrenched in both government policy and DIA practice, there is no question that Scott's views in 1920 represented a longer-term trajectory within which the First World War would come to play a significant role (Titley, 1986, p. 23-36). Certainly, his over thirty-years of service within the DIA alongside "the centralised structure of the Indian Department...allowed these attitudes and biases of one man to influence major decisions on the character of Canada's Indian policy" (Dempsey, 1999, p. 16). As such, Scott and other officials in Ottawa – like J.D. McLean, the Assistant Deputy Superintendent – were the ultimate targets of Indigenous petitions. In most wartime endeavours, the office in Ottawa made most final decisions with utmost control (McGowan, 2011, p. 29).

Despite the essential role of bureaucrats like Scott and McLean, another key to state control of Indigenous peoples were Indian Agents who provided the on-the-ground enactment of DIA policies and practices and served as the primary link between Indigenous communities, the DIA, and, by extension, the Canadian state. Historian Robin Jarvis Brownlie (2003, ix) described how Indian Agents were "power brokers between the department and its 'wards'...insulating internal, decision-making officials from the inconvenience of negotiating with real people [conditions that] persisted at

⁸ Miller (2000) notes that this dates back to at least 1830, when government policy shifted "From Alliance to 'Irrelevance'"

least until the 1960s.” As such, Indian Agents featured prominently in the interactions between the DIA and Indigenous communities, even when Indigenous petitioners went to great lengths to avoid this intervening step. Thus, when it came to requests for discharge or information about enlisted individuals, Indigenous communities were subject to yet another layer of bureaucracy.

As historian James Dempsey (1999, p. 32) has detailed in the case of the Blood (now Kai’nai) tribe during the First World War, it was “older and more traditional members of the band” who were reaching out for information, especially regarding recruitment on reserves, and who, as a result, were blamed for “further injuring the just cause.” Because the younger generations on reserves were targeted most pointedly by the “civilisational” aspects of post-1880 Indian policy and were eligible for military service (Brownlie, 2003, p. 124), resistance to state incursion on reserves during wartime rested with those ineligible for military service: women and the elderly. Thus, the longer-term effects of the Indian Act merged with the shorter-term demands of the First World War to both exacerbate and extend generational divides in Indigenous communities.

This brief snapshot of the DIA in 1914 is necessarily simplistic. Depending on the length of contact, pre-Indian Act relationships, and the perceived degree of “progress” in communities, among other factors, individual Nations had vastly different experiences with the DIA and Indian Agents. This reality notwithstanding, the DIA was clearly the main line of communication between Indigenous communities and individuals, and the Canadian state. As such, the DIA wielded disproportionate control over information during wartime, which allowed the Department, whether by circumstance or by intention, to further solidify its control over Indigenous communities while also advancing existing civilisational policies through the enlistment of young Indigenous boys and men (Winegard, 2012, p. 41-2).

Early Petitions and an Archetype of Communication

“It has been decided that while British Troops would be proud to be associated with their Indian fellow subjects, the Germans might refuse to extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare.”

– Eugene Fiset, Surgeon-General and Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence,
15 October 1915

Despite the eventual participation of Indigenous men and boys in Canada's war effort, the DMD did not actively seek out Indigenous – or any other racialised minority – inclusion in the CEF until well after the declaration of hostilities in August 1914, seeing the conflict from the outset as “a white man's war” (Walker, 1989, p. 4). Importantly, the exclusion of Indigenous men from service stemmed from a perceived “warrior ethic”, seen as traditional and thus antithetical to the civilisational approach of the DIA (Dempsey, 1999, p. 20-21). In fact, many Indigenous soldiers and some community leaders cited the retrieval of a “warrior ethic” as a reason to enlist in the CEF on a voluntary basis (Dempsey, 1999, p. 20-21; Winegard, 2012, p. 48). At least in some communities, military service was seen as surreptitious to the ultimate assimilationist goals of the DIA, while the Department itself was “perfectly satisfied from the evidence already shown of their loyalty and is desirous that they should continue in their peaceful vocations” (J.D. McLean Memorandum, 1914, Dec.10). Despite the de facto banning of Indigenous enlistment, because recruiters were not required to record race on enlistment files, many Indigenous peoples did enlist early in the war (Winegard, 2012, p. 46; Gaffen, 1985, p. 6).

Adding to the subversion of the white-only ideology in enlistment practices was that the policy backing it was not well-known. This meant that enlistment and recruitment of Indigenous peoples emerged concurrently with the surge of voluntary enlistments amongst the Euro-Canadian population (Walker, 1989, p. 4). Because Indigenous enlistees were circumventing official policy, community petitions of their enlistment were scant until early 1916, when manpower demands spurred an Empire-wide about-face in official policy regarding the recruitment of visible minorities (Walker, 1989, p. 16; Winegard, 2012, p. 55). Winegard (2011, p. 6) has stressed the importance of Imperial policy in understanding the contours of Canadian policies. While this is certainly essential to an overarching narrative of Indigenous involvement in the First World War, the fact that the DIA was tasked with the enactment and contextualisation of Imperial policy reinforces the claim that the conflagration afforded the DIA a crucial opportunity to extend its unilateral control – within Canadian borders – over Indigenous communities, despite its responsiveness to Imperial dictates.

Letters from the Six Nations Grand Council and reports from several Indian Agencies in Alberta from 1914 help contextualise the gradual increase of DIA control over information. In a letter to the Indian Agent for Brantford, the Grand Council questioned the actions of Lt. Colonel William Hamilton Merritt – an honorary Chief of the Six Nations and active proponent of military education on-reserve (Winegard, 2012, p. 34-35) – who had “cabled an offerto the Duke of Cannaught with which to equip two Indian companies for active service” (Gordon J. Smith Letter to DCS, 1914, Nov. 3). There was never any response to the letter but it was clear that the DIA did not have full control of military actions on reserves. In fact, the Six Nations Grand Council sent several letters between September 1st, 1914 and April 28th, 1915 keeping the DIA abreast of Council decisions regarding the formation of distinct Indigenous companies on the reserve, stressing internal disagreements and asserting control over on-reserve affairs (Gordon J. Smith Letter to DCS, 1915, Mar 24). Their final letter from 28 April 1915 reiterates the Six Nations’ demand for control on-reserve, saying “the chiefs however did not deem it proper to ask the Government to allow the formation of [Indian] companies, as the Indians already had an opportunity of enlisting through the 37th Haldimand Rifles” (Gordon J. Smith Letter to DCS, 1915, Apr 28).

A similar notice from several Chiefs in Alberta concerning questions of how many eligible Indigenous men resided on reserve, garnered a straightforward response from JD McLean: “the Department has not authorised any such letter to be written by any of its officials and should be glad if you would secure the Indians that the Department has no intention of asking them to volunteer as scouts in the present war or any other capacity” (JD McLean Memorandum, 1914, Dec. 10). Early in the war, the DIA was more concerned with maintaining control and supervision over Indigenous communities rather than administering their contributions to the war, with the exception of Patriotic fund contributions (McGowan, 2011, p. 58-60). With enlistment and recruitment for overseas service not only limited but officially discouraged, this approach is by no means surprising. As the war continued however, the DIA took on a more interventionist role.

By the middle of 1915, due to an increase in petitions, the DIA office in Ottawa was forced to embrace its intermediary role in wartime, consolidating its overwhelming control of information. The first recorded petition from an Indigenous community, sent

to the DIA on June 2nd, 1915 from the Chief and other leaders of the Garden River Band near Sault Saint Marie, argued for the release of Richard Pine on the basis that treaties between the British Crown and the band precluded Indigenous involvement in military affairs outside of Canada and that Pine, whom the petitioners claimed to be underage at the time, had enlisted without the consent of his guardians (Chief Shingwankoon Letter to DCS, 1915, Jun. 2). The letter, addressed to Scott, also indicates that it was not the band council's first attempt to discuss their role in the war. Instead, they had spoken with "A.D. McNabb the Indian Agent [who] told us plainly your majesty's department would not accept our Participation to the Patriotic fund" (Chief Shingwankoon Letter to DCS, 1915, Jun. 2). Though different issues, the Garden River Band's petition indicates the extent to which communication with the Canadian state was not only regulated by the DIA but subject to multiple levels of bureaucracy in the process.

Another early petition indicates a pattern in the travails of Indigenous petitioners trying to clarify the status of young men enlisted and acquire information regarding military service. The guardian of Ignace Daillebout of the Caughnawaga (Khaná: wake) reserve, J.B. Trefle, contacted his Indian Agent, J.M. Brosseau, to petition for Ignace's release on the basis that he was not of age (JM Brosseau, Letter to DCS, 1915, Jul 12). Brosseau then forwarded the request to Scott alongside Baptismal certificates and confirmation of his underage status. As with the Garden River Band petition, there was no official response on record. Similarly, Daillebout was forced to move through the DIA – by ways of the Indian Agent – to petition a young man's enlistment; a decision the DIA could not control. In this way, Trefle was doubly isolated from the DMD, who had final authority in the matter.

The Garden River Band and J.B Trefle's petitions in 1915 are important for several reasons. First and foremost, they represent the first petitions of the war (at least on record), offering an early glimpse of the DIA's middle-man role. Secondly, the claim that Richard Pine and Ignace Daillebout were underage and enlisted without the consent of guardians would become a very common claim in future petitions; a claim the DIA would consistently rebuke by deferring to the DMD, despite parents' assertions that they lacked information. Further, this indicates that recruitment and enlistment was focused on the younger generations, rather than including elders, leaders, and parents, with those left at home resigned to negotiate with the DIA – rather than those

who had recruited their boys – after the fact. Finally, the multiple layers of bureaucracy to which the Garden River Band and Trefle were subject remained a consistent feature until the passing of the Military Service Act (MSA), when the DIA's Ottawa office could respond with a quick, uniform answer: there is nothing the Department can do. Each of these three factors – the DIA as middle-man, deferral to the DMD, and multiple levels of bureaucracy – form an archetype of Indigenous-DIA contact throughout the First World War, with Indigenous petitions left at the behest of the DIA's authority.

Consolidating the Archetype

“A special effort is being made at the present time to have a good representation of Indians among those enlisted for the defence of their country, and you should be proud that your son has shown his patriotism in taking the action that he has.”

– J.D. McLean, Assistant Deputy and Secretary, to Gabriel Assinabe,

January 25th, 1916

Petitions steadily increased and by the middle of 1916 the DIA was forced to not only deal with the volume of petitions but also their geographical breadth. The DIA's control of information steadily increased, partially due to its explicit responsibility for Indigenous affairs but also as a response to the increasing demands of wartime upon Canadian society. While many other Canadian families dealt with similar issues – a lack of manpower, the loss of breadwinners and primary caregivers, and the absence of loved ones (Morton, 2004) – Indigenous communities were doubly affected as wards of the Canadian state confined to reserves and subject to the bureaucracy of the DIA. When challenged with demands for Indigenous inclusion in decision-making, respect for treaty promises, and straightforward communication, the DIA responded by consolidating its control over information not only to ease its own burden during wartime but also, crucially, to insulate the DMD from Indigenous demands.

Early in 1916, an exchange between Gabriel Assinabe, an individual claiming Indigenous status, the Indian Agent for Thessalon, Samuel Hagan, and J.D. McLean, suggests the extent to which the DIA sought control over information, with the

chronology of the letters – rather than their content – acting as the key indicator. On January 20th, Gabriel Assinabe sent a letter to the DIA detailing the enlistment of his unnamed and underage son without his consent (Gabriel Assinabe Letter to DIA, 1916, Jan. 20). The exchange between the Indian Agent and J.D. McLean demonstrates the level of control the DIA had over petitioners. On January 25th, J.D. McLean sent two letters, one to Hagan and one to Assinabe. The letter to Hagan requests that “[you] kindly report as soon as possible as to the occupations of this man and his ability to earn a livelihood, at the same time mentioning what family he has” (JD McLean, Letter to Samuel Hagan, 1916, Jan. 25). McLean’s letter to Assinabe on the same day, on the other hand, responded in typical fashion: “the Department cannot intervene to obtain his discharge...if possible the usual separation allowance will be obtained for you” (JD McLean, Letter to Assinabe, 1916, Jan. 25). It is clear, regardless of the content McLean communicated to Assinabe, that the flow of information would have to move through the Ottawa office. Assinabe was not privy to the investigation into his affairs – left to the Indian Agent – nor did he have control over future correspondences on his behalf. This is especially unusual in the case of separation allowances as soldiers or their dependents were expected to apply directly to the DMD. Further, while Euro-Canadian families were not subject to substantial investigations concerning dependents (Morton, 2004, p. 30-35), due to the DIA’s control, Indigenous families were exposed to greater scrutiny and observation (Norman, 2012, p. 44). In this way, the DIA insulated the DMD from petitioners – even when working to provide aid – by strictly controlling the flow of information to and from Indigenous peoples.

The Assinabe petition is interesting for another reason as well. As Samuel Hagan indicated to J.D. McLean on the 29th of December, he actually was not a member of an Indigenous nation and he was known colloquially as “Yankee John” (Samuel Hagan Letter to JD McLean, 1916, Dec. 29). This indicates that there were actual benefits to identifying as an Indigenous individual in relation to the war effort because the DIA would take on the responsibility for one’s affairs. In a roundabout way, however, this could only be seen as a benefit as a non-Indigenous individual as it also reinforces the idea that the DIA was more strictly controlling of relationships between those individuals and the Canadian state. Thus, the only avenue through which Indigenous individuals could access services was through the DIA, bolstering its jurisdiction and control in the process. At a time of pressing need, any benefits an Indigenous petitioner

might gain from being under DIA authority were mitigated by long-term cessions of personal and/or community power. Because those serving in the military could appeal through other avenues, it was those left on-reserve who were most affected.

Indeed, the benefits of petitioning the DIA, rather than moving through direct avenues, is exemplified in the case of Mrs. Margaret Crain, whose three sons had enlisted in the CEF at Hagersville near Brantford, Ontario. Writing Scott on May 11th, 1916, Crain indicates that her oldest son enlisted under strong pressure from local recruiters but that he was needed at home to support his new wife and maintain his productive farm. He was also assured that “[his brother] that had been away since Aug. 14th, 1914 and was wounded at Ypres could come home and take his place while he went to do his bit” (Margaret Crain, Letter to DCS, 1916, May 11). But her plight was exacerbated by her inability to contact the powers that be within the CEF, instead explaining that “Being my family were all wards of the Government, I thought if anyone could help me out it would be you” (Margaret Crain, Letter to DCS, 1916, May 11). Scott, viewing the petition as “a just and deserving one” (DCS Letter to Margaret Crain, 1916, May 19), went to work for Mrs. Crain, contacting Colonel Thompson on her behalf. His request to Thompson, however, was denied on the basis that “I cannot override Militia Orders...[despite knowing] the family and appreciate[ing] its sacrifices” (Lt.Col. Andrew Thomson Letter to DCS, 1916, May 23). Despite her petition failing, it was clear that Scott could intervene in specific cases he deemed worthy, exploiting his control over the flow of information through the Ottawa office. Mrs. Crain’s political power was limited to the extent Scott was willing to act on her behalf.

Mrs. Crain’s petition nonetheless gained traction again through a series of letters between Scott, the Indian Agent W.C. Van Loon, the local Methodist Missionary, the local physician, and the DMD, in March and April of 1917. The letters indicate that not only was the DIA the main avenue for information and advocacy but also confirm the level of bureaucracy Mrs. Crain was forced to navigate. The exchange – which sought to clarify the circumstances of Mr. and Mrs. Crain – resulted in a formal request from Scott to the Surgeon-General, to discharge the youngest son Albert Crain. Despite being sent in late-March, Scott’s advocacy was delayed both due to the need for sanction from the local Indian Agent and inspections from the missionary and physician. All this information – arriving at the Department on or before March 16th – only reached Scott

after it had gone through the hands of McLean. On April 1st, Mrs. Crain aired her frustrations saying, “I wish you would give me an answer of some kind as soon as possible as we are so bad off for help” (Margaret Crain Letter to DCS, 1916, Apr 1). Mrs. Crain never received an answer, though her son was discharged just two weeks later (AWL Attestation File, 1916). It was only in wading through the DIA bureaucracy that Mrs. Crain eventually gained a satisfactory outcome. For petitioners like Assinabe – who petitioned again in April 1917 – claims were often disputed or viewed unfavourably and the answer was much more straightforward: “the matter of discharge of Indians from Battalions with which they have enlisted is entirely in the hands of Militia authorities” (JD McLean, Letter to Gabriel Assinabe, 1917, Apr 25).

As this indicates, Mrs. Crain’s petition was the exception to the rule. Most of the petitions – many highlighting treaty rights and underage enlistments – did not achieve the desired outcome. Mrs. Crain’s persistence and her favourable standing amongst the Euro-Canadian community,⁹ resulted in the case being taken up even after DMD dismissal. However, the Crain and Assinabe cases confirm the archetype of DIA as a middle-man, often deferring to the DMD, and working through several layers of bureaucracy. Dozens of examples from early-1916 through to the MSA of August 1917 conform to qualities of the Crain and Assinabe cases. Further, as the number of petitions increased, the DIA gained greater control over Indigenous communities by following this archetype. Though not a deliberate policy of consolidating its control, the First World War and its demands provided an opportunity – in fact, a need – to do so. As with Mrs. Crain and her husband, it was the eldest in communities – those ineligible for military service – who were left to negotiate with the DIA.

Conscription: The Epitome of DIA Control

“Under the Order in Council of the 17th ultimo Indian Agents may claim exemption for those Indians under their jurisdiction.”

– Duncan Campbell Scott, February 7th 1918

⁹ Throughout the war, the women of the Six Nations were supported by women in Brantford, especially through the Women’s Patriotic League, which partnered with the Six Nations Women’s Patriotic League. (Norman, 2010, p. 225-227).

The passing of the MSA in August 1917 meant that any Canadian of military age would be subject to conscription beginning in January 1918. For Indigenous peoples, their status under the MSA was not only poorly communicated but also rather precarious. Until January 17th of that year, it appeared that Indigenous men would fall under the provisions of the Act. For Indian Agents – and by extension the communities under their jurisdiction – this was not only unclear but poorly communicated. With the volume of Indigenous men falling under the Act, the DIA moved to streamline its responses by deferring to the DMD more hastily and disavowing its own responsibility for attaining exemptions. Thus, the archetype of communication changed with the passing of the MSA, though direct lines of communication with the DMD were not facilitated by the Department. Instead, after working for over three years as a middle-man between Indigenous communities and the Canadian state, the DIA left them further isolated by simply denying any clarifying information (outside of the fact that Indigenous peoples were subject to the MSA). Though this would change after Indigenous men were granted exemption on January 17th, the DIA's control of information early in the war bore heavily upon Indigenous communities as Scott disavowed the Ottawa office of any responsibility with regards to the MSA.

As the Indian Agent from Kenora, Ontario explained to Scott, "I have posted up all the papers sent me in this Office, which is the only place they can be seen and explained" (Indian Agent, Kenora Letter to DCS, 1917, Nov. 26). Though following instructions, the Agent's dissemination of information regarding the MSA was limited. Guarantees that individuals affected by the Act – not to mention their families and local leaders – would actually receive the information, and have it interpreted, depended heavily on the local Agent. As Indigenous communities would communicate throughout late-1917, information was often unclear, producing anger in many communities and refusal to cooperate in others. In the report of the head Inspector of Indian Agencies in British Columbia, W.E. Ditchburn, many Indian Agents and military officials with whom they were communicating "did not apparently have any definite information on the subject" (W.E. Ditchburn Report to DCS, 1917, Nov. 30), as of December 1917. Thus, the bureaucracy of the DIA and its control over information reached its zenith between the issuance of the MSA and the exemption notice eventually delivered to Indian Agents on January 22nd, even if only by withholding definite answers.

Letters from Indian Agents trickled into the Ottawa office immediately following the MSA. In one exchange from November 26th 1917, Isaac Ogden, the Williams Lake, B.C. Indian Agent, claims that “Indian[s] refuse to report and pay no attention to my instructions in regards [to the] MSA. What steps will I take?” (Isaac Ogden, Letter to DCS, 1917, Nov. 26). Scott, responding the same day, indicated that “there is no action for you to take in this matter, as the enforcement of the Military Service Act does not rest with this Department” (DCS Response to Isaac Ogden, 1917, Nov. 26). Clearly, when the DIA’s jurisdiction was not in question, it would not intervene except in insuring that the information was adequately communicated, in their view, to those who fell under its provisions.

Throughout December 1917, however, Scott’s office became inundated with petitions to conscription from Indigenous councils, demands for clarification from Indigenous individuals, and perhaps most importantly, questions of clarification from Indian Agents themselves. It was clear that the centralised control over information in the Ottawa bureau by a few individuals could not cope with the demands of a wide-sweeping piece of legislation like the MSA. As a result, the Act was poorly communicated – partially due to the remoteness of many reserves and the reality that many Indigenous men worked off reserve – and Indigenous men were given an extension to apply for exemption until January 31st, 1918. The extension notwithstanding, the levels of bureaucracy Indigenous peoples were meant to work through delayed information and stymied their demands thereof. In response to a demand for information over “why us Indians to be drafted” (Solomon Brooks, Letter to DCS, 1917, Dec. 15). McLean responded that “you should consult with the Indian Agent who will no doubt be able to advise you if any of your Indians wish to make application for exemption” (JD McLean Response to Solomon Brooks, 1917, Dec. 17). This indicates that not only had information not reached the reserve through the Indian Agent but that it was unclear why previous relationships with the Crown were not considered in the Act. It *was* clear, however, that political power was firmly entrenched in Canadian sovereignty and by extension the DIA office in Ottawa.

The epitome of DIA control is exemplified by Scott’s memorandum on January 22nd, 1918: “Whereas petitions and memorials have been received from and on behalf of Indians pointing out that in view of their not having any right to vote, they should,

although natural born British subjects, not be compelled to perform military service...Any Indian Agent may make application for any Indian attached to the Reserve over which such Agent has jurisdiction" (DCS Memorandum to Indian Agents, 1918, Jan. 22). Now it was Indian Agents, not Indigenous individuals or leaders, who were responsible for getting exemption. Because Indigenous men were now differentiated under the Act, the DIA's jurisdiction was once again in question. Further, this information, which petitioners had been requesting for over two months, would need to flow through Indian Agents rather than as direct responses to their queries. Scott had the ability to control any and all information and to isolate Indigenous peoples from decisions that directly affected them. The passage of the MSA and the associated confusion it created highlights the role of the First World War in extending DIA control over Indigenous communities.

The First World War and Indigenous Communities: Refocusing the Research Agenda

"The unselfish loyalty, gallantry, intelligence, resourcefulness, and efficiency displayed by Indians from all the nine provinces of Canada should throw a new light upon the sterling qualities of a race whose virtues are perhaps not sufficiently known or appreciated."

– Duncan Campbell Scott (1919, p. 272)

Studies focused on Indigenous peoples in the First World War have centred mainly upon the gallantry and devotion of Indigenous soldiers and communities, the racial biases essential to their experiences, and the effects of service upon postwar political activism. Even in studies that analyze state structures of domination, expropriation, and racism on the home front, differentiation based on age and military eligibility are periphery, rather than central, issues. These narratives often exclude the effects of service upon the eldest members of Indigenous communities, and particularly women, left at home to cope with the absence of young men and boys. But the extension of generational divides, exacerbated by the consolidation of DIA control over communications, is undeniable.

Indigenous community leaders, elders, and families actively petitioned the government for the discharge of their young Indigenous men but at every turn were subject to levels of bureaucracy that isolated them from the DMD, the Canadian state, and the British Crown, alongside the fates of their sons and relations. This confirms Katherine McGowan's observation that many Indigenous peoples had to increasingly define themselves within the confines of the Indian Act for any positive outcome, legitimising DIA jurisdiction and thus Canadian sovereignty (2011, p. 232). It also builds upon work showing that the early-20th Century is essential to understanding how the DIA increased its control over Indigenous communities and advanced its assimilationist policies with Scott at the helm (Brownlie, 2003, p. 124-149; Miller, 2000, p. 132-136). Thus, even in the face of active opposition and the preponderance of Indigenous voices – predominantly women – the DIA seized the conditions of the First World War to turn an active dialogue between Indigenous peoples and various levels of government into a one-way, oppressive conversation dictated by the Department. Though not a singular impetus for overwhelming DIA control, the First World War provided pivotal opportunities to extend its practice.

It is not surprising, in this context, that Scott lauded Indigenous participation in the First World War, especially by highlighting loyalty and other traits thought to be evidence of the success of the "civilisational" program. Equally unsurprising is historians' focus on the "forgotten warrior" trope until the late-2000s (Lackenbauer and Sheffield, 2007, p. 209-231), which while different in kind, represents a very similar type of analysis. However, the effects of the First World War upon Indigenous peoples and communities needs to move farther beyond analysis of men in service, to those who were left to negotiate with the DIA: women and the oldest members of Indigenous communities. In doing so, historians can tell different stories derived from stories of service, struggle, sacrifice, and the spaces in between. This paper does not purport to do so, but elucidating the effects of DIA control through a gendered and age-based lens, provides a framework for contextualizing the myriad of Indigenous voices with stories still to tell about the experience of the First World War.

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