

CANADA AT WAR

The Home Front

FOCUSING ON THE ISSUE

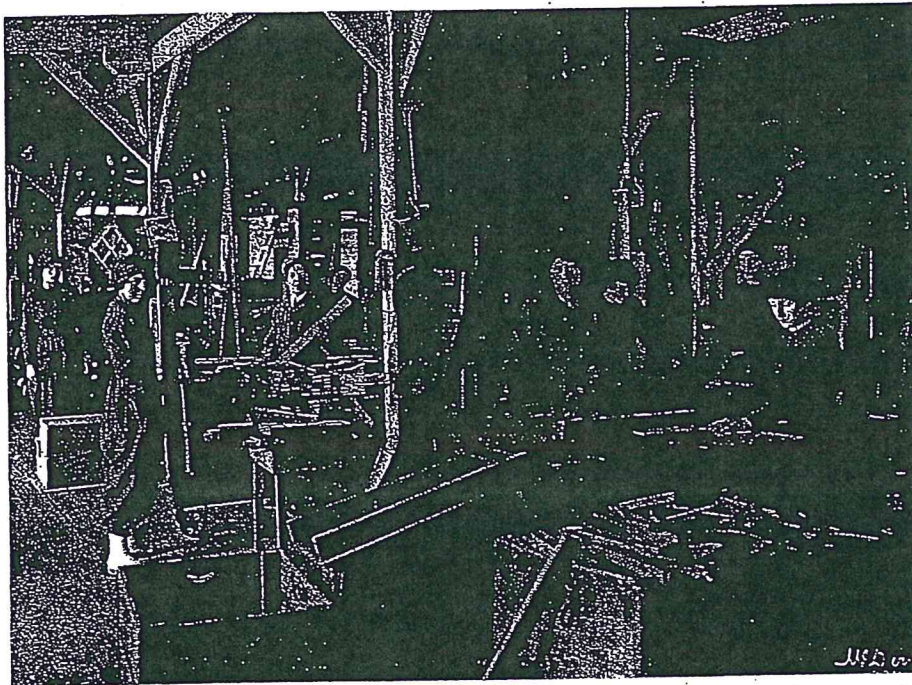
The First World War brought significant changes to the home front. What involvement did Canadian women have in the war effort? What impact did the War Measures Act have on Canadian society?

Women in the War

Canadian women made an invaluable contribution to the war effort. While some women served overseas as nurses and ambulance drivers, most women helped out on the home front. Canadian women worked tirelessly to support the soldiers. Members of the Red Cross volunteered to knit socks, roll bandages, and wrap food parcels for the troops. Women staged variety shows and used the profits to buy candy, soap, writing paper, and other supplies to send overseas.

In these voluntary efforts women's traditional roles were largely maintained. In the economic sphere, however, women's participation expanded like never before. The shortage of men made it necessary for women to work outside the home. Often they took jobs that were traditionally considered "men's work." Not only did women work in banks, insurance firms, and the civil service, they also became gas jockeys, streetcar conductors, and fish cannery workers. Yet while they performed the same jobs as men, women were usually paid less.

When Prime Minister Robert Borden ordered compulsory military service in May 1917, women were called upon to run farms, build aircraft and ships, and work in munitions factories. In fact, women were largely responsible for sustaining the country's agricultural and industrial needs. As a result, by 1918 Canada was no longer the debtor nation it had been since Confederation. The economy was booming, and women could claim much of the credit. By the end of the war, they had earned the right to vote and were beginning to play a more prominent role in Canadian society.



Women worked in a lumber mill in Edmonton in 1918 as part of their contribution to the war effort.

The War Measures Act

Early in the twentieth century, the Canadian constitution had established limits on political power and divided power between the federal and provincial governments. War, however, changed all the rules. How could the Canadian government preserve democracy while at the same time respond to the emergencies of war? This was the overriding question Parliament asked itself in August 1914. Its response was quick: a War Measures Act.

In order to preserve "the security, defence, peace, order, and welfare of Canada," the War Measures Act empowered the federal Cabinet

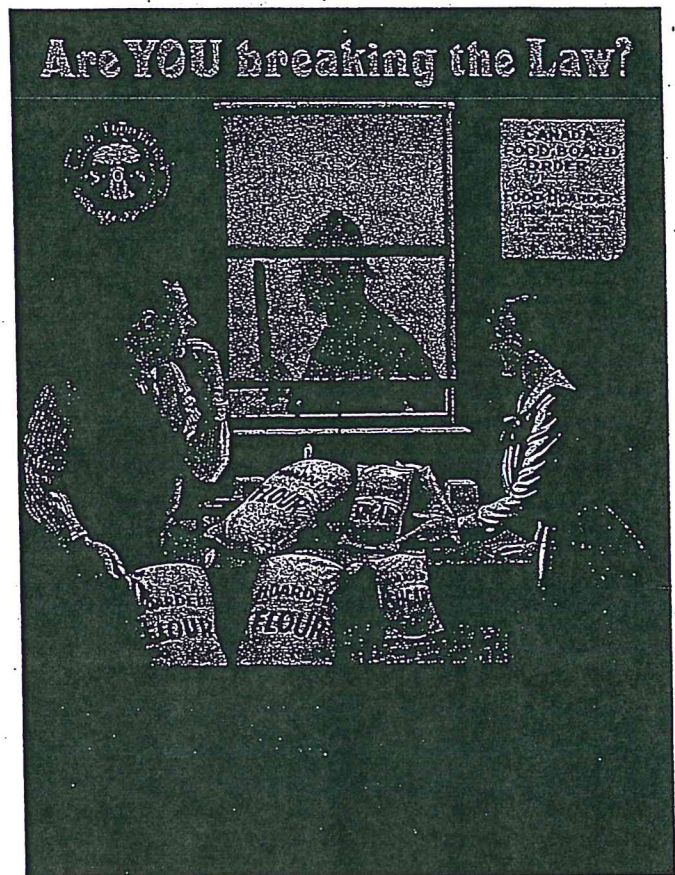
to act swiftly and resolutely in an emergency. Instead of submitting its proposals to Parliament for approval, as it normally would do during peacetime, the federal Cabinet made decisions without parliamentary debate. In effect, this meant the suspension of democracy in Canada.

The War Measures Act had a significant impact on Canadian society. Before 1914, Canada had a *laissez-faire* economy. Once war began, however, it became increasingly important to regulate commerce. Trading with the enemy was prohibited. Industrial efforts were focussed on fuelling the war effort. With the growing demand for food, the government used its powers to establish a Board of Grain Supervisors, which tightly controlled wheat marketing. In order to conserve energy supplies, the Cabinet also appointed fuel controllers to promote "heatless days." During these days, people were encouraged to restrict their use of coal and to substitute it with hydro-electricity. To raise revenues, the Cabinet used its authority to introduce emergency financial measures: a war tax on business profits and an income tax. (Although these taxes were to be in effect only as long as the war lasted, one of them lingers to this day!)

Civil liberties were also affected by the War Measures Act. In 1914, over 500 000 people in Canada were classified as **enemy aliens**. While the government promised people of German and Austro-Hungarian heritage that they could keep their property and businesses, it became increasingly difficult for them to find jobs.

Ultimately, they were encouraged to leave the country or face **internment**. Those who were interned were treated as **prisoners of war**. Other civil liberties restricted under the War Measures Act included the right to strike and the freedom of expression.

When the war ended, the powers of the emergency government were quickly dissolved. While the legislation served its purpose,



According to this poster, what were the penalties for hoarding food? How does this poster show the combination of voluntary and compulsory measures used under the War Measures Act to respond to emergencies during the First World War?

the **paradox** is that in preserving democracy it limited the freedoms of all Canadians.

KEYWORDS

munitions
laissez-faire economy
civil liberties
enemy alien
internment
prisoner of war
paradox

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Imagine you are a young Canadian woman living during the First World War. Compare the status you have as a Canadian woman in 1915 with the status you had at the outbreak of war. What changes might affect you once the war is over and the soldiers return?
2. Write a viewpoints box in which you summarize the arguments for and against the War Measures Act.