

French-Canadians During the First World War: A Complex Story Rendered Unrightfully Simple.

By James Paquet

“They didn’t do their part; they didn’t even want to fight.”¹ Narratives are all around us. From the stories we are read as children, to the various media we consume and even the history we are taught. This is true for all histories, even that of Canada’s experience during the First World War. Narratives like Vimy Ridge being the birth of a nation for Canada are part of our culture and are very common to this day. This is no less true when it comes to the history of French-Canadians during the First World War. This essay will look at two narratives that are commonly seen: French-Canadians not “doing/giving their fair share” and them not supporting Canada joining the war or its war efforts. By using primary and secondary sources I will demonstrate how these narratives were created and kept alive both through misinterpretation and sometimes through willful ignorance. I will also discuss some of the newer research that has been done and how it allows us to challenge these narratives so we can have a better understanding of the history and experience of French-Canadians during the First World War.

Not “doing/giving their fair share”

The narrative that French-Canadians didn’t “do/give their fair share”, especially when it comes to enlistment, is one that is still very commonly seen today. However, the reality is much more complex than one might think, and its origins, at least in academia, are curious to say the least.

¹ A quote a fellow student said to me when discussing the French-Canadians, specifically those from Quebec, in the First World War.

In 1937, American author Elizabeth H. Armstrong wrote a book titled: *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-1918*.² In this piece she tries to explain to an American audience why French-Canadians, primarily in Quebec, had reacted so strongly to conscription and why their feelings of nationalism were so strong.³ The book does make some good arguments and offers a more nuanced view of French-Canadians during this time period than what was written at the time, especially in the English language press. However, as with all good things it is not without its flaws. In the annex of the book, she created an estimate of how many French-Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force as there were very few publicly available that had been made. Armstrong's estimate was that between 32000 and 35000 French-Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. This includes volunteers, conscripts, and those who served in the British Navy or those of other allied countries.⁴ This estimate, and the argument made with it, that French-Canadians contributed very little to the CEF has some issues. The first issue is the calculations she makes and the numbers cited to make them. I did her calculations as she described them myself and arrived at a higher number than she did.

	Overseas	Conscript	Other Forces	Min. Total	Max. Total
Armstrong	15000	13500 ⁵	4-5000	32500	35000
Mine	15000	15200+	4-5000	34200	35200+

The following table demonstrates a comparison between my calculations and hers.

As can be seen above the difference between my results and hers is the number of conscripts. Armstrong bases her number on the total number of conscripts in the province of

² For this essay the French translated republication of this book was used. Any translations have been done by me. Armstrong, Elizabeth H. "Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918 », Montréal, VLB éditeurs and Columbia University Press, 1998.

³ Armstrong, Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918

⁴ Armstrong, Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918, 279-280

⁵ In her book Armstrong states that the number of conscripts must have been close to 15000. To simulate this close number 10% was chosen as a maximum amount to be reduced.

Quebec being 19050 and states that while not all of them are Francophones “We can safely assume that 80% of the conscripts from the province of Quebec were French-Canadians”.⁶

She also accounts for “the few Francophones from the other provinces” but does not offer any numbers as to how many these “few” may be.⁷ The problem here is that 80% of 19050 is 15200, putting – based on her statement – the minimum number of Francophone conscripts in the province of Quebec at 15200. This does not include French-Canadians from other provinces. Interestingly enough she claims that “This number corresponds quite to the estimate made by Colonel William Wood in the book of the history of the British Empire which focuses on Canada, which he states comes from the Historical Section of the post-war General Staff at Ottawa”.⁸ Armstrong seemingly misunderstood or simply misrepresented what Colonel Wood said as he actually writes: “It was said that the more than 2,000,000 French Canadians had produced less than 20,000 volunteers. But, since all the “Canadian-born” were lumped together in the returns, this could not be proved in time. The Historical Section of the post-war General Staff at Ottawa thinks 30,000 nearer to the truth.”⁹ This would increase the total number French-Canadians who served to as high as 50000 which is a significant increase. More issues also appear in the annex such as: the misrepresentation to what percentage French-Canadians represented in the CEF, the wrong number of French-Canadians living in provinces other than Quebec being given, and an incorrect representation of what percentage French-Canadians represented in the population of Canada.¹⁰ Other issues or misconceptions are also present in the book but for the topic at hand these are the most significant.

⁶ Armstrong, *Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918*, 279

⁷ Armstrong, *Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918*, 279

⁸ Armstrong, *Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918*, 280

⁹ Colonel William Wood, *Canada in The World War, 1914-1918*, in *The Cambridge History of The British Empire* Vol 4, Cambridge, 1930.

¹⁰ Armstrong, *Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918*, Annex and Fifth Census of Canada, Ottawa, 1911, p. 340

Now one might think that an estimate faced with so many issues might not make a significant impact or even be taken seriously, but one would be wrong. Armstrong's approximation was adopted and repeated by both Anglophone and Francophone historians alike for over 80 years.¹¹

In his 2002 book: *Canada's Army. Waging War and Keeping the Peace*. Jack. L. Granatstein wrote "After conscription came into force, the usual guesstimate, almost certainly too generous, is that 50,000 Francophones served during the war, a number that would include volunteers and conscripts."¹² However, with language like this and on the same page writing: "However apologists then and later massaged the data, Francophones had not given their 'share' to the war." it isn't surprising the narrative stayed in place.¹³ The numbers of 15000 volunteers and 35000 total enlisted can also still be seen in more publicly accessible sources such as The Canadian War Museum's website and 1914-1918 Online respectively.¹⁴

In 2017, a new estimate was created by historian Jean Martin who had done what the Canadian Government had said would be impossible to do: go through every service file and count the number French-Canadians.¹⁵ Martin did so by counting all the individuals who bore last names that were clearly French not including any names that were common in both languages such as Martin, Gilbert, or Lambert unless their first name was clearly French. By

¹¹ Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War," Canadian Military Journal, Vol. 17, No. 4, Autumn (2017) and House of Commons of Canada, Debates, 13th Parliament, 2nd Session, Volume 1, Ottawa, 1919

¹² Jack L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army. Waging War and Keeping the Peace*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 75 quoted in Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,"

¹³ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army. Waging War and Keeping the Peace* p. 75. quoted in Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,"

¹⁴ Dr. Serge Durflinger, French Canada and Recruitment During the First World War, The Canadian War Museum, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/dispatches/french-canada-and-recruitment-during-the-first-world-war/#tabs> and Mélanie Morin-Pelletier, French Canada and the War (Canada), 1914 1918 Online, 2016, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/french_canada_and_the_war_canada

¹⁵ Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,". 52

doing so it most likely offsets any Anglophones that were counted for having Francophone names. With this method Martin counted that at least 74795 French-Canadians served in the CEF.¹⁶ This is obviously a much higher number than the one proposed by Armstrong 80 years before, but what do the numbers actually represent? With her original estimate Armstrong stated that French-Canadians only made up 5% of the entire CEF. This however wasn't truly a fair calculation as around a third of the CEF was made up of British Immigrants, and while she does state this fact, she does not offer another percentage in regards to their proportion of Canadian-born members.¹⁷ Not listing this statistic is quite a disservice to the Francophone contribution, as unless someone does the math themselves, 5% will be the number they remember. With her estimate of 35000, French-Canadians would make up 12% of Canadian-born members.¹⁸ With Martin's count of 75000, French-Canadians would actually make up 12% of the total enlisted and 24% of Canadian-born enlisted.¹⁹ It would be hard to deny that these new statistics do not deal a significant blow to the narrative of French-Canadians not doing their part. This is especially true considering the fact they only made up around a third of the Canadian-born population at the time.²⁰ After my research, the question I still hold when it comes to this narrative, and that I pose to those who believe in it is this: what constitutes "doing/giving their fair share"?

Support For the War

The narrative that French-Canadians didn't support Canada's involvement in the war is very prevalent, especially due to the events of the conscription crisis and often a reduction of the

¹⁶ Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War," 48-49

¹⁷ Armstrong, *Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918*, 280

¹⁸ Jean Pariseau and Serge Bernier, "French Canadians and Bilingualism in the Canadian Armed Forces Volume I 1763-1969: the Fear of a Parallel Army", Directorate of History Department of National Defence, Ottawa, 1986

¹⁹ Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,". 54

²⁰ Jean Martin, "Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,". 54

various views French-Canadians held to those of Henri Bourassa and other nationalist politicians.²¹ As with any generalization or oversimplification, the reality of the situation is much more nuanced than many people believe. One of the ways this narrative has been reinforced by historians is, as Terry Copp explains: “Historians, who have long had access to microfilm copies of *Le Devoir* and the weekly *Le Nationaliste*, have allowed this limited perspective on French-Speaking Quebec to dominate accounts of the war years.”²² It is important to note that this narrative has been reinforced by Anglophones and Francophones alike. It is one that is also clearly linked with the narrative discussed above as the lower rates of enlistment from French-Canadians that was perceived by Anglo-Canadians, especially in the first contingent, led them to question French-Canadian support for the war effort.²³ While it is true that their numbers in the first contingent were low, there are some reasons for this. One of these reasons being, when the first contingent was being raised in 1914, the CEF was an Anglophone institution which made it less appealing for Francophones. Not all units were prepared to accept French speakers and just over 24% of Francophone volunteers were rejected in comparison to only 8.5% of Anglophones.²⁴ One way French-Canadian support for the war can be seen is with the efforts that were made to create a regiment in which they could serve in their own language. On September 10th 1914, the newspaper *La Presse* with its average daily circulation of 148000, would publish a column stating that various well-known French-Canadians were putting pressure on military authorities to have permission to create a 2000-man regiment fully composed of French-Canadians.²⁵ This would be the beginning of a weeks long press campaign to support the

²¹ Emanuelle Cotton-Dumouchel, “French Canada and Enlistment in the First World War: A Study of Recruitment Posters”, *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2022, 55

²² Terry Copp, and Alexander Maavara, *Montreal at War 1914-1918*, The Canadian Experience of War, University of Toronto Press, 2021

²³ *La Presse*, September 18th, 1914.

²⁴ Jean Martin, “Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in The First World War,”. 50

²⁵ *La Presse*, September 10th, 1914.

creation of a French-Canadian regiment and to show the support of those same people for Canada's war effort. This was done especially to try and calm the English language press that was publishing unsympathetic pieces about French-Canadian support. A 50000-dollar (just under 1.3 million dollars today) donation from Dr. Arthur Mignault to assist in financing the regiment, also helped convince the Borden government of the creation of such a unit.²⁶ On October 15th 1914, the government would officially approve the creation of a French-Canadian regiment which, by this date, 1600 men had already enrolled themselves into the regiment known at the time as the "Royal Canadien-Francais".²⁷ This unit would eventually become the 22e bataillon canadien-francais [22nd French-Canadian battalion], today's Royal 22e Régiment. The unit would be the only French-Canadian battalion to go to the front during the war and saw over 5500 soldiers join its ranks.²⁸ Fourteen other French-language battalions would be created but had varying levels of success. Having been created in such a short time period many units were in competition with each other. This led to many being disbanded and their recruits being used as reinforcements for other units.²⁹ As the war went on the divide between English and French-Canadians continued to grow, leading to the narrative of a lack of support to grow with it. This would of course come to a boiling point with the instauration of conscription and Quebec's reaction to said event. Even though anti-conscription sentiments were felt all over the country, this period would become synonymous with French-Canadians in the eyes of many from both language groups and would cause this narrative of unsupportiveness to remain to this day.

²⁶ Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e bataillon (canadien-francais) 1914-1919 : étude socio-militaire*, Les presses de l'Université Laval en collaboration avec le ministère de la Défense nationale et le Centre d'édition du gouvernement du Canada Ottawa et Québec, 1986.

²⁷ *La Patrie*, October 17th, 1914.

²⁸ Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e bataillon (canadien-francais) 1914-1919 : étude socio-militaire*, 141

²⁹ Emanuelle Cotton-Dumouchel, "French Canada and Enlistment in the First World War: A Study of Recruitment Posters". 56

Recently Dr. Serge Marc Durflinger would write a book chapter on the return of the 22nd battalion in 1919. The battalion's return to Quebec City offers a compelling piece of evidence when it comes to the support a significant number of Quebecers had for the war. As Durflinger writes: "It adds an alternative dimension to the general and increasingly dated historiographical interpretation of the province as simply anti-participationist."³⁰ The celebrations held for the battalion's return and the praises that were sung about it in the press, are quite telling of the pride Quebecers had in regards to these soldiers. Tens of thousands of people were present for the welcoming home of the men and the celebration in the streets of Quebec City, even in the heavy rain.³¹ Such support and pride in these men begs the question: if all French-Canadians, especially those from Quebec, were against the war, would so many have celebrated and had such pride for these men?

Conclusion

When explaining reasons why enlistment numbers were lower in Quebec than other provinces O.D. Skelton wrote: "These were obvious facts, but prejudice blinded many eyes."³² On both sides prejudice has kept these narratives alive and well. It is also difficult to challenge a narrative when it supports your own beliefs. However, is it not a disservice to all those French-Canadians who served to keep this narrative of low enlistment numbers alive, or to erase all those French-Canadians who supported the war by limiting Francophone's views to those of

³⁰ Serge Marc Durflinger, "L'honneur de notre race" *The 22nd Battalion Returns to Quebec City, 1919*. In *Canada 1919 : A Nation Shaped by War*. Edited by Tim cook and J. L. Granastein, 72-85. Studies in Canadian Military History. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020.

³¹ Serge Marc Durflinger, "L'honneur de notre race" *The 22nd Battalion Returns to Quebec City, 1919*. In *Canada 1919 : A Nation Shaped by War*.

³² Oscar Douglas Skelton, "Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier (volume 2), Oxford University Press, 1921.

Bourassa? It is long overdue for these narratives to change and I hope we can see more of said change soon.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, Elizabeth H. “Le Québec et la crise de la conscription 1914-1918 », Montréal, VLB éditeurs and Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Colonel Wood, William, Canada in The World War, 1914-1918, in The Cambridge History of The British Empire Vol 4, Cambridge, 1930.
- Copp, Terry, and Alexander Maavara, *Montreal at War 1914-1918*, The Canadian Experience of War, University of Toronto Press, 2021.
- Cotton-Dumouchel, Emanuelle, “French Canada and Enlistment in the First World War: A Study of Recruitment Posters”, Canadian Military Journal, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2022.
- Fifth Census of Canada, Volume 2, Ottawa, 1911
- Gagnon, Jean-Pierre, *Le 22e bataillon (canadien-français) 1914-1919 : étude socio-militaire*, Les presses de l'Université Laval en collaboration avec le ministère de la Défense nationale et le Centre d'édition du gouvernement du Canada Ottawa et Québec, 1986.
- House of Commons of Canada, Debates, 12th Parliament, 7nd Session, Volume 3, Ottawa, 1917
- House of Commons of Canada, Debates, 13th Parliament, 2nd Session, Volume 1, Ottawa, 1919
- La Patrie*, October 17th, 1914.
- La Presse*, September 18th, 1914.
- Martin, Jean, *Yes, French Canadians Did Their Share in the First World War*, Canadian Military Journal, Volume 17 No. 4, 2017
- Pariseau, Jean, and Serge Bernier, "French Canadians and Bilingualism in the Canadian Armed Forces Volume I 1763-1969: the Fear of a Parallel Army", Directorate of History Department of National Defence, Ottawa, 1986
- Skelton, Douglas Oscar, “Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier (volume 2), Oxford University Press, 1921.