ACTIVITIES

1. Examine the document on pages 24–25. What does this document say about the attitude of people in Canada towards Britain at this time? How does the document on page 26 demonstrate a growing feeling of Canadian identity among Canadian troops?
2. List the attitudes in Canada in 1914 that led to the exclusion of women and other groups from participating in the war.
3. Why did the government need power to control the economy, transportation, and trade when war was declared?
4. Name the civil liberties that were threatened by the War Measures Act.

New Technology and the War

The muddy trenches and devastated landscape northern France became symbols of the way th war was being fought. In earlier wars, infantry so diers had fought in armed units supported by ca alry (soldiers on horses). They charged the enem across open fields, firing rifles equipped with ba onets. By 1914, however, new weapons were s powerful and deadly that it was suicidal to charg across open ground. Newly developed machin guns fired at unprecedented speed. Airplanes, in vented only a decade before the war began, fle over battlefields, allowing pilots to spy on enem activity; later the planes were equipped with m chine guns. By 1916, armoured tanks had bee

The War on Land

Before the war began, Germany had developed the Schlieffen Plan, a bold strategy for a two-front war. France to the west was the Western Front, and Russia to the east the Eastern Front. The plan was for the German army to quickly invade Belgium, then France, and capture the capital city of Paris. Once this was accomplished, Germany could turn its attention to Russia. The plan almost worked. By August of 1914, German troops were only 35 km from Paris. They were, however, exhausted by the pace of the Schlieffen Plan. France and Britain rallied to push them back into northern France, where the Germans dug a defensive line of trenches. The Allies dug their own system of trenches, often just a few metres away. Eventually a vast network of trenches stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border. Between the trenches of the two enemies lay no man's land, a terrible wasteland of corpses, barbed wire, and mud. By Christmas of 1914, the Western Front was locked in a stalemate with neither side able to make advances, yet both sides were unprepared to retreat.

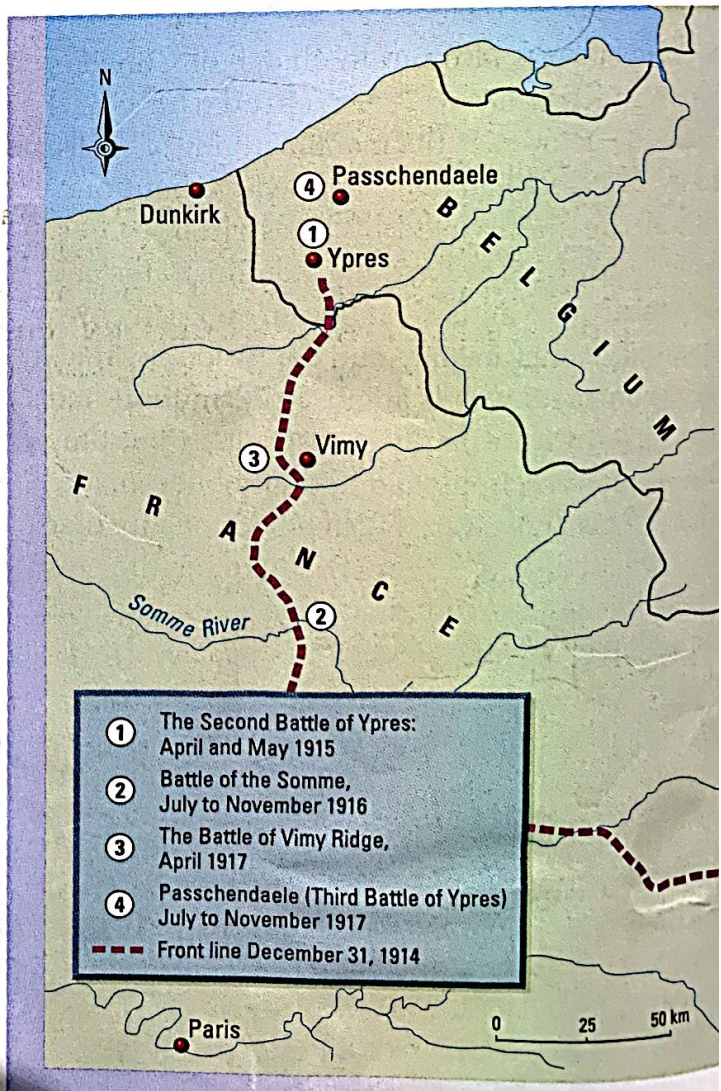


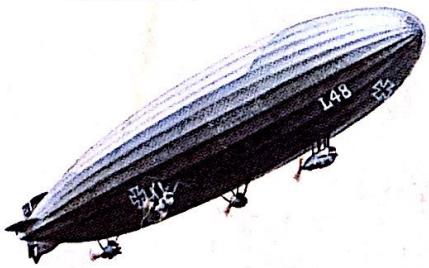
Figure 2-7 The Western Front.

Innovations

War Technology

During World War I, transportation and weapons technology developed rapidly. The result was a war with more casualties than had ever been experienced before.

Germany used *dirigibles*, inflatable airships, for scouting and bombing missions. Ferdinand von Zeppelin built huge rigid dirigibles by covering a light framework of wood or metal with a thin "skin" of waterproof fabric or aluminum. The shell was filled with a lighter-than-air gas such as hydrogen, and the airship was propelled forward by an engine suspended underneath. Britain used smaller frameless dirigibles to protect ships from submarines. ▼



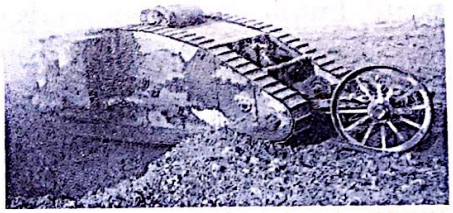
During World War I, bigger *field guns* and *cannon* were developed. Germany's "Big Bertha" artillery could arch shells almost 25 km upward to hit targets up to 120 km away! Giant guns were moved into position on railcars, and worked together in groups called batteries. Often the guns fired shells filled with explosives and *shrapnel*, metal balls or fragments.

▲

At first, *fighter planes* were used to find the enemy; later they were used to attack. There was always a risk that the machine guns used to fire on the enemy would chop off the plane's own wooden propeller, so engineers developed an interrupter system to block the machine gun from firing at the moment the propeller passed in front of it. This safeguard reduced the number of bullets shot, so many pilots used a top-mounted gun that fired above the propeller.

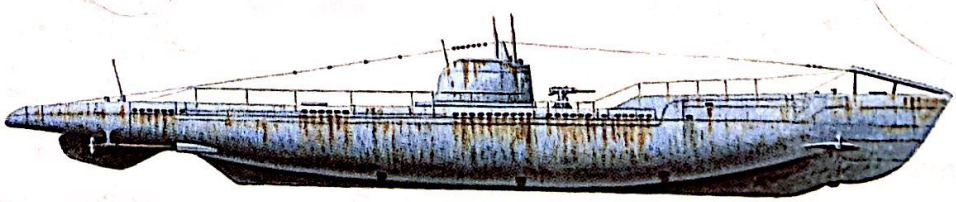
Although the United States and Britain were responsible for much of the development of the early *submarines*, Germany used them most. Their *U-boats* (from *Unterseeboot*, or "under-sea boat") used diesel engines and travelled faster on the surface than most ships. A periscope allowed crew members to view the surface from under water. U-boat crews sank many Allied ships with *torpedoes*, cigar-shaped bombs driven by a propeller. ▼

The British developed *tanks* to crush barbed wire and shelter the crew from gunfire while crossing no man's land. Soldiers would follow a wide line of tanks as the tracked vehicles crawled slowly forward. The original tanks were underpowered and very hard to turn. They also often stuck in the mud. By 1917, though, improvements made them important in the Allied ground war. ▼



▲

Both sides used *poison gas* during World War I. Germany was the first to use chemical warfare, releasing clouds of chlorine gas at Ypres in 1915. The gas burned the skin and lungs of the Allied forces, including Canadians. Later, both sides used phosgene gas (invisible but suffocating) and mustard gas (which creates huge skin blisters). One young soldier temporarily blinded in a British gas attack in 1918 was Adolf Hitler, later to lead Germany in World War II. As the use of poisonous gas increased, troops were issued with *anti-gas respirators*.



built to protect crews as they advanced across the battlefield. Using tanks, troops could finally break through the protective wall of barbed wire in front of trenches. The early tanks were crude and often got stuck in the mud, but by the end of the war, they had become a more reliable weapon.

Soldiers may have been using modern weapons on the battlefield, but many of their commanders failed to understand how this new technology demanded new tactics. Over the next three years, hundreds of thousands of soldiers on all sides were slaughtered in the battlefields of France and Belgium as generals stubbornly engaged in a war of attrition, each side repeatedly attacking the other until one was completely exhausted and unable to continue.

Figure 2-8 Many Canadian soldiers lost their lives in the trenches while others suffered psychological disorders and nervous breakdowns.

Gathering information What can you tell about life in the trenches from this photograph? How might these conditions have contributed to psychological problems?

Life in the Trenches

No soldier could ever have been prepared for the horrible conditions of trench warfare. Trenches were cold and damp in the winter and often flooded in a heavy rain. Muddy trenches became stinking cesspools, overrun by rats. Soldiers' clothes were infested with lice, and many men developed trench foot, a painful condition that caused their feet to swell and turn black. An injured limb might require amputation because medical supplies were limited and repair was not possible. Many of those seriously injured in attacks were left to die in no man's land because rescue attempts were too dangerous. Men were in constant fear for their lives, either from deadly sniper fire or from exploding shells. One soldier reported:

> The air is full of shells ... the small ones whistling and shrieking and the heaviest falling silently, followed by a terrific explosion which perforates even the padded eardrums, so that a thin trickle of blood down the neck bears witness that the man is stricken stone-deaf. The solid ground rocks like an express [train] at full speed, and the only comparison possible is to a volcano in eruption with incessant shudder of earthworks and pelting hail of rocks.
>
> Source: Toronto *Globe*, April 15, 1916.

The CEF in Battle

The Second Battle of Ypres

Some of the bloodiest battles of the early war years were fought in and around the Belgian city of Ypres, located in the Flanders district. It was here on April 22, 1915, and again two days later that French and Canadian troops were blinded, burned, or killed when the Germans used chlorine gas even though the use of gas for military purposes had been outlawed by international agreement since 1907. As the clouds of gas drifted low across the battlefield, soldiers tried to escape from the deadly fumes that destroyed their lungs. Many men suffocated or choked to death. Over the next month, neither side gained much ad-

vantage in the fields of Flanders though 6000 Canadians were killed, wounded, or captured.

The Battle of the Somme

In July 1916, British and French forces under the command of General Douglas Haig launched a massive attack along a line of low ridges near the Somme River, France. A veteran of cavalry warfare, Haig insisted on using strategies he knew had worked well in previous wars, but they were useless in trench warfare. As wave upon wave of troops were ordered to march across open fields, they were mowed down by German machine guns. Almost 85 per cent of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, over 700 men including all officers, were killed or wounded within half an hour. When the battle finally drew to a close in November, there were over a million casualties—almost equal numbers on both sides—although Haig claimed victory. Almost 24 000 Canadians were among the casualties, and most soldiers were badly shaken by having witnessed the slaughter. One Canadian soldier, Frank Maheux, recalls the scene:

> I passed the worst fighting here since the war started. We took all kinds of prisoners but God we lost heavy, all my camarades killed or wounded.... Dear Wife, it is worse than hell, the ground is covered for miles with dead corpses all over.... Pray for me dear wife, I need it very bad.... As long as I live I'll remember it.
>
> Source: Quoted in Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 158.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge

Since their first offensive in 1914, the Germans had controlled Vimy Ridge, a strategically important area of land in northern France. The French had tried three times to regain Vimy, but they were unsuccessful. Late in 1916, Canadian troops were chosen to lead a new assault under the command of General Julian Byng, a popular British officer (later appointed a governor general of Canada). Byng developed strategies for attack and trained the troops well, rehearsing their movements thoroughly. From the west side of the ridge, Canadian troops bombarded German positions for over a month. Meanwhile, sappers (army engineers) constructed tunnels to move troops secretly to forward positions. At zero hour on April 9, 1917, Easter Monday and the first day of the attack, Canadian troops moved into position. The weather was cold and snowy, and a strong wind blew snow

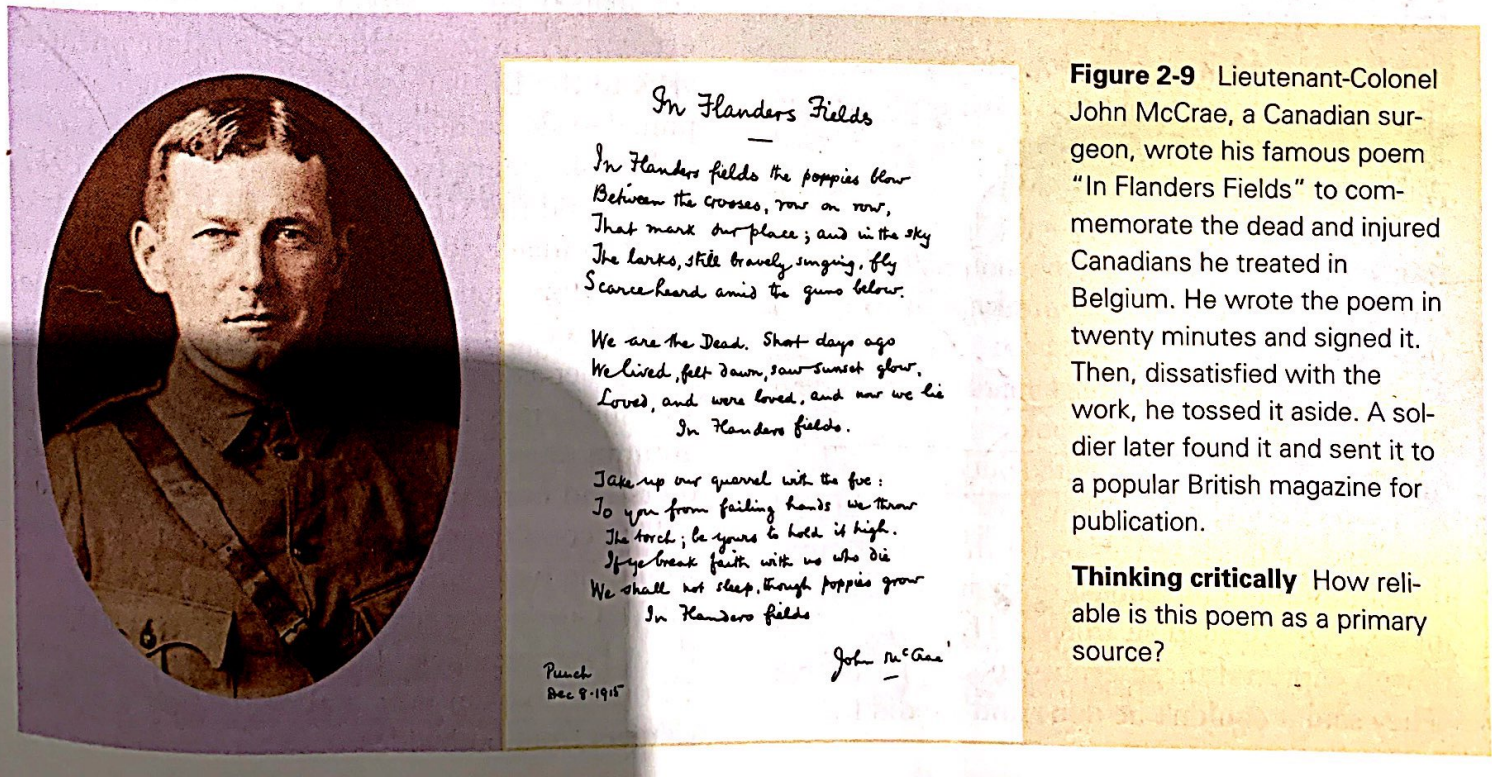


Figure 2-9 Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian surgeon, wrote his famous poem "In Flanders Fields" to commemorate the dead and injured Canadians he treated in Belgium. He wrote the poem in twenty minutes and signed it. Then, dissatisfied with the work, he tossed it aside. A soldier later found it and sent it to a popular British magazine for publication.

Thinking critically How reliable is this poem as a primary source?

Figure 2-10 Canadian soldiers return from Vimy Ridge, May 1917.

Expressing ideas This photograph became one of the most famous images of Canadians in World War I. Why do you think this was so?

into the faces of the enemy on the ridge. The Canadian corps followed their plan of attack with precision and bravery, and in less than two hours they had taken their first objectives. On April 10, they captured Hill 145, the highest point on the ridge, and by April 12 they had taken "the pimple," the last German position. It was a stunning victory. The Canadians had gained more ground, taken more prisoners, and captured more artillery than any previous British offensive in the entire war. Although the cost was high—over 3500 men killed and another 7000 wounded—the losses were significantly fewer than in any previous Allied offensive because of the meticulous planning and training.

The victory at Vimy Ridge marked a Canadian milestone, and Canadians took great pride in the success. Their victory was noted outside Canada as well. An editorial in the New York *Tribune* stated that "every American will feel a thrill of admiration and a touch of honest envy at the achievements of the Canadian troops." Historian Pierre Berton captured these events in simpler terms: "They said it couldn't be done and we did it."

Passchendaele

Byng was promoted for his role at Vimy and his replacement was a Canadian, General Arthur Currie, a former real estate dealer from Victoria, British Columbia. The first Canadian appointed to command Canada's troops, Currie brought an increasingly independent Canadian point of view to the British war effort. Although a disciplined leader and open to new strategies, Currie still took orders from General Haig. In 1917, Currie and the CEF were called upon to retake Passchendaele Ridge in Belgium. Unlike Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele had little strategic value, but General Haig was determined to retake it. His earlier assault on Passchendaele had left massive shell craters in the ground, which the heavy autumn rains turned into a quagmire. Some soldiers and horses actually drowned in these appalling conditions. Currie warned that casualties would be high, but Haig would not change his mind. Currie was right. The Allies won the battle at Passchendaele, but the "victory" cost over 15 000 Canadian lives and nearly half a million soldiers from both sides.

Figure 2-11 Nurses and surgeon in a World War I hospital.

Gathering information How does this scene differ from scenes in modern operating rooms? Identify three elements in the scene that could be sources of infection.

Women on the Western Front

Almost 2500 Canadian women joined the medical and field ambulance corps. Some women served as nurses in the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Affectionately called "Bluebirds" after the colour of their uniforms, the nurses worked in military hospitals in the battle zones as well as in hospitals in Britain. Many were killed or injured by artillery fire, bombs, or poison gas. One nurse, Bertha Merriman, recorded her experiences in letters to her parents in Hamilton, Ontario:

> La Panne, Belgium, June 12, 1915
>
> Last night we had a perfectly terrible time. Patients came in in a rush, and were so awfully wounded. My operating room was going all night; I never experienced anything like it.... I am not telling you how many we lost last night, because the censor might not send this letter if I did. We are told not to give details or numbers.
>
> The surgery is more like butchery, but of course it is necessary. They cut away any flesh or bone with which the shell has come in contact, leaving huge holes, and making no attempt at suturing. Then they cleanse the wound with ether, and cover all around with iodine. This radical work is necessary on account of poison and of gas gangrene.
>
> Source: Bertha Merriman, Merriman Family Papers (Ontario Archives).

ACTIVITIES

1. With the aid of a diagram, explain how the failure of the Schlieffen Plan resulted in a stalemate on the Western Front.
2. Write a letter home from the Western Front, either from a soldier's or a nurse's point of view. In your letter, describe conditions where you are. Give your thoughts on leadership.
3. The use of gas as a weapon was outlawed by the 1907 Hague Convention. Discuss whether chemical weapons should be allowed in warfare.
4. Create a series of wartime sketches showing some of the conditions at the front. Include depictions of the air war and field hospitals.