

**Valour in Vain: An Investigation of Post-World War I Policies and Institutions in the
Execution of Soldier Settlement for Indigenous Veterans**

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The term human rights has manifested itself into our everyday lexicon; however, its meaning and, more critically, its application has become overshadowed by the atrocities we see taking place on an international scale. The United Nations defines human rights as “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status” (United Nations, n.d.). Nevertheless, it is one thing to know the definition but something else entirely to see it applied in our world. Events that have occurred and are still occurring in both the past and present reveal that we, as an international body, still have much to do. One such case is the bigoted conduct towards Indigenous peoples during the First World War, notably the management and implementation of soldier settlement for Indigenous veterans returning from the war.

At the onset of the First World War in 1914, the Canadian government was initially hesitant to recruit Indigenous peoples on the grounds that the Germans might not extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare (Lackenbauer, 2009). However, by 1916, reinforcements were needed to replace the high casualties, so Indigenous peoples were actively encouraged to enlist (Lackenbauer, 2009). Throughout the war, individuals such as Francis Pegahmagabow (an Ojibwa sniper from Ontario) and John Shiwak (an Inuit from the Northwest Territories) made a name for themselves (Gaffen, 1985). For example, on completing his service, Pegahmagabow was credited with 378 kills and awarded the Military Medal in three instances (Winegard, 2012). However, despite the significant contributions of Indigenous peoples both on the battlefield and the home front, they continued to be discriminated against as before the war. This essay will focus on how post-WWI policies and institutions discriminated explicitly against Indigenous veterans by making it difficult for them to obtain the same conditions of soldier settlement as non-Indigenous soldiers. This will be explored through the Canadian government’s decision to

confiscate Indigenous reserve land, the implementation of a separate regulatory body for the execution of the Soldier Settlement Act and the pressure for Indigenous veterans to become enfranchised.

Following the First World War, the Canadian government introduced various support programs, such as farm and financial grants for returning soldiers (Winegard, 2012). However, with about 26,000 veterans applying under the Soldier Settlement Act (SSA), procuring large amounts of land was a significant endeavour (Titley, 1986). Thus, the decision was made to obtain land from other sources, such as Indigenous and school lands (Soldier Settlement Act, 1927). From this, it is evident that despite the contributions of Indigenous peoples throughout the war, they continued to face discrimination and unjust treatment. An Order of Council, ratified on April 23, 1919, gave the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) the authority to confiscate Indigenous reserve land that was left unused or improperly used (Winegard, 2012). Under this law, around 85,000 acres of allegedly surplus Indigenous reserve land was surrendered and given to non-Indigenous veterans (Lackenbauer, 2009). Historian Fred Gaffen (1985) discusses how the action of the federal government to confiscate Indigenous reserve land was popular politically but not among Indigenous communities. Indigenous veterans had hoped for better treatment upon their return from the war, but this was not the case. While the Indigenous peoples were compensated for the land that was taken (a sum of about \$1.01 million), it was held in trust by the DIA, which promised to parcel out the money as it saw fit (Winegard, 2012). This method of compensation not only eliminated the opportunity for Indigenous communities to decide how to use the money but also put the decision-making in the hands of another governing body, one that was susceptible to bias and discrimination. Overall, this process of procuring Indigenous lands was a source of unrest and frustration among many Indigenous veterans (Winegard, 2012).

The implementation of a separate regulatory body for the execution of the Soldier Settlement Act (SSA) also displays the government's discriminatory attitudes toward Indigenous veterans. For non-Indigenous veterans, those who wished to enter the farming sector were assisted by the Soldier Settlement Board, which purchased land for soldiers (Gaffen, 1985). In meetings between Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, and the Soldier Settlement Board, it was decided that the DIA would administer the Act for Indigenous veterans (Titley, 1986). This was assented to in a 1919 clause of the Indian Act, which stated that for purposes of administration, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs shall have equal powers to that of the Soldier Settlement Board under the Soldier Settlement Act, 1919 (Indian Act, 1927). Additionally, historian Brian Titley (1986) points out that Arthur Meighen, the appointed Prime Minister at the time, had doubts that Indigenous veterans would experience success in farming and, thus, supported the administration of the DIA under the Soldier Settlement Act. Meighen believed Indigenous veterans would achieve better results under the department's guidance. (Titley, 1986). We can see the government's collective reasoning was that Indigenous veterans would not be effective farmers and, therefore, needed to be guided by a separate regulatory body. This further displays the presence of discrimination and bias towards Indigenous veterans that were present even in the highest positions of the legislature.

The decision to transfer the administration of the Soldier Settlement Act to the Department of Indian Affairs granted the department authority to establish criteria for providing land grants to Indigenous veterans. One such criterion that was greatly emphasized was the condition for Indigenous veterans to become enfranchised - essentially the "relinquishment of [an individual's] Indian status" (Titley, 1986, p. 12). This can be observed when discussing the

Soldier Settlement Act and its conflict with the Indian Act (Gaffen, 1985). Section 15 of the SSA stated that soldiers may be given a free grant for a 16-acre plot of land (Soldier Settlement Act, 1919); however, a clause in a 1927 amendment to the Indian Act directly conflicted with this section. The clause stated that no Indigenous resident in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, or the Territories may acquire land under any act regarding Dominion lands (Indian Act, 1927). These contradictory statements created an obstacle for Indigenous veterans, and while some were able to obtain land grants without losing their treaty status, most were not (Gaffen, 1985). In these two primary documents, it is evident that possessing Indian status created challenges for returning soldiers to gain support and put much pressure on them to become enfranchised. Furthermore, historian Timothy Winegard (2012) points out that the application of the SSA was, in a sense, another form of assimilation, as it forced Indigenous veterans and their families to live outside their reserves in order to gain the benefits of post-war programs. Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, firmly endorsed this idea. Scott voiced his opinion in a 1920 memorandum, stating that he wished to “get rid of the Indian problem” and that the objective of Indian Affairs was to “continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (Winegard, 2012, p. 41). Extreme views such as these reveal the overarching government stance at the time and the resulting adverse treatment of Indigenous peoples. While the Soldier Settlement Act was intended to support veterans of the war, it also created pressure for returning Indigenous soldiers to be enfranchised and assimilated into the rest of society.

In this essay, the discriminatory attitudes held by the government toward Indigenous peoples at the time are evident, and the points discussed show how, despite the numerous contributions of Indigenous soldiers in the First World War, they were mistreated and neglected

upon their return. Many of these views are prevalent today, and as former Canadian Senator Murray Sinclair puts it, there is a “general view within society that Indigenous People are inferior and can't be trusted” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020, para. 8). Sinclair also echoes that Canadian legislation like the Indian Act “reflected those beliefs about Indigenous people” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020, para. 9). Our society both in the past and present has and continues to be a breeding ground for hatred and mistreatment. However, if we as an international body strive to create a place where human rights are not just a hope for the future but rather rights extended to all peoples and groups, we may soon be able to see a world where discrimination, racism and hate have no place.

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