

## *"The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tank: Revitalizing the Canadian War Spirit Through Film"*

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### Introduction

By 1916, after over two years of fighting on the Western Front, Canadian soldiers suffered heavy casualties and losses. At home, the patriotism of Canadians began to diminish as "it was hard to find the glory in a man's death."<sup>1</sup> With mounting casualties and mourning families in Canada, some Canadians opposed the war.<sup>2</sup>

The Canadian federal government, committed to achieving victory with its Allies, knew that it had to foster morale among ordinary Canadians to prevent some opposition to the war.<sup>3</sup> Appointed by Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden and Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes, Sir Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, became responsible for capturing Canada's exploits in France and Belgium through photography, art, and film.<sup>4</sup> The British War Office did not initially support Aitken as it feared that he could

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> See Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008). Cameron Telch, "Resiliency Among Canadian Soldiers: Surviving and enduring the Great War." *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, no. 134 (June 2024), p. 44.; Tracy Nichole Iverson, "An Empty Grave: Grief and Mourning on the Canadian Home Front in the First World War." Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2021, pg. 73. "Peace Activists." *Canada and the First World War*, accessed 6 September 2024. <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/voices-for-peace/peace-activists/#:~:text=A%20small%20number%20of%20Canadians,the%20ranks%20of%20peace%20activists>.

<sup>3</sup> "Peace Activists."

<sup>4</sup> Tim Cook. "Documenting the First World War." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published 1 August 2014; Last Edited 5 May 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/documenting-canadas-great-war>

document military secrets, which could end up in the hands of the Germans; by 1916, he eventually succeeded and gained the support of Canadian and British political leaders who supported his goals.<sup>5</sup> He was given the rank of lieutenant colonel and became Canada's representative "Eye Witness," overseas where he ensured to "enshrine in a contemporary history those exploits which will make the First Division immortal."<sup>6</sup> Using his own influence, Aitken created the Canadian War Records Office (CRWO) in 1916 to publicize the Canadian war contribution.<sup>7</sup> By 1916, the first official photographers and cinematographers arrived on the Western Front to document, capture, and bring home some of the war to Canadian audiences.<sup>8</sup>

As challenging as it was to film the war as cameramen could be killed in action, some Canadians back home watched films, including the 1915 film *Canada's Fighting Forces* and the 1916 film *The Battle of the Somme*.<sup>9</sup> In *Canada's Fighting Forces*, the Canadian combat experience at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 was depicted through animation; in the *Battle of the Somme*, some scenes were censored from the film as Lieutenant Colonel Ernest J. Chambers, Canada's Chief Press Sensor, feared that audiences in Canada were not used to watching graphic scenes of the war.<sup>10</sup>

One Canadian film that captured the entirety of Canadians in combat and their heroic efforts on the Western Front is the 1917 film *The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks*. Officially dubbed "Canada's first war film," it showed Canadians fighting at the Battle of Courcellette in September 1916.<sup>11</sup> The battle itself was fought in France and involved British tanks in combat, the Mark I tanks.<sup>12</sup> The Courcellette operation

<sup>5</sup> "Lord Beaverbrook," Canada and the First World War, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/after-the-war/history/lord-beaverbrook/#:~:text=In%20early%201916%2C%20Beaverbrook%20established,records%20to%20document%20the%20war.>

<sup>6</sup> Cook, "Documenting."

<sup>7</sup> "Lord Beaverbrook,"; Cook, "Documenting."

<sup>8</sup> "Lord Beaverbrook."

<sup>9</sup> Tim Cook, "Canada's Great War on Film: *Lest We Forget* (1935)." *Canadian Military History* 14, 3 (2005); p. 10.; Tim Travers, "Canadian Film and the First World War," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Travers, "Canadian Film," p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> "The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks," *The Kingston Daily Standard* (Kingston), March 8, 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/785940262/?terms=the%20CANADIAN%20VICTORY%20AT%20COURCELETTE%20%3A%20and%20the%20advance%20of%20the%20tanks&match=1>, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> "New Battle Film Shows Canadian Heroes in Action: Will be Shown Under the Auspices of the Star at the Princess Theatre for One Week Beginning on 11 February" *The Montreal Star* (Montreal), 3 February 1917,

was part of an enormous action called the Battle of Ancre where the French settlements of Belmont Hamel, Flers, and Courcellette were captured by the Allies.<sup>13</sup> For the Canadians, Courcellette was significant because they broke through a portion of German lines along the Western Front.<sup>14</sup> According to news media reports in 1917, the film featured the “largest number of Canadians ever assembled for an operation on the battlefield—an army larger than Napoleon’s at historic Waterloo.”<sup>15</sup>

In *The Canadian Army in Action*, British tanks are shown in combat at Courcellette and breaking through enemy positions; other scenes include Allied soldiers readying themselves for the battle and crossing No Man’s Land.<sup>16</sup> The film depicted the aftermath of the battle, wounded soldiers, and the dead being buried.<sup>17</sup> There were also other scenes of dead Germans in the trenches, captured Prussians, and soldiers from British Columbia voting in elections; the film ends, as one journalist wrote, with a “number of striking silhouetted scenes that could not have been more graphic and beautiful.”<sup>18</sup> The film was produced by the Canadian War Records Office, under the leadership of Aitken, and shown in Canada, but it was filmed by an unknown sanctioned cinematographer of the British Army, according to *The Montreal Star*.<sup>19</sup> What is significant about the film is that it

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Newspapers.com

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/742613706/?terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film&match=1>, p. 19; Andrew McEwen, “A useful accessory to the infantry, but nothing more”: Tanks at the Battle of Flers-Courcellette, September 1916.” *Canadian Military History* 20, 4 (2011), pg. 9.

<sup>13</sup> “The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks,” *The Montreal Star* (Montreal), 3 February 1917, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/742613706/?terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film&match=1>, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>15</sup> “Canadian Army in Action and Advance of the Tanks: The Official Moving Pictures of the Battle of Courcellette,” *The Edmonton Journal* (Edmonton), 22 February 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/470926422/?match=1&terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film>, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> “Canadian Army in Action,” *The Edmonton Journal*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> “Canadian Army in Action,” p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> “Canadian Army in Action,” p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> “The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks: The Official Moving Picture of The Battle of Courcellette,” *The Edmonton Journal* (Edmonton), 21 February 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/470925833/>, p. 32; “The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks,” *The Vancouver World* (Vancouver), 17 February 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/64674238/?match=1&terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film> p. 16; “New Battle Film Shows Canadian Heroes in Action,” p. 19; “The Canadian Army in Action,” *The Montreal Star*, p. 19.

was the Canadian War Records Office's first authorized production, and it was the first film to feature tanks to Canadian audiences.<sup>20</sup>

*The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks* was a significant Canadian film that Canadian media promoted to depict the prowess of Canadian soldiers at Courcellette to revitalize the war effort in Canada. This is significant because Canadians were demoralized and fatigued by the ongoing fighting on the Western Front.

### The Body of the Text

*The Canadian Army in Action* justified the actions of Canadian soldiers in France to Canadians back home. 1916 marked some of the bloodiest battles for the Canadian Corps, where they engaged at the Battle of the Somme and suffered 24,029 casualties.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Canadians were battle-fatigued by late 1916.<sup>22</sup> Canadian families grieved for deceased loved ones, Canadians were stressed on the home front as the war required constant resupplying of goods and services, and fewer Canadians volunteered for military service by late 1916 as public enthusiasm for the war effort declined.<sup>23</sup> Although the Canadian government tried to censor grim news from the frontlines to protect public morale, Canadians became aware of the realities of the war from returning soldiers and letters from loved ones overseas.<sup>24</sup> *The Canadian Army in Action* attempted to rejuvenate the Canadian war effort at home according to one journalist: "Canadians laid down their lives there [at Courcellette]. It was a Canadian action, a Canadian achievement, a Canadian victory, and for the people of Canada Courcellette became the heartcentre of the whole world cataclysm."<sup>25</sup> The film was not censored for audiences as Aitken intended to use it to promote "the cause of right against might" to stir up enthusiasm at

<sup>20</sup> "New Battle Film," *The Montreal Star*, pg. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2022), 135.

<sup>22</sup> J.L. Granatstein and Richard Jones, "Conscription in Canada," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published February 6, 2006. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/conscription>

<sup>23</sup> Telch, "Resiliency Among Canadian Soldiers," 44; "Government Intervention," *Canada and the First World War*, accessed September 7, 2024. <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/the-home-front/government-intervention/>; Granatstein and Jones, "Conscription in Canada."

<sup>24</sup> Cook, "Canada's Great War on Film," 8.

<sup>25</sup> "Canada's First War Film is an Official Record," *The Toronto Star Weekly* (Toronto), February 10, 1917, Newspapers.com

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/991281624/?match=1&terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film>, pg. 22.

home.<sup>26</sup> It appeared that the media attempted to capitalize on the fact that Canadians were engaged in a colossal battle for civilization against the autocratic forces of the Kaiser and his army. The media's reference to the term "Canadian" indicated that the film attempted to create a distinct Canadian identity and that Canadians at home must remember and celebrate the heroic efforts of the Canadian Corps.

The film showcased to Canadians the technological power of the army fighting overseas. The depiction of the tank demonstrated it was a significant turning point for how the war was conducted: "Great, armored, irresistible snails, crawling over the shell-smashed surface of the earth, crashing through obstructions, bridging shell holes and trenches, facing the hail of machine gun and rifle bullets, spitting death into the German trenches and driving the terrified German soldiers before them in demoralized mobs."<sup>27</sup> *The Leader-Post's* description of tanks revealed that they broke the stalemate of trench warfare during the Courcelette battle. The tanks were described as the ultimate weapon in the film to Canadians as they were depicted as invulnerable and the face of death for the enemy. The tanks' description in the film, according to one journalist at the *Winnipeg Tribune*, was meant to inform viewers that Canada, along with its Allies, possessed a great weapon of war that would bring about victory for Canada.<sup>28</sup>

*The Canadian Army in Action* demonstrated that young Canadians fought at the Battle of Courcelette for the betterment of all Canadians. According to *The Toronto Star Weekly*, the film depicted "the boys you sent to war, the lads you pray for, the lads you'd starve yourselves to feed and maintain there on the battle line, if need be, 'somewhere in

<sup>26</sup> "The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks," *The Vancouver World* (Vancouver), February 15, 1917, Newspapers.com  
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/64674135/?match=1&terms=%22The%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tanks%22>, pg. 1.; "The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks: The Official Moving Pictures of the Battle of Courcelette," *The Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton), March 15, 1917,

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/1099971011/?match=1&terms=%22The%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tanks%22>, pg. 4.

<sup>27</sup> "The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks," *The Leader-Post* (Regina) February 14, 1917, Newspapers.com

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/493303327/?match=1&terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film>, pg. 9.

<sup>28</sup> "The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks," *The Winnipeg Tribune* (Winnipeg), March 3, 1917, Newspapers.com

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/44202658/?match=1&terms=The%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tanks> pg. 24.

France' -the very flower of Canada's manhood, her hope and her glory."<sup>29</sup> The film served as a reminder to Canadian viewers to not forget Canada's finest men, doing "their bit" to achieve victory on European battlefields.<sup>30</sup> In many ways, the film prompted audiences that Canadian servicemen were bleeding to prevent other Canadians back home from serving in the Canadian military and losing their lives. The description of Canada's youth in the media highlighted that they underwent a "trial by fire" at Courcellette, serving as a testament that Canadian military personnel served with honour for the glory of all Canadians.<sup>31</sup>

*The Canadian Army in Action* reached a large viewership of Canadians nationwide. The film was immensely successful among audiences. Shown in major cities, including Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Medicine Hat, Canadians were struck with awe when they witnessed the movement of tanks in the film.<sup>32</sup> One viewer, F.A. McKenzie, said, "The picture will sweep through Canada like a prairie fire, showing the actuality of war as never before."<sup>33</sup> Canadians responded enthusiastically to the film; for example, local soldiers from Owen Sound said it was "a most remarkable reproduction" and encouraged all Canadians to see it.<sup>34</sup> Amid the carnage and battle fatigue of the war, the film rejuvenated the morale of Canadian viewers as entire audiences reacted "with outbursts of spontaneous applause" and cheered for their fighting Canadians.<sup>35</sup>

*The Canadian Army in Action* was an effective propaganda film by the Canadian War Records Office. The national agenda of Canada's media indicated that it had one common goal: to advance the interests of Canada's prowess on the battlefields of the

<sup>29</sup> "Canada's First War Film," pg. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Osborne Humphries, *A Weary Road: Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 290.

<sup>31</sup> Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 210.

<sup>32</sup> "Human Beetles of Gigantic Size Do Tanks Appear," *The Montreal Star* (Montreal), February 3, 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/742615750/?match=1&terms=%22The%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tanks%22%3B%20Toronto> pg.3; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Vancouver World*, February 15, 1917; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Winnipeg Tribune*; "Canadian Army in Action," *The Edmonton Journal*, February 22, 1917.

<sup>33</sup> "Official Pictures of Canadian Army: Show Film at the Rex Theatre in Brantford Next Week," *The Brantford Expositor* (Brantford), March 26, 1917, Newspapers.com <https://www.newspapers.com/image/734246928/?match=1&terms=the%20Canadian%20Army%20in%20Action%20and%20the%20Advance%20of%20the%20Tank%20film>, pg. 10.

<sup>34</sup> "Official Film of Canadians and the Tanks," *The Owen Sound Sun* (Owen Sound), February 16, 1917. Newspapers.com. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/726805371/?terms=remarkable&match=1> pg. 1.

<sup>35</sup> "Human Beetles," pg. 3.

Western Front by rigorously promoting the film and Canada's fighting soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Negative media reporting of the film was not on the agenda for most newspapers as they sought to safeguard the morale of Canadians by fostering the war effort.<sup>37</sup> Canadian reporters took the opportunity to promote Canada "as a quasi-independent nation" through its successful battlefield exploits in the Courcellette film.<sup>38</sup> It appeared that the film was a successful piece of national propaganda as it became the "national record of these heroic days" where audiences globally would also be equally proud of the fighting Canadians.<sup>39</sup>

## Reflection and Conclusion

Also called *The Canadian Victory at Courcellette and Advance of the 'Tanks'* some scenes from the film are available to watch on the Imperial War Museum's website. It is an interesting film that reveals the exploits of the Canadians at Courcellette. What makes this picture incredibly unique is that it shows the grim realities of the war for the Canadians: from tending to the wounded, burying the dead, bombarding enemy positions, voting in elections, interacting with German prisoners, releasing observation balloons into the sky to report on Germans' movement, and advancing into combat. It is no wonder that Canadian media outlets in 1917 vigorously promoted the film nationally as it showed that "each man did his duty in the hour of death and the hour of victory" at Courcellette.<sup>40</sup> I highly recommend that historians of the Great War and anyone passionate about historical films watch these available scenes from *The Canadian Army in Action* to witness the day-to-day life of Canadians on the frontlines. Fortunately, the film has been

<sup>36</sup> See "Canada's First War Film," *The Toronto Star Weekly*; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Montreal Star*; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Edmonton Journal*, February 22, 1917; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Vancouver World*, February 17, 1917; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Leader-Post*.

<sup>37</sup> Jon Tattrie, "Propaganda in Canada," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published July 16, 2019; Last Edited February 23, 2021. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/propaganda-in-Canada>

<sup>38</sup> Joel Bainerman, *The Crimes of a President: New Revelations on Conspiracy & Cover-Up in the Bush and Reagan Administrations* (New York: S.P.I. Books, 1992), 161.; "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Montreal Star*; "Canada's First War Film," *The Toronto Star Weekly*.

<sup>39</sup> "The Canadian Army in Action," *The Montreal Star*, pg. 19.

<sup>40</sup> *The Canadian Victory at Courcellette and the Advance of the Tanks* (1917: Topical Film Company), Historic Film. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022934>

preserved and is currently stored at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa where historians can view it.

*The Canadian Army in Action and the Advance of the Tanks* was one such film that Canadian newspapers reported to show the heroic contributions of Canadian soldiers during the Battle of Courcellette. The media's positive reports of the Courcellette battle in the film highlighted that the fighting Canadians were achieving a glorious victory for the people of Canada. The representation of the tank in the film demonstrated that Canada and its allies achieved a great weapon of war that could overcome any German trenches and achieve a swift victory for the Allies. Even more significant was the media's constant reminder to viewers to not forget about the heroic sacrifices Canadians made during the filming of the Courcellette battle since every Canadian must show their gratitude to the fighting men of the Canadian Corp, as argued by the media. Indeed, *The Canadian Army in Action* showcased that Canadian soldiers were expected to achieve victory in the battle and the larger war for the future of Canada and her people.

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