




Canada and the South African War: A Case for Further Including the South African War into the Ontario History Curriculum

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DOI: 10.53103/cjess.v5i3.366

Abstract

The South African War (1899-1902) was an important event in Canadian history as it not only impacted English-French relations in Canada, but also shaped Canada's imperial relations and national identity. That said, the South African War comprises a very small proportion of the Ontario history curriculum during the grades in which history is a mandatory subject. Through an analysis of the images and stereotypes surrounding Canadian soldiers, the creation of Canadian-specific battalions, and the success of Canadian forces in battles such as Paardeberg, this article provides an explanation for why the South African War is an important component of Canadian history that is worthy of study. Additionally, this article provides a study of how the South African War is currently included in the Ontario history curriculum prior to Grade 11 (at which time history is no longer a mandatory subject) and makes a case for why the war should be further included. It is ultimately argued that the South African War is an important event in Canadian history and should therefore be included to a greater extent in the Ontario history curriculum.

Keywords: South African War, Canada, Ontario, History, Curriculum

Introduction

The South African War (1899-1902), also known as the Boer War, was a war fought between the British Empire and the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in southern Africa (Miller, 1993). Fighting against the Boers, who were farmers of Dutch descent, were troops from the United Kingdom as well as soldiers from British settler colonial societies such as Canada (Miller, 1993). Importantly, this was the first time that Canada fought in a war overseas (Miller, 1999). Additionally, the South African War helped to provide English Canadians with a sense of national identity distinct from that of Britain, whilst simultaneously helping to bolster a separate French-Canadian nationalism

(Miller, 1993, 1999). Canada's first overseas war thus played a large role in shaping the country's imperial relations and sense of nationalism.

Despite the importance of the South African War in Canadian history, it surprisingly only comprises a small proportion of the Ontario history curriculum during the years in which it is mandatory for students to study history. As students in Ontario are not required to study history beyond Grade 10, many students will graduate from high school without having taken any additional history courses. The Ontario history curriculum up until the end of Grade 10 therefore comprises the extent of formal education that many Ontarians receive regarding Canadian history, making the curriculum content very important. Currently, mentions of the South African War prior to Grade 11 can only be found in the Grade 8 history curriculum. The description of the Grade 8 history curriculum states that students will "explore the perspectives of groups on issues of concern to people in Canada from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of World War I" (Government of Ontario, 2023, p. 266). The South African War thus falls within the timeline of this course. That stated, the five mentions of the South African War that can be found in the curriculum document only use the war as suggestions or sample questions, meaning that teachers do not actually need to teach it as part of their lessons. Additionally, the suggestions and sample questions regarding the South African War seem to focus on the strained English-French relations in Canada that were caused by the war. Therefore, discussions surrounding imperial relations between Canada and Britain, as well as between Canada and the other British settler colonial societies of Australia and New Zealand were left out. Additionally, there is no mention of how the South African War helped to shape Canadian nationalism, or even a discussion of the South African War as a precursor to the First World War. Following an explanation of why the South African War was important in Canadian history, an analysis will be provided for why the war should be further incorporated into the Ontario history curriculum prior to Grade 11. This article will therefore argue that the South African War should be included to a greater extent into the Ontario history curriculum due to its importance in Canadian history.

The Importance of the South African War in Canadian History

The South African War has had an important impact on Canadian history. In addition to the strain that it placed on English-French relations in Canada (due to many French Canadians not wanting the country to participate in an imperial war), as is already discussed in the Ontario history curriculum, the South African War also helped shape Canada's imperial relations with the United Kingdom and other British settler colonial societies, as well as aided in the creation of a Canadian national identity (at least amongst English Canadians). Although there are numerous examples from the war in which Canada's imperial relations and national identity can be seen to change and develop, this

will be shown through the promulgation of stereotypes and images surrounding the Canadian soldiers, the organisation of Canadian troops into Canadian-led battalions, and the success of Canadian forces on the veldt.

One way the South African War helped to create a Canadian national identity was through the stereotypes that were created about the Canadian soldiers. Newspapers from around the empire often described Canadian troops as having embodied the rugged masculinity that resulted from the harsh climates and terrains of their country (Chalkley, 2024). Shaw (2013) argued that these stereotypes were embraced and promulgated by Canadian newspapers and that the “discourse surrounding the volunteers seems a good indication of how the country saw itself – hardy, northern, and youthful” (p. 101). The Canadian troops were therefore “presented as the embodiment of [the] country’s idealized self-image” (Shaw, 2013, p. 101). That said, in addition to the image of Canadian troops that was forming in the media, the Canadian soldiers also began to see themselves differently from the other troops. More specifically, Miller (1999) noted that the war caused Canadian soldiers to become increasingly aware of their differences from the other imperial troops, and that they “had little tolerance for those among their number who aped British mannerisms” (p. 321). Therefore, the South African War contributed to the production of a distinct Canadian identity, at least on the veldt, that differed from its imperial counterparts.

In addition to the perception of Canadian soldiers, the Canadian troops were also organised and decorated in ways that differentiated them from other imperial troops. More specifically, Miller (1999) argued that Canadian soldiers were placed into Canadian-commanded battalions rather than being divided into British battalions. As Canadians were in their own separate battalions, this made the Canadians more identifiable and also meant that any victories they achieved could be attributed to them as Canadians. Additionally, Miller (1999) noted that Canadian soldiers used different equipment from other troops and even wore maple leaf badges on their helmets. The Canadian troops thus stood out visually from their imperial counterparts and even used symbols that represented them nationally. This therefore demonstrates that the South African War was an event in which Canada was able to differentiate itself from the United Kingdom and the other British settler colonial societies.

Furthermore, the South African War provided Canadians with the opportunity to make a name for themselves on the battlefield. The Battle of Paardeberg in particular provided Canada with the opportunity to stand out from the rest of the imperial troops. Shaw (2013) highlighted that this battle, in which Boer General Cronje surrendered to Canadian forces, “assumed mythic proportions” and led to Canadian soldiers receiving praise and recognition (p. 106). McGowan (2009) added that this praise that Canadians received from the highest echelons of the military led some Canadian soldiers to feel that their British counterparts were jealous of their accomplishments. Miller (1999) noted that

the Battle of Paardeberg led to an “inflated nationalist rhetoric” including from the then Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier. The South African War, and in particular the Battle of Paardeberg, thus led to a heightened sense of Canadian nationalism, even back home.

Through the stereotypes of the Canadian soldiers, the formation of Canadian-specific battalions, and the victory of Canadian troops at battles such as Paardeberg, it can therefore be seen that Canadians were gaining an image and reputation that allowed them to stand out. The South African War thus helped differentiate Canadians from their imperial allies and create a separate Canadian identity. With Canadian newspapers and politicians repeating these stories from the veldt, a Canadian national identity, especially amongst English Canadians, was increasingly taking shape. Miller (1993) argued that the South African War “altered Canadians’ perceptions of themselves, their relationship to the British Empire, and to each other” (p. 424).

Further Including the South African War into the Ontario History Curriculum

As was shown, in addition to impacting English and French relations in Canada, the South African War also played an important role in shaping Canada’s imperial connections and bolstering a Canadian national identity. However, despite the important influence that the South African War has had on Canadian history, it only comprises a small proportion of the Ontario history curriculum (prior to Grade 11, at which time history is no longer a mandatory subject). As was previously noted, mentions of the South African War within the grades that history is a mandatory subject can only be found in the Grade 8 curriculum, and even then, only uses the South African War as an optional suggestion for teachers (Government of Ontario, 2023). Additionally, suggestions and sample questions regarding the South African War seem to focus on how the war impacted English and French relations in Canada. Therefore, the impact that the war had on Canada’s imperial relations and national identity is not included within the curriculum.

Moreover, it is important for students to study the South African War to a greater extent in Grade 8, as the next history course (either CHC2D or CHC2P) is not until Grade 10, and the curriculum for the Grade 10 history courses states that the timeline for the courses begin with 1914, the year the First World War started (Government of Ontario, 2018). Miller (2008) argued that it is important to learn about Canada during the South African War if one wants to truly understand Canada during the First World War as it allows the learner “to assess the continuities and discontinuities between the two conflicts” (p. 17). More specifically, Miller (2008) stated that the South African War “offers Canadian scholars a useful baseline against which to measure change over time, to understand Canadian troops’ responses to warfare and their country’s war-induced self perception”, as well as “offers a perspective from which to assess the validity of the Great

War's alleged transformative character" (p. 17). As Grade 8 is the last opportunity students have to study the South African War before learning about World War I in Grade 10, it is important that the South African war be taught beyond just English-French relations in Canada. If Ontario students are taught about the South African War to a greater extent in Grade 8, before studying the First World War in Grade 10, they could, as an example, compare and contrast the Battle of Vimy Ridge with the Battle of Paardeberg. Therefore, learning about Canada in the South African War more thoroughly can be hugely beneficial for students' later learning about Canada's role in World War I.

Although the South African War does receive greater attention in later history courses, such as CHI4U, which is offered in Grade 12, these courses are optional and not always offered by schools (Government of Ontario, 2015). As students are only required to study history until the end of Grade 10, it is important that the curriculum includes everything that students should ideally learn. This article has endeavoured to show why the South African War was important to Canadian history as well as why it should be further included into the Ontario history curriculum prior to Grade 11. By further including the South African War into the curriculum, students will hopefully learn about Canada's changing connection with the British Empire, the bolstering of a Canadian national identity, as well as help students to more successfully study World War I when they enter Grade 10. As the curriculum currently stands, Grade 8 would seemingly be the easiest year in which to incorporate a more comprehensive and well-rounded study of the South African War, that goes beyond English-French relations in Canada, as it fits in chronologically and will help prepare students for learning about World War I in Grade 10.

Conclusion

The South African War was an important event in Canadian history, which in addition to impacting English-French relations in Canada, has shaped imperial relations and national identity. Due to the importance of the war, this article has argued that the South African War should be further included in the Ontario history curriculum prior to Grade 11 (at which time history is no longer a mandatory subject). Unfortunately, the South African War largely seems to go unnoticed. Chaktsiris (2013) argued that despite the large South African War memorial that was built on University Avenue in Toronto, on which Canadian soldiers made of bronze "gaze over the city, the city does not often gaze back" (p. 25). Although this quote refers to the recognition of the South African War more broadly, it seems to bode true for the pre-Grade 11 Ontario history curriculum as well. The further inclusion of the South African War into the Ontario history curriculum may therefore shed more light on this important event in Canadian history for future generations to learn from.

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Having completed degrees in both history and teaching from the University of Toronto and King's College London, Jacob Chalkley is currently pursuing a doctorate from the University of South Carolina, focusing on history education. Alongside his studies, he works as a teacher of history.