



In the decade after World War I, an American writing about the dangers of tobacco argued “the War maimed, killed, and devastated; but the worst thing the war did was entrench the cigarette.” (Leslie, 1928 cited in Tate, 1999)

Tobacco was not unique to World War I. In previous wars, it had served as an aid in maintaining morale and discipline. But in the years during and following the First World War, cigarettes started to move into mainstream culture in Canada and the United States, and historians argue various developments were at play.

The introduction of a rolling machine in the 1880s accelerated the production of cigarettes, but as the industry expanded, it faced opposition from a growing anti-smoking movement. With the onset of First World War, some argue the tobacco manufacturers initiated an extensive effort around supplying tobacco, in particular cigarettes, to soldiers. The aim was to mitigate the negative effects of the opposition movement and increase the use of their product.

But others argue while the industry was ready to combine opportunity with patriotism, the tobacco manufacturers were just one of several players involved. Military and government leaders, the media and charity organizations each had a hand in promoting tobacco products during the War.

One line of reasoning contends the US military and government took the lead in distributing cigarettes to American soldiers. This argument asserts government and military authorities were determined to fight a “clean war” untainted by alcohol or prostitution. Tobacco was seen as a way to steer soldiers away from greater vices. The thinking was that soldiers soothed by cigarette smoke would be less likely to seek other temptations. The US Congress banned the sale of alcohol to soldiers and established prostitution-free zones around military camps, but included tobacco products in rations and subsidized their sale at canteens. The US War Industries Board encouraged domestic production of tobacco by designating cigarette manufacturing as an essential industry.

For their part, Canadian and American newspapers emphasized the importance of tobacco for the war effort and linked tobacco with patriotism. *La Presse*, for example, declared that tobacco soothed nerves and made it possible for soldiers to face dangers. And, the *Montreal Gazette* encouraged the public to show their patriotism by donating to the Gazette Cigarette and Tobacco Fund, proclaiming “our boys are giving their lives; all they ask of us is something to smoke.”

Some historians argue while the manufacturers did not take the lead in encouraging the distribution of tobacco to soldiers, they recognized the value of being identified with the war effort. Tobacco manufacturers were major contributors to the tobacco funds and the newspapers publicly thanked them by regularly publishing the list of donors.

Charity organizations that had once opposed cigarettes, including the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, agreed to support their distribution to American and Canadian soldiers. This was seen by some charity members as a way to steer soldiers away from greater vices or as a source of comfort. One YMCA official, previously a supporter of the anti-smoking movement, wrote:

*There are hundreds of thousands of men in the trenches who would go mad, or at least become so nervously inefficient as to be useless, if tobacco were denied them. Without it they would surely turn to worse things ... The argument that tobacco may shorten the life five or ten years, and that it dulls the*

*brain in the meantime, seems a little out of place in a trench where men stand in frozen blood and water and wait for death. (Polling, 1918 cited in Tate, 1999)*

But not everyone felt this way. Some staff involved with the YMCA and other charities wondered about the appropriateness of distributing a substance they had previously opposed. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Canada argued tobacco as a gift to soldiers exposed them to "gas poison hurled upon them from the enemy's side and tobacco poison thrust upon them from the side of their mistaken friends." (Bigelow, 1916 cited in Jarrett, 2005) Health professionals also spoke out and warned of the health consequences. For instance, one physician wrote: "more American soldiers will be damaged by the cigarette than by German bullets." (Kellogg, 1917 cited in Tate, 1999) However, those who protested were at risk of having their patriotism questioned. Various authorities had stressed tobacco was necessary for soldiers fighting a war and few were willing to challenge them.

