

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPT:

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

perspective
a point of view

To understand the past, historians sometimes imagine it as if it were a foreign land. They look for evidence to discover how people in that land thought, felt, and went about their daily lives. They try to see that foreign land from the **perspective** of someone living there. People's perspectives are influenced by their beliefs, values, and motivations. Historians also try to recognize that they are bringing their own modern-day perspective to their observations.

As a historical thinker wondering about historical perspective, ask yourself questions such as these:

- What were the beliefs, values, and motivations of people living in that time?
- How do those beliefs and values differ from today's beliefs and values?
- Did the people make understandable decisions based on the information they had available to them?
- What beliefs, values, and ideas do I already have that affect how I think about this event, period, or person?
- What can I learn from the evidence about how people lived their lives in this time period?

◀ **Figure 3** What does this ad tell you about attitudes about women's roles in Canada in 1969? How were the beliefs and values of Canadians living then different from those of today?

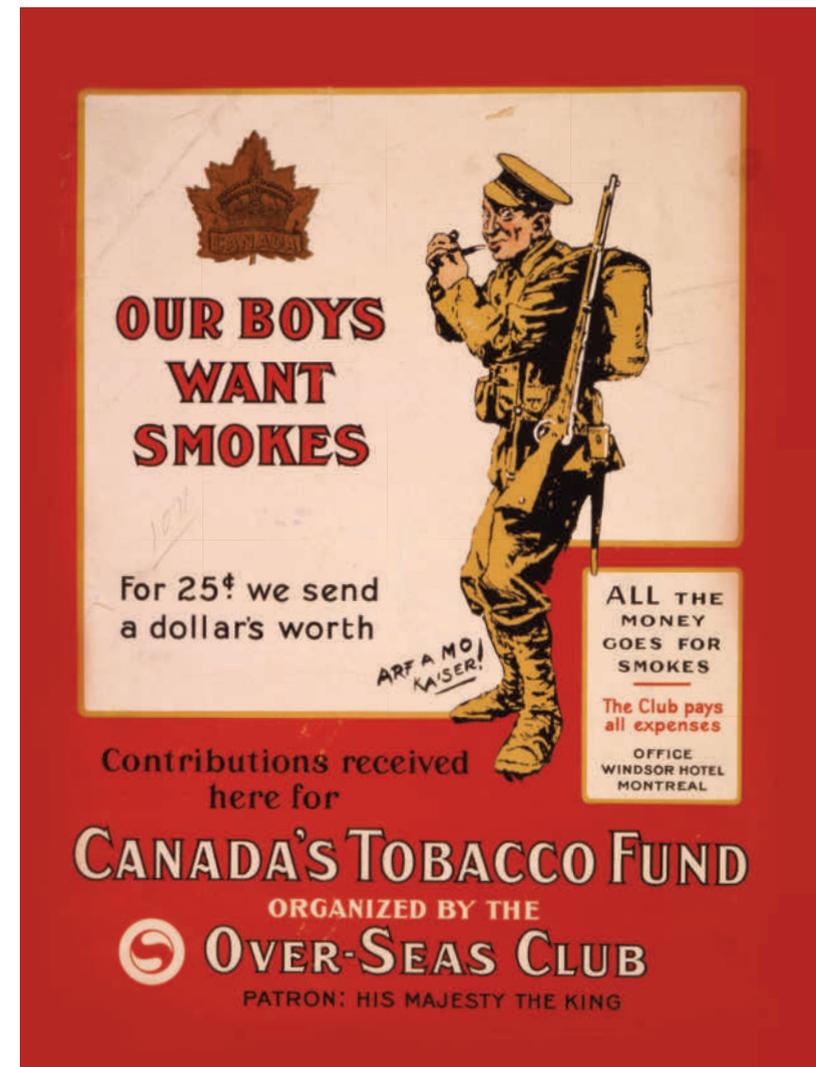


Understanding Perspectives

When historians try to recognize the perspectives of people of the past, including their biases, beliefs, and values, it helps them overcome their own presentism. Presentism is interpreting events of the past with the ideas and values of the present. That does not mean historians have to agree with how people thought and felt in the past. But it does mean that they have to try to understand how people in the past thought and felt, because historians need to represent the past accurately and respectfully.

Here's an exercise you can try. Make a list of what you believe would make up the ideal country. Now imagine the list that someone living in Canada about one hundred years ago would suggest. How would your lists compare? They might have some items in common, such as good schools, available healthcare, and plenty of job opportunities, but it is likely that many of the items would be different.

For example, you might value equality for men and women. In 1914, would all Canadians have put this on their list? Women at that time did not have the right to vote, and many Canadians supported this inequity. They believed that if women could vote, it would lead to the breakdown of society. At the same time, many other Canadians were working toward the goal of equality for men and women. They would have put equality for men and women on their list for an ideal country.



▲ **Figure 4** What clues do you see in this World War I poster about people's attitudes during this time? How do these beliefs and values compare to today's beliefs and values?