

VOICES of YOUTH in WARTIME

Students at Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School during the Second World War

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Article abstract

This article examines the experiences of adolescents in Canada during the Second World War through a case study of Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School (K.C.I.) in Kitchener, Ontario. Although many prewar school activities remained a significant part of the student experience at K.C.I., the war impacted the students' daily lives in ways specific to adolescents who attended school during this time period. Through their participation in various initiatives for the war effort, largely divided along gendered lines, students at K.C.I. contributed towards "school spirit" and developed a sense of responsibility as a future generation of Canadian citizens. This in-depth study of one Ontario high school in wartime demonstrates that age must be emphasized as a prominent factor in shaping experiences on the home front.

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by Sara Karn

In this era of rapid transition, our immediate aim is, of course, to preserve our mighty Empire and the fine ideals for which it stands, by hurling back the barbaric forces that are striving for world domination and the subjugation of enlightened democratic peoples. Although we cannot comprehend the full import of the tremendous social upheavals now in progress, we do realize that it will be the lot of our generation to remold and revitalize what is left of civilization... It is therefore everyone's task to rise above the trivialities of life, and to direct all talents and energy towards solving the vast and complex problems which confront mankind in this grave hour.¹

These stirring words appeared in the editorial of the *Grumbler* student magazine² at Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School for the 1941-1942 school year. The magazine's executive committee issued this call to fellow high school students to fulfill their duty as Canadians and become involved in the war effort of their school and local community. Their words provide a sense of some of the ways in which

adolescents perceived the war and their own roles within wartime society. It is clear the students recognized the important contributions their generation could make not only during the war, but also in its aftermath.

This article examines the experiences of adolescents in Canada during the Second World War through a case study of Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School (K.C.I.)³ in Kitch-

¹ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 7.

² Although the *Grumbler* is referred to as a student magazine, in many ways it resembles current student yearbooks.

³ The school has been referred to by many different names during its existence, due to the provincial changes in school status and the city's name change from Berlin to Kitchener in 1916. For a complete list of school names see H.W. Brown, "The Kitchener and Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School: Its His-

Abstract

This article examines the experiences of adolescents in Canada during the Second World War through a case study of Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School (K.C.I.) in Kitchener, Ontario. Although many prewar school activities remained a significant part of the student experience at K.C.I., the war impacted the students' daily lives in ways specific to adolescents who attended school during this time period. Through their participation in various initiatives for the war effort, largely divided along gendered lines, students at K.C.I. contributed towards "school spirit" and developed a sense of responsibility as a future generation of Canadian citizens. This in-depth study of one Ontario high school in wartime demonstrates that age must be emphasized as a prominent factor in shaping experiences on the home front.

Résumé: *Dans cet article, nous allons examiner les expériences d'adolescents au Canada durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale grâce à une étude de cas du Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School (K.C.I.), un établissement d'études secondaires situé à Kitchener, en Ontario. Bien que beaucoup d'activités scolaires d'avant-guerre restaient intégrales à l'expérience étudiante de KCI, la guerre impacta la vie quotidienne des écoliers d'une façon spécifique aux adolescents de cette période. À travers leur participation à diverses initiatives pour soutenir l'effort de guerre, d'habitude divisées selon les rôles traditionnels, les étudiants de KCI contribuèrent à « l'esprit d'école » et développèrent un sentiment de responsabilité en tant que future génération de Canadiens. Cette étude approfondie d'une école secondaire de l'Ontario en temps de guerre démontre que l'âge doit être souligné comme un facteur important dans la formation des expériences sur le front intérieur.*

ener, Ontario (Figure 1). Although many prewar school activities remained a significant part of the student experience at K.C.I., the war impacted the students' daily lives in ways specific to adolescents who attended school during this period. The school provided a setting with a con-

centration of adolescents who were able to appeal to their peers when organizing various clubs and fundraisers for the war effort, often developing out of prewar school activities and organizations. At K.C.I., these activities fostered "school spirit" and a sense of community, evident through a consistently successful war effort that involved the majority of students at the school. War work was largely divided along gendered lines at K.C.I., conforming to prewar notions of the types of activities male and female students should be involved in. However, the demands of war did create some changes in the opportunities available for female students. The war also contributed to a greater sense of responsibility for high school students at K.C.I., struggling to find their place in the world during an already difficult phase of life. According to both students and staff members, student involvement in the war effort

tory," *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Waterloo Historical Society* (Waterloo, ON: Chronicle Press, 1927), 268.

The initialism K.C.I. was selected for this article because it was used by the students themselves during the Second World War, and the school is still widely known by this name today.



Figure 1: Photo of K.C.I. from *the Grumbler*, 1945-1946.

strengthened their character and prepared them for becoming productive Canadian citizens. Through an in-depth study of K.C.I. during the Second World War, examining student magazines and local newspapers, this article explores the wartime dynamics and experiences within one Canadian high school.

A consideration of the history of high school education in Ontario directly prior to the Second World War reveals the place of schooling in the lives of

adolescents. During the interwar period, the number of students enrolled in high schools in Ontario increased drastically as compulsory school attendance laws were established.⁴ According to Cynthia Comacchio, by the beginning of the Second World War “some measure of high school attendance had become the common experience of Canadian youth.”⁵ K.C.I. was no exception. The school’s enrolment increased from 295 students in 1919 to 620 students by 1939.⁶ This

⁴ For more on the increase in enrolment in high schools and expanded vocational training during the interwar period, see Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of a Modern Canada, 1920-1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 99-127.

⁵ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 101.

⁶ Ontario, Department of Education, *Annual Report 1919* (Toronto: A.T. Wilgress, 1920), 210; On-

is an important consideration in the context of the Second World War because it demonstrates the growing role of education in the lives of adolescents. The school environment at K.C.I. shaped adolescent wartime experiences on a greater scale than ever before.

In addition to more students attending school and remaining in high school longer, schools also included a more diverse group outside of the predominantly middle-class Anglo-Canadian student body.⁷ The expansion of high schools to include vocational training during the interwar period meant that more adolescents of the working class attended school longer to learn practical skills for the workforce. The vocational and technical classes were almost exclusively for male students, with the exception of some classes created for female students, such as typing for clerical work. Although ethnicity undoubtedly influenced high school experiences, there is a lack of explicit reference to ethnicity in sources from K.C.I. during the Second World War.⁸ While Kitchener's prominent German population was a source of conflict in the city (known as Berlin until September 1916) during the First World War, these issues are not present in the sources examined from the Second World War. This is likely due to the fact

that by the time of the Second World War high school students of German heritage at K.C.I. were another generation removed from immigrating to Canada. Therefore, the ethnicity of adolescents at K.C.I. was not as strong of an identifying factor, as it had been for previous generations.

Similar to ethnicity, direct references to the religious beliefs of K.C.I. students were not present in the sources examined. Although there was a sizeable Mennonite community in the Kitchener area, it is difficult to determine whether any Mennonite adolescents attended K.C.I. during the war.⁹ The pacifist response to the war, from either the Mennonite community or other conscientious objectors, was absent in the student magazine and local newspaper articles about K.C.I., as these views did not conform to the school's position in support of the war. In response to the local Mennonite community's concerns about the militarist position of the education system during the Second World War, Rockway Mennonite Collegiate was established in Kitchener in 1945.¹⁰ However, the lack of emphasis on religion and ethnicity within the sources considered for K.C.I. has meant this study will focus on other factors that impacted student experiences.

The sources allow us to compare

tario, Department of Education, *Annual Report 1939* (Toronto: T.E. Bowman, 1940), 235.

⁷ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 100.

⁸ The only possible indication of ethnicity in the student magazines was the last names of the students at K.C.I.

⁹ For more on the education of Mennonites during the war, see John J. Bergen, "The World Wars and Education Among Mennonites in Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 8 (1990), 159-65.

¹⁰ See Samuel J. Steiner, *Lead Us On: A History of Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, 1945-1995* (Kitchener, ON: Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, 1995).

how male and female students became involved in the war effort.¹¹ The most significant factor shaping wartime experiences considered in this study is age. Comacchio's works on adolescence in the first half of the twentieth century provide a model.¹² She explains that high school reinforced a "generational consciousness" as a result of a concentration of large numbers of one segment of the population.¹³ In her article on adolescents during the Second World War, Comacchio argues that for many Canadians age was the factor that most influenced their perspective, experiences, and memory of the war, and that "adolescents were the most affected of the wartime generations."¹⁴ These considerations will be applied to K.C.I. during the war in order to understand the role that age played in constructing student identities and experiences.

An examination of student magazines and local newspapers spanning the war years helps us understand how students at K.C.I. experienced and made sense of the war. The main analysis comes

from issues of the *Grumbler*, pictured in Figure 2, a student magazine produced by students at K.C.I.¹⁵ Taken together, these sources reveal an overall increase in student war work in line with the increased demands of those on the home front. However, historians have questioned the extent to which such magazines reflect the student body. In an article on university yearbooks, Lisa Panayotidis and Paul Stortz raise concerns about "who is allowed to 'speak' on behalf of whom."¹⁶ Comacchio also considers the limitations of high school yearbooks, including their representation of the majority of students and the influence of "official institutional culture" on student views.¹⁷ She concludes that, nevertheless, yearbooks express adolescent views and "uncover the normative culture."¹⁸ This is particularly relevant to this study in which the student magazine was expected to express support for the war and served as one medium through which participation in war work was promoted to fellow students at K.C.I.

It is evident that the executive com-

¹¹ See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91:5 (1986), 1053-1075; Joan W. Scott, "Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?" *Diogenes* 57:1 (2010), 7-14.

¹² See Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*; Cynthia Comacchio, "'To Hold on High the Torch of Liberty': Canadian Youth and the Second World War," in *Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp*, edited by J.T. Copp, Geoffrey Hayes, Michael Bechtold, and Matt Symes (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 33-66.

¹³ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 127.

¹⁴ Comacchio, "'To Hold on High the Torch of Liberty,'" 34.

¹⁵ After the war broke out, the *Grumbler* changed from a monthly issue to a yearly publication as a result of student efforts being directed to other wartime activities.

¹⁶ E. Lisa Panayotidis and Paul Stortz, "Contestation and Conflict: The Yearbook *Torontonensis* as an 'Appalling Sahara,' 1890-1915," *History of Education* [UK] 39:1 (2010), 36.

¹⁷ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

Figure 2: Wartime issues of the *Grumbler*.
Photo by Sara Karn.

mittee of the *Grumbler* was aware of concerns about the presentation of student opinion, addressing the issue by changing from a yearly publication to a monthly issue in 1938 in order to include more students.

The committee declared, “More than ever before this is a publication for the students, by the students, and about the students.”¹⁹ In 1941, the executive committee explained in the *Kitchener Daily Record* that they wanted to “make the publication more representative of student effort and initiative” and seventy students were involved in the magazine’s production that year.²⁰ Overall, magazine sales were successful at K.C.I., suggesting that the student body generally approved of the portrayal of student views and experiences in the *Grumbler*.²¹

To supplement the findings in the student magazines, newspaper articles were also examined. The articles were gathered from the *Kitchener Daily Re-*



cord, dating from 1939 to 1945. In the Saturday editions, a weekly column written by students of K.C.I. entitled “Collegiate Grumblings” was featured in the newspaper. The articles were an important way for students to represent their school within the community, providing details on sports teams and other events, as well as updates on the school’s war efforts. Although the articles appear in almost every Saturday edition during the school year, commentary on war work is mostly concentrated between 1942 and 1944. Therefore, this weekly article is a valuable source for tracking changes in student commitment to the war effort throughout the years of the war. Similar to the student magazines at K.C.I., the

¹⁹ *Grumbler*, Volume 1, No. 1, November 1938, 4.

²⁰ “Collegiate Grumblings,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 29 March 1941, 18.

²¹ See, for example, “Collegiate Grumblings,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 8 February 1941, 20. According to the article, *Grumbler* sales reached 1000, while the number of students at K.C.I. was 1300.

local newspaper would have been expected to publish articles that established a position in support of the war. This accounts for the fact that none of the articles for the “Collegiate Grumblings” column published during the war expressed a negative tone or anti-war stance.

Studying the experiences of Canadian youth poses some unique methodological challenges. Adolescents do not figure prominently in official records of the war, and it is difficult to access memoirs or other personal accounts of their wartime experiences. There were few records left by or about the students at K.C.I. Although the *Grumbler* states that it “has been around in one form or another since 1904,”²² no issues prior to 1921 were found in local archives, libraries, or at the high school itself. It also was not until the interwar period that high school students began writing the weekly column in the *Kitchener Daily Record*. For these reasons, this article focuses on the Second World War.

Historians have increasingly considered the impacts of war on students, informing the research undertaken here.²³ The earliest case study by Christine Hamelin examines students at two

Ottawa high schools, arguing that they acquired a “sense of purpose” as a result of their involvement in efforts for the Second World War.²⁴ Though perhaps Hamelin overstates and generalizes the changes war created for high school students, her work provides a point of comparison for an analysis of sources similar to those for K.C.I. Barry Gough contributes the only Canadian book-length study of high school students in wartime, with a case study of Victoria High School in British Columbia during the First World War.²⁵ Although his work inspired the initial idea for the research undertaken here, Gough’s focus remains largely on the experiences of male students who fought overseas and makes little mention of women or school activities on the home front. In contrast, this research will account for gendered experiences of the war, while maintaining a focus on the home front. Gough’s methodology also differs in that he selected the individuals he includes in his study based on their connection to the high school, whether or not they were recently students of the school, resulting in a lack of generational consideration. The case study approach undertaken by these

²² *Grumbler*, 1939-1940, 4.

²³ See Anne Millar and Jeff Keshen, “Rallying Young Canada to the Cause: Anglophone Schoolchildren in Montreal and Toronto during the Two World Wars,” *History of Intellectual Culture* 9:1 (2010-11), 1-16; Frances Helyar, “‘Gladly given for the cause’: New Brunswick Teacher and Student Support for the War Effort, 1914-1918,” *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 1, no. 3 (2012): 75-92.

²⁴ Christine Hamelin, “A Sense of Purpose: Ottawa Students and the Second World War,” *Canadian Military History* 6:1 (1997), 35.

²⁵ Barry M. Gough, *From Classroom to Battlefield: Victoria High School and the First World War* (Victoria, BC: Heritage House Publishing, 2014).

historians demonstrate that there was no single Canadian adolescent experience of the world wars. As the collection of these case studies grows, comparisons can be drawn between student experiences across the country. This will allow for a greater understanding of the place K.C.I. holds among other high schools during the Second World War.

While historians often overlook the voices of youth in studies of war in Canada, the aforementioned works have brought their experiences to the fore alongside the rise of home front studies.²⁶ Their works demonstrate that, although a greater distance separated the home front and frontlines for Canada in comparison with European countries, young Canadians on the home front were impacted by the wars in many ways. However, it is also clear that the Canadian historiography is in its beginning stages, and there are many avenues for future study. This research adds to the historiography by focusing on students at one Canadian high school, in an attempt to create a more nuanced picture of the Second World War. These considerations of the responses of

youth in wartime are relevant in the present day when children and adolescents around the world continue to be impacted by war and conflict. Through studying the ways in which previous generations of adolescents in Canada were impacted by wars fought overseas, historians can uncover adolescent voices of the past while empowering students of today.

“All Out for Victory”: Building Community and “School Spirit” at K.C.I.

High school has long been a place for fostering unity through sports, concert bands, school plays, student government, and other activities outside of academics that form a prevalent part of the student experience. In the early twentieth century, high schools began to focus on developing the extracurriculum to provide students with supervised activities that allowed for socialization outside of the classroom and taught students to be productive citizens. During the interwar period, the concept of “school spirit” began to characterize high school

²⁶ See Charles Johnston, “The Children’s War: The Mobilization of Ontario Youth during the Second World War,” in *Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario’s History*, edited by Roger Hall, William Westfall, and Laura Sefton MacDowell (Toronto: Dundurn, 1988), 356-80; Norah Lewis, “Isn’t this a terrible war? The Attitudes of Children in Two World Wars,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation* 7:2 (1995), 193-215; Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001); Tim Cook, “He Was Determined to Go: Underage Soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force,” *Social History/Histoire sociale* 41:81 (May 2008), 41-74; Susan R. Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man’s Land: English-Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Kristine Alexander, “An Honour and a Burden: Canadian Girls and the Great War,” in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*, edited by Sarah Glassford and Amy J. Shaw (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 173-94; Amy Shaw, “Expanding the Narrative: A First World War with Women, Children, and Grief,” *Canadian Historical Review* 95:3 (2014), 398-406.

culture, with the “teaching of loyalty, cooperation, and fairness.”²⁷ Through engaging in extracurricular activities, it was believed that students developed a sense of identity and belonging within the school, as well as the local community.

While the Second World War brought about many changes for high school students at K.C.I., this emphasis on the collective remained at the core of school culture. Through their involvement in various war-related activities, students at K.C.I. contributed towards a sense of community and “school spirit.” Students held friendly competitions between “forms”²⁸ for weekly war savings and salvage collections, established a branch of the Junior Red Cross, sent parcels to students serving overseas, welcomed young British war guests, and held memorials for former students killed in service. Many of these organizations developed out of prewar clubs and events and were often similar to local initiatives taking place in communities across Canada during the war. However, war service at K.C.I. developed out of the efforts of a particular generation of Canadians, who integrated typical high school activities with war activities in order to meet wartime demands. These activities took shape through the actions of student leaders in the high school and their appeals to the student body to do their

duty and become involved. According to an article entitled “K.C.I. Does Her Bit” published in the *Kitchener Daily Record*, in February 1942 when the war was intensifying, “All Out for Victory’ seems to be the watch-word with the ‘School on the Hill’ willingly doing its share.”²⁹ An analysis of the different aspects of war service at K.C.I. during the Second World War suggests that an overwhelming number of students were involved in these efforts, contributing to the shared success of the school’s contributions to the Canadian war effort. In wartime, demonstrating “school spirit” through a commitment to the school’s war efforts was linked to patriotic duty.

War savings held a prominent place at K.C.I. throughout the years of the war. The Student Council established a War Savings Committee that organized mite box collections, as pictured in Figure 3, taking place each Monday to go towards the purchase of war savings stamps at the school. While support fluctuated from week to week, according to reports in the *Grumbler* and “Collegiate Grumblings” column, students consistently contributed to the war savings campaign and always met their annual goals. For example, in 1942 there was a “steady stream of coins from the students” and they raised over two thousand dollars for the war effort.³⁰ The magazines and newspaper

²⁷ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 115.

²⁸ School “forms” were similar to the “home rooms” of today’s high schools. During the Second World War, K.C.I. offered academic, technical, and commercial classes, and students were divided into groups or “forms” under each of these categories, depending on their year and area of study. Each form was responsible for contributing money and valuable items to the war effort.

²⁹ “K.C.I. Does Her Bit,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 21 February 1942, 14.

³⁰ “Collegiate Grumblings,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 21 March 1942, 15.

articles also provided a way for student leaders to commend students on their efforts and encourage them to continue donating regularly. In the words of Glenys Packer, a student on the War Savings Committee, "A weekly total of \$196.16 has been collected. Can we make \$200.00 or more? I hope that before this letter goes to press the total will have climbed far higher. Let K.C.I. spell not only 'Kitchener Collegiate Institute,' but 'Kitchener Crowns It.'"³¹ It is clear that the students believed their contributions to the war effort were significant, and that they reflected a positive image of the students at their school.

One of the most successful tactics used to encourage war savings donations was the introduction of a competition between academic, technical and commercial forms at the school. Each form was responsible for developing their own fundraising ideas, and weekly updates by the committee highlighted the top forms. This shift from the centralized organization of war savings to more responsibility being placed on each form not only proved to be more successful, but also resulted in greater collabora-

tion between students. When weekly reports broke down contributions by subject, and sometimes grade and gender, students worked together to come up

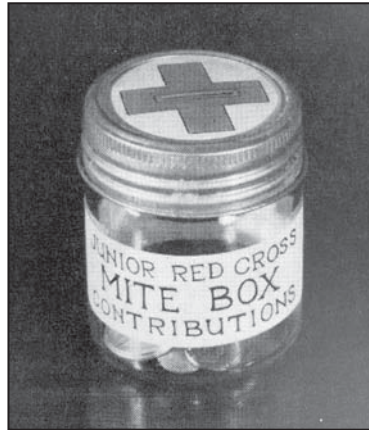


Figure 3: War Savings Mite Box. Grumbler, 1944-1945.

with an original idea to raise more funds. This commitment to war savings continued to grow throughout the war, and even into the post war period because the students recognized that "the financial debt incurred by the war must be taken care of."³² Through their support of war savings over six years, students at K.C.I. demonstrated the spirit of their school and

the contribution adolescents could make to the war effort.

In the fall of 1943, senior students at K.C.I. established a branch of the Junior Red Cross, in partnership with the Hi 'Y' club.³³ The announcement of the creation of the Junior Red Cross in the school magazine emphasized the fact that students at K.C.I. had always donated to the Red Cross.³⁴ This is yet another example of a prewar activity that developed into a prominent school organization during the war. Following calls by student leaders in October 1943 to "make this the leading activity at K.C.I.," the number of students directly

³¹ Grumbler, 1941-1942, 96.

³² Grumbler, 1945-1946, 106.

³³ Hi 'Y' clubs were run by the Kitchener-Waterloo branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), in association with K.C.I.

³⁴ Grumbler, 1943-1944, 38.



Figure 4: K.C.I. students at the "Blisskrieg Ball" in December 1941. *Grumbler*, 1941-1942.

the war effort. A leading example of this is the monthly tea dances that took place, with proceeds donated to the Red Cross. Figure 4 shows two K.C.I. students at a 'Blisskrieg Ball' themed Christmas dance in 1941. These dances were very popular among students, and their success was praised for demonstrating "the patriotic spirit of K.C.I."³⁷ In this way, students at K.C.I. were able to engage in many activities of interest to their generation, while also showing their commitment to the war effort and, therefore, their school community.

Another significant contribution K.C.I. students made to the war effort was through a salvage campaign, organized by a committee appointed by the Students' Council at the beginning of 1941. In conjunction with the local salvage committee, students held monthly collections of valuable materials, such as paper, rubber, grease, felt, and leather, which could be reused and repurposed for the war effort. The "Collegiate Grumbings" newspaper column published regular updates on salvage collection, revealing that students at K.C.I. took an active part in the campaign. The student magazine

involved in the Junior Red Cross rose to sixty, representing all forms.³⁵ Over the course of the war, this group of students organized an extraordinary number of different events, from raffles and draws, to sales of stationery and books, school concerts and dances, as well as sporting events and movie showings. One fundraiser even promoted "school spirit" by selling "super" K.C.I. pennants in school colours.³⁶ Many of these events formed the usual student experience before the war, but simply became fundraisers for

³⁵ "Collegiate Grumbings," *Kitchener Daily Record*, 30 October 1943, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1945, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 February 1942, 4.

noted that, since September 1941, the students had collected thirty-three tons of salvage,³⁸ and the highest number of participants was over 360 in February 1942.³⁹ The campaign was presented to students in a way that made their contributions seem important, but reinforced that they would not be burdensome to students. In the spring of 1943, students were recommended to take part in house-cleaning season and donate unwanted materials.⁴⁰ Locker inspections were also conducted at the school, motivating students to take the opportunity to clean out their lockers and “donate your waste to the cause.”⁴¹ The salvage committee also adopted the idea of a competition between forms, making it yet another successful area of war work at K.C.I.

The aforementioned student organizations that evolved during wartime

played an important role in establishing a sense of community within the school. In addition to these, there were other programs and events associated with K.C.I. that expanded the school community to include other groups. In an attempt to alleviate the shortage of labour experienced in Canada during the war, many vocational schools, including K.C.I., established War Emergency Programs.⁴² Local residents, including students at K.C.I., could enroll in evening classes to train for jobs such as motor mechanics, welders, clerks, typists, and stenographers. Over the course of the war over 1400 students graduated from these programs at K.C.I., a source of

pride for the school.⁴³ K.C.I. also hosted a number of young British war guests for the duration of the war, such as those pictured in Figure 5. In an open letter



Figure 5: British war guests at K.C.I. *The Anniversary Grumbler*, 1980.

³⁸ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 45.

³⁹ “Collegiate Grumbings,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 7 March 1942, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 April 1943, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30 October 1943, 9.

⁴² War Emergency Programs were established under *The Youth Training Act* of 1939 to provide training in war industries to young Canadian citizens. According to the *Act*, the funding for these programs was provided by both the federal and provincial governments. *Youth Training Act, 1939*, <<https://www2.viu.ca/retrospective/documents/YouthTrainingAct1939.pdf>> (accessed on 27 June 2017).

⁴³ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 45.



Figure 6: Student memorial at K.C.I. today. Photo by Sara Karn.

pride in “[sending] the spirit of K.C.I. to our fighting men abroad.”⁴⁵ Students also created an Honor Roll of graduates of the school since 1937 in active service, displayed in the halls in recognition of their efforts.⁴⁶ For those who made the ultimate sacrifice, a memorial organ was dedicated to K.C.I. students killed during both world wars. As expressed in a late 1943 article in the *Kitchener Daily Record*, “May the resounding and stirring tones of this, our organ, always remind the students of KCI of our

to Canada in the student magazine, one such student expressed their gratitude to Canadians for ensuring their safety during the war, and was particularly thankful to the welcoming students of K.C.I.⁴⁴

Former students of the school who had enlisted in service were never far from the thoughts of those at K.C.I. The Overseas Parcel Committee sent packages of chocolate bars, cigarettes and letters to recent graduates overseas. The item that students were most pleased to send to those on active service were copies of the *Grumbler*, allowing the former students to maintain a connection with their old school. The student magazine expressed

fighting brothers who have died that we may live!”⁴⁷ Figure 6 displays the memorial to students killed during the Second World War that remains at K.C.I. today. In many ways, the school community at K.C.I. during the Second World War was expanded to include former students and incorporate new students, all with the common objective of helping to ensure victory.

The sustained efforts of students at K.C.I. during the Second World War did not go unrecognized. Student leaders, teachers, and the principal all emphasized war work in their messages to students and the community on war-

⁴⁴ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 19.

⁴⁵ *Grumbler*, 1944-1945, 48.

⁴⁶ “K.C.I. Does Her Bit,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 21 February 1942, 14.

⁴⁷ “Collegiate Grumbings,” *Kitchener Daily Record*, 30 October 1943, 9.

time experiences at K.C.I. One student president, R.S. Lederman, expressed his pride in fellow students for balancing academics with “patriotic gestures” to help win the war.⁴⁸ Another student, Bill Pugh, emphasized the tradition of K.C.I.’s commitment to the war effort from the very beginning.⁴⁹ In the foreword to the 1941-1942 edition of the *Grumbler*, Principal R. N. Merritt highlighted the indispensable efforts of youth in particular during the war for enlisting in active service, training as mechanics and technicians, and supporting war savings and other campaigns. He declared, “Altogether, when the final tabulations are made, the school will be seen as having done a magnificent job in the time of crisis.”⁵⁰ An article by a student in the *Grumbler* expressed a similar sentiment: “... we are proud to have done our best and to have achieved one of the most enviable records found in any of the schools in Canada.”⁵¹ Whether or not K.C.I. actually had one of the highest records of war contributions of high schools in the country would be difficult to confirm, and is of little concern to this study. More importantly, students perceived their efforts in this way, which served to unite the school community and foster “school spirit.” The school setting provided a space for a concentration of adolescents to establish their generation’s reputation in wartime through a shared effort.

“We Serve”: Gendered War Work at K.C.I.

Through their various contributions to the war, students at K.C.I. experienced the Second World War in gendered ways. On the home front, war work at the school was divided according to gender, reinforcing prewar social conventions regarding appropriate activities for male and female students. While most female students engaged in domestic tasks, the demands of war did offer new opportunities and leadership roles for females. Many male students from K.C.I. who came of age during the Second World War enlisted for active service, fulfilling their duty while still transitioning into manhood. The enlistment of male students impacted enrollment at K.C.I., with a shift towards more female students than male students at the school during wartime. This further influenced the gendered dynamic of the school. In these ways, the wartime experiences of students at K.C.I. were shaped not only by their identity as adolescents, but also as a result of gendered expectations.

For female students at K.C.I., the war mostly required a continuation of their prewar roles as girls but their place within the school community expanded in some ways. During the war, female students remained actively involved in team sports, especially basketball, thrived in

⁴⁸ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 56.

⁴⁹ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 46.

⁵⁰ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 5.

⁵¹ *Grumbler*, 1944-1945, 49.



Figure 7: Female students at K.C.I. baking for the war effort. Grumbler, 1945-1946.

the arts, and were enrolled in classes to prepare them for becoming wives and mothers in the home. However, the war augmented their role within the school to include taking the lead on many organizations and initiatives for the war effort. Female students at K.C.I. organized the Junior Red Cross committee, raising money through weekly collections that taught girls to keep track of money.⁵² Another activity of the Junior Red Cross was sewing and knitting as a group every week on Tuesday nights. Students practiced these important tasks that all girls were expected to know, while making

socks, mittens, and other articles of clothing for men overseas. School instruction at K.C.I. also merged with war activities, simultaneously teaching girls important skills for the home, such as baking (Figure 7), while contributing to the war effort. The Household Economics classes made objects such as toys, aprons, clothing, and knitted wear to later be sold for war funds.⁵³ As the war carried on and male students were increasingly needed to help on farms, in factories, and in active service, school enrolment numbers at K.C.I. shifted in favour of female students.⁵⁴ In addition to their already

⁵² Grumbler, 1943-1944, 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ According to page 252 of the Department of Education's *Annual Report 1939*, there were 388 male

Figure 8: Male students at K.C.I. organizing donations for the Navy. *Grumbler*, 1944-1945.



prominent roles in traditional female wartime activities, girls began to take on more leadership positions within the student government and on the *Grumbler* executive. However, these changes were neither abundant nor long lasting, as younger male students were often the first choice to fill the

roles of their older male peers, and gendered school roles persisted in the post-war period. Nevertheless, when female students at K.C.I. were asked, "Girls, how are you answering this call?"⁵⁵ it is evident that they responded in full force.

Male students at K.C.I. also contributed their share to the war effort through the many clubs and activities established at the school prior to the war. In addition to their continued involvement in male-dominated areas like sports, particularly the successful rugby team, science club, and the debating team, many boys at K.C.I. added war work to their list of high school activities. A motor mechan-

ics group of twelve male students organized a donation of posters, magazines, books, and playing cards for the Navy. These donations are on display in the photograph in Figure 8 from the *Grumbler*, reaching a pile that "measured three feet high, three feet long, and three feet across."⁵⁶ This group of boys drew from their own knowledge of some of the activities males enjoyed in their leisure time, such as reading and playing cards, when organizing an initiative to help those in the Navy. The Thermal Snatchers club at K.C.I. also used their experience building model airplanes to assist the local Air Cadets in their training. The

students and 256 female students enrolled at K.C.I. For each of the following war years, female students outnumbered male students. By 1945, there were 281 male students and 316 female students enrolled at K.C.I. Ontario, Department of Education, *Annual Report 1945* (Toronto: T.E. Bowman, 1946), 206.

⁵⁵ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 76.

⁵⁶ *Grumbler*, 1944-1945, 51.

group of thirty-four male students was commended by the Air Cadet leaders for their actions in wartime, a source of pride for the school.⁵⁷ Similar to female students, boys enrolled in classes developed specifically for male students that adopted war work as part of the curriculum. Students in technical classes made splints for wounded soldiers, as well as cribbage boards and hand-looms for prisoners of war.⁵⁸ The War Emergency Classes at K.C.I. trained many male students in motor repair work and prepared them for manufacturing jobs in munitions factories. Both in and out of the classroom, male students engaged in tasks that not only prepared them for their futures as working men who would support their families, but also contributed valuable work for the war effort.

Another aspect of the male experience of war for students at K.C.I. involved active service in the Canadian military. Most high school students were too young to enlist, and instead participated in Cadets; however, an impressive number of current students and recent graduates of the school responded to the call. According to the list of names included in the "On Active Service" page in the 1941-1942 issue of the *Grumbler*, over 175 boys had enlisted in the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy. These Honor

Rolls were published throughout the years of the war as the numbers of enlisted K.C.I. students climbed from "practically none in 1939-40 to over 232 names in 1944."⁵⁹ The students in service were regularly acknowledged in the *Grumbler*, and the 1941-1942 edition was dedicated "to the Democracies and to the boys of K.C.I. in uniform, we have dedicated this issue of the *Grumbler* because we are unable to pay them higher tribute than to say, by this way, we are proud of them."⁶⁰ K.C.I. students, both male and female, sent parcels overseas to those who had recently attended the school, containing chocolates and wrapped toffee, letters, and a copy of the *Grumbler*. Many soldiers responded and their answers were included in the student magazine to demonstrate that "nothing means quite as much to the boys as knowing that their old home school hasn't forgotten them."⁶¹ Their responses expressed their gratitude and fond memories of school, but also gave students a small indication of some of their experiences overseas that were "somewhat different from the good old days at K.C.I."⁶² One former student was even interviewed for the *Grumbler*, providing some details on his motivations for enlisting, experiences during training, and thoughts on how the Allies would win the war.⁶³ The connection

⁵⁷ "Collegiate Grumbings," *Kitchener Daily Record*, 18 April 1942, 11.

⁵⁸ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 38.

⁵⁹ *Grumbler*, 1945-1946, 104.

⁶⁰ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 8.

⁶¹ *Grumbler*, 1945-1946, 104.

⁶² *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 43.

⁶³ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 26.

K.C.I. had to many former male students serving in the war is a key example of how gender impacted student experiences during the Second World War.

For both male and female students at K.C.I., their experiences as high school students largely depended on their gender. Girls were involved in home front activities similar to those women were expected to engage in, but adapted within the school setting. In addition to their work on the home front, some male students fulfilled their duties as newly developed men by enlisting in active service. This impacted not only those male students who fought overseas, but also the students on the home front who maintained contact with them throughout the war and continuously strove to increase the number of parcels they sent. Generation and gender were significant factors that influenced the wartime experiences of K.C.I. students.

“Hold it high”: Developing Responsible Citizenship at K.C.I.

The editorial of the 1945-1946 edition of the *Grumbler* opens with a reflection on the war and the anticipated role students at K.C.I. would be expected to play in postwar society. The writer, Frederick Little, invokes John McCrae’s famous poem, “In Flanders Fields,” by expressing to students of his generation that those who fought during the war had “thrown to us the torch” and

“we must hold it high.”⁶⁴ The students of K.C.I. met the demands of wartime, but knew they would continue to face challenges following the war. Many students recognized that their school experiences during the war shaped their transition into adulthood. By remaining informed on developments overseas and being actively engaged in the war effort, students assumed more responsibilities and built character. These high school students made a voice for themselves and demonstrated to the rest of the population that their generation would prove to be productive Canadian citizens. Students at K.C.I. were prepared to take the lead on rebuilding postwar society.

Throughout the war, high school served to educate students about modern values and ideologies, as well as events transpiring overseas. As adolescents, high school students now had the capacity to better understand what war meant and how it impacted Canadians. It was not only through official course instruction by teachers that students at K.C.I. learned about the war, but also from their peers. The student magazine consistently featured war cartoons, short stories, and poems on war themes, and student commentary about the war. Students wrote articles on the origins of the war, provided details on major battles, and covered speeches and meetings between world leaders. This is evidence that those students who wrote the articles were well informed about the war, and the executive clearly believed that these topics interest-

⁶⁴ *Grumbler*, 1945-1946, 3-4.

ed students. In addition to being a source for important war updates, the *Grumbler* promoted democracy not only for all nations, but also within the high school. The executive of the 1939-1940 school year explained their view of the *Grumbler* as a “truly democratic institution.”⁶⁵ From the beginning of the war, students at K.C.I. attempted to reflect wartime values and concerns in their own school activities, such as the student magazine, in order to keep fellow students updated on the war. As a result, students at K.C.I. were eager to become involved with the war effort.

Student involvement in wartime activities at K.C.I. contributed to a greater sense of responsibility as adolescents and allowed students to develop valuable skills and qualities. Many courses began to incorporate new areas such as defense training and First Aid studies. According to one student, Edith Merner, “The subjects taught are beneficial in time of peace as well as in time of war.”⁶⁶ The war also provided students with opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities that required responsible, organized students in order to ensure that initiatives were met with success. Although each club or organization required sponsorship by faculty members, articles in both the newspaper and student magazine emphasized students as the main coordinators of these efforts. Students at K.C.I. highlighted their generation’s persever-

ance and recognized the collective efforts of students at their school.

The school’s principals also took pride in their students and described some of the character traits the students developed over the course of the year as a result of wartime activities. During the 1943-1944 school year, Principal Merritt expressed his confidence that adolescents at K.C.I. developed necessary qualities that would continue to benefit them as adults. He emphasized the importance of extra-curricular activities in particular, including war work: “We continue to believe that our various extracurricular activities powerfully inculcate those qualities of courage and determination that are now and will continue to be in demand.”⁶⁷ Principal W.T. Ziegler also revealed faith in his students for rising to the challenge, and listed several values he believed students at his school acquired during the year including citizenship, ethical character, worthy use of leisure, and health. He concluded, “One can surely say then, that a student who takes part in the rich experiences offered in this school, is better prepared to face the vicissitudes of life, that are before him.”⁶⁸ While there may be a degree of aggrandizement to these principals’ words on their own school and students, it is difficult to question the positive influence that war work had on adolescent development during their time in high school at K.C.I.

⁶⁵ *Grumbler*, 1939-1940, 2.

⁶⁶ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 44.

⁶⁷ *Grumbler*, 1943-1944, 4.

⁶⁸ *Grumbler*, 1944-1945, 9.

One value in particular that war work instilled in students at K.C.I. was the importance of becoming active Canadian citizens. Throughout the war, newspapers and magazine articles continually emphasized that youth could, in fact, make a difference to the war effort. It was their duty as a generation of young Canadians to show support for “King and country.” In the April 1939 edition of the *Grumbler*, a speech by Captain Rawson of the Canadian Militia was published as an appeal to youth to become involved in the Kitchener branch of the Leadership League. He believed that youth were not too inexperienced to be involved with the League because “the grownups have made a bad enough mess of it; youth cannot do worse.”⁶⁹ This placed value on adolescents and encouraged them to see themselves as contributing members of society. The Chairman of the Board of Education, T.H. Kay, also recognized the school as an important site of change, highlighting the war work of students at K.C.I. inside the classroom as well as through extra-curricular activities. In expressing his satisfaction with the students’ efforts, Kay linked war work at K.C.I. to active citizenship: “We are all proud of our school and of the work it is doing. We are proud to be Canadians and determined to do what we can to assist in the preservation of the liberty and privileges we now enjoy.”⁷⁰ As the war came

to an end, the editorial of the *Grumbler* for 1945-1946 reflected on the devastation in Europe and Asia in comparison to Canada, before concluding with a sentiment of appreciation for “living in a fortunate land.”⁷¹ There was a sense of hope that students would continue to be active Canadian citizens in times of peace.

Looking to the future, wartime experiences at K.C.I. were valued for preparing adolescents for their roles as adults in peacetime. As a result of their involvement in the war effort, many students felt as though they not only made an impact as youth, but that they could benefit the nation in the future. In the words of one student, Frederick Little, “The destiny of our country lies in the hands of this generation.”⁷² He highlighted many important qualities and values for an individual in the postwar world to possess, including adaptability, problem solving, and promoting equality, pointing to his generation of adolescents as those who most embodied such a citizen. These words were meant to empower fellow students at K.C.I. to maintain their roles as leaders following graduation. On two occasions, the *Grumbler* was dedicated to graduating students of K.C.I. because “the future of this land depends on the quality of her people, the quality of their education.”⁷³ By this measure, students at K.C.I. were well equipped to apply their knowledge, skills, and values developed in wartime

⁶⁹ *Grumbler*, Volume 1, No. 5, April 1939, 1.

⁷⁰ *Grumbler*, 1941-1942, 55.

⁷¹ *Grumbler*, 1945-1946, 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Grumbler*, 1944-1945, 3.

to their roles as active Canadian citizens striving to build a better world.

Conclusion

The rousing message in the *Grumbler* that introduced this article highlights many of the main themes and arguments that have been explored. The language used during the first years of the war invoked notions of patriotism, active citizenship, and support of the Empire, while emphasizing the leading role adolescents could play. The student magazine called on K.C.I. students to cast aside frivolous adolescent activities and fulfill their wartime duties by engaging in their school's war effort. This excerpt serves as a key example of the discourse directed at adolescents, often by their peers, to encourage their generation's participation in the war effort, as well as in postwar society.

At K.C.I., students continued participating in many prewar activities while also experiencing the impacts of war on a daily basis as a group of adolescents attending high school. Students expanded the activities of school clubs and organizations to include various initiatives for the war effort, contributing to a collective effort

that established community and "school spirit" at K.C.I. The types of war work students engaged in largely depended on their gender, as male and female students assumed different roles similar to those considered appropriate before the war. The war did bring about some changes for female students in leadership opportunities at K.C.I., but overall students were expected to conform to prewar standards within the school environment. Student involvement in the war effort also developed character, especially a greater sense of responsibility as adolescents, and provided them the skills and knowledge they needed to become a future generation of productive Canadian citizens.

This case study of one Canadian high school in wartime recognizes that age must be emphasized as a prominent factor in shaping experiences on the home front. The school remains a particularly important site for studying the impacts of war on adolescents. School culture forms a unique dynamic, and it is within this environment that the experiences of adolescents are uncovered. The students who attended K.C.I. during the Second World War represent some of the voices of youth in wartime.
