

<https://carleton.ca/populistpublics/>

### **The Canadian Red Ensign:**

### **A Case Study in Symbolism**

**Grade 10:** Civics and Citizenship (CHV20)

Units:

- 4.2 Politics and society: 1982–present

**Grade 10:** Canadian History Since World War I (CHC2D)

Units:

- E. Canada, 1982 to the Present

**DESCRIPTION:** Hate speech and representation is increasingly disseminated and normalized online and in most forms of media. As a result, it is ever more likely that students will come into contact with it. Far right arguments and characterizations are often rooted in claims to an imagined past and the appropriation of historical symbols. As is the case with the Red Ensign, this appropriation can be subtle and not widely known about in the general culture. This lesson can serve to facilitate a greater awareness of how Canadian national symbols can be coopted into exclusionary discourse. The visual examples used here were gathered by research assistants for the “Populist Publics: Memory, Populism, and Misinformation in the Canadian Social Mediascape” project at Carleton University, and are meant to give a sense of the online content with which a student might come into contact.

**TIME:** One 60–90 minutes class period for the students to read the article, fill in the worksheet, and, if desirable, conduct a discussion based upon their answers.

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Inform about pervasive types of hate representation and speech
- Encourage critical thinking about ideologically motivated evocations of history
- Situate media literacy within a matrix of current events and historical knowledge

#### **MATERIALS:**

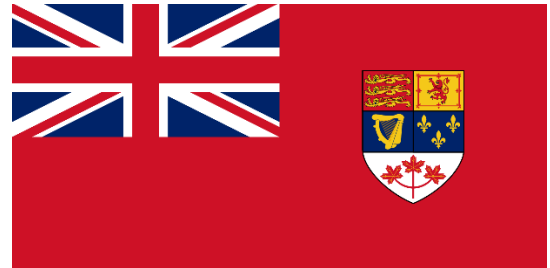
- Worksheet
- Referenced newspaper article (included)
- Background: Forrest Pass, [“Is the Red Ensign an extremist symbol?”](#) *ActiveHistory.ca* curator, Library and Archives Canada and editorial director *Flag Research Centre*

## The Canadian Red Ensign:

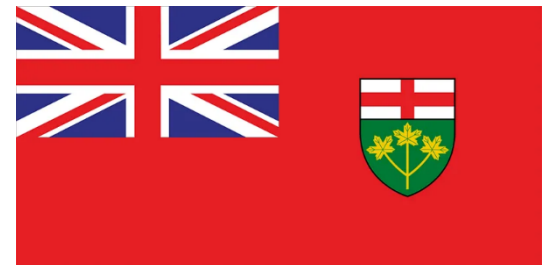
### A Case Study in Symbolism

#### So Many Flags!

This is the Canadian Red Ensign flag.



It is not to be confused with the provincial flag of Ontario . . .



. . . or Manitoba (even though they look super similar).



The Red Ensign was used to informally represent Canada from the 1870's on, a status that was made official in 1892. However, as part of the British Empire, the Union Jack remained Canada's official flag.



Canada got its own official flag, the Maple Leaf, in 1965.



## Military History

The Red Ensign has long been associated with the Canadian military. Versions of it featured prominently in patriotic displays and recruitment efforts during World War One, and it can be seen in contemporary photographs of Canadian troops, on the prime minister's car, and in victory parades. Most significantly, the Red Ensign was carried by the 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.

The Ensign was also used as a symbol that represented Canada's armed forces in World War Two, and in 1945, it was named a "distinctive Canadian flag" to fly on government buildings.

In view of its association with the Canadian Army during the world wars, the Ensign is currently flown alongside the Maple Leaf flag at numerous war memorials. It is also often used by veterans' groups and the Royal Canadian Legion.



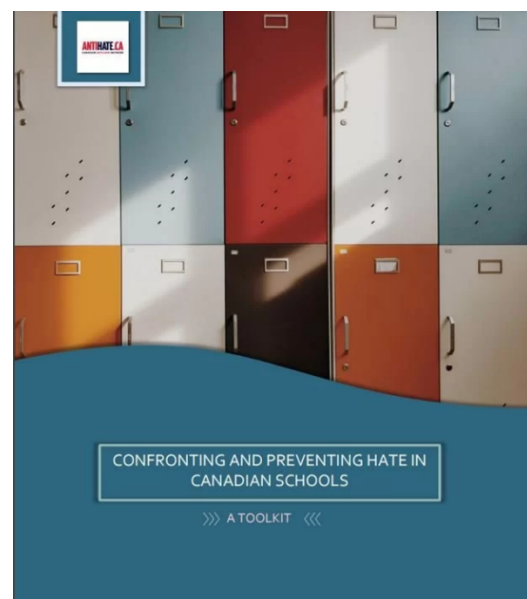


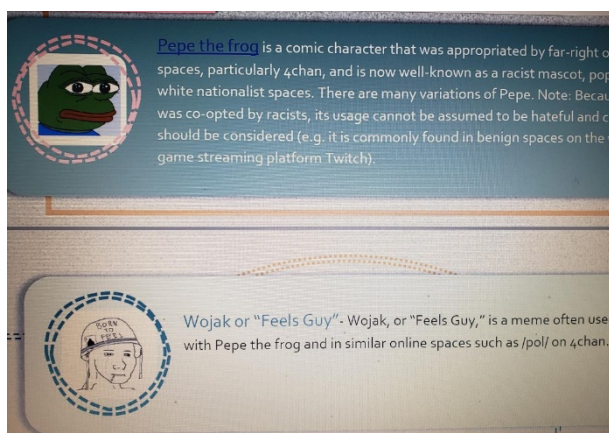
### Controversy

In 2022, the Canadian Anti-Hate Network put out an educational resource for “confronting and preventing hate in Canadian schools.”

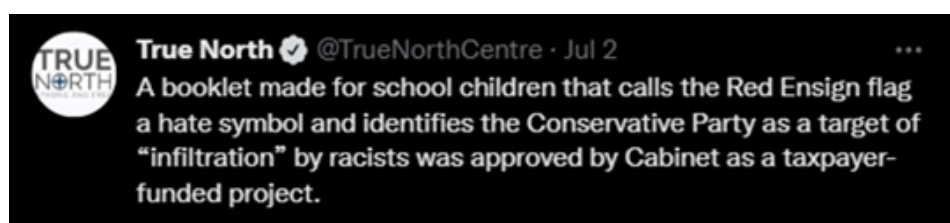
However, this educational resource almost immediately sparked a controversy. The point of contention was that, among the far-right symbols to which teachers were alerted, was the Canadian Red Ensign.

It contained information on hateful language and symbols that students might use, as well as suggestions for how teachers might constructively react to them.





Below, list the reasons that the following social media posts give for objecting to the Red Ensign being designated as a 'hate-promoting symbol':





### The Far Right

In their own defense, the Canadian Anti-Hate Network cited multiple examples of the Red Ensign being used by far-right groups associated with Neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan.

If you had to guess, why do you think that the Red Ensign appeals to groups such as these?







### Question Sheet

***Please read the attached National Post newspaper article and then answer the following questions:***

1. The article describes the Red Ensign as “Canada’s equivalent of the Confederate flag.” Why might that be the case?

2. A white nationalist in the article proclaims that the Red Ensign is Canada's true flag. What are his reasons for saying this?
3. According to the article, what do racists believe that the Maple Leaf flag stands for?
4. Do you agree with the Canadian Anti-Hate Network that the Red Ensign is a symbol that promotes hatred? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe that the people who objected to the flag's designation as a symbol that promotes hatred raised valid concerns? Why or why not?



6. Do you think that it is possible for a symbol like a flag to have two meanings simultaneously, or to change its meaning over time?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. In your opinion, if a symbol can have multiple meanings (like the Red Ensign), how does one determine which meaning is the most valid?

## **Former Canadian flag, the Red Ensign, gets new, darker life as far-right symbol**

*The perversion of the Red Ensign was first observed among white supremacists, who saw it as a throwback to a time when Canadians were overwhelmingly white*

**Graeme Hamilton**

National Post

Jul 10, 2017

When five members of the anti-immigration, alt-right Proud Boys strode into a Halifax park on Canada Day to confront Indigenous protesters, the Canadian flag they carried was more than 50 years out of date.

With a Union Jack in the corner and a coat of arms on a red background, the Canadian Red Ensign held aloft by one member has largely disappeared from public view since it was replaced in 1965 by the Maple Leaf.

But the Red Ensign, a variation of which Canadian troops fought under in both world wars, has recently taken on a darker symbolism, adopted as Canada's equivalent of the Confederate flag by some extremists here.

The perversion of the Red Ensign was first observed among white supremacists, who saw it as a throwback to a time when Canadians were overwhelmingly white and of European extraction.

Anti-immigrant protests by the Aryan Guard in Calgary featured the Red Ensign as far back as 2008, and photos showed group members decorated their apartments with the flag alongside a Nazi flag and a Confederate flag.

When John Beattie, who founded the Canadian Nazi Party in the 1960s and remains a white supremacist, ran for municipal office in 2014, a reporter noted that he flew the Red Ensign flag at his home.

Notorious white nationalist Paul Fromm has campaigned to have the Red Ensign returned as Canada's flag, calling it "the flag of the true Canada, the European Canada before the treasonous European replacement schemes brought in by the 1965 immigration policies."

Northern Dawn, a Canadian alt-right website launched last year to defend Western heritage against "chaos," has used the Red Ensign as its Facebook cover photo. In a July 1 essay on the site, Gerry Neal decried the 1965 replacement of the Red Ensign with the current flag as evidence of a Liberal revision of national symbolism "to eliminate reference to our British heritage."

Anti-Racist Canada has been tracking the growing popularity of the Red Ensign among extremist groups for years. A spokesperson, who for safety reasons asked to be identified only as Chris, said racists have adopted the Red Ensign "to represent a time when Canada was a 'white man's country.' They view the flag that flies in Canada today as an abomination representing multiculturalism and diversity.

"If you attend any far-right rally or march in Canada, there is a very good chance that, along with 'white pride,' Nazi, and Confederate flags, you will also see the Red Ensign being flown rather than the Maple Leaf."

For the Royal Canadian Legion, which flies the Red Ensign outside its headquarters and includes the flag in its official colour party, the idea that it has been adopted by extremists is hard to stomach.

"There is significant and genuine affection for the Red Ensign in the veterans' community of Canada for the reason that wars were fought and lives were lost under that flag," Bill Maxwell, secretary of the Legion's Poppy and Remembrance Committee, said.

"Canadians fought for the freedoms we enjoy today. I don't think they fought to have the Red Ensign denigrated in such a manner, quite frankly."

Caitlin Bailey, executive director of the Canadian Centre for the Great War, in Montreal, said the Red Ensign was a symbol of unity as a young nation went to war. It was the flag that flew over Vimy Ridge to signal its 1917 capture by Canadian troops.

“It’s unfortunate that it has turned into a white nationalist symbol,” she said. “It’s not right, and it flies in the face of what the Red Ensign means.”

C.P. Champion, editor of the history journal the *Dorchester Review*, recently wrote in support of greater prominence for the Canadian Red Ensign, arguing it should fly permanently at the National War Memorial in Ottawa.

He said in an interview that he was disappointed when the self-described traditionalists of the Proud Boys were captured on video provoking Indigenous protesters with the flag.

“It looked like it was trivializing, or treating as a kind of talisman of defiance, a flag that has a much more venerable and mainstream role,” Champion said. “I’ve always thought it’s important not to let traditional symbols be appropriated by fringe elements.”