

Certificate of International Learning - Capstone Project
A historical look on modern interconnectedness - a personal essay

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The world is extremely interconnected. We as a society are aware of the hyper dependency of states and nations, but less aware of the fragility of these connections. This is something that was discussed, either directly or indirectly, throughout every requirement for the Certificate in International Learning. We have more that connects us than divides us, and it is important to hone in on these commonalities, instead of letting them cause rifts in our communities. In our modern Canadian society, it is easy to see how cultures, perspectives, and people become intertwined. However, I find it very interesting to look at the history of our country, and others, to see how we became so connected. This is something that I got to explore while travelling abroad, and that reinforced what I've learned during my other CIL requirements.

From August to December 2023, I lived abroad in Lille, a mid-sized city in the north of France. During my time abroad, I attended a university, learning about French culture, history and translation. While there, I was able to learn lots about the history of the region, and more specifically the history relating to the First World War. Lille and the surrounding areas had been occupied during a large part of WWI (Ministère de la Défense, n.d.). It was taken by German forces early in the war, and, as it was located close to the Western Front, became a hub for German activities (State Government of Victoria, n.d.). This has become central to the region's history today, with monuments and museums, among other things, to honour the battles and sacrifices made a little over 100 years ago.



Figure 1. Lille à ses fusilles monument. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)



Figure 2. Le monument aux morts. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)

I had the opportunity to visit some of the towns located on the Western Front. This was a great way to learn more about the history of the region, and to be reminded of the sacrifices made for our lives today. Beyond the sense of immense gratitude that I felt while visiting a museum or observing a memorial, these areas also enabled me to reflect on the connections these soldiers made, no matter race, religion, etc.

The first museum that comes to mind when considering the above topic is the Wellington Tunnels (La Carrière Wellington) located in Arras, a small town found less than an hour away from Lille. These chalk quarries, used to build structures in the town from “[...] as early as the 10th century [...]”, served as underground barracks for over 20,000 soldiers during the preparation for the Battle of Arras (Carrière Wellington, n.d.). It was the New Zealand Tunnelling Company who helped connect the underground network in just 6 months (Carrière Wellington, n.d.). In this museum, I was able to visit the tunnels, taking an elevator 20 metres underground. I was able to walk around as a guide told stories of soldiers who had spent months in these tunnels, many younger than I was. At one point, the tour guide showed a very moving projection of soldiers exiting for war. As the projection played, you could hear their breaths, cries, and bullets whirring. It was truly a chilling experience.

As I walked around the tunnels, I couldn’t help but think of all the soldiers that came together for the Battle of Arras. French, British, Australian, Scottish, New Zealand, and

Canadian forces, among others, came together to defend French citizens against the German offensive (Carrière Wellington, n.d.; The Tank Museum, n.d.). I found this to be very moving. Even over 100 years ago, without the sort of globalisation that we have today, people of different countries, different languages, came together to defend what they believe in. They had one common goal, and that was all it took for them to work together.

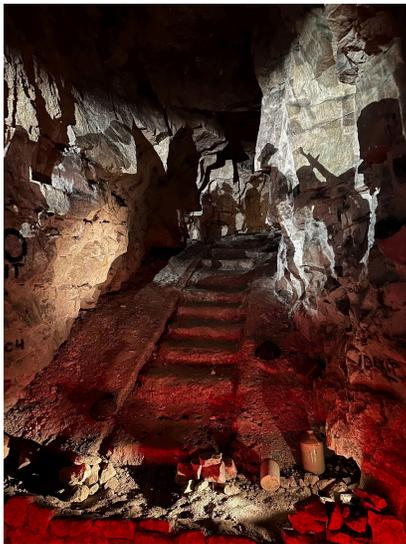


Figure 3. Inside the Wellington Tunnels. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)



Figure 4. Battle of Arras Memorial. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)

The second area that I visited was the Vimy Ridge War Memorial. This monumental Canadian feat, achieved by our young country more than a century ago, was a part of the Battle of Arras, and the reason why the troops in the Wellington Tunnels were able to proceed with their mission (The Tank Museum, n.d.). This was a memorial that I have been wanting to visit for years, and I am very grateful that I got the opportunity to see it and honour those who lost their lives on the battlefield. Seeing the rolling hills leading up to the memorial, the trenches located on either side of a very small ‘No Man’s Land’, was breath taking to say the least. Again, I couldn’t help but consider the Canadians who came, who fought, and who lost their lives for a country, for a people that wasn’t their own. They were willing to risk their lives for the greater good of humanity, and that is very powerful.



Figure 5. Vimy Ridge Memorial. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)



Figure 6. Graves at Vimy Ridge. (Source: Rakowski, 2023)

Throughout my experience at these memorials, I was able to reflect on our cultural connections in the past, but also the present. Humans have a need to connect with others, and to find common ground with others. This is something that I have experienced at every moment during my Certificate of International Learning.

There are lessons to be taken from the past, things to be learned. As I reflect on the actions of these people who fought for the land that I was privileged to call my home for 4 months, there are recurring patterns of selflessness, compassion, and solidarity. These very actions are things that I have experienced during the Intercultural Relations Training, and that have allowed me to form connections and learn from people all around the world. When I think back to one of my CIL approved courses, EDU F 236, I see selflessness in the Franco-Albertan people. This group, a cultural and linguistic minority in Alberta, paved the way for Francophone school boards across the country, enabling French Canadians in minority situations to access schooling in their mother tongue (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2024). When I think of my second language requirement, I think of the compassion I have received from native speakers. Though I may not have a mastery of the French language, I have constantly received positive feedback, advice, and encouragement from native French speakers,

both in Canada and in France. When I think of my Intercultural Communications Training, I experienced solidarity from other CIL members. Though our paths had crossed for only a short time, we were able to connect through our shared experiences and common interests.

Everything that I have been able to experience throughout the CIL really culminated in my trip abroad. These ideas of selflessness, compassion and solidarity were present throughout, and I was able to create amazing memories with people all over the world. One memory that comes to mind is when I, a Canadian, went to a rugby game in France surrounded by Scottish and Romanian fans. Though everything else about us may have been different, we were all there to cheer on and enjoy the game. Another example that comes to mind is a concert that I attended in Belgium, in which I met people from the UK, Turkey, and even a fellow Canadian. We were all there to enjoy music that we loved and were bonded by that moment.

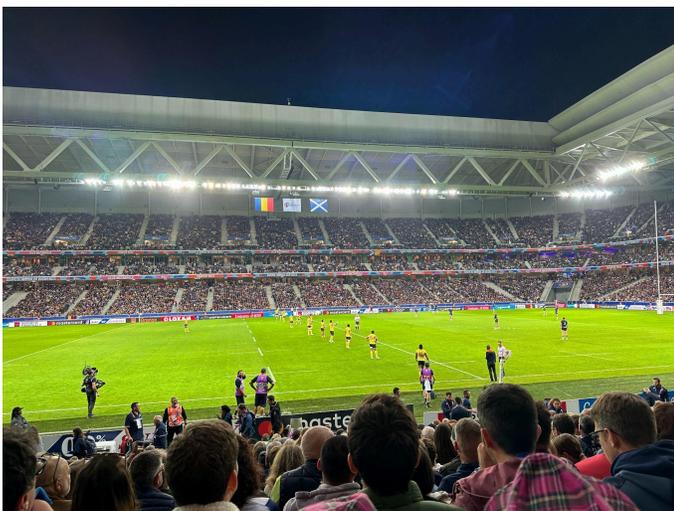


Figure 7. Scotland vs. Romania Rugby Game.
(Source: Rakowski, 2023)



Figure 8. Hozier Concert.
(Source: Rakowski, 2023)

To conclude, it is important that we as humans remember that there is more that connects us than divides us. When we look back at our history, we can learn from our rights and wrongs, and move forward to become understanding, caring, and welcoming global citizens.

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