

World War II and the Canadian Conscription Crisis

Before we start, we need to first understand answer the question – What is Conscription?

Canadian Experience with Conscription

This would not be the first time that Canada had come up against the issue of conscription during wartime. When was the last time that this issue came up?

During that period, there was a distinct division between those who supported conscription and those who did not. For the most part, English Canadians supported conscription while French Canadians did not. Why do you think the French refused to support the idea of conscription while English Canadians were heavily in favour of such an act?

The French Canadian population was so outraged with the idea of conscription that during Easter in 1917, there were riots that brought out across parts of Quebec in protest to Prime Minister Borden's decision.

World War II, Canada, and Conscription

With another war, there again arose the issue of whether or not Canada would need to conscript men into the army to fight against Germany. Many people remembered what happened in Quebec during the First World War and were not anxious to repeat that situation. In order to placate the fears of Canadians – and to ensure that French Canadians voted for him – Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King promised at the outset of the War that he would not issue an order for conscription for overseas service. King was very careful in his choice of words – he said there would be no conscription for overseas service. Why is this differentiation important?

In 1940, the Canadian government introduced and passed the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) that allowed for the government to conscript people into the military – but only to be placed in

Canada. The idea was to train and prepare men and women for military service if Canada were to be invaded. It also allowed the government to place men and women into wartime production jobs to help increase the output of the defense manufacturers. According to the NRMA, those men and women who were conscripted could not be sent overseas for service. Canada would maintain its volunteer military service.

By the late summer of 1944, however, issues began to arise with the number of Canadians who were joining the military to go overseas and fight. Although the war would soon be over, nobody had any idea of how to determine this. The number of Canadians volunteering to enter the military could not keep up with the demand of troops needed over in Europe and the Pacific. Something needed to be done and King knew he needed to act.

King had faced pressure from the Conservative party and the military to introduce conscription as early as 1941. In response to the Conservatives calls to bring back conscription, despite the fact that it could again lead to rioting in Quebec and perhaps even election defeat, King sought a compromise. In 1942, he arranged for a plebiscite to be held across Canada. Does anybody know what a PLEBISCITE is?

The question the people of Canada was asked was very simple: Would you allow the government of Canada to repeal the parts of the National Resources Mobilization Act of 1940 that forbid overseas military conscription? The question essentially asked whether or not you would allow conscription. When the final vote came down, 63% of Canadians overall said 'Yes' and released the government from their promise not to introduce overseas conscription. Just like World War I, however, the issue came down to linguistic and cultural lines: 78% of English Canadians voted in favour of releasing the government from their promise, while 72% of French Canadians voted against the measure.

With the country split along cultural lines, King sought to compromise. He stated that he would only use conscription in an emergency situation. He used the slogan: "Not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary". What do you think this slogan means?

The first part of King's statement was aimed at French Canada, and the second part of King's statement was intended for English Canada. What this slogan essentially did was to allow King to use conscription only if it turned out to be absolutely necessary. He promised not to use it immediately, only if the situation called for it. King was the ultimate politician who attempted to please everyone. It was this type of approach that allowed him to remain as prime minister for more than 21 years.

Conscription would not be used until 1943 during the Aleutian Islands Campaign. The Italy invasion (which we will be talking about very shortly) had severely depleted Canadian troop levels and resources, and King was forced to send the home-front conscripts overseas. Normandy and the D-Day Landing of 1944 also took its toll on the Canadian troops, and further men were conscripted to be sent overseas – about 17 000 in total.

Zombies

With conscription came a very curious issue – the Zombies of the Canadian army. These were men who were conscripted into the army under the National Resources Mobilization Act and had completed their basic training here in Canada but then refused to go overseas to fight in Europe or the Pacific. They stayed in Canada and had nothing to do: they basically were “sleep walking” through the War like zombies. These men were very disliked amongst others in the military: people who served could not believe that the Zombies would wear the uniform of the Canadian military, but refused to fight alongside their brothers over in Europe and the Pacific. Eventually, however, King forced 17 000 of the Zombies to be sent to Europe and be prepared for battle.

In the end, very few conscripts would see action: of the over 17 000 men sent over under the NRMA, only 2463 made it to the front lines and any fighting. Of these, 79 did lose their lives. Politically, this was a successful gamble for King, as he avoided a drawn-out political crisis and remained in power until his retirement in 1948.