

CHC2P Unit 1: 1914-1919: Forming Identity

Activity 5: Conscription and War Propaganda

Overview

This activity focuses on the conscription debate and the use of propaganda in World War I.

Lesson

ROBERT BORDEN: The Argument in Favor of Conscription

"In February 1917, I, Prime Minister Robert Borden, went to Europe and visited the Canadian troops there. I came to realize that the Canadian troops were making tremendous sacrifices on the front lines and deserved further help. Canada is maintaining four full divisions of troops, but that number will fall to three and then to two, if more reinforcements are not supplied."



"We have sent over 326,000 men overseas so far and that is a great effort, but that great effort will be wasted if we lose the war. If we do not send further reinforcements, we are betraying the efforts of every Canadian who has died so far in this war. We owe it to the Canadians who have given up their lives to continue this battle until we win. We cannot desert and humiliate our soldiers on the Western Front by not sending them much-needed reinforcements."

"The only way we can win is by introducing conscription. We have tried every way imaginable to obtain more voluntary enlistments and we are now convinced that we will not receive enough voluntary enlistments to continue our great efforts in the European war."

"I know that I said in 1914 that only voluntary enlistment would be used in this war. That was three years ago and the situation has now changed. We are in a crisis situation. We face one of the greatest emergencies in world history. We need more men to stop the Germans. The number of men required will not be less than 5,000 and will probably be 100,000."

"Other countries such as Australia are using conscription and we must do so also. All citizens in this country benefit from Canadian laws and freedom. All citizens in this country have an equal obligation to support the defence of this country."

"The bill introduced in this House of Commons will bring conscription to most able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 25 as a start. Single men will be called up first, followed by young married men. Those who are not healthy and those who have special jobs will not be drafted. Also, if you can convince the

government that in conscience you are opposed to war, you do not need to go to fight. For example, members of the Doukhobor religion will not be drafted."

"I will not bring in the conscription law until after the voters of Canada have had an opportunity to express their viewpoint on conscription in a general election. If my party wins the election that will be held in December of 1917, the people of Canada will have spoken and conscription will become a fact of life."

WILFRID LAURIER: The Arguments Against Conscription



"At the beginning of World War I, the government of Prime Minister Robert Borden promised that no young man would be forced to go over to Europe to fight in the Great War. A young man could volunteer to go over to fight, if he so desired."

"Now in this year of 1917, the Prime Minister and his party wish to pass a law that will introduce conscription to Canada. If this law is passed, young men between the ages of 18 and 21 and who are unmarried, will receive a notice in the mail that will require them to report for army duty. If this bill is passed, the government will have broken its promise to the Canadian people."

"I, Wilfrid Laurier, and my Liberal Party are opposed to conscription. Canada is not in danger of attack from Germany, and therefore, we do not need to force young men into the army."

WILFRID LAURIER: French Canada and English Canada

"Some people have accused the French Canadian race, of which I am a member, of being cowards and disloyal to Canada. That is not true. Over 16,000 French Canadians have already enlisted in the armed forces and have gone over to Europe to fight. French Canadians do not have a large amount of loyalty to France, one of the countries fighting on our side in the war.

In 1759, the English defeated the French in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, and Canada eventually became a country that was a colony of England. After 1759, there were no immigrants coming from France to Canada. As a result, French Canadians in this year of 1917 have no relatives living in France. They have no great emotional attachment to France."

"In fact, many French Canadians feel that Quebec was deserted by the mother country of France in 1759 and, therefore, they have little enthusiasm for helping France today. The loyalty of French Canadians is to Canada - a country in which they have lived for over 300 years. French Canadians will approve conscription to defend Canada, but not to defend a country 3,000 kilometers away."

"On the other hand, many English Canadians were either born in England or have relatives living in England. They have an emotional attachment to their mother country. Therefore, it is not surprising that over 300,000 English Canadians have volunteered for the Canadian armed forces and have gone over to Europe to help out England. I applaud the many volunteers who have willingly made sacrifices to help win this war."

"However, I repeat again, we cannot force people to be volunteers, unless our country of Canada is under direct attack. And there are absolutely no signs that Germany is able or willing to come across the Atlantic Ocean and to attack Canada."

WILFRID LAURIER: Working People and Farmers



"Many working people are opposed to conscription because if they are crippled in the war, they and their families face a life of extreme poverty. Many farmers are opposed to conscription because they need their sons to help run their farms. Farmers can help win the war by growing crops and livestock. We can help England and France not by sending more soldiers, but by sending bread, meat, and potatoes to these countries."

"In the past three years, Canada has made great contributions to this war. We have nothing to be ashamed of as far as pulling our weight. But since our country is not being attacked, we do not need to introduce conscription."

"I ask the prime minister to please withdraw this bill that will force young men to fight. Working people, farmers, and French Canadians are opposed to the bill. If the bill is passed, it will cause a great deal of bad feeling in this country. Young men cannot, and should not, be forced to go into the army."

PROPAGANDA POSTERS

During World War One, the government used propaganda posters to get people involved in the war effort. Propaganda is spreading ideas in such a way as to convince people to support a certain viewpoint. Propaganda often involves giving only one point of view. Here are a few examples from the First World War.



Assignment

1. What were Prime Minister Robert Borden's arguments in favour of conscription in 1917? Describe at least 3 in your own words.
2. According to Liberal Party Opposition Leader Wilfrid Laurier, why were French Canadians less likely to volunteer to fight in Europe than English Canadians?
3. According to Laurier, aside from French Canadians, what other two groups were opposed to conscription in 1917? Why were they opposed?
4. Who do you think has the best opinion about conscription—Robert Borden or Wilfrid Laurier? Would you have been for or against conscription during WWI?
5. During World War I, the government used propaganda posters to get people involved in the war effort. Propaganda is spreading ideas in such a way as to convince people to support a certain viewpoint. Propaganda often involves giving only one point of view. Take a look at the propaganda posters in this activity-- what is the message of the posters?
6. Is propaganda still used by the government in today's society? If so, what would be an example?
7. Complete **one** of the following **on a separate page**:
 - A propaganda poster for World War I. Create your own poster with a message.
 - A poem dealing with war. You might keep in mind the example of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields."
 - A map of the Western Front, in which you show the line of trenches and some of the major battles of the war.