

CHC2P Unit 3: 1939-1959: War and Peace

Activity 5: Conscription

Overview

In this activity, you will examine the conscription crisis in Canada during World War II and the use of "Zombies" in the Canadian army nearing the end of the war.

Lesson

French Canada

During WWI, the topic of conscription had divided the country, especially the French and English portions, in 1917.

When Canada entered World War II, Prime Minister Mackenzie King promised the country that the government would not bring in conscription for overseas service. However, in 1940, the government did conscript men to be trained to defend Canada in case it was invaded.

As in the time of World War I, French Canadians for the most part were opposed to being forced to fight in a war that did not involve the defence of Canada. Many French Canadians viewed both world wars as conflicts that were of British concern, and not Canadian concern.

Plebiscite and Compromise



By 1942, King was under pressure from the military to conscript soldiers. He provided Canadian voters with a plebiscite - a yes or no vote on an issue. The plebiscite question asked voters if they would release the government from its promise of no conscription: 78% of English Canada answered "yes" to the question; 72% of French Canada answered "no" to the question.

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".

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.

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.

Zombies

A new Minister of Defence in King's cabinet tried to persuade the men who had been conscripted for home service to go overseas. These men were known as the "zombies" because they had nothing to do but sleep-walk in a situation where Canada was not threatened.

The "zombies" refused to go into battle. Finally, in November 1944, King forced 16,000 "zombies" to go to the battlefields in Europe.

Fortunately for King, the war was soon over and only 2500 "zombies" saw combat action.

Many people in French Canada - including Cabinet Minister Louis St. Laurent, a future Prime Minister - realized that King had done as much as was possible to solve the conscription crisis and keep the country united.

Assignment

1. Describe King's approach to conscription.
2. How long did King remain Prime Minister of Canada?
3. What were Zombies?
4. Would you have been in favor or against conscription? Create a poster that represents your opinion on conscription. Be sure to include a title, some pictures and 3 reasons/arguments to back-up your opinion.