



## The Conscription Debate Lesson Plan

**Description:** In this lesson, students learn about the conscription debate in Canada in 1917. Students are organized into three groups (anti-conscription farmers, anti-conscription French Canadians, and pro-conscription English Canadians), and conduct research on the argument for or against conscription made by their assigned group. Students then participate in a debate on the topic.

### **Recommended Grade Range**

All provinces and territories except Quebec: Grades 10 to 12

Quebec: Secondary 4 and 5

**Prerequisites:** This lesson should follow previous discussions and lessons on the First World War.

### **Objectives:**

- Students learn why Prime Minister Borden introduced the Military Service Act in 1917, enacting conscription by law;
- Students learn why many farmers and French Canadians opposed conscription;
- Students work in groups assigned to represent farmers, French Canadians, and English Canadians, and conduct research for a debate on conscription;
- Student groups organize their research results in a table;
- Students conduct a debate on the issue of conscription using their research.

**Estimated Time:** 3-4 class periods

### **Materials Required:**

- Overhead transparencies of First World War recruitment posters printed from the resources section, or copies of these posters to hand out to students, downloaded from resources sections;
- Projector (if not using copies);
- Internet/computer lab access for 1-2 class periods;
- Copies of the Conscription Debate Worksheet.

### **Lesson:**

#### ***Warm-up***

- Project or hand out images of recruitment posters
- Ask students to discuss the posters, prompting them to consider issues related to joining the military. What reasons might people have for volunteering to go to war?

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What reasons do the posters suggest? Are the posters effective in convincing the viewer? What reasons might people have for not volunteering to go to war?

- Remind students to keep in mind the social context of Canada during the First World War.

### ***Main Activity***

Ask students to imagine that it is 1917. At the start of the war in 1914ans had eagerly volunteered to participate in the First World War. Now, however, the number of war dead has reached at 30,000, and is increasing steadily, and there is no end to the war in sight. Fewer and fewer Canadians are willing to enlist voluntarily. As a result, Prime Minister Borden has enacted the Military Service Act, which essentially requires all able-bodied men aged 20-45 to join the military. The implementation of conscription is very controversial.

Draw a table on chart paper (you will return to it after students complete their research projects), with two columns: “For” and “Against”. Ask students to brainstorm reasons people might have for supporting the conscription or protesting it.

Explain to students that they will be researching three key groups involved in the conscription debate during the First World War. Assign all students to one of three groups: farmers, French Canadians, and English Canadians.

Distribute the Conscription Debate Worksheet, and explain to students that they will be researching the argument made by their assigned group during the First World War conscription debate.

Allow one to two class periods for students to conduct research in the library and/or on the internet. Below are some web pages that you may want to direct students toward in the initial phases of their research:

- Canadian War Museum: Canada and the First World War
- Canadian Encyclopedia : Conscription
- Histori.ca: The Conscription Crisis of 1917
- CBC archives: The First World War: Canada Remembers
- McCord Museum: Wanted! 500, 000 Canadians for WW I
- Library and Archives Canada: Serving the World From Our Shores
- Alternative Service: History (In English only)
- Mennonite Central Committee: A Short History of Conscientious Objection in

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Canada (in English only)

- Université de Sherbrooke: Bilan du siècle (In French only, search for conscription, 1917-1918)

Once research has been completed, allow students some time to consolidate their research as a group and prepare for the debate. When groups have their arguments prepared, have them sit together and conduct the debate with you as the moderator.

### **Wrap-up**

When the debate has ended, show the class the “For” and “Against” chart that was completed before the students conducted their research. Use the chart to help students reflect on what they have learned. What arguments made by each of the three groups are already on the chart? Are there any new points students would add as a result of their research? Have students summarize the results of conscription. Do they think it was the right thing to do? How did it affect Canada?

Remind students that not all French Canadian and farmers were against conscription; and not all English Canadians were for it.

### **Assessment:**

*Conscription Debate worksheets:*

- Ensure each student hands in his or her worksheet (not just one per group).
- Student should cite information from several sources - you may want to assign students a specific number of required sources.
- Information cited should be relevant to the perspective taken by the group assigned to the student.
- Main points that should be included by each group:
  - *Farmers:* Many farmers were angry about conscription. They were initially exempted from conscription because they were working at home to provide valuable supplies for the war effort. Prime Minister Borden broke this promise in 1918 with an announcement that farmers were now eligible for conscription.
  - *French Canadians:* Many French Canadians were against conscription. They felt little connection to the British government that had drawn Canada into the war, and so were not motivated to participate in the war by the same patriotic emotions felt by many English Canadians. In addition, the Canadian military was almost exclusively English-speaking.
  - *English Canadians:* Many English Canadians supported conscription

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because of patriotic connections to Britain and a desire to support Britain in the war.

### *Debate:*

- For this portion of the lesson, mark based on student participation, behaviour within and amongst groups, and relevance of the points made by the student during the debate;
- Student should work well with other students in his or her group, and should not dominate the debate if other group members wish to speak (you may wish to ask students in each group to evaluate their fellow group members based on their participation in the assignment);
- Student should treat the opinions of other groups with respect.

### Extension Activities:

- Discuss as a class how students would feel if there was conscription today under similar circumstances. Would they support it or not? Why? Under what circumstances would they support conscription? Do students know of any countries today that have conscription?
- There was already tension between English and French Canadians when Borden introduced the Military Service Act. Reasons for this tension include the fact that during the war, both Ontario and Manitoba had removed guarantees that they would provide French language schools, while English Canadians were frustrated that fewer French Canadians than English Canadians were volunteering for the war effort. Have students research different elements of the tense relations between French and English Canadians over the course of the war. Students can present their findings to the class.