

The Military Service Act

The angry crowd began to jeer at the soldiers who had been watching them all day. Insults were soon swapped for snowballs as the situation escalated and tensions rose. Then shots rang out and one of the soldiers fell to the ground in pain. Upon receiving the order to clear the streets, the angry soldiers fired on the crowd with their machine guns. In the chaos, four protesters were killed and many more were injured (Cook, T., Noakes, J., Clarke, N., 54).

Aside from the snowballs, the story above sounds like something that happens in countries under dictatorships and repressive regimes located far away from the country where I am comfortably typing these words. But it didn't. This event happened in Quebec City, Canada on April 1, 1918 as part of the Easter Riots and was a graphic result of a bitter dispute that had a far reaching and long lasting influence on Canada. The issue at stake was the Military Service Act, which impacted Canada in a greater way than any other military event.

Canada entered World War 1 with a very small army that expanded by a tremendous amount as hundreds of thousands of men signed up to fight. Due to the enormous number of volunteers, Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden promised the country that there would be no conscription. However, by 1917, the Canadian divisions overseas had suffered serious losses and most men who wanted to join the army had already done so, which meant that there were few new recruits to replace the casualties. To keep the Canadian divisions up to strength, Borden changed his mind about conscription and on May 18, 1917, he introduced the Military Service Act ("The Conscription Crisis"), setting off a political maelstrom.

The Military Service Act allowed the government to force all men between the ages of 20 and 45 to serve in the army ("Quebec's conscription crisis divided French and English Canada"). This angered Quebec where the war was unpopular, because most French-Canadians did not feel connected to Europe and hence did not see the need to fight there. But Borden insisted that the Act was necessary to win the war and most Canadian Anglophones agreed because many of them were recent British immigrants that still had connections to Europe. Even though practically all members of parliament from Quebec voted against the Act, it passed

successfully on August 29, 1917 ("Quebec's conscription crisis divided French and English Canada").

To ensure that he had the support of most of the voters before using the Act, Borden held a federal election in December 1917 where everyone who voted against him was considered a traitor, or at least unpatriotic ("Election of 1917"). Despite the opposition of Quebec, Borden won ("Election of 1917") and finally used the Military Service Act in January, 1918, a decision that had an enormous influence on Canada's future.

Although relatively few conscripted men served on the Western Front, they allowed the Canadian Corps to continue to play a significant part in Great Britain's victory. This contribution allowed Borden to write the XI Resolution, which argued for more independence for Canada from Britain and was a large step towards the Statute of Westminster in 1931 which granted Canada full autonomy ("Canadian Foreign Relations").

Unfortunately, by using the rest of Canada to impose conscription on Quebec, Borden extended the divide between French-Canadians and the rest of Canada, which already existed due to cultural and linguistic differences, to the political spectrum. Quebec felt disconnected from the rest of Canada and the first suggestion of separating from Canada occurred on December 21, 1917, when the Francoeur Motion was proposed, which suggested that Quebec withdraw from Canadian confederation ("Motion Francoeur"). At the federal level, Borden's Conservative Party lost a lot of support in Quebec, which would hurt it in elections for decades to come. Anti-conscription protests occurred across Quebec, including the Easter Riots which ended with the deaths of four French-Canadians at the hands of Anglophone soldiers. ("Conscription Crisis").

This was not easily forgotten and created a resentment towards the federal government among French-Canadians that increased their support for Quebec separatism as years went by. To unify the country, the government repatriated Canada's constitution in 1982 to create the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This charter confirmed the bilingualism of Canada and promised Canadians the right to education in the French language across Canada

("Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms"). This impacted my life because it has allowed me to attend the French immersion program in my school district.

The Military Service Act is also one of the reasons that I live in Canada today. At the end of the First World War, my Mennonite ancestors, who were a group of Christian pacifists, were living near Omsk in the Soviet Union. The new communist government persecuted the Mennonites, which caused thousands of them, including my great-grandparents, to decided to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to Canada during the 1920s ("Mennonites from Russia"). One of the reasons they choose Canada was that Mennonite immigrants to Canada before the war had been guaranteed exemption from military service. Even when Canada introduced conscription, it did not break this guarantee because the War Service Act included a provision that exempted members of pacifist churches, such as the Mennonites, from service in the army ("Military Service Act 1917 (Canada)").

Although my great-grandparents were unable to immigrate to Canada when they left the Soviet Union in 1929 because extended members of their family did not meet Canada's health requirements, their dream of moving to Canada stayed with them. They ended up moving to Paraguay and spent the next three decades there and later in Brazil, before they managed to immigrate to Canada in 1960.

The Military Service Act had a tremendous impact on Canada's history as a nation and also affected the life I live today, at a time when my ancestors had yet to call Canada home. Despite the severe animosity it sparked between Quebec and the rest of the country, the Act directly contributed to some of the most significant parts of Canadian history, such as Canada's complete independence and Canadian bilingualism. It is for these reasons that the Military Service Act should be recognized as the military event that had the most important impact on Canada's history.

(999 words)

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Telephone interviews with Erwin Rahn (my grandfather) on February 19 and 20, 2017