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Did the French Canadians Cause the Conscription Crisis of 1917?

DESMOND MORTON

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A FEW DAYS AFTER the Great War broke out in 1914, Canada's Acting High Commissioner in London, George Perley, MP for the Quebec constituency of Argenteuil–Les Deux Montagnes and temporary replacement for the late Lord Strathcona, received a polite suggestion from the British colonial secretary: “Why not raise a Royal Montcalm Regiment in Canada? It might associate the name of Montcalm and the Province of Quebec specifically with an Empire War?” Perley dutifully transmitted the message to his prime minister, Sir Robert Borden but adding no endorsement for the idea: “personally doubt wisdom of doing anything to accentuate different Races as all are Canadians.” Perley was as blissfully unaware as the Prime Minister about how profoundly the Great War would tear Canada's founding nations apart and doom his own party to Liberal dominance for the rest of the Twentieth Century. While Montcalm was better remembered in Quebec as a loser rather than a proud link to an embattled France, Perley and Borden would have been wise to consider how best to engage Quebecois in a war proclaimed by Great Britain without any consultation with Ottawa or any other dominion or colony in a world-wide Empire.

Of course, when he sent on the message, Perley seemed to be right. The news of war inspired a popular excitement that was

reported to be even greater in Montreal and Quebec than in the rain-drenched cities of the Canadian West. French-language newspapers were almost as enthusiastic as the Anglophone press in supporting the war. Henri Bourassa's *Le Devoir* dutifully echoed its proprietor's opposition to fighting in a British war, but no one could be astonished at a familiar Bourassa opinion. Bourassa himself narrowly escaped internment by the Germans. He was visiting Alsace to see how the French language was surviving German occupation of the former French province, and he slipped across the frontier minutes before it closed. In Ottawa, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the Opposition and French Canada's leading federal politician declared a truce in partisan conflict and insisted that Canada must do all in her power to support the British cause.

A few months earlier, a sad and significant development had occurred within Quebec's share of Canada's volunteer militia. The 86th Regiment in Trois-Rivières was quietly disbanded. Opposition politicians had an obvious explanation. The regiment had been commanded by a former mayor who had become Minister of Highways in Quebec's Liberal government. Colonel Sam Hughes, a Borden loyalist as well as an outspoken Orangeman, had been chosen as the Conservative Minister of Militia. Hughes was a blind believer in his own genius. He had answered the demands from Canadian militarists, including his elder brother, James L. Hughes, for universal cadet training for Canadian schoolboys and girls by insisting the militia summer camps were the ideal environment for teaching young Canadians patriotism and respect for their betters.

The truth about the 86th Regiment was perhaps more alarming than the claims of political meddling. The regiment vanished from the Militia List because its junior officers had failed to qualify for their rank by attending courses at the infantry school at St-Jean or even the artillery school at the Citadelle in Quebec City. When a provisional school was established at the new armouries in Trois-Rivières, hardly any of the 86th's unqualified officers showed up, though the timetable would have allowed most of them to remain at their respective day jobs. That failure was the last straw for the Militia's senior officers and, on the eve of war, the regiment was disbanded.

Sam Hughes approved the decision but played no active part beyond approving the provisional school in a final attempt to save the unit. When war came on August, his fear that the British would, in his vernacular, "burke it," led him to order the Union Jack to



Recruiting exhibition in Montreal ca. 1916-1917. [McCord Museum VIEW-16832]

be hauled down from the roof of Militia Headquarters, only to be restored when the war was declared. His staff had prepared a detailed mobilization plan that selected specific militia regiments across Canada to recruit to full strength and assemble at Petawawa, the country's biggest training camp. Hughes had a better idea. He had turned down a plan to open a similar camp outside Quebec City when local landowners became too greedy to surrender their land at a nominal price. With a war in Europe, Quebec City would be the ideal place to embark a Canadian contingent and the proposed camp at Valcartier was revived. Colonel William Price of Quebec's most powerful business family, was charged with preparing the camp and contractors building the Connaught rifle range outside Ottawa packed up their tools and travelled to the new camp to provide it with one of the biggest rifle ranges in the world.

Instead of arriving with regiments hurriedly recruited and expanded in their home towns, telegrams summoned colonels and whatever officers and men they could assemble to come to Valcartier where Sam Hughes would organize them into a First Canadian Contingent big enough to form a British-style infantry division. In the end, some 31,000 men arrived from the rest of Canada, far more than an infantry division in numbers and even more outsized in the ratio of officers to other ranks. Instead of twelve infantry battalions, Hughes would organize nineteen. The bulk of the men—close to

seventy percent—were British-born, many of them recent immigrants who had learned that Canada, with its harsh climate and its “No English Need Apply” signs, was not an easy place to make a fortune. Of the remaining 30 percent, there is some evidence that Canadian-born Francophones were disproportionately more numerous than their English-speaking counterparts. Organizationally, that made no impact on Hughes.

Since Confederation, every significant operation by the volunteer militia had been structured to ensure significant French-Canadian representation. In the Red River Expedition of 1870, the two Canadian battalions had each represented a major province, Ontario and Quebec. In 1885, two French-speaking battalions, one each from Montreal and Quebec, had gone west. Even in the South African War, Major Oscar Pelletier and a francophone company raised in Montreal had been part of Colonel Otter’s 2nd “Special Service” Battalion. Later, one of three artillery batteries was essentially francophone and Lt. Col. François-Louis Lessard had commanded one of two regiments of Canadian Mounted Rifles.

Periodically, some of the British generals who commanded the Canadian Militia between 1874 and 1904, raised the issue of language, usually to the annoyance and resentment of their stubbornly unilingual militia staff officers. A British Army that raised its soldiers in India and Africa had no room for unilingualism in its traditions but generals who dared to raise the issue, such as Major Generals Ivor Hutton and E.T.H. Hutton, saw their Canadian careers foreshortened.

The tradition of Quebec francophone involvement meant nothing to Sam Hughes. If he wished the Canadians to be commanded by one of their own, Colonel Lessard was an obvious choice though it was inconceivable that Hughes would choose a French Canadian Roman Catholic for a job he badly wanted for himself. Instead, Hughes promoted himself to major-general and made it clear to the British that he was the ideal man to command the Canadians when they formed a division. The British remembered him in South Africa, where he wrote letters to the Cape Town newspapers expressing his contempt for his British superiors; they sent him home to Canada in 1900. In September 1914, the War Office appointed a British officer, Major-General Edmund Alderson, who had commanded Canadians in the Boer War and would command them in France until his campaign to replace the seriously defective Ross rifle gave its chief advocate, Sam Hughes, an obvious excuse to get rid of him



Religious service for the 148th Battalion before going overseas. McGill campus, Montreal. [McCord Museum MP-0000.63.1]

When Canada's First Contingent embarked for England in early October, 1914, a single company in the 14th Battalion from Montreal was composed of Francophones. A 12th Battalion was formed from the tiny contingents from rural Quebec and Atlantic Canada militia units. When a Second Contingent was launched in October, it took a delegation of Montreal businessmen, led by Arthur Mignault, a wealthy patent medicine manufacturer, and a campaign by *La Presse*, then Canada's largest daily newspaper, to persuade Hughes that the new contingent could include a 22e bataillon Canadien-français. While Mignault and Lorenzo Prince, managing editor of *La Presse*, suggested a number of possible commanding officers for the battalion, Hughes imposed his own choice, an elderly Colonel Frederic Mondelet Gaudet, whom the Minister himself had fired as the director of the Dominion Arsenal for alleged incompetence.

Whatever his limitations, Colonel Gaudet had the good judgement to find a successor in Colonel Thomas Tremblay, another, much younger, product of the resolutely anglophone RMC at Kingston and a man whose raw courage and commitment to discipline helped make the 22e bataillon Canadien-français sufficiently outstanding to earn a postwar place in Canada's tiny permanent force. When Quebec MP's discovered after the war that five of twenty-five Canadian soldiers executed by firing squad bore French names, they planned an angry

protest. When they discovered that Colonel Tremblay had approved most of the executions to reinforce the discipline and self-respect of his battalion, they dropped their plans, Tremblay had restored the military prestige Colonel de Salaberry had left as a heritage of French Canada.

When he cancelled the mobilization plan Militia staff officers had prepared for a Great War in Europe, Sam Hughes gave himself the power to determine how Canadians would be recruited and who would lead them in battle. Hughes's concept of organizing Canadians for the war in France was to select a suitable commanding officer for an infantry battalion or artillery battery and let the chosen officer recruit the thousand officers and soldiers for a battalion or a couple of hundred for a battery. They would also need fund-raising resources to finance the advertising for the recruiting effort and to meet the expenses of recruiting officers as they searched for volunteers in rural districts and remote communities. The 22^e battalion, for example, was recruited mainly in Montreal but significant contributions came from Quebec, Sherbrooke and Hull as the present Gatineau was called at the time.

Recruiting in Quebec posed some inherent structural difficulties. The province had not experienced the brief but intense militarism shared by Ontario and other predominantly Anglophone provinces which had often taken the form of cadet corps in public and private schools. Quebec's population was, on the whole, more agricultural than that of Ontario and men who transferred their labour from the farm to the army dropped farm productivity dramatically. Rural districts of western Ontario also proved to be reluctant recruiting territory. Urban populations, by contrast, included the poverty-stricken elements created by the economic depression that coincided with the last years of the Laurier government and continued in the Borden years. Such men might be coerced into enlisting by the promise of three meals a day and an army overcoat but they were not necessarily valued member of the CEF. Montreal was also a centre for munition production. Workers, male and female, were recruited by reminding them that making munitions was as vital to victory as soldiering. It was both dangerous and better-paid.

War in 1914 tended to encourage English-speaking Canadians to identify with their British ancestors and to respond enthusiastically to the demands of Imperial patriotism. For obvious reasons, this mood found little or no echo among francophone Quebeckers. On the contrary, the evidence that Canada had been engaged in a vast and difficult war without consultation or consent persuaded many

Quebecois that they had no personal commitment to the war. While some, notably Bourassa's lieutenant, Olivar Asselin, felt a passionate commitment to fight or die for France, more Quebecers were urged by the clergy to let France be punished for its controversial secular reforms in the early years of the twentieth century. A flow of Catholic clergy across the Atlantic to Quebec filled many of the province's pulpits to suggest that France's war and the consequent costs were part of divine retribution for seizing control of public education.

The Borden government struggled to contain both pro-imperial zeal and reluctance by insisting that service in the Canadian Contingent would be entirely voluntary. Several hundred would-be soldiers were sent home from Valcartier in 1914 at the behest of wives who had not granted their husbands permission to enlist or of mothers who complained that their sons were under-age for military service. Both the Prime Minister and Colonel Sam Hughes repeated their commitment to the voluntary principle in speeches across Canada. Hughes also encouraged recruiting with the repeated insistence that volunteers would enter battle serving beside neighbours and old friends, in battalions that, for the most part, were locally recruited. Some CEF units welcomed recruits from Scandinavian and other ethnic communities that had developed in the period of mass European immigration during the more prosperous of the Laurier years. A few recruited actively in Aboriginal communities.

Voluntarism was not without its risks. Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin, the British officer commanding the Canadian Militia in 1914 warned the government that it could probably not maintain more than two infantry divisions in the field if all recruits had to be volunteers. It was a warning that Sam Hughes ridiculed as typical of the timidity and incompetence of British army officers. Instead, Hughes insisted, Canada could easily raise twenty-four divisions of volunteers and Sir Robert Borden announced to Canadians in his 1916 New Year's Day message that Canada's enlistment target had been raised to half a million men.

French Canada was part of the target for this massive enrolment. With substantial financial help from Dr. Arthur Mignault and a promotional campaign in the pages of *La Presse*, the ranks of the 22nd Battalion had been filled with the aid of drafts from Western Canada's francophone communities and from Acadians who enlisted at Amherst, NS—the unit's last Canadian stop before heading to England with the Second Contingent. Hughes promptly authorized



Anti-conscription parade in Victoria Square, Montreal. 24 May 1917. [Library and Archives Canada C-006859]

a 41e bataillon to be recruited in Quebec's Military District No. 5, covering the northern end of the province. The command was given to a former second-in-command of the 22nd Battalion, and it was not a success. The bulk of recruiting occurred in the harsh winter of 1916 and in Montreal's shelters for homeless men. Montreal had no appropriate barracks and existing militia regiments, most of them anglophone, proved reluctant to share their armouries with the men of the 41st. The unit's second-in-command was dismissed when he used regimental funds to buy himself an automobile. Sent to England to organize a mess for the battalion's officers, Lieutenant Coderre, the assistant adjutant of the 41st, was arrested for murdering a sergeant from a neighbouring unit who had come to the premises believing them to be a brothel. Arrested by British police, Coderre would probably have been hanged for his offence without the snowstorm of letters from prominent citizens of Sherbrooke protesting that "le fou Coderre" suffered from mental, not criminal, disabilities.

The 41st became a major source of replacements for the severe losses the 22nd Battalion suffered at Courcellette and Regina Trench during the Somme offensive of 1916, and Colonel Tremblay was forced to ignore his haemorrhoids and rejoin his regiment to restore the stern discipline a first-class unit required to maintain its reputation.

In all, eight of the 262 infantry battalions raised for overseas service in the Great War addressed themselves to enlisting francophone recruits and letting them serve in their own language. While the quality of their recruits allowed French Canada's 22nd battalion to maintain its heroic and sacrificial record to the end of the war, some of the recruited battalions resembled the 41st Battalion in their quality of leadership and efficiency and some were possibly worse. The 206th Battalion, raised by Lieutenant Colonel Tancrede Pagnuelo, was broken up in Canada after Pagnuelo himself directed his men to desert. He, himself, was arrested, charged for stealing his soldier's pay cheques and sentenced to six months in prison. Some battalions were very much better managed, trained and prepared for service.

As usual, everything depended on the officers and on the commanding officer who selected them and managed the unit's fiscal administration. As Jean-Pierre Gagnon records in his thorough and extensive chapters on the recruiting of men for the 22e battalion, younger officers who had served in the francophone company of the 14th Battalion were obvious choices to organize units back home in Quebec but how could they, in their young lives and brief service, have acquired the knowledge and experience to manage the training and administration of a regiment of raw recruits?

Olivar Asselin raised the 163re Battalion, "les poils aux pattes," with the distinct mission of fighting for France. With a war veteran as Colonel, he accepted the lesser role of second-in-command. When he complained about sharing a barracks with a drunken and disorderly battalion, Sam Hughes promptly ordered the 163rd to defend the British island of Bermuda. When he accepted Black recruits, the venerable British commander-in-chief on the island was enraged and ordered that the 163rd never be allowed near the Front. Asselin went to war as a lieutenant in the 22nd, too poorly paid to support his wife and three children.

Whether well or badly commanded, units raised in Quebec faced difficulties familiar to anyone who has tried to recruit soldiers in war time. The medical certificates of fitness, issued by family physicians, frequently ignored obvious disabilities. Why should a doctor annoy current and future patients by denying a young man a chance to serve his country? Each battalion struggled to fill its ranks but when that task was complete and orders arrived for the embarkation to England, francophone units promptly experienced hundreds of desertions or absences without leave. A major expense for each unit's recruiting

fund was the cost of prosecuting deserters in Quebec courts. Many of the deserters simply enlisted in another battalion to retain a soldier's free meals and his \$1.10 day's pay. Others slipped back across the American border where some miscreants set up shop to sell advice on how to fool the military authorities. In the mood of Quebec by 1917, none of this seemed particularly reprehensible.

Yet Willoughby Gwatkin had been right. By the summer of 1916, Canada maintained four infantry divisions and a three-regiment cavalry brigade on the Western Front. Participation in the battles on the Somme cost 23,000 casualties; capturing Vimy Ridge took ten thousand dead, wounded and prisoners. By the summer of 1916, volunteers stopped appearing at recruiting depots across Canada and in Quebec. There were many reasons. The supply of adventure-seeking patriots had dried up. The brutal realities of Trench warfare crushed romantic illusions of glory. Fervent assertions of British identity faded into questions about the competence of the Empire's generals in the face of recurrent failures and mounting casualties.

In the spring of 1917, Dominion prime ministers gathered in London to meet the latest British premier, the former Minister of Munitions and radical Liberal, David Lloyd George. Dominion politicians would finally learn how the war was really going.

Some news was good and already known. The United States had entered the war; the Canadians had taken Vimy Ridge. After years of failure and defeat, that was a very welcome victory. But the Americans had no modern army and would need two years to create one. Meanwhile, the winter offensive by the French Army had ended in mutinies and mass desertions. On the Eastern Front, Russian armies had reeled backward from German attacks and mass desertions and mutinies had spread through the Czar's armies and navy.

At the front, Russian soldiers were starved of food and ammunition because the Russian railway system had crunched to a stop. Since Moscow was the only site for repair shops, every line into the city was jammed by broken down locomotives and railway cars. A Canadian named Joe Boyle would solve the problem by ignoring landlords and levering the broken cars and engines off the rails and into adjacent fields. That came later. In the spring of 1917, we were losing a terrible war. Was this a moment for Sir Robert Borden to report that Canada would have to cut its contribution to the war in half? His answer was the Military Service Act of 1917 with its escape-clauses for farmers and their sons and for conscientious objectors, to be forgotten in 1918

when English Canada had re-elected him and a Union government of Conservatives and non-Quebec Liberals.

Did Quebec cause the conscription crisis of 1917? Dare we blame Sir Sam Hughes? What could he or his government have done to persuade a Quebec that had reluctantly gone to war in 1914 to give its heart and soul to share a commitment when the prewar policies of the government had ignored French Canada? What would it take to make Quebec feel part of the Dominion its leaders had created in 1867 and sustained at each ensuing crisis?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Desmond Morton is Hiram Mills Professor of History Emeritus at McGill University. He graduated from the Canadian Academy in Kobe, Japan in 1954 and entered the *Collège militaire royal de St-Jean*, graduating to RMC in 1957. He was commissioned in 1959 and spent two years at Oxford with a Rhodes scholarship. He left the army in 1964 and returned to England to secure a PhD at the University of London in 1968. He is the author of forty-two books on Canadian military social and political history. Having taught for a Quarter-century at the University of Toronto, he came to McGill in 1994 to found its Institute for the Study of Canada. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1997 and earned the Canadian Forces Decoration as honorary colonel of 8 Wing, RCAF in 2004.

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GOING TO WAR

