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# The Home Front (Newfoundland)

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The social, political, and economic significance of Newfoundland's dominant industry shaped the wartime response of thousands of fishermen as well as leaders who could not afford to ignore their valid concerns for their own livelihoods and the country's economy. Politicians struggled to balance these concerns with military needs and the political demands of the largely urban press, returned men, and elites in the capital and throughout the country. In the final year of the war, this resulted in a coalition government, conscription, and the suppression of dissent.

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Politics and Mobilization](#)
- [3 The Regional Nature of Participation](#)
- [4 1917: War Weariness, Dissent and National Government](#)
- [5 1918: Conscription, Dissent and Censorship](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

This essay examines the regional nature of [Newfoundland's](#) participation in the First World War, press [censorship](#), and other indications of dissent surrounding recruitment and conscription. Newfoundlanders' shared grief and pride during the conflict heightened [nationalism](#), but historians have also argued that the human and economic costs of the war significantly contributed to the

country's post-war problems and its loss of democracy in 1934. Recent studies highlight the ways in which the war intensified regional and class divisions. As the war demanded more sacrifices, workers in towns and the hundreds of fishing villages known as outports protested that they were being asked to send more and more men while bearing the cost of unfair price increases. However, the division was not always that stark or that complete, as Newfoundlanders throughout the country also demonstrated continued support for the war and pride in "ours."

## Politics and Mobilization

Three days after [Britain](#) declared war, Newfoundland's premier, [Edward Morris \(1859-1935\)](#), pledged to increase the country's [naval](#) reserve force from 600 to 1,000 and to raise and equip a land force of 500 men.<sup>[1]</sup> Eventually, the country would support a separate battalion to fight alongside Great Britain and its other dominions. On 12 August, a public meeting in St. John's led to the formation of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA). It had representation from all religious denominations and political parties but was dominated by the merchant and professional classes of the capital. Morris' [government](#) gave this committee, under the chair of Governor [Walter Davidson \(1859-1923\)](#), full responsibility for recruiting and managing the country's regiment.<sup>[2]</sup> The NPA directed the [war effort](#) until spring 1917 and, while it muted partisan debate, it contributed to class and regional divisions.

The governing People's Party drew much of its support from St. John's. The opposition was a coalition of the Liberal Party and the Union Party, the political arm of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU).<sup>[3]</sup> Formed in 1908 to reform the fishing and sealing industries, by 1914 the FPU's membership of over 21,000 represented approximately half of the country's fishermen.<sup>[4]</sup> Its charismatic leader, [William Coaker \(1871-1938\)](#), was the dominant voice in opposition. Coaker was an [imperialist](#) who supported Britain's [war effort](#) but initially argued that the colony could not afford a separate battalion and should focus on providing men for the navy and on feeding the allies. Men who wanted to become soldiers should be encouraged to join British or Canadian forces. As Newfoundland [losses](#) grew from late 1915, however, criticizing the war effort, and particularly the commitment to a separate Newfoundland regiment, became increasingly untenable.<sup>[5]</sup>

By the end of the war, approximately 6,000 men had served in the Newfoundland Regiment and at least 2,000 on British naval vessels. After 1917, a further 500 men were recruited for a forestry battalion and at least 500 sailed on merchant vessels, keeping the allies [supplied](#) and trade intact. More than 3,000 Newfoundlanders also fought as part of other allied forces, most of them with the Canadians.<sup>[6]</sup> The over 12,000 Newfoundland men who served represented 35.6 percent of the country's male population between 19 and 35 years of age. Almost as many volunteered but were rejected as medically unfit. The casualty rate among Newfoundlanders serving overseas with Newfoundland and British forces was 50.7 percent.<sup>[7]</sup>

## The Regional Nature of Participation

The first men called up in 1914 were naval reservists. 83 percent of this force, which provided men for British vessels throughout the Atlantic and [Mediterranean](#), were drawn from the experienced seamen of outport Newfoundland.<sup>[8]</sup> But after the country met its first commitment of 1,000 men, neither the NPA nor the St. John's-dominated [press](#) paid much attention to the country's sailors.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Newfoundland Regiment, on the other hand, fought as a unit in the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division. With its first action at [Gallipoli](#) (September 1915-January 1917) and the devastating losses at Beaumont Hamel (1 July 1916), Monchy (14 April 1917), and elsewhere, the regiment became identified with national [pride and sacrifice](#). This focus on the regiment exaggerated the difference in wartime contribution between the capital and [rural](#) Newfoundland.

Newfoundland's "First 500," the contingent which left for England in October 1914, was dominated by St. John's men, particularly members of the cadet corps based in the capital and a couple of other larger towns. These fit young men competed in [sports](#), practiced drill and musketry, and were indoctrinated in British military traditions; they formed the core of the first contingent.<sup>[10]</sup> Most fishermen, on the other hand, were away from their homes in August 1914, engaged in the offshore fishery of the Grand Banks or the northern fisheries in the Strait of Bell Isle and on the coast of Labrador.<sup>[11]</sup> Outport men made up increasing proportions of subsequent contingents, but of those who enlisted before the imposition of conscription, 35.7 percent came from St. John's, whose population represented 18.8 percent of the population.<sup>[12]</sup> Furthermore, the first contingent were the men who were mowed down at Beaumont Hamel, , and subsequently were most closely identified with the nation's [sacrifice](#).<sup>[13]</sup>

As early as 1915, recruiters were complaining about low outport enlistment. Initial uncertainty about how the conflict would affect the fish trade contributed to fishermen's hesitancy. Distance from the capital also played a part and men who sought to enroll had to travel to St. John's to enlist and train.<sup>[14]</sup> Many travelled long distances, only to be rejected as medically unfit for service. These and other administrative issues caused enlistment difficulties throughout the war.

Early NPA recruiting efforts in the outports were often poorly handled and received mixed receptions. While they were welcomed and supported in some areas, in others, such as small communities along the southwest coast, recruiters faced sometimes hostile audiences who questioned the justification for the war. Patricia O'Brien argues that such negative responses led politicians to avoid further direct involvement in recruiting until the fall of 1917, undermining its effectiveness. Governor Davidson, politicians, NPA recruiters, and portions of the St. John's press seized on reports that distant communities knew little and cared less about the issues at stake in the war.<sup>[15]</sup> The widespread support for a Patriotic Fund, the country-wide success of the Women's Patriotic Association, and numerous reports of patriotic fundraisers in towns and tiny villages bring such blanket assumptions into question.<sup>[16]</sup>

While weak administration and disinterest undoubtedly affected rural enlistment, historian Chris Martin argues that authorities never fully acknowledged the impediments to enlistment posed by the social and economic foundation of the small fishing communities that made up most of rural Newfoundland.<sup>[17]</sup> In St. John's, as in other urban centres throughout the empire, recruiters could rely not only on patriotic fervour and social pressure, but on the need of working-class men for employment. In the outports, on the other hand, family production units relied on the physical labour of strong men. While clerks and factory workers might be replaced by women and older or less fit men, the same could not be done on small fishing boats or larger schooners in harsh North Atlantic waters. Families and small communities simply could not continue to exist without a core of young male workers.

Politicians could not completely ignore these socio-economic realities. Morris urged Davidson and the NPA to discourage enlistment by married men with dependants.<sup>[18]</sup> Similarly, when members of the Grenfell Mission offered to raise recruits in Labrador, authorities declined their help.<sup>[19]</sup> The government feared becoming responsible for servicemen's outport families, or dependants of the fishermen and trappers of sparsely settled Labrador.

## 1917: War Weariness, Dissent and National Government

In 1917, intense fighting at Monchy-le-Preux, Cambrai and elsewhere earned the regiment its royal designation, but high numbers of casualties seriously threatened its survival as a distinct unit. The 1,031 recruits for 1917 were surpassed by casualties of 1,202.<sup>[20]</sup> Even with lowered medical standards, rejection rates remained high.

At home, disruption of European fisheries and good catches improved fishermen's incomes, encouraging them to invest in new equipment.<sup>[21]</sup> Paying for these improvements required a continued supply of workers, another factor which mitigated against enlistment. In the city, workers' wages failed to keep pace with wartime inflation, and labour unrest grew. Working class leaders accused merchants, including many NPA leaders, of using wartime conditions to unfairly raise prices. In March, an official enquiry proved these suspicions correct.<sup>[22]</sup>

In the face of this unrest and with his mandate running out, Morris formed a coalition. In July 1917 Coaker and Liberal leader W. F. Lloyd (1864-1937), along with six other opposition members, formed a National Government, which extended its own life for one year. A Department of Militia under J. R. Bennett (1866-1941) assumed control of the war effort and the government announced measures for pensions and separation allowances. Responding to the demands of labour, it also initiated a war profits tax and created a food control board.<sup>[23]</sup> The new government hoped to avoid conscription, a policy widely unpopular in the outports and officially opposed by the FPU. Coaker threw his influence behind a recruitment drive in the fall. It produced 350 volunteers, but this was 150 short of the target.<sup>[24]</sup>

In spring 1918, after continued heavy losses sustained in the new [German offensives](#), the regiment was removed from the line. The Colonial Office warned that it would be broken up unless a draft of 300 men was raised immediately, with a steady supply of sixty recruits per month thereafter.<sup>[25]</sup> Returned soldiers organized and added their voices to the majority of the press and many other organizations throughout the dominion to demand conscription.<sup>[26]</sup> The government estimated that 10,000 single men were available for service.<sup>[27]</sup>

Jason Churchill argues that depicting conscription as a battle between St. John's and the outports ignores significant support throughout the country as well as opposition in the capital. He cites statements of support by outport branches of organizations such as the Loyal Orange Association and an anti-conscription resolution from the powerful St. John's Longshoremens' Protective Union. Nevertheless, his study of recruiting committee reports reveals significant dissent outside the capital.<sup>[28]</sup> Coaker maintained that had conscription been put to a referendum, it would have been defeated two to one.<sup>[29]</sup>

In April, a last-ditch recruitment campaign targeted rural Newfoundland. The new governor, [Alexander Harris \(1855-1947\)](#), appealed "especially to those of the outports."<sup>[30]</sup> Newspapers published tables comparing enlistment rates by electoral districts, arguing that some districts and towns were not doing their part. Veterans travelled throughout the country warning men that this was their last chance to volunteer. "Can you imagine what a reception Conscripts will receive from those brave lads of ours who for over three years have been bearing the brunt of battle?"<sup>[31]</sup> [Propaganda](#) from this period did not acknowledge the high outport contribution to the navy or the occupational requirements of fishing communities. It appealed to manly courage and the imperial sentiment of "Britain's oldest colony," but primarily stressed national pride: it would be unthinkable to allow the regiment to be disbanded. Between April and the enactment of conscription on 11 May, over 600 men enlisted.<sup>[32]</sup>

## 1918: Conscription, Dissent and Censorship

The War Measures Act, enacted in September 1914, gave the government wide discretionary [powers](#) to pass any measures deemed necessary for the war effort, including censorship of the press.<sup>[33]</sup> Until the end of 1917, newsmen had largely been left to censor themselves, but this changed in the new year. In January 1918, Morris suddenly resigned. Lloyd became prime minister, but Coaker was the dominant force in the new government, a circumstance unacceptable to many former People's Party representatives and the newspapers they controlled. By the time the legislature was set to reopen in April, the government's plan to introduce selective conscription was widely known. While the opposition press had been calling for such a measure for months, it strongly objected to the fact that the Military Service Act (MSA) was linked to one prolonging the government's life for another year. A St. John's weekly, *The Plaindealer*, criticized Coaker for reneging on a promised referendum on conscription and suggested that people should resist this

betrayal. The paper's main grievance was not conscription, but continued power for the "Coakerites." It even went so far as to implicate the new governor, for making himself "a consenting party to this violent assault upon the liberties of the people." The government censored copies of this issue.<sup>[34]</sup>

The MSA, enacted on 11 May, required unmarried men between ages nineteen and twenty-five to report to St. John's by 24 May, an unrealistic deadline given communication and administrative circumstances throughout the country.<sup>[35]</sup> Further delays were caused by the fact that men previously found unfit for service had to register for exemption. In two articles published on 23 and 28 May, the St. John's *Daily Star* complained that inefficiencies led to delays at the exemption tribunals causing "unnecessary tying up of men and consequent crippling of the country's industries."<sup>[36]</sup> The government not only seized the two offending issues, but shut the paper down. *The Star* brought the matter to the Supreme Court, arguing that its criticism was valid and its shutdown not justified by the War Measures Act. The court agreed and ordered the release of the company's building and press.<sup>[37]</sup>

After this defeat, the government imposed harsher censorship regulations. Stories touching on shipping, conscription, the local (Victory) loan, the regiment, or the conduct of army or navy affairs had to be submitted to a new press censor. *The Telegram* protested this imposition of "Prussian" methods, arguing that the press was being "bludgeoned into servile submission."<sup>[38]</sup> *The Star* complained that *all* criticism was being quashed and that they were forbidden to publish stories which appeared in the government press.<sup>[39]</sup> Clearly, from 1918 on, the government attempted to use wartime censorship not only to facilitate conscription, but also to suppress political dissent.

The newspapers were not alone in opposing conscription, but for the most part people worked within the law. Men sought exemption based on the fact that they had one or more brothers serving, and others claimed medical disability. Most commonly, fishermen, their parents, or their employers argued that their labour was required for the fishery. Even whole fishing communities made appeals for accommodation. The "people of Change Islands and Fogo" telegraphed the Colonial Secretary that they were ready to leave for the northern fishery but could not be cleared because some of their crew were of military age. They claimed that at least some of these men were medically unfit. The Colonial Secretary forwarded the message to the head of the Military Service Board, suggesting the local doctor be authorized to determine fitness. He noted that, "The vessels from that locality sail about this time of year to the northern parts of the Island and to the Straits of Belle Isle and delay now means great loss to them."<sup>[40]</sup>

Joseph Seviour of Harbour Main similarly complained that he had already spent \$7,000 outfitting his schooner for the Labrador fishery but could only get six of the eight men he needed and two of those were of military age. He maintained that the issue went beyond his own interests. "Cannot something be done whereby loss, not alone to the individual but to the country as well, could be avoided in the matter of the fishery?"<sup>[41]</sup>

The 1911 census showed that just over 55 percent of adult males were engaged in the fishery.<sup>[42]</sup> By 1918, they were making unprecedented incomes. Catches were good and exporters also profited as disruptions in the European fisheries increased demand for Newfoundland cod. Furthermore, manufacturing and other industries were affected by conditions in the fishery. By 1918, it would have been pointless to enact conscription and exempt fishermen. Nevertheless, it is not hard to understand the logic of those who argued that depleting the fishery of its labourers could not only ruin individual families, but also undermine the country's whole economy.

In June, squads of police and deputized veterans were authorized to arrest suspected defaulters. As they moved through communities like the press gangs of old, news that they were coming usually led men to enlist or apply for exemption. They reported only two incidents of significant opposition, and these were quickly diffused. Near the fishing communities of Flatrock and Torbay, men threatened them, but fell in line after a few arrests. The police feared violence would erupt in Bonavista, where men paraded to protest the MSA. They arrested the leader for failing to enlist and inciting eight others to do the same. The other men were given the opportunity to enlist and did so, but the leader was sentenced to two years in prison.<sup>[43]</sup>

Some newspapers reported additional acts of resistance, but other sources disputed them. Under the dramatic heading "Sedition," for example, the *Evening Telegram* reported that in Wesleyville, a town in the heart of FPU territory, opponents of conscription disrupted a patriotic concert and left church when the preacher urged compliance with the MSA.<sup>[44]</sup> The FPU's *Advocate* accused the opposition press of gloating over such reports for political gain.<sup>[45]</sup> The highly political nature of the press by this point, combined with stricter censorship, makes it hard to verify some of these reports. There was clearly opposition to conscription, but resistance appeared mild, isolated, and short-lived. In the end, of the estimated 10,000 eligible men, 4,183 enlisted and 4,633 applied for exemption, leaving only about 10 percent who did not comply with the MSA.<sup>[46]</sup>

None of these conscripts saw action. In August, Bennett reported that the regiment was back up to strength and because the fishing season was "exceedingly backward," men formerly ordered to report by 1 September were placed on leave until 15 October. By then, the country was in the grips of the Spanish Flu epidemic and leaves were extended for another month. After 11 November, the government dropped any pending action against defaulters and released the few men who had been imprisoned "to allow everyone concerned to get back as quietly and as quickly as possible to their ordinary avocation."<sup>[47]</sup>

## Conclusion

The initial decision to establish a distinct unit of Newfoundland soldiers within the British army shaped many decisions which followed. Focus on the Newfoundland Regiment downplayed the significant contributions of rural Newfoundlanders to the Royal Navy and other Newfoundland and allied forces. In the final two years of the war, outport men also comprised a majority of new enlistees in the

regiment. Nevertheless, many of the country's leaders and returned men, as well as the majority of the press, maintained that they had not done enough. Ultimately, conscription did not impact the country's military effort. The regiment was maintained as a distinct unit made up exclusively of volunteers. This effort, however, was costly in men and money and it intensified pre-existing class and regional tensions throughout the country.

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## Notes

1. ↑ O'Brien, Mike: Out of the Clear Sky. The Mobilization of the Newfoundland Regiment, in: Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 22/2 (2007), pp. 403-405.
2. ↑ O'Brien, Patricia: The Newfoundland Patriotic Association. The Administration of the War Effort, 1914-1918, Master's Thesis, Memorial University 1981.
3. ↑ O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, pp. 23-25.
4. ↑ Ibid., pp. 5, 17.
5. ↑ Cadigan, Sean: Death on Two Fronts. National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914-34, Toronto 2013.
6. ↑ Gogos, Frank: The Royal Newfoundland Regiment in the Great War. A Guide to the Battlefields and Memorials of France, Belgium, and Gallipoli, St. John's 2015, pp. 30-31.
7. ↑ Sharpe, Christopher: The "Race of Honour". An Analysis of Enlistments and Casualties in the Armed Forces of Newfoundland, 1914-1918, in Newfoundland Studies 4/1 (1988), pp. 29, 32, 34.
8. ↑ Ibid., p. 43.
9. ↑ O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, pp. 103-104.
10. ↑ O'Brien, Mobilization 2007, pp. 404, 406.
11. ↑ Martin, Christopher: The Right Course, the Best Course, the Only Course. Voluntary Recruitment in the Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1918, in: Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 24/1 (2009), pp. 60-61.
12. ↑ Sharpe, Race of Honour 1988, pp. 37-39.
13. ↑ Harding, Robert: Glorious Tragedy. Newfoundland's Cultural Memory of the Attack at Beaumont Hamel, 1916-1925, in: Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 21/1 (2006).
14. ↑ Martin, Recruitment 2009, p. 61.
15. ↑ O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, p. 112.
16. ↑ Ibid., pp. 211-215.
17. ↑ Martin, Recruitment 2009, p. 56.

18. ↑ Ibid., p. 59.
19. ↑ Ibid., p. 64.
20. ↑ Ibid., pp. 75-75.
21. ↑ O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, pp. 171-172.
22. ↑ O'Brien, Mike: Producers versus Profiteers. The Politics of Class in Newfoundland during the First World War, in: *Acadiensis* 40/1 (2011), pp. 60-63.
23. ↑ Ibid., pp. 281-293.
24. ↑ Ibid., p. 288.
25. ↑ See, for example, *Evening Telegram*, 11 April 1918.
26. ↑ *Evening Telegram*, 6 April 1918.
27. ↑ O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, p. 308.
28. ↑ Churchill, Jason: Of Fighting "Baymen" and "Townies". Towards a Reassessment of the Newfoundland Conscription Crisis 1917-1918, in: *Canadian Military History since the 17th Century*, Ottawa 2001.
29. ↑ Coaker's speech was reported approvingly in the FPU's newspaper. *Evening Advocate* 16 May 1918.
30. ↑ *Evening Telegram*, 11 April 1918.
31. ↑ *Evening Telegram*, 10 April 1918.
32. ↑ While it could not be known at the time, these volunteers were enough to maintain the regiment until the Armistice. O'Brien, The Newfoundland Patriotic Association 1981, p. 319.
33. ↑ See *Daily Star*, St. John's 12 October 1915.
34. ↑ *The Plaindealer*, 27 April 1918.
35. ↑ Military Service Act, in: *Evening Telegram*, 20 May 1918.
36. ↑ *Daily Star*, 23 and 28 April 1918.
37. ↑ *Daily Star*, 10 June 1918.
38. ↑ *Evening Telegram*, 8 June 1918.
39. ↑ See for example, *Daily Star*, 27 August 1918.
40. ↑ Rooms Provincial Archives (RPA), St. John's, GN2.14 Box 11, 105, Military Service Board, Conscription and Exemptions, Colonial Secretary to Chairman, Military Service Board, 15 May 1918.
41. ↑ Ibid., Joseph Seviour to Colonial Secretary, 4 June 1918.
42. ↑ Calculated from figures in *Census of Newfoundland and Labrador 1911, St. John's 1914*, pp. xxiii and 484-487, issued by HathiTrust, online: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3885787;view=1up;seq=29> (retrieved: 23 July 2019).
43. ↑ RPA, MG632, Patriotic Association of Newfoundland, File 22(e), Report, Military Service Board, 1 April 1919. See also *Evening Telegram*, 2 July 1918.
44. ↑ *Evening Telegram*, 16 May 1918.
45. ↑ *Evening Advocate*, 18 June 1918.
46. ↑ Report, Military Service Board, 1 April 1919.
47. ↑ Ibid.

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