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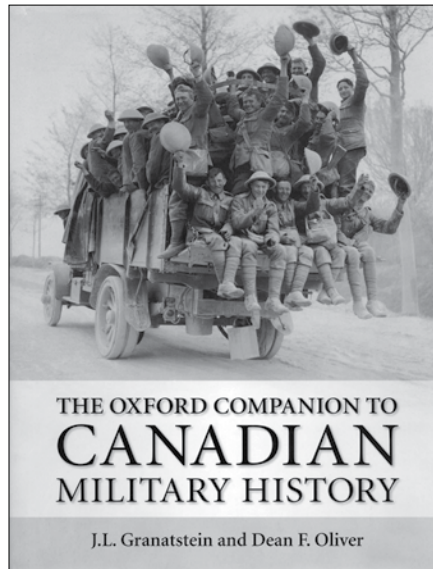
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# The Canadian Home Front in the First and Second World Wars

## The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History

J.L. Granatstein and Dean F. Oliver

With its population of some eight million and with only a rudimentary industrial base, Canada was completely unprepared for war in August 1914, unprepared psychologically, militarily, and organizationally. No such conflict had happened before, and no one in government or out could have contemplated the reality of the next four years of war. Those who thought ahead in that summer of 1914 envisaged a few short, sharp battles on land, the triumph of Britain's Royal Navy at sea, and a triumphal march into Berlin led by the French,



along by uncompromising appeals to patriotism and by the moral certitude of a just cause and an imminent victory.

The economy was in the doldrums when war began, and the inevitable interruptions of trade made matters worse. It took a year or more before the war-induced boom began to take hold, grain exports increased, and the first munitions were sold. Canada's

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Résumé : Nous étions conscients d'à peine aborder le sujet des guerres mondiales au pays. La concision reflétait en partie l'état de la recherche : les nombreux sujets, petits et grands, que des générations d'historiens n'ont pu éclaircir, ou ceux pour lesquels les légendes populaires, défendues avec passion, laissent peu de place aux analyses sereines. Nous nous sommes aussi en partie censurés afin d'éviter de répéter ce qui figurait ailleurs dans l'ouvrage. Même en mesurant notre prose, nous avons couvert beaucoup de terrain, quoique, sans doute – pour la Première Guerre mondiale en particulier – insuffisamment. L'industrie, les femmes, l'histoire locale, l'économie, la défense du pays, la gouvernance, l'administration et les politiques du temps de guerre, et ce pour les deux guerres, méritaient tous davantage d'attention que ne le permettaient le temps et l'espace. Ces sujets se classent parmi les principaux défis auxquels nous avons dû faire face dans cet ouvrage.  
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**Abstract: On the world wars at home, we were conscious of just scratching the surface. In part, brevity reflected scholarship: the many issues, great and small, that generations of historians have failed to elucidate, or those on which popular myth, passionately argued, still crowd out sober judgement. In part too, we self-censored, trying not to repeat entries elsewhere in the book. Even in skimming trees we covered plenty, although arguably – especially for World War I – not quite enough. Industry, women, local history, the economy, home defence, governance, administration, and wartime politics in both wars could all stand more room than time and sheaf space easily allowed. Of the summative challenges we faced in the book, these entries were among the greatest.**  
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Russian, and British armies. The only question in most minds was whether the Canadian volunteers would get to the front in time to test their mettle before the German Kaiser's Prussian hordes had run up the white flag in precipitous surrender. The justness of the cause was unquestioned and Canada, as a British colony, was in the war at once, bound legally by Britain's declaration of hostilities. Even in Quebec, especially Montreal, where pro-imperial sentiment found less popular traction and fewer vocal advocates among francophones, there seemed initially to be little doubt. Across the country, young Canadians hurried to sign up, hustled

# BIG GUNS OF THE HOME FRONT



**ACTION STATIONS** *Everyone*

Canadian War Museum 20010129-0593

production of artillery shells, after November 1915 wholly controlled by the Imperial Munitions Board, would amount to over \$1 billion worth, a huge sum by any standard. The war eventually created labour shortages as men went into the army and factories went on double shifts, and workers, male and female, came to the cities from rural areas. That, in turn, created a farm labour shortage that left farmers, struggling to plant and then bring in crops that could command good prices for once, desperate for help. Wartime inflation pushed up the price of food, leading city dwellers, many of them earning better wages than before the war, to curse farmers for their financial opportunism and supposed failure to enlist for military service. The wartime calls for "A New National Policy" of lower tariffs and the postwar rise of farmer progressivism had their roots in this strain.

Another factor was conscription. To farmers, compulsory military service meant that even less labour would be available for their use. Their argument that food was as much a war-winning weapon as armaments was true enough, but it received little broader credence in the feverish atmosphere of 1917. Victory then was everything, and Canada needed every recruit it could possibly find to be at the front. Including French-speaking Canadians? That was a problem. Quebec, while happy enough to operate war factories, was not sending volunteers to the army in anything like the numbers of English Canada. There were no hard data available for public discussion, but none truly believed that francophone volunteers amounted to more than 25,000 or so, if that. Québécois nationalists noted, with some justice, that Canada's enlistment figures were badly skewed: it was the British-born who were enlisting, they argued, and not the English-speaking Canadian-born. Moreover, the language of the army was English, there



**The Rod Turner – Frances Loring**

were almost no French-speaking senior officers, Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes was an Orangeman who hated Catholics, and the real threat to French Canada lay in Ontario where Regulation 17 forced English on French-speaking

children. Why should French Canadians enlist to fight the Prussians when it was in Ontario that the French language was actually threatened?

The passage of the Military Service Act in August 1917 and the imposition of conscription split the country. The farmers won sweeping exemptions just before the election; the francophones did not. Both would be called up wholesale when the Germans' 1918 offensives threatened to win the war. For good measure, the Borden government guaranteed itself election victory when its Military Voters Act and its Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to soldiers to use where most helpful for the government, took away the votes of recent immigrants, and granted them to women relatives of soldiers. The December 1917 election also hit a new low in racism, Quebec being damned as a slacker province and Liberal leader and anti-conscription stalwart Sir Wilfrid Laurier as the Kaiser's henchman.

The vote for women may have been an election-winning tactic in 1917, but it was also implemented in recognition of the role women had played in the war. Working in factories, replacing men as tram drivers, knitting socks for soldiers, or working in the fields, women had earned the vote. Other social reforms also moved quickly forward in the hothouse atmosphere of the war. Prohibition was necessary so scarce alcohol could be used for munitions. Income taxes came into place to make those who earned most carry their share of the war's costs. Implemented in 1917 after the Americans came into the war and imposed it on their citizens, food rationing in theory meant that scarce goods could be more equally shared. And the state intruded into hitherto forbidden areas: for example, as venereal disease spread rapidly, keeping men from the front, Ottawa

and the provinces entered into their first shared cost program to counter it.

The war created an enormous gap between those at home and those who fought. The bitterness of returning soldiers in 1919, their rage against the French Canadians, the immigrants, the profiteers, the slackers, embittered Canadian life for a generation. It divided city from country, French from English, worker from management, and young from old in ways that sparked regional resentment, political division, and social and labour conflict. This was true even as Canadians celebrated justly their achievements in arms, the return of their heroes, and the role claimed by the Dominion in imperial affairs as the result of its wartime efforts. Remembrance and commemoration were civic duties even as tight-fisted governments

shrank the military, reduced budgets, and struggled to ensure that payments to veterans did not crush the exchequer. Close-lipped old soldiers might choose to forget the war that those who were not there never understood, but its scars and impacts echoed through the interwar period just the same. Conscription in the Second World War was an issue precisely because of the memories of the First World War. Because of the 1914–1918 experience, the public and the government had some sense of what might be expected.

Canada in 1939 was still caught in the Great Depression with unemployment high and the economy groaning. There was no enthusiasm anywhere for the coming war, certainly not in French Canada or on the farms across the nation. The wave of public

enthusiasm that greeted the Munich agreement of September 1938 – the pact that stripped the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia in a triumph of Anglo-French appeasement – demonstrated that such sentiments were far more widely shared than in 1914. There was also growing fear that appeasement would not be enough. The very real sense that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were a menace to democracy increased sharply when Hitler tore up the September agreements by marching into Prague in March 1939. War in Europe was coming; Japanese expansion in China and its growing naval power suggested, especially to those living along the vulnerable West Coast, that it might not be long in engulfing the Pacific either.

The public's attitude at the beginning of the war in Europe in

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**Forging 6-inch Shells, Toronto – George Reid**

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**Top left: Mackenzie King and members of the Cabinet broadcasting messages to the Canadian people following the special emergency Cabinet meeting following Great Britain's declaration of war, 3 September 1939. From left to right, C.G. Power, Ernest Lapointe, Mackenzie King, and Norman Rogers.**

**Bottom left: C.D. Howe was the minister of munitions and supply during the war, but his galvanizing spark made him Canada's "minister of everything."**

Library and Archives Canada C-084023



declaration of war on 10 September, one week after Britain, demonstrated autonomy, appeased the imperialists, and mollified – more or less – critics in Quebec. Whether the country's national interests were yet at stake in a war in Europe was another question entirely.

In effect, Canada had played no part in prewar diplomacy, and went to war when Britain did for much the same reasons as in 1914. The nature of the German regime (and that of Italy and Japan as well) would become truly apparent only later, despite growing public evidence, much of it disgracefully ignored in Canada as elsewhere, of the plight of Europe's Jews. The extent and pace of fascist ambitions could no longer be denied in September 1939, however, and these surely were worth opposing, even for former proto-isolationists like King. Anglo-Canadian opinion would never have countenanced non-involvement in any case, and King was always aware of the strength of this view. A wily prime minister had made a wise call at the right time for the right reason; that he could have done no less was beside the point. Political adroitness notwithstanding, entering the war was one thing; fighting it was another.

Mackenzie King's war was initially to be one of "limited liability." Canada would do its part but it would not risk tearing itself asunder by virtue of its effort, as it had in the First World War. The prime minister would have preferred not to send an army division overseas early in the

September 1939 was one of fearful resignation. The memory of the terrible casualties of the First World War hung heavily over the country, and in Quebec the scars of the 1917 conscription crisis were still fresh. For Prime Minister Mackenzie King, the wartime task was to bring Canada into and through the war undivided, or at least substantially less divided than in the earlier struggle. He had to bring Quebec along as Canada entered the war against Germany, while managing the enthusiasms of more imperialistic Canadians who would, then as before, press Ottawa for automatic commitments and maximal efforts on behalf of the mother country. He could not – and did not want to – dissociate Canada from the British position, nor could

he endorse it so closely or so soon as to divide his party, his base of support in Quebec, or his ability to conduct the war at home. The Statute of Westminster of 1931 made Canada autonomous in foreign policy, but the statute's powers had yet to be tested. King's answer in September 1939 as British and French ultimatums to Germany for its retreat from an invaded Poland expired and the great powers marched again to war, was to call Parliament, permitting Canadians, at least nominally, to decide if their country should join the war. The result of the discussion was preordained and entirely academic, given his party's strength in the House and the Conservatives' united support for hostilities, but the week-long delay, leading to a

struggle, but his Cabinet insisted. Even so, King forced the British to agree that the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), huge and expensive as it was, would be Canada's primary role. Nor would there be any conscription for overseas service. King had promised this in March 1939 (as had the Opposition leader, Dr. R.J. Manion), and he repeated it in September. These attitudes persisted into the spring of 1940, long enough for the Liberals to be re-elected in a landslide. But the Germans swallowed Denmark and Norway in April and stunningly crushed the Low Countries and France in May and June. Britain was now alone, Canada and its 11 million people now its major ally. The budget caps on war expenditures came off, the economy began to hum, and Canada was wholeheartedly in the war. C.D. Howe, hitherto the transport minister, became the minister of munitions and supply, and "C.D." provided the galvanizing spark. He would become Canada's "minister of everything."

He did not have much to work with. There were at least 400,000 unemployed and one million on relief in 1939, while only 3.8 million had gainful employment, 2 million of those in agriculture. The gross national product (GNP) was \$5.6 billion, and government spending was in the range of \$680 million a year. The war altered matters dramatically: the GNP in 1945 was \$11.8 billion, more than double the prewar figure. Unemployment had disappeared and 5.1 million people had work, with 3.2 million in industry. The manufacturing sector had almost doubled in size, and war industry at its October 1943 peak employed 1.2 million men and women or 13.3 percent of the

population over 14 years of age. And, of course, 1.1 million men and women served in the wartime armed forces.

The government needed money to pay for the war's costs, and increased taxes provided much of it. Ottawa's authority was constrained by the British North America Act's separation of powers between the federal and provincial governments—until the federal budget of 29 April 1941 announced Ottawa's intention to levy the taxes required to fund the war, paying to every province that agreed to surrender its income, corporate, and succession taxes an annual payment equal to its previous revenues from these fields. This was to be a voluntary agreement, Ottawa pronounced piously, but any province that failed to agree could face the burden of saddling its citizens with double taxation. There were pro forma protests, but the provinces caved in. The Dominion-Provincial Taxation Agreement Act, 1942 formalized the deal. The government now had the taxation room it needed to fight the war. Excise, sales, and retail purchase

taxes were increased or imposed. Raw tobacco faced a ten cents a pound levy, cigarette taxes increased from \$5 to \$6 a thousand; cameras, photographs, and radio tubes had a ten percent tax added to their cost, and a luxury tax on virtually all entertainment added 20 percent to the cost of movies and sporting events. A War Exchange Tax, ordinarily 10 percent, raised revenue and deterred unnecessary imports, thus preserving scarce US dollars.

The rates of corporation and income taxes increased dramatically. At the beginning of the war, a married man with two children paid no income tax at all unless he was in the upper brackets; if he earned \$3,000, his income tax was \$10. Four years later, after tax increases had squeezed hard, the \$3,000 a year man was paying \$334 in income tax and an additional amount of \$1,200 in "compulsory savings," a surcharge in the form of a loan to be repaid at the end of the war. The ingenuity of the federal finance department was almost as unlimited as the government's need for



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**Performing One Half of the Operation Known as "Applying the Tracks" to a Valentine Tank – Frederick Taylor**

money. Corporation taxes increased from 18 to 40 percent, generating \$636 million—or nearly half of all corporate profits—in 1943. Excess profits taxes produced more revenue. All profits in excess of 116 2/3 percent of standard profits (the average of profit from the not-so-buoyant years from 1936 to 1939) were taxed at 100 percent. Corporations, however, were to receive a 20 percent rebate after the war. “No great fortunes,” the finance minister said, perhaps with more optimism than was justified, “can be accumulated out of wartime profits.” High corporate and personal taxes, while they did not stop some from getting rich out of the war, tried to ensure that a measure of equal treatment prevailed. So too did the freeze on prices and wages, imposed in October 1941. From September 1939 to the imposition of wage and price control, the cost of living went up 17.8 percent; but, for the rest of the war, the increase was only 2.8 percent, the most successful record of fighting inflation among all the belligerents. Essentially, the managers of the wartime economy had learned from the errors of The First World War: they taxed heavily and managed inflation, and the nation and the war effort benefitted. With all this money coming in, wartime spending in Ottawa reached well above \$5 billion in 1945, almost nine times 1939 spending.

Production increased dramatically in every sector of the economy between 1939 and 1945. Good weather helped produce bumper crops of grain – 556 million bushels of grain in 1942, every bit of which found a market at home or overseas. Pork production more than doubled while beef rose by one-third and agricultural exports rose threefold. In the iron and steel industries, pig iron and steel ingot production more than doubled over the course of the war, and a nation that in 1939 had built no merchant ships, by 1944 had put 345 into the

water; aircraft production reached 14,700 by the beginning of 1945; and Canada’s auto plants turned out 45,710 armoured vehicles and 707,000 military trucks of all kinds. The Canadian army ran on these vehicles, and so too did much of the British army.

The total of war production in Canada was \$10.9 billion by 1945, placing Canada fourth among the Allies with one-seventh of total Commonwealth production. The Canadian military used only a third of this bounty, and so rich had Canada become (and so short of hard currency to pay for anything were Britain and its Empire) that virtually all the remainder was given away as gifts to Britain, or as Mutual Aid to Britain and the Allies. Mutual Aid was the Canadian equivalent of the Americans’ Lend-Lease, and in percentage terms was more generous. But there was self-interest here too: war production in Canada was an investment in full employment and in infrastructure-building at home.

Canada was at war, straining every sinew for victory but, extraordinarily, the country had never been so prosperous. There was work for everyone – fathers, mothers, daughters – with as much overtime available in the factories as individuals could handle. Average wages increased dramatically, rising from \$956 in 1938 to \$1,525 in 1943. People had the money to eat better than they had during the Depression, even if food rationing put limits on what meat, butter, sugar, coffee, tea, as well as appliances, autos, gasoline, and other commodities were available. But if Canadians could not buy everything they wanted, they could save for the future. The government sold \$12.5 billion in Victory Bonds that everyone purchased (down to children spending 25 cents on war savings stamps), and every bond drive was oversubscribed. At the same time, bank accounts increased, a cushion

for the expected postwar downturn. Many flirted with the black market, trying to get meat or gas or auto tires, but the government’s Wartime Prices and Trade Board kept careful watch on profiteers.

Everyone worried about their husbands, sons, and brothers in action overseas, but Canadians listened to the radio – Lorne Greene reading the CBC news was “the voice of doom” but Bert Pearl and “The Happy Gang” offered good fun and music – and their kids followed the adventures of “L for Lanky” about the crews of Bomber Command when they were not collecting tin cans, fruit baskets, or milkweed pods for recycling and war purposes. Teenage girls put on bobby socks while city boys wore zoot suits with big shoulders and an exaggerated drape in the pants that somehow defied clothing rationing, and some zoot-suiters fought with servicemen over girls. Most young people danced to swing at large dancehalls or listened to Glenn Miller records. Parents worried about their daughters having sex or, worse, an illegitimate child in an era before birth control was reliable, while others fretted over hasty wartime marriages and feared that divorce would rise high enough to shake the social order. A wife with a husband overseas worried that he was having affairs with English women (and later Italian, French, Belgian, Dutch, and German women). Their servicemen spouses feared that slackers and the “zombies,” as home defence conscripts were called derisively, could be preying on their lonely wives. Certainly there was immorality and many marriages foundered under the stress of long absence (some soldiers in the 1st Division were away from Canada

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**Opposite: “Loyal citizens do not hoard”  
– Rationing signs in the window of a  
Montreal shop, May 1942.**

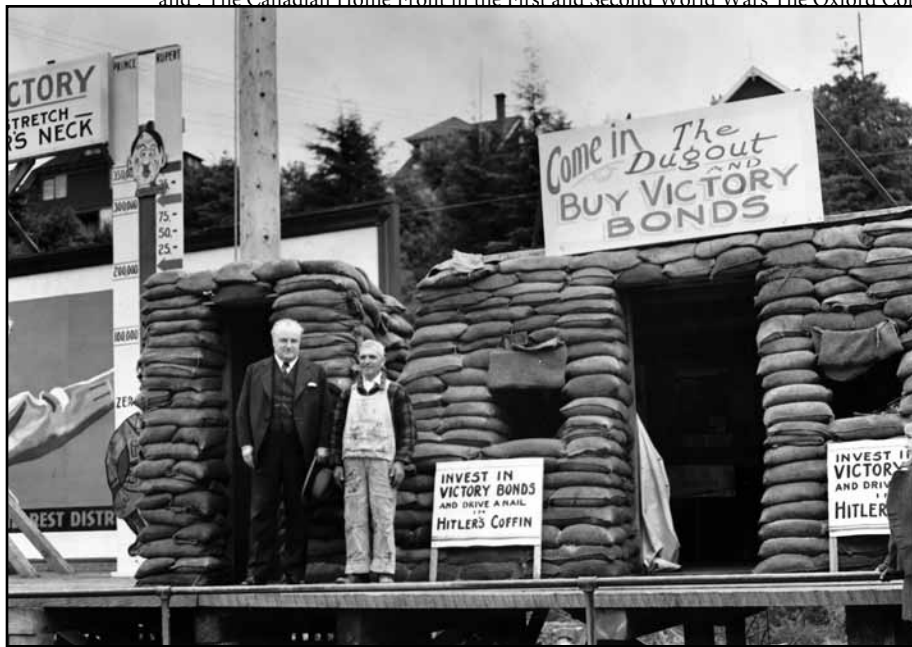
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*Loyal citizens  
do not hoard,*

**RATIONED**  
**SUGAR**  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. a week  
PER PERSON  
**TEA**  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the usual  
PURCHASE  
**COFFEE**  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the  
USUAL PURCHASE

Library and Archives Canada PA 95708



**Top left: “Invest in Victory Bonds and Drive a Nail in Hitler’s Coffin” – Selling Victory Bonds in Prince Rupert, BC, 1941.**

**Below left: Ram tanks in production at the Montreal Locomotive Works, July 1942.**

Library and Archives Canada PA 803922



men, serving in uniform, opened up jobs to women that had been unimaginable in 1939 – from street car drivers to aircraft designers – and 1.4 million women were employed, a participation rate of almost one in three, at the wartime peak in 1945. When the war ended and the men came back, many, but not all, of those jobs disappeared. Later feminist scholars notwithstanding, most women wanted to escape the factory to have a home after the war, along with a husband and a family, and to live what was seen as a normal life. Labour participation rates for women never returned to their prewar levels just the same. For women as for men, the struggle had been transformative.

Unionization increased dramatically, with government clearing the way with an order-in-council (PC 1007 of 17 February 1944) that confirmed employees’ rights to form unions and laid out the rules for defining and certifying bargaining units. Labour peace could keep vital production going, and where there were production bottlenecks and failures, one way around them was to create Crown corporations. A shortage of rubber? Set up a Crown company to produce synthetic rubber. Wood veneers for aircraft were in scarce supply? A Crown corporation could do the job. Machine tools? C.D. Howe’s Citadel Merchandising could get them and make sure they went where they were most needed. In all, 28 Crown corporations came into being during the war, some manufacturing, some purchasing and distributing, others supervising and controlling. The establishment of Crown companies, operating with

for six years), but most, like Canada, survived.

Doctors made house calls (but in wartime people could pay their fees as many could not in the 1930s) and they received extra gas coupons and access to tires so they could do so. Comic books, called “Canadian whites” because scarce dyes went to war production, reached young boys and girls, most about superheroes fighting evil Nazis or Japanese militarists. Clergymen and social workers worried about how the absence of fathers overseas might affect the way children developed,

and juvenile delinquency did show wartime increases, peaking in 1942. Life not only went on; it was better than before the war, even with almost everyone conscious of what was at stake.

The war changed Canada dramatically. Hundreds of thousands left rural Canada for the factories in the city, and housing in the cities and towns became a scarce and expensive commodity despite government rent control. Women began to work in war plants, sometimes bringing their babies along to daycare centres at the work site. The scarcity of

great flexibility outside the usual bureaucratic restraints, allowed for efficiencies. The Liberal government benefitted from all this economic success and public wealth. People complained and the Opposition suggested it could have done it all better, of course. But King and the Liberals seemed in control – and were.

There were still challenges to King's dominance. In September 1939, Premier Maurice Duplessis in Quebec called an election to protest what he saw as Ottawa's centralization of power, with the war as an excuse. King's Quebec ministers went into the fray and smashed the Union Nationale with their promises against conscription. In January 1940, Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn complained that Canada was doing nothing in the war and his legislature passed a condemnatory motion that King used as an excuse for a snap election of his own. He won massively, happily for him just before the war in Europe turned against the Allies. King soon had to pass the National Resources Mobilization Act, implementing home defence conscription, and his government moved quickly to squelch (relatively minor) protests in Quebec by locking up Montreal's showboat mayor, Camillien Houde, who had encouraged his citizens not to register. The question of conscription did not go away, with a conscription plebiscite in April 1942 and a major government crisis the next month, as well as a genuine reinforcement shortage in the fall of 1944 that came close to bringing the government down. King bobbed

Canadian War Museum 19930004-030



and weaved and sent 16,000 home defence conscripts overseas, but he held the government and country together in a fashion that guaranteed him his place among Canada's great leaders.

King also used the wartime opportunity to begin to put social welfare measures into law. In 1940, he secured provincial consent to amend the constitution and put Unemployment Insurance on the federal government's books, knowing that wartime full employment could fill the coffers so that benefits could be paid out when (no one thought it was if) bad times returned with peace. In 1944, with the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation showing strength in the opinion polls and forming the government in Saskatchewan and the Opposition in Ontario, King's government passed a family allowance bill,

giving mothers a monthly payment for each child; for many women, this was the first money of their own they had ever had, and it was intended to be used to buy milk, cribs, blankets, baby shoes, and a myriad of items that would keep farms and factories working after the war. This one scheme was to cost Ottawa almost half the total 1939 federal budget, an indicator of how the war had changed everything. And because Ottawa's mandarins feared a return of economic depression, there was a host of other plans designed to spend money to create jobs: a Veterans Charter to reward servicemen and servicewomen with clothing, money, and training; money for home building; money to convert industry to peacetime production; money for

great public projects; money for everything. It worked – the economic downturn all had expected did not materialize, and Mackenzie King and the Liberals won the 1945 election, narrowly, to be sure, but deservedly just the same.

This article originally appeared in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History* (2011) and is reprinted with the permission of Oxford University Press.

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