

BAPTISM BY FIRE

CANADA'S FIRST TERM ON
the Security Council

photo: UNAC

IN JANUARY 1948, FOR THE FIRST TIME, Canada took its seat as a rotating, two-year member of the UN Security Council. As things turned out, this first term covered a tumultuous period. From the South Pacific to western Europe, the post-World-War-II world was smouldering with crises and in some places aflame with armed conflict. In short, the Security Council, still less than three years old, was being tested by exactly the challenges it was designed to meet.

» In Europe, where the Cold War was setting in, the Soviet-engineered Communist coup in Czechoslovakia galvanized the Western nations into negotiating the Treaty that would create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Canada joined other Council members in a unanimous resolution — promptly vetoed by the U.S.S.R. — to investigate the coup.

Later in 1948, the Council had a shooting war on its hands: Britain withdrew from the Palestine Mandate, the UN recognized the new state of Israel, and a brief but bloody conflict ensued. Canada was one of eight Council members calling for an immediate UN-supervised cease-fire. Canadian Forces were later to participate in keeping the peace.

In South Asia, India and Pakistan were fighting over the disputed province of Kashmir. The Council adopted a resolution by Canada and five other members calling for a cease-fire. Canadian soldiers were subsequently part of a small UN unit sent to Kashmir to report on observance of the cease-fire, which came into effect on January 1, 1949.

In this period, one crisis in particular had the potential to ignite a third world war: 1948 and 1949 were the years of the Soviet blockade of Berlin and the Western airlift that defeated it. Canada was involved in Security Council attempts — ultimately futile — to defuse the crisis. When the 11-month blockade ended in June 1949, it was by U.S.-Soviet agreement.

A fourth challenge to peace loomed in the emerging nation of Indonesia, and it was here that Canada exerted its greatest influence. A precarious truce existed between the Netherlands and the forces fighting for independence. General Andrew McNaughton, serving as Council President, presented a Canadian resolution mapping out a plan for peace. When the move was predictably vetoed by the Soviets, McNaughton argued, in effect, that the veto did not matter since the Council had earlier approved the essential elements of the peace plan. It was a milestone of sorts — the first time in which a veto in the Council had made no difference. Peace and independence came to Indonesia in December just as Canada's two-year term was ending.

Apart from its role in these events, Canada played an influential part in shaping future UN approaches. In 1948-1949, the Security Council was still learning on the job about the challenges of keeping the peace in a polarized world. Through its pragmatic approach, which combined commitment with the art of the possible, Canada helped draw the template for the Security Council's dealings with future crises. And Canada itself came out at the end of its two-year term with a greater appreciation of the potential of the UN and a new determination to make it work. —