

in its own right was seen as a mark of the country's growing independence.

A test of the League's effectiveness came in 1931. Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria. The League of Nations, and Canada supported the decision, failed to defend China; Japan's aggression went unchallenged. The League and its members did not want to get tangled up in distant conflicts; they preferred to try to isolate themselves from any such adventures.

Four years later, the issue of one nation attacking another came up again: Italy, under the leadership of the dictator Benito Mussolini, invaded Ethiopia, which shared an ill-defined frontier with an Italian colony in East Africa. The League of Nations condemned Italy's aggression and brought in economic sanctions. League members were forbidden to trade with Italy in certain goods. However, coal, steel, and oil were not on the list of banned goods, and Italy's invasion would have collapsed without oil. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King summed up Canada's view of the somewhat half-hearted sanctions by saying that it was not Canada's job to "regulate a European War."

The prime minister was speaking as much to the audience at home as the international community. King was well aware of the unity problems within Canada that had been caused by involvement in foreign wars before. During the Boer War (1899-1902) the country had been split on sending soldiers to help Britain in its fight against the Afrikaners of South Africa. English Canada supported sending Canadian soldiers, French Canada was adamantly opposed. The same division appeared over whether or not to conscript soldiers to fight in the trenches of The First World War. The conscription crisis of 1917 almost tore the country apart. Prime Minister King did not want to see the country so seriously divided over another foreign involvement.

This same attitude prevailed in the years before The Second World War. Canada, along with other nations, believed that the best way to deal with Germany's Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was to make concessions to avoid an open conflict with him. When Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland, which had been lost to Germany after The First World War, the rest of the world did nothing. Then, Hitler took over Austria; again, the world stood by and watched. Next, in September 1938, came the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. The leaders of France, Britain, Germany, and Italy agreed, in Munich, that Hitler should be allowed to annex the Sudetenland as it was the home of many ethnic Germans. Canada was very supportive of the Munich agreement believing that Hitler only wished to unite Europe's German-speaking people.

When Hitler conquered the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the world realized his ambitions were not limited to reuniting the German people. Britain and France then offered to guarantee the sovereignty of other German neighbours. In September 1939, Hitler attacked Poland, triggering The Second World War.

Prime Minister King called Parliament into session and a declaration of war was passed. Canada, as a sovereign nation, was at war with Nazi Germany.

---

## Canada at war

---

King's pre-war policy of avoiding foreign entanglements that might threaten national unity had helped to heal the wounds that had been opened by the conscription issue of The First World War. Now, the Prime Minister faced another threat to stability in Canada. At the start of the war he promised there would be no conscription of soldiers to fight overseas. But would the Prime Minister be able to avoid conscription if the war dragged on for several years?

As it turned out, King had little time for reflection on the issue. The government of Maurice Duplessis in Quebec called a snap election in October 1939, within a month of the declaration of war. Ottawa, Duplessis claimed, was using the war as an excuse to grab power and to weaken Quebec's sovereignty. That challenge to the wartime authority of the federal government became the focus of the provincial election campaign.

Ernest Lapointe, the prime minister's Quebec lieutenant, and three other cabinet ministers from Quebec entered the election campaign. They repeated their promise that no one would be conscripted to fight overseas. To elect Duplessis, Lapointe and his colleagues contended, would undermine their authority to speak for Quebec. So they threatened to resign if Duplessis won, which would have removed all Quebec representation from the federal cabinet.

The tactics worked and Maurice Duplessis' government was defeated at the polls. But the conscription issue would not go away. By 1942, the need for more fighting men forced King to call for a national vote asking the people of Canada to release him and his government from their repeated promises not to bring in full conscription. In the plebiscite, English Canada overwhelmingly supported conscription. However, less than a third of Quebecers were in favour. Still, King was able to avoid the final issue until 1944. Losses in Europe made it imperative that conscripts be sent to make up the numbers. The Prime Minister ordered overseas 16,000 men who had been conscripted for duty in Canada only.

The outcry was nothing like the one that followed conscription in 1917. King had resisted drafting men overseas as long as possible and this was appreciated in French Canada. National unity had been bruised by the issue but not broken.

---

## Canada in a world of superpowers

---

The experience of The Second World War made it clear that no nation could stand outside the world community. Even if it took no part in making decisions it would be affected by them. The best course for Canada was to try to influence world decisions, as far as it was possible for a middle power to do.

During the war, Canada gained both experience and prestige as a result of its contribution to allied victory. Officials made contacts with the country's