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Canada and Two World Wars

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During the two World Wars, Canada was very active both on the World stage and at home. During this time, two different men lead the country and each faced several challenges, some that were very similar and some that were quite different. Robert Borden and William Lyon Mackenzie King, both dealt with their challenges and became known as some of the country's greatest leaders. Both wars would see Canada engulfed in a battle at home over conscription. The French-speaking citizens and farmers were against conscription during the First World War and the French would speak against conscription again during the Second World War. Conscription was not the only issue that both Borden and King had to face during their terms in office. Each man had to deal with many changing aspects of society and the fluctuating economy.

Robert Borden, who was born on June 26, 1854 in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia, served as the Prime Minister of Canada from October 10, 1911 to July 10, 1920. Little did Mr. Borden know that Canada would be pulled into a war in Europe just a few years later. The war would begin after a series of event beginning with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian Nationalist in June of 1914. Canada, along with Britain, declared war on Germany when they invaded Belgium. Canada made great sacrifices during this war by sending troops to Europe and by working hard at home to supply the war. Canada also housed prisoners of war during this conflict. One of the largest prisoner of war camps was in the town of Amherst, Nova Scotia. This camp, which was located just a few hundred feet from my home, housed many prisoners which included Leon Trotsky. "After his release, Leon Trotsky joined V.I.

Lenin in Petrograd, Russia, to lead the Bolshevik Revolution.”¹ These camps not only housed those captured during the war but also Canadian Immigrants. People from German and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were considered “enemy aliens” and had to report once a month to local authorities. Those that did not report would be arrested and sent to the prison camps.

The internment of these new Canadian immigrants was justified under the War Measures Act which was unanimously passed by Parliament in 1914. The War Measures Act also had control of the economy and disallowed people from holding meetings in their own homes. This was due to fears that an uprising of communism or fascism would occur in the country.

Conscription would dominate Prime Minister Borden’s problems during the war. In a very short period, thirty thousand volunteers were trained to fight for Canada. “Pleased by the enlistment results and anticipating a short war, Prime Minister Borden promised never to implement conscription.”² Everyone seemed to be anticipating that this would be a short conflict, many saying it would be over before Christmas. At first the recruitment process was very successful with more than three hundred thousand soldiers recruited. This would see a drastic change as munition factories and farmers demanded more help. The National Service Board was created to “determine whether

¹Francis, R. Douglas; Jones, Richard; & Smith, Donald B.; Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation (Harcourt Brace & Company, Toronto, 1996) p. 207

²Ibid p. 207

the services of any man of military age are more valuable to the state in his present occupation than in military duties and either to permit or forbid his enlistment.”³

However, as the war raged on Borden realized that conscripts might have to be used to supply the front with men to continue the fight. The recruitment process was poorly organized and it would drastically fall off after Borden promised to keep a large number of Canadian troops on the front. Conscription would go through but few of those that were conscripted would see combat because the war came to an end.

On the home front, Borden dealt with several issues. Women, who had been working in the public sphere to help with the war effort, were demanding better working conditions and more rights. He would give women the right to vote in the federal election, even though this was restricted to women who had a direct link to a soldier fighting in Europe. He did this in a hope to win the election which would give him the power to put conscription into effect. Borden also faced economical uprising from the Maritimes. Borden had caused the Maritimes, his home region of the country, to face difficult time when his government “decided to get rid of the anomaly of a Maritime-oriented railway once and for all.”⁴ This caused the economical destruction of several areas of the region. The town of Amherst, Nova Scotia, for example, would see several productive factories close or relocate to Central Canada.

³Ibid p. 215

⁴Forbes, E.R.; *The Origins of the Maritime Rights Movement; Readings in Canadian History: Post Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company Canada Ltd., Toronto 1998) p. 324

Borden's term in office would prove to be very difficult but he did push Canada into the World stage. During and after the war he pushed to have Canada recognized as sovereign from the rest of the British Empire. Canada would prevail and would become a member of the League of Nations.

William Lyon Mackenzie King, the grandson of William Lyon Mackenzie who led the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada, served as Prime Minister of Canada from 1921 to 1930 and from 1935 to 1948. He would face many of the same problems that were faced by Borden. King would pull Canada out of the Great Depression with the coming of the Second World War. The nation, like much of the world, was suffering from the stock market crash that occurred in October 1929, which started a chain reaction of economical strife. However, King was a very indecisive man and would never truly make a decision. King would promise a great deal of change. He would make Canada a welfare state with "measures to assist the unemployed, a national health-insurance scheme, old-age pensions, and children's allowance."⁵ These changes would not come into effect until after the war but they would change the face of Canada.

King would face similar issues to those faced by Borden. Conscription again being among the greatest of his challenges. Again conscription was a major issue in French-speaking areas of the country. King would not make a decision in this area and

⁵Francis, Jones, & Smith; Destinies p. 305

this would cause a great deal of division between the English and French in Canada. King did not use conscription but he did not say that he would not use it. A famous saying during the time was “conscription if necessary but not necessarily conscription.”⁶ However, the call for more soldiers did come and King could not keep his promise of no conscription. He began conscripting men to fight overseas but, once again, these men had no effect as the war quickly came to a close.

King also gained footing for Canada on the world stage. He brought the country closer to the United States of America with both the Ogdensburg Agreement and the Hyde Park Declaration. The Ogdensburg Agreement “created the Permanent Joint Board on Defense (PJBD), responsible for discussing military questions of mutual interest.”⁷ This would lead to Canada and the United States working together to defend North America from any foreign attack. The other deal that brought the two nations closer together was the Hyde Park Declaration. Great Britain was purchasing supplies from Canada but when the Americans offered the Lend-Lease Program, Canada fear that it would lose the money Britain was giving them for supplies. The States was going to lend the items to Britain and they could pay them later. Canada and the United States came to an agreement that Canada and the USA would trade freely with Britain picking up the bill. These two items brought the major nations of North America close and would cement a connection that still remains today.

⁶Ibid p. 297

⁷Ibid p. 298

Women played a different role to that of the previous war. This time around, women served in the armed forces. They worked not only as nurses and medical staff, like in the first war but in the offices as well. Women working in these jobs would free up men to serve in battle on the front lines. There were special divisions created for women in the army, navy and air force. Not all women served in the armed forces. At home, women were called to duty in the work place. They were needed to help supply the soldiers with ammunition and other supplies. Women would serve the war on two fronts, both in Canada and in Europe.

The nation did not get away without holding people prisoners during the war. This time Canadians were being held in the internment camps. "On 27 February 1942 the Canadian government announced plans to remove all persons of Japanese ancestry from the coastal region of British Columbia."⁸ They were forced to give up their property, which was sold off at bargain basement prices, as in the previous war with German-Canadians. These people were moved away from the coast after the Japanese attacked the American navy base of Pearl Harbor. This would bring the United States into the war but not before Canada declared war on Japan. During the next several months, twenty-two thousand Japanese were moved to camps in the interior of British Columbia or somewhere else in the country. There was a fear that Japanese submarines were patrolling the coastal waters and it was believed that some of the Japanese fishermen were sending them information. Among the families that

⁸Ward, W. Peter; *British Columbia and the Japanese Evacuation; Readings in Canadian History: Post Confederation* (Harcourt Brace & Company Canada Ltd., Toronto 1998) p. 398

were held in these camps was that of the famous Canadian scientist, David Suzuki. At this time he was a young boy.

As the war ended, Canada joined the United Nations and would grow more on the world stage. The country suffered great losses but also achieved many large steps on the road to becoming a world power.

Robert Borden and Mackenzie King faced similar issues and dealt with them in different fashions. They would have to deal with problems both at home and abroad during these two horrible wars. However, in each case these two men would prevail and lead the country into a much better situation as the wars winded down. Both men worked hard to make Canada stronger. You can look at their decisions and see that they were made to help keep them in power but without Mackenzie King and Robert Borden, where would Canada sit today?

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