

LIFE AT HOME

Back in Canada, the war changed everything.



Worker Cecilia Black in a war production factory in 1943.

WAR FACTORIES

By early 1940 the government realized Canada could produce weapons, planes, ships, trucks and ammunition not just for our war effort but for other countries, too. It set up a special department to make, buy and send out what was needed. Business leaders jumped in to help — they were known as “dollar-a-year men” because that’s what they were paid.

Canadian war production moved fast — more than half of it happened in factories that didn’t exist in 1939. About one-third of it was for Canada’s use; the rest went to Great Britain, the United States and other Allied countries. Canada, a small nation of 11 million people, ranked fourth in the world in what it produced for the war effort. Canada also supplied raw materials like nickel, zinc and asbestos. The Allies would have struggled to win the war without the work of Canadian industry.



Library and Archives Canada, Canadian War Museum



Men gathering hay at a farm service camp

FARMS GET GROWING

Producing enough grain, vegetables, meat, milk and more was so important that the Canadian government created the Agricultural Food Board. It organized what farmers grew and how their produce was turned into food as part of the country’s war effort. Sons of farm families and others who worked on farms did not have to serve in the military — their job was to keep things growing. Farms stayed productive through the work of soldiers who served in Canada, work crews who moved from farm to farm helping out, and even prisoners of war.



BEING A KID

Imagine what it would be like if you had been around during the Second World War. Your father and maybe an older brother would have been gone for years, fighting overseas while you and the rest of your family worried and waited for news. You might have seen unfamiliar men training in your home town, while many of the men you knew best were gone. You might have had one of the 7,000 kids sent here for safety from Great Britain in your class. And if you were from a German, Italian or Japanese family, you might well have been bullied, no matter how loyal you were to Canada.

UNITED/UNIS

Prime Minister Mackenzie King feared a repeat of the way the First World War divided Canada, when many French Canadians didn't want to fight on behalf of Great Britain. They were furious when they were forced to through a program known as conscription. King promised not to use conscription this time around, and many French Canadians volunteered to serve in the military, often in French-speaking units. Others chose to serve in Canada rather than overseas. But as the war dragged on, though, the government eventually broke its promise and brought in conscription.

Library and Archives Canada, Canadian War Museum

VERY FEW ENEMY SPIES WERE EVER CAUGHT IN CANADA. STILL, THE GOVERNMENT WARNED PEOPLE TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT ACCIDENTALLY REVEALING INFORMATION.



Although they took over important work from driving buses to welding steel, women like these Edmonton factory workers were paid much less than men doing the same job.

WORKING WOMEN

All over Canada, women's groups knitted countless socks, scarves, hats and sweaters to keep soldiers, sailors and air crews warm. They packed up canned food to send to Canadian troops and prisoners of war. Unmarried young women had to register with the National Selective Service, a government organization that sent them to work where they were needed most: farms, factories, transportation, construction and more. The NSS later expanded to include women who were married but did not have children. Thousands of people moved from the country to cities such as Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver to do war work. They needed a place to live, so women were pushed to rent rooms to these workers whether they wanted to or not. Government campaigns lectured wives and mothers to keep everyone happy, and especially not to bother men with household problems.

EATING TO WIN

With the country producing food both for Canadians at home and to send to military people and to other countries, the government decided to limit how much people could have of certain things so there would be enough to go around. This was known as rationing. Everyone was given a ration card with stamps that could be traded for food at a specific store. Starting in 1942, first sugar was rationed, followed soon after by coffee, tea, butter and meat. (The best meat was sent overseas to feed the soldiers.) There were strict rules and punishments. Imported food was harder to get because it took up room on ships that was needed for the war effort. Home-grown products such as apples and lobster were praised as patriotic — foods for people who loved their country and wanted to help feed Canada's allies overseas. The government encouraged young men to be healthy enough to serve in the war with slogans like “Eat right, feel right — Canada needs you strong!”



These people in London, England, are lining up to buy potatoes.



INDIGENOUS VETERAN CLARENCE SILVER ONCE SAID, “WHEN I SERVED OVERSEAS I WAS A CANADIAN. WHEN I CAME HOME I WAS JUST AN INDIAN.” FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS PEOPLE’S SERVICE IN THE WAR HELPED THE REST OF THE COUNTRY SEE THAT THE TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN CANADA HAD TO CHANGE.



A crowd in Montreal celebrating the end of the war.

HOME FROM THE BATTLE

After the war, the government passed the Veterans Charter, which ensured those who had served in the military were chosen first for government jobs. Many veterans — former military people — received farmland, education or a loan to start a business. But for tens of thousands of veterans, life back home was not easy. Many couldn't get rid of their terrible memories, while others had to live with missing arms or legs, or serious burns they suffered in the war. Not all veterans were treated well. Those who had served in the Merchant Navy were not considered full veterans by the government until 2000. And while people of all skin colours, religions and background had worked and fought side by side, back in Canada, racist attitudes returned. More than 4,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit people served in the war but couldn't even vote in their home country. Very few were given the benefits they should have received under the Veterans Charter.

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FROM INDIVIDUALS TO GIANT COMPANIES, CANADIANS INVESTED IN PROGRAMS KNOWN AS VICTORY BONDS, WAR BONDS AND WAR SAVINGS CERTIFICATES. THEIR MONEY WAS USED FOR THE WAR EFFORT AND RETURNED AFTER THE WAR ENDED.

FOREVER CHANGED

When the Second World War ended, Canadians could be proud of their contributions. Whether it was ordinary people at home, or at the front lines overseas, Canadians had played an essential part in winning the fight against the Axis powers. Their country was taking its place as an independent nation.

The hardships of war made Canadians realize they needed to look after each other. The government set up national programs such as unemployment insurance, which provided money to those who couldn't find a job, and the family allowance (often called the baby bonus) which helped families with the cost of raising a child.