Canada and World War 2 : Conscription 1942

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| [Anti-conscription rally in front of the Chateau Frontenac, Quebec City, Que. - Photo Credit:CWM Reference. Photo Collection (lcsh UB345.c2)](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/canadawar/p_conscription_e.shtml) Anti-conscription rally in front of the Chateau Frontenac, Quebec City, Que. |

**Politics and Government: Conscription**

Conscription, or compulsory military service, divided the nation in the Second World War and threatened the survival of political leaders. In 1939 Prime Minister Mackenzie King, conscious of the opposition of French-speaking Quebec to conscription in the First World War, promised that there would be no conscription for overseas service. By mid-1940, however, there was enormous pressure from English Canada for total mobilization of manpower. King introduced the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA), which called for a national registration of eligible men and authorized conscription for home defence. From April 1941 the young men called up were required to serve for the rest of the war on home defence duties.

But this was not enough for some in English-Canada, which provided the bulk of the volunteers for the armed forces. They had an uncomplimentary name for the NRMA conscripts, calling them "zombies" - the living dead, only half human, who peopled horror movies. Increasingly, there was pressure on the "zombies" to volunteer for overseas service.

With the entry of Japan into the war in December 1941 came further demands for overseas conscription. In a plebiscite of April 1942, King asked Canadians to release him from his 1939 promise. Overall, the "Yes" side won, with 64%, but Quebeckers voted 73% against and many other non-English-Canadians were also opposed. The NRMA was amended to allow conscription for overseas service, but for now King went no further because there were sufficient volunteers still available.

Fighting in Normandy after [D-Day](javascript:tooltip('../glossarypop_e.shtml#dday');) led to high casualty rates among the infantry. J.L. Ralston, Minister of National Defence, was convinced that it was essential to send conscripts overseas as reinforcements. When his Cabinet colleagues could not agree, King forced him to resign and turned to General A.G.L. McNaughton as the new Minister in a last-ditch effort to avoid conscription. But McNaughton too, despite his great prestige, was unable to find enough NRMA men willing to volunteer. On November 22, 1944, King was forced to reverse his position and order conscripts overseas.

Some 13,000 NRMA men eventually left Canada, but only 2,463 reached units in the field before the end of the fighting. 69 died in battle.

Source: <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/canadawar/conscription_e.shtml>