

The North Atlantic Triangle and Canadian 'Humanitarian' Policy

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Abstract

This article moves away from high politics and strategic policy to examine Canada's "humanitarian" foreign policy, with reference to Ottawa's involvement in Allied relief operations on behalf of prisoners in Europe and the Far East during the Second World War. When war broke out in 1939 Canada was the only Dominion not to comply with London's request that all communications with Washington be channelled through the Foreign Office. Instead Ottawa decided to establish direct relations with the United States Government in its capacity as Canada's "protecting power" with responsibility for representing Canadian interests in enemy territory. This situation obviously changed in December 1941, when the USA entered the war, but the "humanitarian" relationship between Ottawa and Washington grew even closer, a development that was mirrored, and to some extent reinforced, by closer cooperation between non-governmental relief agencies. However, Canada's tendency to put the interests of her own POWs before those of the USA or the British Empire underlined the tensions inherent within the North Atlantic Triangle.

Anyone reading John Brebner's classic text on the *North Atlantic Triangle* will quickly appreciate that when Brebner talked of a triangle, he did not have in mind a balanced, 'triangular' relationship between Canada, Britain and the United States. Rather, Brebner used the concept to capture the essence of what he saw as the unique interplay between the 'Siamese Twins of North America' on the one hand and the great external force which neither of these countries could entirely eliminate from their respective 'courses of action', the United Kingdom, on other.¹ A second striking feature of Brebner's analysis was the emphasis he placed on the political, strategic and economic interactions of the two North American states. His final chapter, on the descent into European and world war between 1932 and 1942 exhibits these preferences very well. While Ottawa's actions are seen within the context of British appeasement of Nazi Germany and subsequent wartime policies, Brebner gives special

consideration to the process that saw Canada's slow absorption into the U.S. orbit, and the defensive cordon it flung around the western hemisphere.²

Subsequent historians, attracted by the clarity and simplicity of Brebner's model, have considerably developed our understanding of these relations. Although they have enjoyed access to official and private papers denied to Brebner when he wrote his book. Historians have left Brebner's central motif intact: studies of the 'North Atlantic Triangle' have at their foreground the development of intimate U.S.–Canadian relations, based on an awareness of their common strategic, political and economic interests.³ Interpretations of this process have, of course, varied enormously. Some have viewed the Second World War as a period in which saw Canada tragically mortgaging its newly acquired independence for American tutelage. Others, by contrast, emphasize the propellant given to closer Canadian-U.S. cooperation by the waning of British power on the international stage.⁴ Still others have explained the North Atlantic Triangle in terms of the personal interaction of the principal *dramatis personae*: W. L. Mackenzie King, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill.⁵ Most recently, research has lifted the veil on the intimate Anglo-American-Canadian intelligence cooperation that developed over the course of the war.⁶ What unites these studies, and ties them to Brebner's initial thesis, is the attention given to political and strategic concerns. Their chronologies lead inexorably from Roosevelt's Kingston speech in August 1938 and the Ogdenburg and Hyde Park agreements of August 1940 and April 1941, to Canada's slow exclusion from Anglo-American war counsels, and the difficulties which arose out of the growing U.S. assertiveness in the Canadian Far North, Newfoundland and Greenland.⁷

This paper echoes Brebner in examining how the emergent U.S.-Canada relationship affected, and slowly overshadowed, Canada's traditional ties with Britain and the British Commonwealth. Where it diverges from the current historiography is its attempt to move away from the well-trodden path of high politics and strategic policy to look at what I will call Canada's 'humanitarian' foreign policy: in particular Ottawa's involvement in Allied relief operations on behalf of prisoners in Europe and the Far East. Discussion of this theme not only benefits from shifting attention away from the 'commanding heights' of the bilateral (or trilateral) relationship, but also provides further evidence of how the interests and aspirations of the United States and Canada converged over these years. An examination of this theme also sheds light on how Ottawa's embrace of its northern neighbour at an official level was mirrored, and to some extent reinforced, by closer cooperation between non-governmental agencies.

Canada's interest in POW policy arose from its responsibilities under the 'POW convention', one of two conventions concluded in Geneva in July 1929. Historians such as Jonathan Vance, the leading authority on Canadian POW policy, have tended to belittle Canada's role in the proceedings.⁸ Such a verdict is however unduly harsh, and overlooks the symbolic importance of Canada's presence at the conference. Those present clearly felt that Canada had earned the right to have its voice heard on such matters. It was widely acknowledged that Canadians knew a thing or two about fighting, and were well placed to evaluate the merits of the various proposals put before the conference. The contribution of the Canadian delegation was moreover not without significance. For foreign delegates Canadian interventions were all the more welcome given the undistinguished performance of their Dominion allies, whose sole contribution to the proceedings, according to one British observer, was to protest at the use of French as the official language!⁹ The Geneva conference and its resulting conventions thus provided Ottawa with an early opportunity to make its mark on the international stage: both as an experienced and responsible member of the international community, and as one capable of operating outside its traditional alignment within the British Empire. Ottawa tellingly delayed formally acceding to the convention until 1933; a full two years after the other parliaments of the British Empire had ratified the conventions.

Ottawa's distinctive approach towards the conventions—committed to the conventions' general principles, but alive to the importance of Canada's status as an independent signatory—was evident in Canadian behaviour when it again found itself at war in September 1939. In compliance with its obligations under the convention, appropriate machinery was immediately set up in Canada for processing and disseminating information about prisoners of war.¹⁰ The fact that a good part of this bureaucracy merely replicated the work of similar organs in London was not lost on Canadian officials, but since prisoner numbers remained low on either side until mid-1940, no one worried unduly about the obvious inanity in duplicating British practices. Of greater long term significance was Ottawa's decision to establish direct relations with the United States government in its capacity as Canada's 'protecting power' with responsibility for representing Canadian interests in enemy territory. No other Dominion government reserved this right, and instead willingly complied with London's request that all communications with Washington were channelled through the Foreign Office in London. The rationale behind Canadian policy was explained by Alfred Rive, head of the special section of the Department of External Affairs, and responsible for overseeing POW matters:

Although we try as closely as possible to follow parallel policies with the United Kingdom in dealing with the protecting power and *vis-à-vis* the enemy, it is necessary for us to diverge from the course followed by the United Kingdom. Such divergences of policy are generally imposed by political geographical or economic differences between Canada and the United Kingdom which it would be difficult for [British diplomats...] to keep in mind, even were [they] fully instructed.¹¹

It was not however merely political, geographical or economic differences that distinguished Canadian interests from those of the United Kingdom. The series of defeats in Norway, France and the Low Countries in 1940, and subsequent humiliation in Greece and Crete the following spring lost some 60,000 British soldiers to German captivity by the middle of 1941. Since Canadian forces played only a negligible part in these operations—Mackenzie King insisting that Canadian forces be held back in readiness for the cross-Channel invasion—only a handful, about twenty-five, Canadian nationals were captured by the end of 1941 while serving in Canadian units. It was not until the debacle at Hong Kong in December 1941, and the raids on St. Nazaire and Dieppe the following year that substantial numbers of Canadian servicemen fell into enemy hands. Before then, Canadian interest lay not so much in protecting its prisoners, but rather in defending the interests of its civilian population, of whom some two thousand found themselves in Europe in the summer of 1940 and had been interned by the German and Italian authorities. Not only did Britain have proportionally fewer civilian internees to worry about than Canada, but, as Norman Robertson, the head of the Department of External Affairs, explained to Mackenzie King in December 1941, there were two ‘special groups’ of Canadians whose fate gave rise to special consideration: the first were French Canadians, who made up about a third of the total, and second were the Canadians of Scandinavian descent, born or naturalised in Canada, and stranded in Europe after the German occupation of Denmark and Norway in April 1940.¹²

There is little doubt that Canadian nationals in enemy hands reaped considerable advantages as a result of Ottawa’s insistence on conducting its own negotiations with the German government through the good offices of their protecting powers. An exchange was arranged for two trade officials, captured with their families in Oslo in April 1940. Relief payments were made to over 1,200 Canadians living in occupied Europe, and Berlin was persuaded to treat Canadians as a separate category, and release Canadian women from internment camps, where they had languished, together with other ‘British’ nationals, since the start of the war. Ottawa even managed to exchange eight

women, captured after their ship, the SS *Zam Zam*, had been torpedoed *en route* to South Africa.¹³ Ottawa's experience with civilian internees convinced Canadian officials that while there were undoubted advantages in maintaining imperial unity, there were equally instances in which national, political or geographical differences justified Canada breaking ranks with its fellow Dominions. Unlike South Africa, Canada had little to fear from its own German population; unlike Australia, transport and exchange arrangements could be made relatively easily. Direct contacts with the protecting power thus enabled Canada to take advantage of opportunities that were simply not open to other Dominions. As Norman Robertson bluntly remarked in late 1941, 'efforts on behalf of [Canadian] nationals are more likely to achieve success if they are not handled through the U.K. authorities as part of a wider representation of British subjects'.¹⁴

The miniscule number of Canadian servicemen captured by Axis forces by late 1941 did not mean that Ottawa was disinterested in British POW policy. On the contrary, the evacuation of Axis civilian internees and POWs from Britain to Canada in July 1940, (so as to reduce the hazard of internal security facing Britain in the event of a German invasion) made Canada in effect, the primary, and 'de facto', 'detaining power' for German POWs in the British Empire. At first, Canada was content to limit its responsibilities towards these men. Britain funded camp construction, covered the prisoners' subsistence expenses, and handled all negotiations with the German authorities. Ottawa felt justified in colluding with British efforts to differentiate between London's responsibility as the 'principal' detaining power, and Canada's more limited responsibilities as 'agent', working on behalf of the United Kingdom government. This so-called 'agent-principal' theory was not without its critics, not least since, as the war progressed, Britain's so-called 'agents'—in Australia, South Africa and Canada—assumed increasing authority over the treatment and wellbeing of their Axis POW populations and took exception to London's efforts to institute uniform practices and standards across the Commonwealth and Empire. But until 1942, most Dominion governments, Canada included, were happy to retain the spurious form of uniformity, and capitalise on the benefits it brought London when negotiating with the Axis governments.

There was however another area of activity—beyond its assumption of detaining power duties—that strengthened Canada's involvement in POW affairs over the first two years of the war. Responsibility for arranging for the production and distribution of relief parcels to POWs traditionally lay not with governments, but with their national Red Cross societies. This arrangement worked well during the Phoney War when prisoner numbers

were few, and transport arrangements between the two sides were relatively simple. The collapse of Allied military fortunes on the continent in June 1940, and the subsequent loss of 40,000 British servicemen to German captivity, threw the rudimentary facilities of the British Red Cross Society (BRC) into disarray. In a desperate effort to cope with the sudden demand for parcels, the BRC expanded its own facilities, subcontracted work to London department stores and finally resorted to appealing to its fellow societies across the Commonwealth. The Canadian Red Cross Society (CRC) not only responded with alacrity, but proved so efficient that production rose from 5,000 per week in January 1941, to 30,000 in March to a staggering 60,000 by the end of the year. By 1943, the CRC was dispatching over 100,000 parcels a week.¹⁵

The full story of the CRC parcel programme has been told elsewhere and does not require repetition here. What does need emphasising however is the intimacy that emerged between the CRC and its counterpart in the U.S., the powerful American Red Cross Society (ARC), over parcel production. With hindsight, it is clear that the CRC's success in meeting the wishes of the BRC rested in no small measure on the assistance it received from the ARC. Close relations were struck up between the CRC leadership, in particular the CRC chairmen, Norman Somerville, and his successor in May 1941, P. H. Gordon, and their opposite numbers in Washington, especially Norman Davies, president of the ARC, and Maurice Pate, his deputy. American neutrality naturally limited what the ARC could do for the red cross society of one belligerent camp, but it is clear that the ARC did all it could to meet the needs of the CRC over the course of 1941, intensifying its efforts to secure voluntary contributions from pro-British aid societies so as to increase the number of parcels it could ship to British POWs.¹⁶ Although both agencies effectively competed for the scarce shipping space to transport their parcels across the Atlantic, internal ARC papers leave little doubt as to warmth that developed between the two societies over the course of 1941.¹⁷

Over the first two years of the war Canadian humanitarianism thus evolved along three discrete avenues. As a member of the Imperial POW Committee the Canadian government could ensure that its wishes, and those of its nationals, were taken into account in the formulation of British POW policy. Secondly, the direct contacts established with its protecting power augmented the room for autonomous Canadian action and brought with it some noticeable benefits for Canadian citizens languishing in enemy hands. Although Ottawa was careful to coordinate its activities with the other members of the Commonwealth, the success of its initiatives demonstrated the advantage of retaining some scope for independent action, even if this involved diverting

from the line proposed in London. Finally, the official contacts established with members of the U.S. administration were replicated at an unofficial level between the two countries' national red cross societies. By drawing on its ties with the ARC, the Canadians forged a powerful position for themselves within British relief policy. As a consequence, while Canada's policy largely developed in tandem with the policies pursued in London, Ottawa's presence in the humanitarian field had a distinctly North American flavour. For all the difficulties that beset Canada's management of POW affairs within Canada – of which there were many – it is clear that by late 1941 Canada had enhanced its standing in Commonwealth and international circles for its work on behalf of prisoners of war and civilian internees.

Most historians of Canadian external relations during the war rightly look to the period after the collapse of France as the high point of Canadian influence in Anglo-American affairs. This was the time when Canada's supposed unique insights into the minds of the two great English speaking worlds came into its own, enabling Canada to act as the midwife of that most special of 'special relationships'.¹⁸ Though there is a good deal of wishful thinking about this reading of events—not least by the Canadian premier, W. L. Mackenzie King—few would deny that subsequent developments, most notably Canada's painful exclusion from senior Anglo-American decision-making, saw Canada's place in the North Atlantic Triangle become increasingly subordinate to the interests of the other two powers.¹⁹ Canada's humanitarian activities however developed along their own trajectory. Indeed, it was probably the period *after* American entry into the war in December 1941 that Canadian standing in humanitarian policy-making reach its apogee. From this date, the reality of captivity touched Canadian families in a way that it had not done in the previous war years. The loss of 'C' Force in Hong Kong, and subsequent captures of Canadian servicemen in Europe over the course of 1942 for the first time gave Ottawa a direct interest in the outcome of British, or Allied, POW-relief and humanitarian policies.

More importantly, American belligerency radically altered the opportunities for humanitarian activities in ways which, on the whole, worked to Ottawa's advantage. True, Switzerland's reluctance to entertain independent communications with the constituent parts of the British Empire meant that Ottawa lost the intimacy it had enjoyed with its protecting power before American entry into the war.²⁰ But any disappointment felt over Berne's refusal to pick up where Washington had left off was more than offset by the opportunities brought in the wake of American belligerency. For the first time, Canada was able to pursue its interests in full collaboration with its American

partner. No longer did it need to rely on the decision-making machinery in London, as had been the case before this time.

The intensification of Canada's humanitarian activities from early 1942 can be charted in a number of areas. Perhaps the most obvious related to the expansion of Canadian involvement in the provision of relief-supplies. The CRC's impressive parcel packaging operation merged with that of its U.S. counterpart to provide a flow of parcels across the Atlantic that went a long way towards meeting the needs of the increasingly large and desperate imprisoned population in Axis Europe. While some officials rightly feared that Canada's contribution would be swamped by the larger U.S. effort, the clear designation of CRC parcels and the sheer scale of the CRC's activities ensured that Canada's contribution was not belittled by the apparent fusion of North American sources of supply. Over 1944, Canada shipped 2.5 million cubic feet of parcels across the Atlantic, against the ARC's 6.1 million. Canadian parcels were also cherished by camp inmates, who found the contents of CRC parcels superior to those produced by the other Allied national red cross societies.²¹

The vast majority of Canada's parcels were sent to men captured while serving in British and American forces: a full eighty percent, in fact, over the course of 1943.²² The preference shown towards these POWs was not to Canada's detriment. After all, since the Axis governments made no distinction between the various national contingents fighting under the British Crown, Canadians were treated with the same level of attention as other members of the British armed forces. Canadian interest in relief matters however extended beyond merely meeting the needs of its own nationals. On the contrary, the glaring disparity between the quantity of parcels reaching British and Canadian POWs and those reaching the servicemen of their European allies—the majority of whom had been captured during the so-called 'invasion epoch' in the first months of the war—sat uncomfortably with officials in Ottawa. After Pearl Harbor, Canadian officials increasingly sought to make common cause with their new found American allies in the hope of overturning London's rigid policy towards invasion-epoch POWs, and its refusal to countenance large scale relief shipments to the continent, on the grounds that any food supplied to European POWs merely relieved Berlin of the responsibility for feeding an important section of Germany's agricultural and industrial workforce. This outlook, which reflected Britain's broader blockade policy for continental Europe at the time, had provoked stout opposition in the United States since the start of the war, and gathered pace over 1940 and 1941 when sections of the American public, lead by the former President Herbert Hoover, agitated strongly against Britain's use of food as a weapon of war.²³

While the compassion shown by Canadian officials towards the invasion-epoch prisoners clearly reflected deepseated moral and ethical beliefs, there is little doubt that Canadian willingness to champion the rights of these luckless souls was influenced in part by a reading of Canada's own foreign and domestic interests. As the Department of External Affairs acknowledged in mid-1942, the urgency of meeting the needs of the invasion-epoch prisoners was 'no doubt more evident in Canada and the United States than in the United Kingdom, because of the proportionately larger immigrant populations from Norway, Poland, Greece, Yugoslavia and even Belgium and Holland'.²⁴ This was not the first time that Mackenzie King's government allowed its sensitivity towards minority or sectional interests within Canadian society to affect government policy, nor would it be the last. From early 1943 foreign political interests clearly began to loom large in King's attitude to the question of European relief. His thinking on the issue was neatly summed up in a letter he wrote to his minister for National Defence, Colonel J.L. Ralston, in latter part of 1943. 'I cannot imagine anything which we could do to assist our European Allies which would be better evidence of our good will, than the contribution of food parcels to the Allied prisoners'. Relief parcels, he argued, were by far the best means of assistance since they put into the hands of 'the individual soldier in Europe ... tangible proof of Canadian aid which he is not likely to forget'. 'Every dollar spent in this form of assistance', he concluded, 'may be far more effective ... than a hundred or perhaps a thousand [dollars] given to a government'.²⁵ Canadian relief policy was thus tightly meshed into Canada's broader foreign political objectives. What had begun as a desire to protect the interests of Canada's minority-populations living under enemy control, evolved over 1942 and 1943 into a programme that complemented Ottawa's efforts to assume a leadership role amongst the 'junior allies' of the wartime coalition.²⁶

If American entry into the war provided Canada with a welcome ally in its occasional quarrel with London's economic warfare and transport authorities, it also strengthened Canada's negotiating position in protecting Canadian interests abroad. Instead of relying, as before, on the resources of the Commonwealth machinery in London, Ottawa sought to capitalise on its special standing in Washington. As the war progressed, Canadian officials became increasingly convinced of the benefits of joining forces with the U.S. when it came to negotiating relief and repatriation arrangements with the Axis governments. The temptation to switch horses, often in mid-stride, was rarely resisted. The long term benefits were however scanty. All too often Ottawa failed to see that its claims for special consideration merely fed into Axis hands, allowing them to score propaganda points at the Allies' expense, or

take advantage of Commonwealth disunity to justify withdrawing from long-winded negotiations.²⁷ Moreover since Canada was responsible for detaining a sizeable proportion of Britain's haul of Axis nationals ... whether German POWs or interned Japanese civilians – its unilateral action undermined British efforts to play on what the historian S. P. Mackenzie has dubbed the 'mutual hostage' factor in POW relations between the two sides.²⁸

Faced with an irascible adversary in Tokyo, who obstructed all Allied efforts to improve the lot of their prisoners, Ottawa can perhaps be excused for trying to make the most of the few opportunities that came its way. Nor should it be forgotten that, until the abortive raid in Dieppe in August 1942, the 2,000 men lost to Japanese captivity in Hong Kong represented almost the sum total of Canadian servicemen held in enemy hands. Canada was, furthermore, not the only Dominion to play fast and loose with the concept of Commonwealth unity: as Kent Fedorowich has shown, Australia could be equally truculent when it felt its interests were not being afforded sufficient weight in London.²⁹ Nevertheless, Ottawa's insistence that the Canadian tail wagged the Commonwealth dog was, to outsiders, a perverse position to take, given the small number, in relative and absolute terms, of Canadian servicemen held in Japanese hands.³⁰ Ottawa's constant flitting between British and American initiatives on the basis of whether one set of negotiations seemed more likely to succeed than another, unquestionably compromised British efforts to secure agreements with the Japanese government.³¹ Regrettably, Ottawa adopted an equally cavalier attitude in its dealings with the German government. In mid-1942, Ottawa blithely informed London that it would only associate itself with negotiations for the repatriation of sick and wounded POWs from Germany on the understanding that it remained free to withdraw from the discussions if similar negotiations under U.S. auspices looked likely to make better headway. Needless to say, British and Swiss efforts to convince Berlin that Canada's caveat was not as malicious as it seemed fell on deaf ears.³² For a brief period the following autumn, Ottawa even considered withholding support for an agreement to repatriate long-term POWs – the majority taken during the battle of France – on the grounds that there was only one Canadian national who would be eligible under the agreement! A similar myopia affected Ottawa's outlook towards an exchange of wounded POWs in early 1943. Instead of reviving the negotiations, which had stalled the previous year, Ottawa preferred to use what limited leverage Britain possessed to press for the release of British and Canadian POWs shackled as a reprisal for British infractions of the POW convention in October 1942.

Lest we risk judging such episodes of Canadian unilateralism too harshly, it ought to be remembered that Ottawa's actions were in part prompted by a belief that at heart, Whitehall was incurably imperialistic in its attitude towards Britain's Dominion allies. The belief was not, it is true, entirely unwarranted. British officials was certainly guilty of confusing the obvious tactical advantage of presenting a united Commonwealth position in their negotiations with the Axis governments with the assumption that British interests were synonymous with those of the Empire as a whole. This was no more so than in late 1942, when Churchill presumptuously committed Ottawa to a policy of shackling German prisoners, without bothering to solicit Canadian views beforehand. The so-called shackling crisis, which erupted in early October and continued until November the following year, laid bare the deficiencies of the Imperial POW machinery and demonstrated the dangers of binding Canadian policy too closely to that of the British government. More significantly, the crisis also showed the extent to which the high ideals of international humanitarian law had slipped over the previous three years. Canada's reaction to the crisis also, however, revealed the political dynamics of Canadian policy making. Faced with a government in London that seemed set on a reckless policy that had little chance of securing the result it was designed to achieve, Canadian officials became increasingly attracted to the idea of staking out Canada's position on humanitarian policy in its own terms, and using the crisis to clarify Canada's standing on the international stage. In the opinion of the head of the Wartime Information Board, Charles Vining, the crisis provided 'a legitimate and unique opportunity to provide a strong stimulus for Canadian morale by demonstrating, with safety, the independence of Canadian nationhood and authority'.³³ 'Breaking with Britain on this issue would', the Board's report ran, 'bring a thrill of pride to every Canadian [and] would tell him more clearly than any Statute of Westminster that he belongs to a free country – a country which knows how to act, when good sense demands it, decisively and without too much deference to Downing Street'.³⁴

There was one final way in which American belligerency and the expansion of the war into the Far East heightened Canadian assertiveness towards POW and relief issues. Within weeks of the outbreak of fighting in the Far East, the British and American governments both set out to arrange for an exchange of diplomats, a repatriation of civilians and the distribution of relief supplies to POW and civilian internment camps across Japanese occupied territory. Dismay at the agonisingly slow pace of these negotiations gave way to mounting concern when news filtered back detailing the appalling conditions endured by the western prisoners. By the late summer, the British government, following the earlier lead of the British Red Cross Society, agreed to cede authority for

relief operations in the Far East to the Canadians and Americans.³⁵ London had enough on its plate coping with the demands of prisoners in Europe not to take on a similar burden on the other side of the world. Relations between the American and Canadian Red Cross societies were therefore strengthened and negotiations were opened with the ICRC to see whether the logistical and political difficulties to effective relief operations in the Pacific theatre might be overcome. For the first time in the war, Canada's humanitarian activities took place in an entirely North American framework; one which was largely divorced from the Imperial POW machinery in London.

Emboldened by its new found prominence in Far Eastern affairs, Ottawa took the opportunity to press for a reform of the Imperial POW machinery in London. Canadian diplomats had long complained at the failure of the Imperial POW committee, established in April 1941, to distinguish between its function as an executive policy-making body and the administrative duties of the various Whitehall departments involved in POW affairs. Re-establishing the committee onto a more inter-governmental basis would, Ottawa believed, rescue policy making from the clutches of some of the 'less progressive' elements in Whitehall,³⁶ and, more importantly, open the door for a membership that extended beyond the narrow confines of the British Empire. Such a reform would also give voice to those parties, such as the Dutch, who had a major stake in the outcome of relief programmes in the Far East and, in making decision-making more democratic, might lead to a more equitable distribution of relief supplies between all members of the United Nations. At base though, Canada's initiative reflected Ottawa's growing disillusionment at the rigidity of London's policy-making machinery and the new-found confidence Canadian officials felt in dealing with humanitarian affairs. With U.S.-Canadian committees already up and running in Washington, it was, after all, a small step for Ottawa to recommend the creation of a genuine United Nations committee, either in London, or, if the British proved unwilling, in Washington.

Far then from seeing American belligerency ushering in a period of decline in Canada's humanitarian policy and eroding Ottawa's status within the North Atlantic Triangle, American belligerency gave new momentum and direction to Canadian efforts to carve out a niche for itself in this important area of Allied policy. It enabled Canada to exploit the privileged position it had built up while America was still at peace and forge close relations with U.S. official and charitable agencies which extended into the later years of the war. In retrospect, it is tempting to see Canada's attitude towards POW affairs from 1942, in particular its tetchy attitude towards the question of institutional arrangements, as echoing the 'functional principle' that the Mackenzie King

government applied to so many aspects of Canadian foreign relations from this date. Functionalism, in essence, entailed focusing Canadian diplomatic efforts towards securing recognition of Canada's special status within those areas of Allied policy-making in which Ottawa could demonstrate legitimate expertise and proven experience. Given Canada's obvious involvement in POW and humanitarian issues, it is rather surprising that historians of the North Atlantic Triangle, or Canadian external relations, have failed to acknowledge the close correlation between Ottawa's actions in this area and the broader, functional approach taken to Canadian foreign policy objectives during the middle years of the war. Canadian active participation in Allied relief and humanitarian affairs is also an important consideration in any explanation of Ottawa's drive to secure representation on the Anglo-American Combined Food Board and, later, the United Nations' Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.³⁷

Ottawa's effort to reform British policy-making arrangements met with some success: the Imperial POW committee was renamed 'inter-governmental', and some steps were taken to divorce the committee from the day-to-day work of the Whitehall bureaucracy. Canadian and U.S. pressure for a more comprehensive relief programme for the continent also bore fruit in the autumn of 1943 when London was finally persuaded to lift its veto on large scale relief shipments for 'invasion-epoch' prisoners.³⁸ Nevertheless, Ottawa's reform agenda was unable to attract sufficient support to transform London's POW machinery into anything remotely resembling an 'inter-Allied', far less 'United Nations' body. More importantly, Canada's big breakthrough – its privileged status in relief programmes in the Far East – failed to deliver the rewards Ottawa had hoped for. Tokyo's refusal to countenance any large scale distribution of POW relief parcels effectively made the joint U.S.-Canadian machinery redundant. In September 1943, despairing at the lack of progress, the British Red Cross insisted on returning to the fold and dispatched a high powered delegation to Washington to liaise with the ARC and U.S. administration. Britain's renewed involvement regrettably did not lead to any dramatic improvement in the conditions of imprisonment in the Far East, but the presence of the British mission in Washington, empowered to speak on behalf of the national red cross societies of the other members of the British Empire, inevitably overshadowed the position of the Canadian Red Cross, and led to Canada's increasingly marginalisation in the decision-making over the remainder of the war.

Ottawa's failure to bring about a genuine alliance between the 'Siamese twins' on relief matters was only part of a broader process that saw Canada's status diminish over the course of 1944. The increasing willingness of individual Dominions to blaze their own trails meant that by the end of 1943, the cloak

of unity that the British government had sought to maintain over POW matters had come to look distinctly threadbare. Since British efforts to build a consensus ultimately hinged on the caprice of individual Dominion governments, initiatives were frequently destined to proceed no further than the committee room. One of the most glaring examples occurred in June 1943 when Ottawa refused to stand behind the New Zealand government in rejecting Japanese accusations of brutality during the breakout of Japanese prisoners at Featherstone POW camp, for fear that at such action would merely provide Tokyo with 'an invitation to [take] reprisals against Canadians'.³⁹ Once Ottawa's position became clear, the other Dominions felt compelled to withdraw their initial support, and the British and New Zealand governments were forced to answer Japanese protests on their own. In such circumstances, it was hardly surprising that some observers felt that Canada's growing desire to have prisoners captured by Commonwealth forces held jointly by all members of the empire, rather than as before, by the British government in London, distinctly presumptuous. Canada's attitude towards the Featherstone affair merely demonstrated, as one irate British official put it, that Ottawa wanted 'all the privileges [joint responsibility] would confer upon them and impose all the disabilities on us ... [while reserving] the right to reject it altogether some time in the future!'⁴⁰ Given such suspicions, it was hardly surprising that the POW machinery in London, notwithstanding its change in name, was incapable of reaching a collective decision on issues of even the least political sensitivity.

Neither Canada, nor the other Dominion governments, appeared to have foreseen the logical result of their action. Independence came at a price. The stymieing of Britain's consultative machinery effectively dismantled an institutional framework which, for all its faults, had given the Dominions the opportunity to voice their opinions and capitalise on their collective strength. Unilateralism might satisfy Dominion nationalist sentiments, but it was rarely capable on its own of improving the lot of Allied POWs, whatever their origin. Canada's desire to have the best of both allies, while committing to neither, merely resulted in the British, and to a lesser extent the U.S., governments tiring of their awkward partner. The implications were felt in a particularly acute form in the Far East, where Canada and the other Dominion governments were increasingly sidelined and only invited to contribute to the various relief and repatriation programmes once negotiations had reached an advanced stage. The effects in Europe were equally far-reaching. With Allied forces set to return to the continent, authority was increasingly devolved to either the theatre commands or the combined Anglo-American machinery in Washington.⁴¹ Both developments effectively cut Canada out of the decision-making process.

If the 'North Atlantic Triangle' has any explanatory or descriptive utility for historians wishing to evaluate Anglo-U.S.-Canadian relations in the twentieth century, it is clear that it is at its most appropriate in the decade from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s.⁴² This was a period in which Canada's international identity and sense of national consciousness was very much bound up with its links to the mother country, but a time when the prospect of developing a durable and meaningful dialogue with its southern neighbour became a distinct possibility. The concept itself, coined by a Canadian scholar working at Columbia University, may not have found much resonance in London or Washington, but it certainly caught the imagination of a generation of Canadian policy-makers, and reflected the thinking of Canada's enigmatic premier of the time, W. L. Mackenzie King. The economic, strategic and political context of Canada in the 1940s coupled with the collective experiences of those in power in Ottawa, inevitably encouraged Canadian officials to depict events within the framework which mirrored—if not matching in every detail—Brebner's 'North Atlantic Triangle'. This was indeed a time in which hemispheric, or continental considerations began to loom larger in Canadian 'mental maps': a time when Canada played the role of the 'third' power and momentarily at least interceded between its traditional mentor and its mighty American neighbour.

The study of Canadian attitudes towards humanitarian and POW relief policy suggests that Canadian efforts to forge a distinct role for itself on the international stage encompassed a wider set of interests than historians have hitherto assumed. In the end, Canadian initiatives in this direction were weakened by the self-conscious approach Canadian officials took to the issues at hand. The politicisation of Canadian attitudes towards relief and humanitarianism may have been an inevitable—if unfortunate—result of Canada's growing maturity as an independent state, but the tendency of Canadian officials to see issues within a North Atlantic framework were probably detrimental to Canada's interests. For one thing, it meant that officials saw issues primarily in terms of their impact on Canada's relations with the British and American governments, rather than a contribution Canada could make to a coalition war-effort, fought on a global scale, against ruthless, unscrupulous enemies. It was not simply that Ottawa chose to privilege Canadian interests above those of its Commonwealth partners. All too often these interests were allowed to take precedence above the collective objectives of the Allied war effort and were used to justify rejecting British or American counter-arguments, which were based, at least in part, on a reading of how their adversaries might respond to Allied actions.⁴³ In this respect the North Atlantic Triangle was as much a hindrance to Canada as a help. With the benefit of hindsight, it could well be argued that it was only

after Canadians had abandoned their naïve attachment to the ‘North Atlantic Triangle’, that humanitarianism was able to deliver the kind of rewards that Mackenzie King’s wartime administration had so eagerly craved.

Endnotes

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- ¹ John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain* (New Haven, 1945), xi.
- ² *Ibid.*, 304–28.
- ³ See for example the recent treatment by John Alan English, ‘Not an Equilateral Triangle: Canada’s Strategic Relationship with the United States and Britain, 1939–1945’, in B. J. C. McKercher and Lawrence Aronson (eds.), *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations, 1902–1956* (Toronto, 1996), pp. 147–183. That is not to say that other issues are neglected. The social implications of Canada’s position within ‘the triangle’ are examined in J. L. Finlay’s stimulating work, *Canada in the North Atlantic Triangle. Two Centuries of Social Change* (Toronto, 1975).
- ⁴ For the former, see Donald Creighton, *The Forked Road. Canada, 1939–1957* (Toronto, 1976), esp, pp. 38–101, and, within a broader historical frame, John Hucheson, *Dominance and Dependency. Liberalism and National Policies in the North Atlantic Triangle* ((Toronto, 1978); for the latter interpretation see J. L. Granatstein, *How Britain’s Weakness forced Canada into the arms of the United States. The 1988 Joanne Goodman Lectures* (Toronto, 1988).
- ⁵ C. P. Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the North Atlantic Triangle. The 1976 Joanne Goodman Lectures* (Toronto, 1976).
- ⁶ David Stafford and Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones (eds.), *American-British-Canadian Intelligence Relations, 1939–2000* (London, 2000).
- ⁷ For a recent survey see Edelgard E. Mahant and Graeme S. Mount, *An Introduction to Canadian-American Relations* (Scarborough, Ontario, 1989, 2nd Edn), pp. 145–175; David MacKenzie, ‘Canada, the North Atlantic Triangle, and the Empire’, in Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The*

- Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume IV. The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 574-96.
- ⁸ Jonathan F. Vance, *Objects of Concern. Canadian Prisoners of War Through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: University British Columbia Press, 1994), pp. 86–9. For Canadian preparations see National Archive of Canada (hereafter NAC.). RG25 Series A2 Vol. 192.
- ⁹ Sir George Warner to Montgomery, 27 July 1929. The National Archive, UK (hereafter TNA.) FO373/2550 T8958.
- ¹⁰ For this process see Vance, *Objects of Concern*, 99–112.
- ¹¹ Memo. by Alfred Rive for Norman Robertson 7 Feb. 1942. NAC. RG25 Series G2 Vol. 2942.
- ¹² Memo. by Norman Robertson for the Prime Minister 19 Dec. 1941. NAC. RG25 Series G2 Vol. 2942.
- ¹³ South Africa, who declined a head-for-head exchange for its *Zam Zam* survivors, preferring instead to await the result of negotiations for a general exchange, never succeeded in securing the early release of its nationals.
- ¹⁴ Memo. by Norman Robertson for the Prime Minister 19 Dec. 1941. NAC. RG25. Series G2 Vol. 2942. By Sept. 1941 the number of Canadians interned in occupied Europe had fallen to 375. Memo of 15 Sept. 1941. NAC. MG26 J4 Vol. 410 file 3975. Memos. by A. Rive (Special Section, Dept. of External Affairs) 21 June and 18 Aug. 1941. RG25 Series G2 Vol. 2874. Dept. External Affairs, Ottawa, to the Dominions Office, 5 Jan. 1942. TNA. DO35/998/4.
- ¹⁵ See P. H. Gordon, *Fifty Years of the Canadian Red Cross* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 68-75, *History. Toronto Branch. The Canadian Red Cross Society, 1914–1948* (Toronto, 1949), pp. 37–75. McKenzie Porter, *To all men. The history of the Canadian Red Cross* (McClelland & Stewart, 1960), pp. 88–90.
- ¹⁶ See Gordon (CRC) to Davies (ARC) 11 July 1941; Mitchell (ARC) to Gordon 17 July 1941. National Archive & Records Administration (US National Archive, College Park, hereafter NARA.) RG200 Group 3 Box 993. 619.0/02.
- ¹⁷ See for example Gordon's letter to Philip Ryan (ARC National H.Q.) 25 Aug. 1941. NARA. RG200 Group 3 Box 993. 619.0/02.
- ¹⁸ See David J. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937–1941. A Study in Competitive Cooperation* (London, 1981), pp. 115–19.
- ¹⁹ See in particular Creighton, *Forked Road*, pp. 62–87

- ²⁰ See memo. by A. Rive for H. Wrong, 'Proposal for Canadian Consul-General at Berne and functions of Swiss Consul-General in Canada', 3 Dec. 1942. NAC. RG25 Series G2 Vol. 2942.
- ²¹ Memo. 'American Red Cross—Canadian Red Cross Society. Relief Shipments to Prisoners of War in Europe—1944', 1 Jan. 1945. NARA. RG2 Branch 3. Box 993. 619.2/02. Porter, *To all men*, 90–1.
- ²² CRC memo. 'Canadian Red Cross Society activities in connection with POW', 20 Sept. 1943. NARA. RG200 Band 3 Box 992 619.2/02.
- ²³ See W. N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade. Vol. 1.* (London, 1952), 549–57, Joan Beaumont, 'Starving for Democracy: Britain's blockade of and Relief for Occupied Europe, 1939–1945', *War & Society*, 8/2 (1990), 57–82. J. H. George, 'Herbert Hoover and World War II relief', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16/3 (1992), 389–407. Meredith Hindley, 'Constructing Allied Humanitarian Policy', *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 9/2 (2000), 77–102.
- ²⁴ Department of External Affairs to Vincent Massey (High Commissioner, London) 25 Aug. 1942. NAC RG2 Series B2 Vol. 120.
- ²⁵ W. L. M. King to Col. J. Ralston no date circa. late Dec. 1943. NAC. RG2 Series B2 Vol. 120.
- ²⁶ For CRC support of these efforts see *inter alia*, Minutes of Meeting between representatives of the AMC, BRC and CRC, 23 Dec. 1943. NARA. RG200 Group 3. Box 992. Gordon to Mitchell 21 May 1943. Box 993.
- ²⁷ Jonathan F. Vance, 'The Trouble with Allies: Canada and the Negotiation of Prisoner of War Exchanges', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 69–85, and Kent Fedorowich, 'Doomed from the Outset? Internment and Civilian Exchange in the Far East. The British failure over Hong Kong, 1941–1945', *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 25/1 (1997), pp. 113–140.
- ²⁸ S. P. Mackenzie, 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II', *Journal of Modern History*, 66/3 (Sept. 1994), pp. 487–520.
- ²⁹ Fedorowich, 'Doomed from the Outset?', p. 133
- ³⁰ See minute by Eden, 20 Jan. 1945, cited in Vance, 'The Trouble with Allies', p. 80.
- ³¹ See Vance, 'The Trouble with Allies', p. 80 and P. Scott Corbett, *Quiet Passages: The Exchanges of Civilians between the United States and Japan during the Second World War* (Kent OH, 1987).
- ³² For the German reaction see Otto Köcher to German Foreign Ministry, 30 July 1942, and 8 Aug. 1942. Politisches Archiv. Auswärtiges Amt., Berlin, R40786.

- ³³ Charles Vining (Chair, Wartime Information Board) to Mackenzie King, 30 Nov. 1942. NAC. RG2 Series B2 vol. 20.
- ³⁴ J. D. Ketchum (Reports Branch, Wartime Information Board), 'The chaining of prisoners and Canadian autonomy: a suggestion for action by Canada', 20 Nov. 1942. NAC. RG2 Series B2 vol. 20. For Canada's view of the shackling crisis see Jonathan F. Vance, 'Men in Manacles: The Shackling of Prisoners of War, 1942–1943', *Journal of Military History*, 59 (July 1995), pp. 483–504 (483).
- ³⁵ Dr. Routley (CRC) to Mitchell (Director Insular and Foreign Operations, ARC) 23 Jan. 1942. NARA. RG200 Branch 3. Box 993.
- ³⁶ Lester Pearson diary entry of 11 Jan. 1940. NAC. MG26. N8. Minute by W. Roberts (FO) 26 Dec. 1941. TNA FO916/15. Lester Pearson, April 1940, quoted in C. P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict. A History of Canadian External Policies. ii, 1921–1948. The Mackenzie King Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 282.
- ³⁷ Ottawa's functionalist approach is analysed in J. L. Granatstein, *The Ottawa Men. The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935–1957* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 126-33 and *idem.*, 'Hume Wrong's Road to the Functional Principle', in K. E. Neilson and R. A. Prete (eds.), *Coalition Warfare: An Uneasy Accord* (Waterloo, 1983), pp. 53–77.
- ³⁸ The CRC was encouraged to join its American counterparts in supplying the necessary resources: adding 300,000 parcels to the ARC's monthly programme of 700,000. Gordon, *Fifty Years of the Canadian Red Cross*, p. 73. In general see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its activities during the Second World War (September 1, 1939–June 30, 1947) Vol. III, Relief Activities* (Geneva, 1948).
- ³⁹ War Committee Minutes, No. 244. 23 June 1943. NAC. RG2 Series 7c. vol. 13, Reel 4876. Winston J. Churchill to W. L. Mackenzie King 19 June 1943. Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge. CHAR 20/113. For the Featherstone incident see W. Wynne Masson, *Prisoners of War. Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* (Wellington, 1954), pp. 356–61. Not all Canadian officials were happy with this decision: See Vincent Massey (Canadian High Commissioner in London) to Department of External Affairs 25 May 1943 and memo. by H. G. Stone (Dept. Ext. Affairs), 21 May 1943. NAC. RG25 G2 Vol. 3190.
- ⁴⁰ Minute by Roseway for Assistant Chief of Staff, 6 June 1943. TNA. WO32/9380.
- ⁴¹ It took intense lobbying by the British to convince the U.S. administration to accept an *ad hoc* Dominion presence on the Combined Administrative

Committee sub-committee, responsible for advising the Combined Chiefs of Staff on POW matters, when matters relating to the Dominions were discussed. P. H. Gore-Booth (British embassy, Washington) to G. Magam (Canadian embassy, Washington) 25 Oct. 1944. TNA. CAB122/665.

⁴² Attempts to stretch the concept to cover broader time periods are not entirely successful: see B. J. C. McKercher and Lawrence Aronson, *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations 1902–1956* (Toronto, 1996), and most recently, David G. Haglund, *The North Atlantic Triangle revisited: Canadian grand strategy at century's end* (Toronto, 2000).

⁴³ This was the case with both the shackling crisis and the Featherstone incident.