

## LESSON ONE – BACKGROUND TO CANADA'S ROLE IN THE DEFENCE OF HONG KONG

### SUMMARY/ OVERVIEW

This lesson is entirely optional and its inclusion depends on the teacher's judgement as well as time available. It focuses on the place of Hong Kong both within students' knowledge as well as its position within educational curricula. The theme of the lesson is to focus on the pervasive ignorance and indifference concerning Canada's role in Hong Kong during World War II as well as to begin to explore possible reasons for that unfortunate situation. Finally, the lesson will investigate possible means of rectifying the apparent unawareness about Hong Kong and reasons why that should be done.

World War II officially began with the Nazi blitzkrieg ("lightning war") launched against Poland on September 1, 1939. In fact, war clouds had been on the horizon for most of the decade of the 1930s. After Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany (and shortly thereafter "Führer") in 1933, the Allies continued to practise a policy of appeasement. There were a series of acts of aggression on the part of the Third Reich: violating military restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, marching troops into the demilitarized Rhineland, the Anschluss ("annexation") of Austria, the Munich Treaty that ceded the Sudetenland (the northwestern portion of Czechoslovakia), the takeover of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. The Allies met each with approval or acceptance, as they wanted to avoid another war at all costs. They had just fought the Great War a generation ago and their attention was more focused on attempting to deal with the domestic consequences of the Great Depression.

The War in the Pacific began with the Japanese bombing of the American 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. (However, an argument could be made that the warning signs were already there. The League of Nations failed to respond to the 1931 Japanese incursion into Manchuria.) Calling it "a day that will live in infamy," U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Japan. Because Japan was allied with Germany and Italy (in the so-called "Axis of Fascism"), the conflict had now become a truly global one. Only a few hours after Pearl Harbor, Japan attacked the British colony of Hong Kong. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill did an amazing about-face. In January of 1941, he had counselled caution when it came to Hong Kong. "If Japan goes to war with us, there is not the slightest chance of holding Hong Kong or relieving it. It is most unwise to increase the loss we shall suffer there. Instead of increasing the garrison, it ought to be reduced....We must avoid frittering away our resources on untenable positions."

Cabinet colleagues and military advisors persuaded Churchill that Hong Kong's strategic importance necessitated an increased military presence. Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King agreed without questioning the wisdom of that judgement, and despatched 1,975 soldiers, who arrived in Hong Kong on November 16, 1941. Those troops, some as young as fifteen, all came from the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada. Both had been on garrison duty, the former in Jamaica, and the latter in Newfoundland. Neither had been properly trained for a combat role, and once in Hong Kong, they had barely three weeks to prepare for battle. Their heavy transport, and much of their other equipment sent on another ship, never arrived.

Despite making a courageous stand against overwhelming odds, after seventeen days of fierce fighting, they surrendered on Christmas Day, 1941. The Canadian losses were heavy: 290 killed, 493 wounded, and the remainder all taken prisoner. The survivors were forced to endure brutal conditions in Japanese POW camps for the duration of the war. They were used as slave labour in coalmines and shipyards. Some were tortured; some badly beaten; some murdered outright. All suffered from completely inadequate food and medical care. Not surprisingly, 267 died in those appalling camps and those that did make it home, looking like skeletons, endured serious medical and physical afflictions for the rest of their lives.

Subsequent demands on their behalf for a formal apology and compensation from the Japanese government have fallen on deaf ears. They had been the first to fight and the last to return home. Yet, they were scarcely greeted as returning heroes. They have, over more than the last half-century, been largely forgotten by the government and the people they served. The Canadian government waited until just a few years ago to compensate them for the suffering they endured. Further, writers and educational curriculum implementers have largely ignored their story. Many history textbooks avoid the topic altogether. Others give it scant coverage. As a result, the overwhelming majority of students are woefully ignorant of this important chapter in Canadian history.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to focus on the lack of knowledge about Canada's role in Hong Kong, 1941-1945
- to explore reasons for this lack of knowledge and indifference to Canada's role in Hong Kong, 1941-1945
- to investigate the consequences and repercussions of Canadian ignorance and indifference regarding Hong Kong, 1941-1945
- to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of Canada's role in Hong Kong, 1941-1945
- to raise sensitivity about the important role that history and historians have in carrying on a nation's collective memory
- to provide an overview of major Canadian military engagements
- to help students improve their listening and speaking skills
- to explore reasons why some aspects of history are known while others are unknown, and the significance of that knowledge and ignorance

## TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Have the students compile a Top Ten List. This list is to be of Canada's most important military engagements, conflicts, or confrontations. Students should do this three times. The first time, they should compile their own personal list. It can be based on general knowledge or assigned research. The second time they should be put in groups of three and instructed to arrive at a group consensus. They must listen and debate what their group's Top Ten List is going to be. Then, thirdly, each group should report its group consensus and the teacher scores the result on the board. (Each time a group ranks a battle or engagement as #1, it receives 10 points; as #2 nine points, etc.) This point system will help decide the Top Ten List to be used in Step 2.
2. Examine the ten choices that made the class consensus list. (Likely choices would include: Plains of Abraham, Queenston Heights, Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, the Somme, Dieppe, Dunkirk, Ortona, D-Day, Oka.) At this point, a series of questions could be asked about the list. They might include the following:
  - a) What are the criteria for "top" military engagement?
  - b) From what time period do most of the choices come? Can you suggest reasons why that might be the case?
  - c) Can you identify any biases that appear in the list?
  - d) What are the difficulties in compiling such a list?
3. Ask, "Are there any important battles or confrontations that appear to be missing from the list?" (Possible suggestions might include: Louisbourg, Sainte-Foy, Chateauguay, Beaver Dam, Moraviantown, St. Eustache.)
4. If Hong Kong, 1941-1945 does not emerge from #3 above, then advance it as a candidate.
5. At this point, students should be provided with a brief overview of the Battle of Hong Kong, either by way of a reading from their textbook (if it provides anything), and/or the relevant section of the McKennas' book based on their TV documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*. A very worthwhile source is pp.58-61 in "Human Rights in the Pacific 1931-1945", the B.C. Resource Booklet containing an excerpt from that book.
6. After the students have familiarized themselves with the outlines of the story of Hong Kong, have them answer the following: What are the significant aspects of Hong Kong that make it a deserving candidate for inclusion in a Top Ten list? (Elements might include the following: the "first in last out" aspect, the questionable decision-making behind the commitment of Canadian troops; the horror of the POW camps; the lack of recognition on the part of the public, government, and history; etc.)

7. Ask the following question: What might be some reasons why the Canadian role in Hong Kong has largely been ignored (lack of media attention, not included in educational curricula, lack of coverage in school texts, reluctance of Hong Kong veterans to draw attention to themselves, other “more worthy” candidates, etc.)?
8. What suggestions can you offer to help rectify this situation? (Get Ministries of Education to include in [mandated] curriculum, have students study it, research it, invite in a Hong Kong veteran into the class, write letters to the editor, etc.)

## LESSON TWO - THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II

### INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

This lesson puts the story of Canada's involvement into the larger context of World War II itself. Logically, it makes sense to have students know exactly how and why World War II came about. That story, in and of itself, is amazing enough given the fact that the Great War had been fought just a generation earlier. The overwhelming aim of world leaders of the 1920s and 1930s was to avoid another such global conflict. Nevertheless, much of what they did, and the consequence of many of their decisions, led to the very result that they wished so desperately to avoid. This lesson examines the steps that led to this most tragic consequence. More significantly, the lesson also analyzes reasons for some of those fateful decisions and ultimately focuses on the central question, "Could World War II have been avoided?"

(Note: There will be some unavoidable overlap between parts of Lesson One and Lesson Two. This is intentional for a couple of explicit reasons. One, many teachers may choose not to do Lesson One so without this overlap, their students would miss out on vital information. Secondly, even in those instances when both lessons are covered, the element of reinforcement might be viewed as beneficial, as it should lead to greater understanding.)

World War II officially began with the Nazi blitzkrieg ("lightning war") launched against Poland on September 1, 1939. However, war clouds had been on the horizon for most of the decade of the 1930s. Ironically, a strong case can be made for the fact that the Treaty of Versailles (1919) that ended World War I contained the seeds for World War II. The Treaty's harsh and vindictive terms - eliminating Germany's navy and air force, limiting its armed forces, stripping it of its colonies, and forcing it to pay massive reparations because of the War Guilt Clause - threw Weimar Germany into political and economic instability. The combination of trying to finance World War I and pay \$242 billion in reparations led to runaway inflation at the beginning of the 1920s in Germany. Unemployment and depression followed at the end of the decade. The German people looked to a leader to solve their economic crises as well as one who would restore their lost national honour and pride.

The Allies studiously practised a policy of appeasement. They had just fought the Great War a generation before, and their attention was more focused on attempting to deal with the domestic consequences of the Great Depression. They had already indicated that stance with their lack of response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. They confirmed it two years later when, once again, they acquiesced in fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia.

After Hitler became Chancellor of Germany (and shortly thereafter “Führer”) in 1933, he implemented a policy of incremental aggression. Confident of the lack of resolve on the part of the Allies, he embarked on a series of offensive acts. Almost immediately, he violated terms of the Versailles Treaty by expanding the German armed forces and building up armaments industries. In 1936, he marched troops into the demilitarized Rhineland, again in express violation of the Treaty of Versailles. In March 1938, without a single shot being fired, the Anschluss (“annexation”) of Austria took place. With the Munich Treaty, the Allies handed over the Sudetenland (the northwestern portion of Czechoslovakia) to Hitler. One year later, Nazi troops occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia. In October of 1938, the Rome-Berlin Axis Pact was signed (and two years later, Japan joined the “Axis of Fascism”). Finally, in August 1939, just days before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Germany and the Soviet Union, bitter ideological enemies, concluded the Non-Aggression Pact.

Canada’s declaration of war this time was very different than it had been twenty-five years earlier prior to World War I. On that earlier occasion, when Britain declared war on the Triple Entente (Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Italy) in early August 1914, Canada was automatically at war. As Britain at that time still determined Canadian foreign policy, there was no debate or vote in the Canadian House of Commons about entry into the Great War. The Canadian entry into World War II was very different. Whereas Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3, 1939, Canada waited a full week, allowing time for a full Parliamentary debate and vote before announcing its own declaration.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to help students develop a chronological sense of the coming of World War II
- to have students gain an appreciation of causes and decisions that helped bring the world to war for a second time within a generation
- to provide the necessary historical context for understanding Canada’s involvement in Hong Kong, 1941-1945
- to understand and appreciate the lesson of history regarding appeasement and recognize where and when it was subsequently applied
- to have students acquire knowledge and insight as to what happened, why it happened, and the significance of it happening with regard to the coming of World War II

## TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

1. Select six to ten of the more significant terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Distribute them to groups of three students and have them analyze what the terms meant and what impact they might have in the post-war period.

2. Give each group ten to fifteen minutes to deliberate. They should nominate a recorder whose task it is to write down the group's findings. In addition, a presenter should also be chosen within each group who will briefly summarize the group's conclusions to the class.
3. Brief debate. (Done either as a class or in groups of three.) Debate the following resolution: Resolved that the peace of World War I led to the outbreak of World War II. Allow fifteen minutes.
4. Again the class should be broken into groups of three or four students. (They can either be the same groups as earlier or reconstituted groups.) Each group has the same task. Given a number of different causes of the coming of World War II, they are to put them into chronological order. Depending on the wishes of the teacher, they can have access to their own pooled knowledge, logical deduction, textbook, or the Internet.
5. Each group should record its list of causes either on the board or flip-chart paper.
6. Conduct a class discussion about the correct historical order.
7. Reassemble the groups and have them address the following questions:
  - a) Which event was the single most important one in helping to bring on World War II? Why?
  - b) What role did human error play in bringing on World War II?
  - c) We know that appeasement failed. Why did it look, at the time, like the wisest policy? And why did it fail?
  - d) Was World War II bound to happen? Was it inevitable?
8. Homework: The Legacy of Appeasement. Identify other instances in which the great historical lesson of "appeasement doesn't work" has been applied.