

Demonstrated Diversity

Canadian World War II Aid to Russia

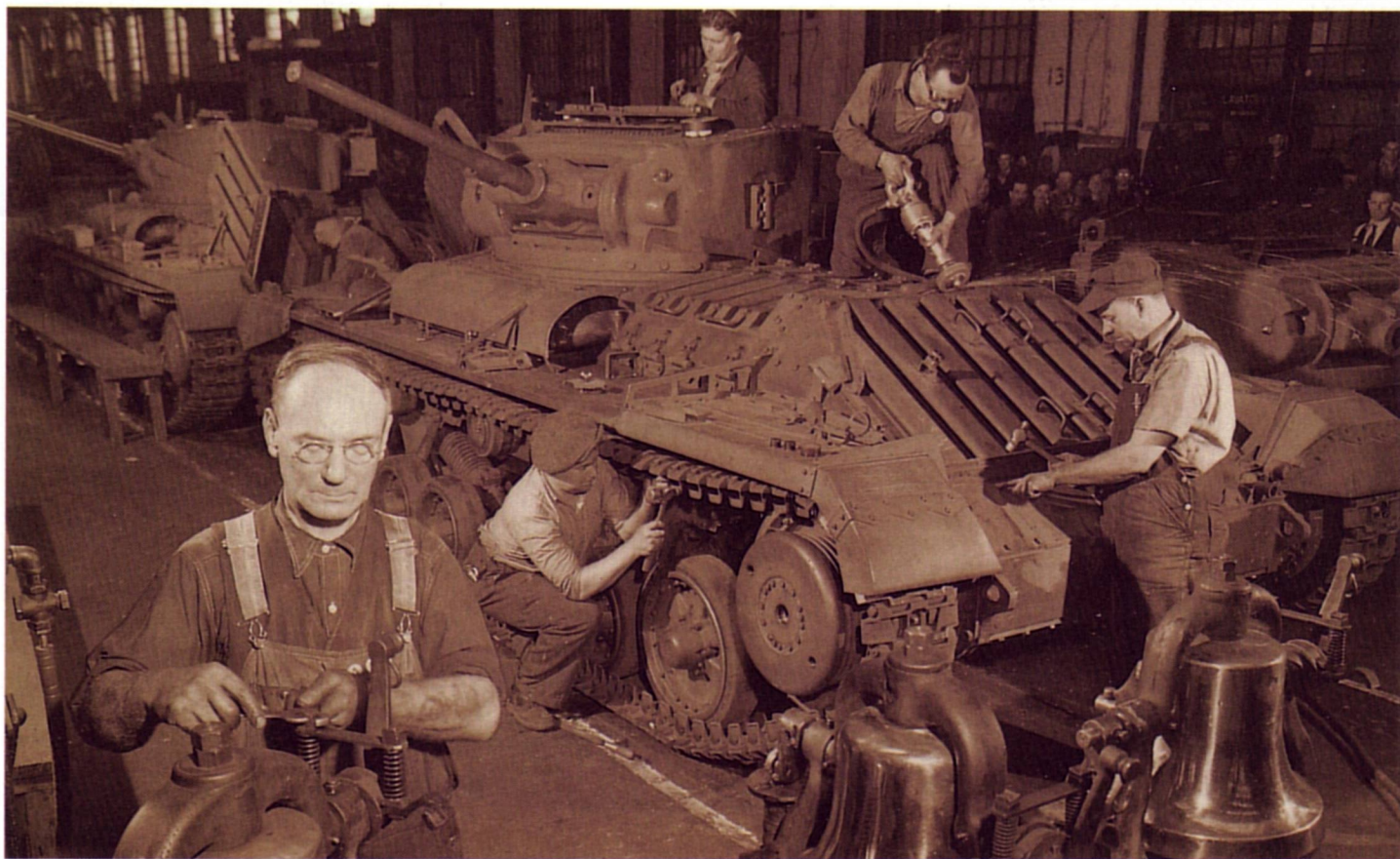
Text by Roy Thomas, photos courtesy National Archives

Canada has been part of the irony of fate which has seen the military resources of one of the world's most successful alliances, NATO, utilized to transport assistance to the homelands of the Red Army, the threat which generated the development of these same Western military assets. Fifty years ago, Canada was also in the process of providing a much larger package of aid to the Soviet Union, then locked in a titanic struggle with Hitler's Germany along a front of thousands of miles. The form that Canadian aid took illustrates the wide diversity of this country's contribution to the allied cause throughout the Second World War.

As expected, Canada provided Russia, Britain and other Allies with vast quantities of foodstuffs. Minerals, not surprisingly, were also a major contribution to the Allied cause, as well as manufactured items that ranged from tanks to complete factories. The production of food, the extraction of resources, and the fabrication, not only of war equipment but also of machinery, that assisted the Russian fight in World War II, is an achievement of which Canadians can be proud.

When Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, Canada's relations with the then Soviet Union were not what would be called "friendly." Canada did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and in fact, in February 1940, had cancelled an agreement to sell wheat to Russia because it was considered that, as a result of Stalin's agreement with Hitler, imported Canadian wheat would free the Soviets to ship their own wheat to Germany.

Provision of aid to Russia was both privately and officially organized. Initially, official Canadian aid to the Soviet Union was given primarily through the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Formal agreements, termed protocols, were signed by these countries. In the case of the First and Second Protocols, agreements were made solely between the Soviet Union, the U.S. and the U.K., thereby reconciling Russian demands with the industrial capacity of the western Allies. In 1943, the Canadian contribution was finally recognized as Canada was added as a signatory to both the Third and Fourth Protocols, this last one being signed in Ottawa. By mid-1943, the Canadian Mutual Aid Board had been established in order to deal with all requests that came from countries fighting the Axis powers, including the USSR and the U.K. As a result, Canada and the USSR sent ambassadors to each other's country in 1943. However, significant Canadian assistance to the Russian war effort was not evident as Canadian aid appeared as part of the United Kingdom's quota.



Such was the case with one of the major manufactured items that was supplied to the Red Army, the "Valentine" tank. In fact, Canada sent more tanks to Russia than the Italians did, and they had an army positioned there. Originally, the United States was looked at as a possible location when, in 1940, it became obvious that additional tank manufacturing facilities were needed outside the British Isles. However, this proved to be a "non-starter" as Americans concentrated their assets on meeting increasing U.S. Army requirements. This led to a Canadian Pacific Railway contract to produce 300 Valentine tanks for the United Kingdom. A Canadian order for 488 additional tanks followed. Hitler's invasion of Russia coincided with the delivery of the first Valentines in June 1941. The initial batch of 30 were retained in Canada, but the remaining 1,390 tanks, made by Angus Works in Montreal, were produced until May 1943 and sent to the Soviet Union to fill British quotas for aid under the first two Protocols.

Also sent to the Soviet Union under U.K. quotas were the majority of the "Articized" (i.e. modified to operate under -40 °F) Canadian Military Pattern (CMP) trucks. These were produced by Ford at Windsor and General Motors at Oshawa in 1942.

One interesting example is the lorry; a three-ton 4x4, six pounder anti-tank portee. It is a CMP truck designed to carry a wheeled gun so that it could be fired either from on the vehicle, or from a conventional position on the ground. Under the Canadian Mutual Aid Board, created in 1943, Canada was to send an additional 1,265 trucks, primarily machine shop lorries. Aid sent on behalf of the U.K. was really a Canadian gift as the majority of production done in Canada for the British was also

provided "free."

Canadian production also seemed to have been mentioned as part of the American quotas. In the case of minerals, a U.S. author notes that half of the 4,000 tons of aluminum that was promised by the United States in the First Protocol was to come from Canada. Tabulating the magnitude of Canada's assistance to Russia becomes easier once the Canadian Mutual Aid Board began to co-ordinate all such contributions. As an example, the final report of this board indicates that 37,286 tons of aluminum ingots were shipped to Russia from 1 July 1943 to 1 April 1945. After this period, an additional 2,216 tons were provided to the USSR.

In spite of this outpouring of assistance, suspicion characterized World War II relations between Canada and the USSR. As part of Canada's munitions production for the Red Army, over 10,000 tons of cordite was manufactured. Although fabricated to Russian specifications, there was still a reluctance to undertake the risk, and expense, of shipping this quantity of explosive before submitting it to proof tests. However, the USSR Purchasing Mission, located in Ottawa, would not provide any information as to the ballistic characteristics of the weapon which would fire rounds using this cordite. As a result, detective-like investigations had to be conducted before proper proofing could take place at Valcartier, Quebec.

The diversity of the Canadian manufacture of war materials can also be illustrated by the number of minesweepers that were transferred to the Russians in 1945. Ten "Lake" class, wooden-hulled minesweepers of RN design, measuring 126 feet in length and of 360 tons displacement, were built in six Great Lakes and

four west coast shipyards. Some of the 1,051 Hurricane fighters, built in Port Arthur to fill British orders, also found their way to Russia before production ceased in 1943. This aircraft type was another U.K. quota item, as per their signed Protocols.

However, it must be noted that manufacturing was not limited to war materials alone. In the period 1 July 1943 to 1 September 1945, Canada provided the USSR with 82,482 tons of steel rails and 1,562 flatcar units. Three complete plants of machine tools were sent, as well as over 500 lathes, shapers, and planers. Small quantities of some items were also requested; these ranged from three copies of the unique Canadian armoured snowmobile, to two maple syrup equipment units (no doubt to tap Canadian expertise in these areas).

Foodstuffs naturally formed a significant part of Canadian help, both as assistance under the Canadian Mutual Aid Board after 1943, and earlier as part of the U.S./U.K. Protocol quotas. Agricultural aid to the USSR covered the spectrum from an estimated nine million bushels of wheat, to eighty tons of brome grass seed. But the end of the war in Europe did not stop Canadian assistance to Russia. Over 28,000 tons of flour were sent in the period 1 April to 1 September, 1945.

The transportation of these goods was also provided by Canada. Five major routes were used for the shipping of the supplies to Russia from North America. Forty-seven per cent of all assistance to Russia from the Western Hemisphere went via the west coast ports to Vladivostok, through Japanese waters. The route to the Soviet Arctic was not significant as the waterways were iced in for all but the summer months, nor was the Black Sea used as it was only opened in 1945. The Persian Gulf became a major funnel for allied support in 1943, but not for Canadian goods. The port of Murmansk, made famous for its convoy difficulties, actually ranks third in volume of traffic handled for the Soviet Union.

Only five per cent of Canadian and British supplies from North America were transported to Vladivostok during the First Protocol (1 October 1941 to 30 June 1942). During the next year, this percentage increased to twenty. However, during the period of the Third Protocol (from 1 July 1943 to 30 June 1944), ninety per cent of all the combined Canadian and British aid from North America went via the Pacific Ocean. During the Fourth and final Protocol, from 1 July 1944 to 12 May 1945, the flow remained high at eighty-four per cent.

Another form of assistance provided was the repair of Soviet merchant vessels and ice breakers. A total of 125 ships were serviced in Canada's Pacific coast ports, principally Vancouver. Victualing, provision of sailor's clothes, deck stores, engine room stores, and making these ships seaworthy were all tasks that were performed on these vessels. Major rebuilding operations were often involved, as many of these Russian ships were between twenty and thirty years of age. Detailed in accounts of the RCN in World War II, Canadian naval personnel, particularly those on the Tribal class destroyers, were also involved in escorting Russian convoys.

Russia was also provided with private assistance. Channelled through the Canadian Aid to Russia Fund, food, medical supplies, and money were collected from November 1942 and September 1945. The money that was raised through this effort

equalled less than half the value of the repair services that were provided to the Russian merchant vessels on the west coast.

Fifty-six per cent, or 7,925 of all aircraft delivered to the Soviet Union from North America, were flown via the Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) route which followed the previously established Northwest Staging route, following airfields in Grande Prairie (Alberta), Fort St. John and Fort Nelson (both in B.C.), Watson Lake and Whitehorse (in the Yukon), and Edmonton (Alta.). About 74 aircraft went down along this flight line. In Great Falls, Montana, was located the plant where the supplied aircraft received their Soviet (red star) markings.

In September 1942, a U.S. Air Transport Command Headquarters was established in Edmonton. On 23 September 1943, the staff of what is now the Municipal Airport in Edmonton, handled a North American record: 860 different planes passed through their hands in a single day. (That is more aircraft than in the present Canadian Forces inventory!) Civilian contract pilots flew the P-40 Warhawk, P-39 Aircobra, and P-63 Kingcobra fighters, while U.S. military personnel delivered the A-20 and B-25 bombers, as well as the C-47 Skytrain transports.

Canadian aid to Russia demonstrated, the diversity of this country's contribution to the Allied cause during the Second World War, and the wide range of capabilities to be found in Canada. Assistance was not limited to raw materials; it included sophisticated war materials such as tanks, and the machinery needed to fabricate such items. As the media draws our attention to Canadian aid today for what used to be the Soviet Union, we should think, with pride, of the assistance this country provided the USSR fifty years ago. ♣

Page 47, Convoy of Allied ships carrying aid and supplies: *Opposite page, Valentine tanks on the production line of CPR Angus works with locomotive bells being assembled in the foreground; Below, Trainload of Valentine tanks headed for USSR.*

