**The Shackling Crisis 1942 by David Gray**

Both Britain and Germany put prisoners of war in chains during the specific, short-lived "Shackling Crisis" during World War II, a retaliatory cycle that was eventually ended by mutual consent.

German and Italian prisoners in Britain were generally treated humanely. They were used for agricultural labour (*left*), and eventually given significant freedom within local communities, especially after 1945. While British and Commonwealth POWs in Germany faced harsh conditions and food shortages, Germany generally adhered to the Geneva Convention for Western prisoners. This was in stark contrast to their treatment of Soviet POWs, who suffered extreme brutality and mass death.

Japan was a signatory of the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1929) but did not ratify it. This meant that while Japan expressed support for the treaty's principles, it was not legally bound by its specific articles during World War II. Japan's wartime conduct often violated the provisions of the Geneva Convention, and it established its own, (brutal) laws regarding the treatment of prisoners of war.

**Two Newspaper reports**

News of this chaining of prisoners appeared in the British press on October 9th 1942:

'**German Prisoners will be Chained – Action if Dieppe men are not unfettered – Canada Consulted on Decision.**

Germany's action in carrying out her threat to chain the 2,500 British prisoners captured at Dieppe has been followed by a British warning that German prsoners will be treated in the same way. A statement issued by the War Office last night said:

> The German Government, having put into operation the illegal action threatened in the communique, the War Office announces that unless the German Government release the prisoners captured at Dieppe from the chains, an equal number of German prisoners of war will be manacled and chained as from 12 noon, Saturday October 10th.'

The next day, on October 10th the following story appeared in the press:

'**Berlin Silent on British Order to Chain Nazis**

Up to a late hour last night the German Government had failed to reply to the British Government's warning concerning the chaining of British prisoners taken at Dieppe.

Today at noon, 1,376 German prisoners will be fettered unless Germany decides at the last moment to unfetter the equivalent number of British now in chains in Germany since Thursday.'

**The "Chains Episode"**

This diplomatic and humanitarian conflict began following the Allied raid on Dieppe in August 1942. After the Dieppe Raid, German forces discovered British operational orders instructing commandos to "bind prisoners" to prevent them from destroying documents. In retaliation, Hitler personally ordered the shackling of approximately 1,370 Allied prisoners, mostly Canadians captured at Dieppe.

In response to the German move, Winston Churchill ordered an equal number of German prisoners held in Britain and Canada to be shackled.

In general, permanent chaining of POWs was against the 1929 Geneva Convention (the relevant convention at the time), which both Britain and Germany were signatories to, as it constituted an outrage upon personal dignity and humiliating treatment. Physical restraints were generally permitted only during immediate capture or transport, or as a temporary disciplinary measure, but not for prolonged periods in camps.

The crisis lasted for over a year. While the Canadian government eventually refused to continue the shackling in their camps (where many German POWs were held), the formal deadlock only ended in late 1943 through the mediation of the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

**From the Canadian Viewpoint**

At around noon on October 12, 1942, a Canadian military commando charged the mess hall of the Bowmanville camp (*left*), located 75 km East of Toronto in Canada, where around 400 German prisoners of war (POW) had barricaded themselves for two days in reaction of the shackling of 100 inmates. During the six hours of the operation, Canadian militaries – armed with tear gas, bayonets, and high-pressure fire hoses – struggled with the German captives, who threw bricks, tables, and chairs and used baseball bats and hockey clubs as handmade weapons. In total, more than 80 Germans and 20 Canadians were wounded. This riot, known as the

*Battle of Bowmanville*, presents a turning point on the Ottawa-London relationship on the treatment of German prisoners of war and the respect of the 1929 Geneva Convention.

The British-German 'Shackling Crisis' began with the discovery by the German army of a British order to shackle German prisoners during the military operation at Dieppe in August 1942. In reprisals, the German authorities ordered that all British prisoners captured at Dieppe be handcuffed until London assured a termination of the chaining order. Britain responded by ordering the shackling of German prisoners until Berlin changed its policy, which led to an escalation of retaliation between the two countries. At that time almost 16,000 German soldiers were detained in Canada (a total of 34,000 German POWs were held in 1945).

During this crisis, the Dominion of Canada, after having unwillingly followed the shackling order, refused to apply the British retaliation policy anymore and decided, without consulting London, to unshackle the prisoners. Ottawa tried rather to find a solution to this deadlock with the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The crisis ended only in November 1943.

The decision to refuse the shackling policy revealed the complex relationship between Ottawa and London on the war captivity topic. Two years before, in June 1940, the Canadian government accepted to support its ally by detaining German internees and prisoners of war (*left*), on its territory. However, those operations quickly became an issue for the Canadians, who used their status of detaining power to affirm their national sovereignty on the international level and to distance the country from London's influence.

In the case of the shackling episode, the Canadian position was clearly tied to its support for international humanitarian law and its own national sovereignty. The Canadian Department of External Affairs (DEA), mentioned to London that Canadian public opinion dictated that the respect of international law and the position of Canada within the international community and as a defender of the Geneva Conventions remained important. In addition, the Canadians made up a large majority of the allied prisoners taken at Dieppe, who suffered from German retaliation.

The definition of detaining power by London and Ottawa was a difficult object of negotiation between 1940 and 1943 because Britain insisted to remain the official detaining power and considered the Dominion as a simple 'agent' of London. Following this statement, the British authorities tried to centralise communication with Germany, Switzerland and the ICRC in the hands of the Foreign Office and the War Office, thus exercising complete control of the humanitarian diplomacy. Ottawa rejected this arrangement and worked rather directly with Geneva.

As the Canadian representative in London stipulated: "Canada had signed the Convention as a sovereign state and was not willing to abrogate its sovereign status by treating interned German soldiers in accordance with British interpretations of the Geneva Convention." (War Office, Minutes)

This struggle went beyond the respect of international humanitarian law. The political agenda drove Canadian humanitarianism policy here. By claiming their own channel with Geneva and Berne, Ottawa promoted its political interest against the influence of Britain by confirming its status as a sovereign nation, as well as the main detaining power for the German POWs on its territory. Also, by working closely with the ICRC, Canadians assured the respect of the Geneva Conventions for German prisoners, and then tried to protect their nationals held in Germany, despite some objections from London.

Despite this 'spat', relations between Canada and Britain remained absolutely solid. Indeed:

'During WWII Canada provided approximately $4 billion in aid to Britain, which included a gift of $1 billion and a loan of $700 million. This aid was crucial for financing Britain's war effort and was a significant contribution to the Allied cause.' (Hansard).