

Unlikely Diplomats
The Canadian Brigade in Germany, 1951-64

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Introduction

ON 5 FEBRUARY 1951, Brooke Claxton, the Canadian minister of national defence, announced that Canada would send “ground forces ... [to western Europe] to show emphatically ... that we stand together with our allies.”¹ Claxton’s declaration to Parliament marked the first time the nation had sent troops overseas in a deterrent peacetime role, epitomizing the Louis St. Laurent government’s willingness to engage actively in international affairs. Nonetheless, there are clear lines of continuity underlying the cautious days of William Lyon Mackenzie King, the optimistic era of Louis St. Laurent, the controversial period under John Diefenbaker, and the difficult Lester B. Pearson minority years. In examining the ideas that arose in the aftermath of two world wars, this book explores why Canada decided to send a brigade to Europe after withdrawing its forces so hastily at the end of the Second World War. Canada belonged to the North Atlantic Alliance, and Claxton’s statement about solidarity with allies seems clear, yet new evidence reveals significant disagreements among Canada’s allies about the brigade’s intended roles, its status, and its relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany (the FRG).² The North Atlantic Alliance’s continuing convoluted disagreements created intricate challenges for Canadian leaders who hoped to use the brigade to highlight Canada’s independence as a nation, to give greater weight to its voice, and to improve its relations with the Germans. Many analysts point to the North Atlantic Alliance and its skilful use of nuclear deterrence and negotiation to avoid bloodshed as remarkable achievements, which indeed they were.³ Yet behind the alliance’s public appearance of confidence, readiness, and solidarity, politicians, diplomats, and military leaders squabbled and negotiated fiercely, pushing different national and individual agendas. Nuclear deterrence and the ongoing disputes affected Canada, its goals, and the purpose of its troops in subtle and unforeseen ways, creating an “unbearable lightness of military being.”

The expression “the unbearable lightness of being” comes from the title of a 1982 novel by the Czech author Milan Kundera that was also adapted into an American movie of the same name.⁴ The characters in Kundera’s novel face complex problems of identity and purpose under Communist totalitarian rule. They are trapped in a world of paradox and oppression. I use the phrase to refer to a different set of paradoxes that arose during the nuclear arms race,

when Canadian troops prepared for a battle that would never take place. Canadian military families not only moved next to the planned combat zone in Germany, but the Canadian government also spent defence dollars on housing, schools, community centres, and skating rinks rather than on weapons in an effort to retain well-behaved and trained volunteer soldiers. By 1964, the Canadian Army had succeeded – its soldiers were highly trained and older, and many were married with children. But what was their purpose?

Three recurring themes or paradoxes appear throughout *Unlikely Diplomats* – each building on the central matter of purpose inherent in the phrase “the unbearable lightness of military being.” The first concerns Canada and its role in the world. The Canadian government wished to make its voice heard and sought to influence international security, but its officials often faced events and obstacles beyond their control. On some occasions they were excluded, and at other times their participation seemed to count for little. How did Canadians deal with these issues, and to what extent were they able to overcome barriers and promote their ideas about peace and security as well as national priorities and interests? The second theme addresses the impact of nuclear deterrence. From the moment of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the atomic bomb affected perceptions of the utility of conventional forces. A few observers even concluded that nuclear weapons rendered conventional forces obsolete. Because the Western nations, including Canada, adopted nuclear deterrence as a primary strategy, deterrence had an enormous impact on their political and military thinking. It influenced Canada’s defence policy and the operational plans for Canada’s brigade in Germany. How did nuclear deterrence affect the purpose of the Canadian Army⁵ and especially the brigade in Germany? The first two themes are closely intertwined, as the Cold War nuclear arms race influenced the ability of smaller nations to make their independent views count. After taking part in two world wars, would Canada find itself dragged into another great conflict not of its own making, and would this conflict bring about unthinkable destruction?

The third theme highlights Canada’s unique approach to international security. With the ascendance of nuclear arms and a limited voice, the Canadian government emphasized non-military means of enhancing international security. These means included promoting effective international organizations and the implementation of economic measures to develop international trade and stability, as well as measures to improve solidarity and cohesion and to encourage a high quality of life. Aspects of these non-military measures affected the alliance strategy, the intelligence assessments, and spending priorities. How did these priorities and especially the policy of promoting a high quality of life affect the Canadian Army, its capabilities, and its character? By 1964, the new

strategic environment, Canada's priorities, and the brigade's role in Germany had transformed the Canadian Army in a fundamental manner, but we will see that the transformation had not been anticipated or deliberate. Rather, it happened almost by accident.

Canada's fight for a voice in international forums had an indirect and weak association with the German problem in the period following the First World War, as I demonstrate in Chapter 1. Although Canada was a member of the League of Nations, Canadian leaders did not seem convinced that European security was a key national concern during the 1920s. British calls for dominion forces to bolster imperial interests worked against building Canadian forces, especially during the 1920s and early 1930s, when the threat to Canada itself was low. Although the German problem was not resolved, the League of Nations made progress during the 1920s. Few foresaw the Depression and the Second World War, two developments that were not simply the consequence of the First World War but rather the result of multiple variables.⁶ As tensions built in Europe, External Affairs and the Department of National Defence gave conflicting advice to the King government. By the mid-1930s, the Royal Canadian Air Force and the Royal Canadian Navy had increased their strengths in reaction to the rising threat, while the Canadian Army, associated with expeditionary actions outside Canada and with the high losses of the First World War, lagged behind. By 1939, the Canadian Army was not prepared for combat in Europe. Nonetheless, Canada made impressive military and material contributions to the allied victory, and Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong devised the principle of functionalism, which stated that Canada should be treated in accordance with its contributions and given a greater voice in some specific areas. King and other Canadian officials used this principle to promote Canada's participation in forums where its interests and inputs were significant.⁷ Despite this principle, they did not gain a voice in the German peace settlement. For the Canadian Army, the perceptions that its contributions did not buy Canada much influence in key forums and that it might be used to bolster imperial rather than national interests were undoubtedly damaging to its future. The interwar period and Second World War provide an important prologue to the discussion of Cold War problems.

Before the close of the Second World War, the Canadian government began to consider the army's postwar priorities, which proved to be limited. Canada did not keep its occupation forces in Germany for long.⁸ Prime Minister King, ever aware of the importance of public opinion, made his decision to withdraw Canadian forces in early 1946. The government quickly demobilized the army to allow veterans to return to their families, schools, and work. During and after the war, the British government asked if Canada would contribute "its share"

to occupation forces in Germany, and the King government was under some pressure to help out. My re-examination of the British government's attempts to convince Canadian cabinet ministers to do so adds to the interpretation that the British arguments backfired badly. During the war, Canadian officials had expressed the need for a mechanism to allow for their input into occupation policies, but no such mechanism developed. At least some blamed Great Power dominance for aggression,⁹ and so procedures to allow smaller allies a voice in decision making had a substantive underlying purpose beyond that recognized by historians.¹⁰ As well, the British government, deeply in debt, hoped to use Commonwealth forces to bolster Britain's sagging status and influence rather than cut back on worldwide defence commitments. As Chapter 2 shows, King and his ministers insisted on economic means of assistance, promoting trade, lowering tariffs, and lending money to Britain, rather than on maintaining a larger peacetime army to provide troops for occupation or other purposes. Canadian leaders promoted peace, security, and national interests by these non-military means, by participation in the United Nations, and by promoting functional participation during the early Cold War era. Their priorities and the international situation worked against the Canadian Army acquiring more.

At the close of the Second World War, many world leaders and eminent thinkers wrestled with the "German problem," particularly with preventing a future German resurgence, which remained an important security concern for at least two decades to come. Yet the Four Powers¹¹ opposed the participation of smaller allies, like Canada, in the German peace settlement. When faced with this arrogance and intransigence, Canadian officials protested by refusing to present their views in a secondary forum, by pushing hard for representation, and by working with other smaller allies to develop common ground. The development of effective forums for the participation of smaller allies boosted their national interests while also enhancing international security by reducing the dominance of the Great Powers, which many blamed for two world wars. In the meantime, some Canadians stubbornly voiced their opinions by informal methods of their own choosing while confidently predicting that greater Canadian trade with Britain and Europe would give their voices more weight. They believed that greater international trade would also create stability, peace, and wealth. In most respects, Canadian officials reflected the influence of American, British, and European ideas about the impact of economics on international peace and security. However, Canada's approach was also optimistic, nationalistic, and occasionally antagonistic, though its officials, hoping to promote progress among the Four Powers, tried to play a constructive role and sometimes muted protests about their own exclusion. However, the Four Powers'

negotiations over Germany faltered and eventually collapsed. As Lt. Gen. Maurice Pope (a Canadian who served in the Canadian Berlin Mission from 1946 to 1950) recorded, conditions in Germany deteriorated in the immediate postwar era, and the failure of Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States to reach an agreement resulted in the long-term division of Germany into two parts: the communist East and the democratic West.¹²

With the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1947 and the Soviet blockade of Berlin during 1948 and 1949, the East-West split widened. Canadians debated participating in the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49 but only sent supplies. The story of the differences between the isolationist Prime Minister King and the enthusiastic internationalist Under-Secretary of State Pearson is well known to many Canadians,¹³ but few are aware of Defence Minister Brooke Claxton's key role in this debate. Claxton pointed out that Canada had no legal authority in Berlin. He worried about the limited capabilities of Canadian forces and promoted the principle of no participation without representation. These factors influenced Canadian decision making with respect to the employment of Canada's forces in the Berlin Crisis. It might seem obvious that no sovereign nation would contribute forces to a particular cause unless that nation also had a formal voice in related decision-making forums, but in the early postwar era Canada fought several diplomatic battles to establish exactly this principle. During 1948 and 1949, Canadian diplomats and military officials took part in emergency defence planning but had little representation in the bodies undertaking this work. During negotiations for the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), they pushed hard for greater representation, and refused to accept reconstruction of the Second World War's strategic and military decision-making forums. Canada's permanent forces increased slightly as the threat rose and as Canada achieved a formal voice in military decision making. After NATO formed in 1949, Canadian leaders continued to promote more effective representation of smaller allies in NATO's various decision-making bodies.

Without question, Canadian leaders also saw the alliance as a means to balance American dominance.¹⁴ Yet by 1964 the alliance had failed in this regard, and Canadians, for a variety of reasons largely beyond their control, achieved only limited increased trade with Britain and Europe.¹⁵ Chapter 3 describes these developments and why Canada decided to send a brigade group and air squadrons to Europe in 1951. The Canadian hope of balancing American domination played an indirect role in the eventual decision to place the brigade in the British zone of the FRG.¹⁶ However, despite many common interests and goals, Britain and Canada differed on the status of the brigade in the FRG, and, once again, the old issues of representation, participation, and an independent

voice for Canada arose. The Americans, the British, and the French controlled the presence of troops in the FRG until 1955, and the British controlled the German occupation funds used to support troops in their zone in Germany. Canada's relations with Germany became intertwined with those of Britain and the other allies. By placing the Canadian brigade in the British zone, the Canadian government faced unforeseen and complicated legal and financial obstacles and had to manage tricky public relations issues with the Germans. At this point, the question was not simply what did the Canadians hope to achieve but also what did the Germans want?

The Germans were former enemies. Germany was divided into two parts, the FRG was not yet a member of NATO, and the population of the FRG did not widely support Western alignment. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer faced considerable opposition to his pro-Western stand. Kurt Schumacher, the leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), pushed for a neutral status similar to Austria's, allowing for German reunification and greater independence. He and others feared that Western alignment increased the likelihood that Germany might become a battlefield between the East and the West.¹⁷ During the late 1940s and 1950s, church leaders, members of the SPD, and others voiced doubts about Adenauer's pro-Western politics, NATO's reliance on nuclear weapons, and the presence of foreign troops on their soil. The Germans did not passively accept a Cold War prism, choosing between the East and the West. Rather, they sought alternative solutions to the German problem and the Cold War, including disarmament, neutrality, and unification. For some, NATO seemed to be beating the drums of war.¹⁸ New archival evidence reveals that Canadian politicians, diplomats, and intelligence experts were aware of the wide range of German opinions about Western alignment. Because many Canadians had lost their lives serving in two world wars, the Canadian government regarded stability in Germany and Europe as essential to world peace and to Canada's future. Canadian thinking about peace and security stressed long-term economic, political, and cultural factors and it put little emphasis on military readiness – despite the contribution of a brigade and an air division to NATO's European defence.

The Soviet threat proved a key factor in German decision making. The Soviets exploded an atomic bomb in August 1949, and the Soviet forces were considerably superior to Western forces in Europe. "Actual force levels in Central Europe favoured the East by a ratio of 3:1."¹⁹ Significantly, few thought that the Soviets actually wanted war. Adenauer insisted on political equality as a precondition for German cooperation in European defence, and he wanted the American nuclear deterrent as a security guarantee, but he also wisely pushed for stronger

conventional defence.²⁰ The British and the French relied upon German occupation payments to help finance the presence of their troops on German soil. Drawing upon American and Commonwealth ties and refusing to limit their interests to Europe, the British tried to bolster their world status.²¹ They hoped that Canadian participation in the alliance would strengthen their hand. The French, too, hoped to use NATO to bolster their status. They wanted a NATO security guarantee but were unwilling to pay a heavy price for it. They feared German rearmament and resurgence and hoped for North America's assistance in defending colonial territories such as Indo-China and North Africa. Canadian officials disagreed with the French about the development of Third World nationalism, colonial disputes, and the specific means for promoting peace and prosperity. As a result of widely differing security concerns, French leaders felt excluded by the Anglo-Saxons and began to pursue a more independent line early on in NATO.²² No doubt, the French government welcomed a Canadian contribution to European defence, but differences in priorities came to the fore with regard to the status of Canadian forces on German soil in 1951. The French also disagreed with the Canadians with respect to the FRG and the timing and nature of changes to its status.

Canadian officials challenged British and French policies in NATO, and when it came to their own forces, they stood their ground. Alone among its allies, Canada refused to allow its brigade in Germany to be labelled as part of the occupation forces, and it refused to take on any occupation duties. During late 1951 and early 1952, Adenauer skilfully used Canada's stand and allied differences to promote German demands for equality, but in the face of British and French opposition, he failed to achieve much progress. Officials within individual governments disagreed and debated. They changed their minds as time went on and circumstances evolved, and they sometimes left behind confusing and even misleading records of what transpired during their interactions. As a result, the current historiography is incomplete.²³ In this case, detailed Canadian evidence clarifies the British version of negotiations over the status of the Canadian brigade in Germany and highlights Canadian concerns about sovereign rights, an independent voice, and the importance of public relations with the Germans. Canada had its own agenda, including supporting Adenauer's requests for German equality to encourage the FRG's Western alignment.

Negotiations regarding the status of the brigade took place during the early development of European economic integration. The French took the lead, negotiating for German resources to benefit their sluggish economy and pushing for high tariffs to develop independence from North America. These and

other circumstances limited Canadian trade with the Europeans. Unforeseen events such as the Suez Crisis of 1956²⁴ further damaged NATO solidarity and subsequently influenced European and German trade negotiations, as well as the terms adopted by the European Economic Community.²⁵ Pearson won a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the United Nations peacekeeping efforts in the aftermath, but the crisis negatively affected Canada's trade relations in Europe. Facing formidable roadblocks, Canadian officials followed remarkably consistent security and trade policies under King, St. Laurent, Diefenbaker, and Pearson. Canada's officials, its policies, and the presence of its brigade in Germany allowed the nation to assert its right to a formal seat in key decision-making forums. If this seat did not result in the fulfillment of Canada's trading goals, it was nonetheless an important achievement. Without a seat, officials received only second-hand information and had no direct means of expressing national views.

By 1964, Canada had made modest gains, playing a small, constructive role in European negotiations and in the key transformations of this period. Moreover, Canadian leaders saw the brigade as a means to promote Canada's identity, independence, and national priorities. Given its foreign policy goals, Canada wanted its troops to develop good relations with the Germans, to treat them as equals, and to influence their opinions in favour of Western alliance. For this reason, the troops and, later, their families became "unlikely diplomats," a more demanding, complicated, and essential role than anyone anticipated. Chapter 4 analyzes the relationship between the troops and the Germans in communities where the troops were located. Economic conditions, political ideology, nationality, gender, cultural expectations, and allied policies affected interactions between the Canadians and the Germans. The decision to send Canadian troops to Germany had a huge impact on many Canadian and German lives, and local relations were initially troubled. The optimistic foreign policies developed in the small capital city of Ottawa proved difficult to implement in the still-devastated environment of Hannover, and later Soest, Germany. In these centres, many Germans and displaced people were hungry, unemployed, and homeless. Predictably, the communists seized upon Canadian and allied troop misbehaviour for propaganda purposes, but after six long years of occupation, they were not the only ones outraged when the occasional drunken soldier became loud, unruly, or involved in a brawl. If most soldiers behaved well, the few who did not made headlines in Germany and Canada: as a result, the Canadian Department of National Defence and the brigade embarked on an active public relations campaign. They repressed criticism within the brigade, resulting in incomplete and possibly misleading archival records. Yet they also addressed issues and improved conditions, encouraging the individual efforts

of soldiers, their families, and their German neighbours, which, over time, made a positive cumulative difference.

In the earliest years, the British Army of the Rhine's (BAOR) priorities sometimes conflicted with Canada's goals. Canadian Lt. Gen. Guy Simonds, who served as the chief of the general staff, sympathized with the British Army, which controlled the occupation funds. As a result, some new construction for the brigade did not meet Canadian standards. Minister Claxton's early hopes and directions to promote a Canadian lifestyle for the brigade went largely unfulfilled until 1955. During the Second World War, almost a half-million Canadians serving in Britain had also faced difficulties adjusting to British society and expectations. Initially, rocky relations improved with time as both the Canadians and the British "simply got to know each other better" and as organized recreation and hospitality ameliorated the loneliness and isolation of troops.²⁶ Similar statements might be applied to the Canadian brigade's experience in Germany, but the situation in the FRG during the early 1950s was more volatile, complicated, and crucial to future security. Even after the FRG joined NATO and occupation officially ended, remnants of occupation policies affected the Canadian brigade and its relations with the communities around it. During the 1950s, family life in Germany did not match the idealized expectations that some held.²⁷ However, by the early 1960s, Germany was recovering. Every little village had a flower shop, a beauty salon, and a tea room. Towns had choirs and orchestras, and the larger ones had operas. Factories reopened, cars multiplied, and the Germans were polite and welcoming.²⁸ Housing increased. The brigade also improved conditions for soldiers and their families by dedicating more of the defence budget to homes, schools, and community support. This story, touching as it does on the German economic miracle, ends on a happy note in 1964, but Canadians remained in the FRG for decades longer.²⁹

Military historians have long been fascinated by the relationship between the military and society. For the most part, Canadian historians have focused on the militia (reserves or part-time soldiers) as the embodiment of the citizen-soldier or as the representative of Canadians. Yet, after the First World War, the reserves declined in importance, and the permanent force (full-time or regular soldiers) grew.³⁰ Yet the militia myth endures, partly because Canada continues to rely on its reserves in times of need, calling on them during the Second World War, the Korean Conflict, and again in Afghanistan. When the brigade went to Germany in 1951, the Canadian government called upon reservists, reflecting an expectation that the brigade would serve in Germany for a limited period. For the most part, families were left behind in Canada, yet some went anyway without official support, and they led government policy by their actions. By

1954, regular force units replaced reservists, and personnel policies began to address the recruitment and retention of a large number of well-trained, well-behaved volunteers in the permanent force, largely in response to the brigade's role in Germany. Chapter 5 challenges the myth of a golden age in the Canadian Army during the 1950s and looks at the problems, the retention rates, and the solutions. Canadian Army Headquarters initially opposed sending families overseas. I examine how inter-service arguments and especially the air force example influenced army decisions. Eventually, Canadian Army Headquarters changed its negative attitude to marriages and married men, sending families to Germany and supporting them there. These decisions affected the budget and the resources available for combat, reflecting a new and different purpose for the regular force and eventually changing its character. Canadian Army Headquarters never asked if the brigade was in Germany for combat or if it was there to represent Canada in a favourable light, but its personnel policies and its expenditures answered that question.

Finally, what of strategy and operations? Chapter 6 delineates how the political strategy of deterrence, with its reliance on nuclear weapons, affected the operational plans for a small brigade located in a heavily populated area of the FRG.³¹ Recently declassified documents reveal little-known doubts about American, British, and NATO strategy that were privately shared among a few senior officials but never circulated widely, even among military officers, because of fears of damaging deterrence, solidarity, and morale. Some documents came from Britain and circulated among a few British officers but were never shared with Canadians until they were released by the British archives. Other Canadian documents were buried for years in a leaky second basement of the National Defence Headquarters and only recently came to light. Together, they demonstrate British and Canadian thinking about NATO-wide issues that Britain and Canada could not resolve but that nonetheless affected plans for the British Army of the Rhine and for the brigade. These documents shed light on why Canadian military leaders became increasingly discontent with plans for the brigade, raising questions about the effectiveness of strategic nuclear weapons and about the limitations of tactical nuclear weapons and plans for forward defence in Germany.

Chapter 6 concludes with an examination of how nuclear deterrence and NATO politics affected Canada in the years before and after Canada had access to American nuclear weapons. Why did Canada negotiate for access to tactical nuclear weapons? This examination adds to the existing scholarship on Diefenbaker, American Gen. Lauris Norstad, and the controversy over nuclear weapons that helped to bring down the Diefenbaker government in 1963. A

brief look at the relationship between the American administration of John F. Kennedy and the outgoing American NATO commander Norstad addresses Diefenbaker's suspicions that Kennedy had influenced Norstad's public criticisms of Canada's failure to negotiate access to nuclear weapons in January 1963. The decision of the Pearson government to acquire access to nuclear weapons remains controversial. The Canadian Army supported the acquisition of tactical nuclear weapons for a variety of reasons, though these weapons had little utility in the operational field in Germany. Small conventional forces struggled with problems of purpose, relevance, and survival in the nuclear battlefield. These problems were not necessarily less severe after the agreements for access to nuclear weapons were finalized in 1964. Rather, the inadequacies of the Honest John weapons system actually exacerbated the brigade's impossible operational role.³²

Under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the Canadian forces in Europe were reduced in size, and the brigade moved away from the British zone to join the Canadian air force in southern Germany – changes that many saw as part of a drastic new approach to Canada's foreign and defence policy. Yet the seeds of changes implemented under Trudeau had been sown during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Canadian military leaders had privately expressed dissatisfaction with NATO's plans, the British Army of the Rhine, and the brigade's role in Germany long before Trudeau came to power. Questions about the purpose of conventional forces began with the first use of nuclear weapons at the close of the Second World War, and those questions persisted throughout the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union developed formidable strategic weapons. Despite large changes in Canada's defence policy – joining the North Atlantic alliance, sending troops to Germany during peace time, and even acquiring access to nuclear weapons – non-military means of establishing peace and security remained crucial elements in Canada's thinking. This emphasis came about partly because Canada's relatively small force did not buy it much influence. If the decision to cut the brigade and move it south was the end of an era, the rationale for that move harked back to the same factors that had impacted the character, size, and role of the Canadian Army during the interwar period and at the close of the war in 1945.

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