

Mutual Hostages

By 29 December there was sufficient anti-Japanese hysteria that the Chiefs of Staff Committee in Ottawa advised the Cabinet War Committee that they, police, and local authorities ‘were concerned less at the possibility of subversive activity by Japanese than at the danger of serious anti-Japanese outbreaks.’ Indeed, the next day, Major-General R.O. Alexander, commanding on the Pacific Coast, wrote to the chief of the general staff:

The situation with regard to the Japanese resident, in British Columbia is assuming a serious aspect. Public feeling is becoming very insistent, especially in Vancouver, that local Japanese should be either interned or removed from the coast. Letters are being written continually to the press and I am being bombarded by individuals, both calm and hysterical, demanding that something should be done. I have been informed that certain sections of the public in Vancouver propose to hold public demonstrations and street parades against the Japanese in the near future unless official action is taken. If these are held, they might lead to very serious inter-racial clashes involving considerable damage, bloodshed and possibly fatal casualties. (page 79)

Canadian defences on the west coast were indeed weak. The RCN ships in the Pacific were too few and too lightly armed; the RCAF lacked airfields, aircraft, and trained crews or anti-aircraft guns to protect them. West-coast commanders thought the RCN could possibly counter an attack by a merchant raider or with small surface or submarine vessels, but they knew their forces could not cope with attacks by larger vessels or airborne raids nor prevent sabotage. At the meeting of the Joint Service Committee, Pacific Coast, on 9 January 1942, as the Ottawa conference was meeting, they recommended removing ‘all male Japanese and other enemy aliens between the ages of 16 and 50’ from coastal areas to reduce the likelihood of sabotage. (pg. 82–83)

The cabinet was also aware of mounting public demands in British Columbia for stronger defence measures. Howard Green, MP (Vancouver South, Conservative), told Parliament that, in seven weeks, Japan had gained control of the Pacific Ocean. He predicted that sooner or later British Columbia would be bombed and quoted from the Japan Times and Advertiser that ‘it was within the realm of probability “that the armed forces of this country [Japan] will land on the American continent.”’ The Canadian forces on the west coast, Green complained, were so inadequately equipped that some reserve army members lacked rifles. Moreover Green, like many others, had lost faith in the generals, suggesting that in case of invasion they ‘would make another of their strategic retreats with the remnants of our forces to the mountains, leaving the people on the coast to their fate.’ A few days later, Thomas Reid (New Westminster, Liberal) observed: ‘so many optimistic reports have been made by high military men and authorities, which later events showed were certainly not justified, that people to-day can hardly be blamed for being rather sceptical.’ (page 86, 88)

Mutual Hostages was written by two well-known Canadian historians, Patricia Roy and J L Granatstein, and two historians in Japan, Masako Iino and Hiroko Takamura.

Mutual Hostages. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.