Canada’s Plan to Torch St. John’s: Upper Canadian Arrogance or Tabloid Journalism
Canada’s plan to torch St. John’s

Under a top-secret 1942 ‘scorched earth policy’ to thwart invading Germans, troops would have razed St. John’s and five other cities. Officials would not have alerted residents until the last minute, writes Daniel Leblanc.

A top-secret “scorched earth policy,” designed by the Canadian government in 1942, would have sacrificed Newfoundland to German invaders with nothing but a burning wasteland, newly declassified documents show.

Guns, ammunition, food stocks, hospital, docks and other installations — both civilian and military — would have been destroyed with sledgehammers, dynamite and fire before the Nazis could take the island.

Six Canadian cities — Halifax, Sydney, and will be featured in the July issue of The Archivist magazine.

The government’s scorched earth policy was to be “thoroughly, carefully planned” and “rigorously applied,” documents show, giving conquering Germans nothing but dirt.

The south side of St. John’s, at the time was dotted with the most powerful weapon in the military’s arsenal.

St. John’s into a version of hell, with fire spreading to the wooden houses and buildings and reducing them to piles of ash. St. John’s residents — who numbered about 30,000 at the time — were not told of the strategy, which included a plan to evacuate ships in merchant ships.

The decision to devise the plan was made in 1942 as German submarines attacked ships along North America’s East Coast,Biloxis and wreckages washed on to the Gaspe Peninsula and Cape Breton Island as the U-boats

Confederation gets thumbs up

On anniversary of vote, 76 per cent are proud Canadians

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Newfoundlanders’ decision to join

In the Observer

On the road: Communities founder on shoals of the economy, B1

Humbled heroes: Harsh life built admiration for ordinary people, B1

‘Raucous, wonderful place!’ from artist Mary Pratt to federal CEO John Kelin, newspaper later under a spell of Newfoundland B3

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Newfoundlanders’ decision to join
A top-secret " Scorched Earth Policy" was designed by the Canadian government in 1942 that would have sacrificed Newfoundland and hounded would-be German invaders nothing but a burning wasteland, newly declassified documents show.

Guns, ammunition, food, hospitals, docks and other military and civilian installations would have all been destroyed with sledgehammers, dynamite and fire before the Nazis could take the island.

Six Canadian cities — Halifax, Sydney, Shelburne, Saint John, Quebec City and Gaspe — as well as airports on the West Coast (in the event of a Japanese attack) were also listed on the Scorched Earth Policy, but detailed plans for these cities and airports were destroyed after 1944, when the threat of invasion was over.

Only plans for Newfoundland survived purge of five or six of the tanks, letting the fuel leak into the harbor before igniting a mushroom of fire and smoke over the city.

The blaze would have transformed St. John's into a version of hell, with fire spreading to the wooden houses and buildings and reducing them to piles of ash. St. John's residents who numbered about 40,000 at the time were not told of the destruction strategy, which included a plan to evacuate them in merchant ships.

The decision to devise the plan was made in 1942 as German submarines attacked ships along North America's east coast. Bodies and wreckage washed onto the Gaspé Peninsula and Cape Breton Island as U-boats travelled up the St. Lawrence River to within 400 kilometres of Quebec City. They also circled Newfoundland and even landed on the coast of Labrador, leaving a weather station behind.

In early March 1942, the British government circulated its “Instructions issued to Certain Colonial Dependencies on Scorched Earth been approached, nor is it the intention to approach them on this subject until it appears that a wholesale Scorched Earth is likely to be ordered,” announced the Chiefs of Staff Committee, made up of the heads of Canada's army, navy and air force, in a memo to commanding officers on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Compensation questionable

Any questions about compensation from civilians regarding their lost possessions was to be answered in the following way: “The question of compensation cannot be decided until after the conclusion of the war.”

No estimate of civilian casualties is given in the government's plans which do, however, paint a vivid picture of widespread destruction of property. The colourfully painted houses of St. John's, which legend says took on their famous look because of a shortage of house paint after the city-wide fire of 1892, fit perfectly into the Canadian plan.

“Owning to the large amount of wood ships for trips from the eastern Canadian coast to the British Isles, was finally cutting into ship losses. In June 1942, U-boats downed 144 Allied ships; one year later, that number was down to 20, and falling.

Defeat in the Battle of the Atlantic was one of the main reasons the Axis forces lost the war. On June 22, 1944, two weeks after the invasion of Normandy by the Allied forces, the Canadian government thought it “opposite to revise” its scorched earth policy.

In July 1944, the Chiefs of Staff Committee recommended its cancellation.

“Since these plans were made, the anticipated forms and scales of attack against Canada were reduced. In view of this and the improved strategic situation generally, it is considered that normal precautions to prevent ammunition
Upper-Canadian arrogance

Only poor old natives not told of wartime plan to burn St. John’s, mayor grumbles

By Daniel Leblanc
The Ottawa Citizen

The Canadian government cracked down on accused war-time plans to burn St. John’s in the fall of 1943, but it still permitted the city to remain a “well-guarded” one, according to a war-time order.

Andy Wells said that Canada’s war-time policy of the city was Upper-Canadian arrogance.

“arrogance of the Canadian government,” Wells said. “They permitted the city to remain a ‘well-guarded’ one, but they still cracked down on accused war-time plans to burn St. John’s.”

The city of St. John’s was the only Canadian city to be designated as a military target during the war, Wells said.

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**Scorched: Time to move fuel tanks, historian says**

Even though Newfoundland was still independent from Canada at the time, the Canadian government had to decide who was responsible for the island’s protection. The British had their hands full with the Germans.

Mr. Wells was asked what his perspective on the issue was tinted by the fact that he was a Newfoundland native.

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LETTERS

Torching St. John’s sparks hot debate

Despite the often abysmal standard of collective genius emanating from official Ottawa, surely the wartime decision by Mackenzie King’s cabinet to destroy St. John’s, NF, to thwart a potential German invasion ranks as the most ludicrous of all (“Canada’s plan to torch St. John’s,” May 30).

Or perhaps it was a bold, uncharacteristic stroke of military brilliance planned by a wimpy Ottawa to halt a relentless Nazi march to Parliament, Bay Street or, God forbid, Rosedale.

As Newfoundlanders compensated to become Canadian by Order in Council in 1945, we now experience this historical revelation with great dismay. In this current contentious society we cannot decide whether to sue the Canadian government for the loss of collective memory for potentially denying us our idyllic childhood’s in St. John’s or whether we should sue Ottawa for being on the winning side, thus denying us the opportunity to be shipped off in convoy to Bermuda, the Turks and Caicos or some other congenial and warm place.

We don’t know who was responsible for all of this. Maybe it was Mackenzie King at the cabinet table. Or possibly it was King in seance with his mother or his dog, Pat. We will leave it for the courts to decide.

Rosann Cashin, Maureen Woodrow, St. John’s and Ottawa

Irresponsible not to plan

I am appalled at the quality of reporting in this article and the subsequent articles concerning the plan to destroy a number of cities in Canada and Newfoundland.

The article shows no knowledge of the time in which the plan was, as it was, conceived. The reporter presents this as an unwarranted affront to the people of Newfoundland and a reckless abandonment of their city. The article itself points out that five Canadian cities were also slated for total destruction, but that three of those cities were larger than St. John’s. I lived in one of them at that time.

The thought of the Nazi government establishing submarine bases on the east coast of North America was considered to be unacceptable in the extreme. Some believe it was capable of strangling the transport of war material to Britain.

The war would have been irretrievably lost, according to military opinion at that time. It would have been irresponsible for military leaders not to plan the destruction of critical military bases at that time.

Keep in mind that in the Soviet Union, exactly that policy was being carried on.

The implication that N.D.P. members were in Newfoundland and a scoundrel and why did they leave Sicily and Normandy? We’re flying from Ceylon? Why to Hong Kong?

For the same reasons not to Newfoundland. To make effort to fight oppression never forget that.

M. Gordon Foster, Ottawa

It’s the only way to fight an invasion

During 1940 and 1941, a woman army in Europe, Britain, Poland, Belgium, Norway and France, was bombarded into ruins, the bombing of the German Wehrmacht for much alarm.

Furthermore, Germany was locked in a struggle in which the North Atlantic was made that, in the case of Britain, Winston Churchill Royal Navy would reloca

EDITORIAL

Torching towns in wartime

But overall, His Worship was a little unfair. He assessed contingency plans drawn up in the bleakest year of the Second World War, and applied a modern perspective to them. He also failed to acknowledge that while there were plans to destroy St. John’s, there were also plans to do the same thing to Halifax, Sydney, St. John and Quebec City. That unfailing amnesia about the impact of the most important seaports of Canada.

Nineteen forty-two was a frightening year. It was the year that four large carriers were sunk off Belle Island and the German invasion of the French port of Cherbourg was destroyed, thus saving the port of Cherbourg for the Allied advance. The Germans were so in command of the waters around the island that they could have invaded any time they wished. Although we now know that the Germans never had the wherewithal to invade the island, in the darkest years of the war, fears ran rampant.

The scorched earth policy that had St. John’s in smoking ruins was a common strategy in the war. The Russians burned everything they could in advance of the German armies; the British had plans for massive destruction of their ports if the Germans were to invade; the destruction of the French port of Cherbourg delayed the Allied advance for weeks; and the Germans themselves destroyed all but one or two bridges across the Rhine in a futile attempt to stop the Allied advance. Destroying infrastructure was cruel, but effective, strategy during the war years.

When seen in this context, the plan for St. John’s and the six Canadian seaports was nothing more than a part of the frightening concept of total war. It is a sign of progress that now we see such massive destruction and waste as destruction.

But using the plans as proof that Canada did not love all towns as much as they should is a bit much. Love and affection count for little when you’re fighting for your lives.

If the mayor wishes to fire the first shot of anti-Canadianism, there are much better issues than a dusty old plan of defence that someone forgot to bury many years ago.
“DOUSE SINGE JOHN’S POLICY”
(IN CASE OF CANADA’S TOP SECRET “SCORCHED EARTH POLICY”)

1. City Residents would gather hundreds of ICEBERGS outside the Narrows.

2. When ♂♂♂!♂♂♂ Mainlanders start the fire, the icebergs will melt quickly and rush into the Harbour.

3. The Water would overflow and DOUSE the Flames!

CITY OF SINGE JOHN’S
"Rigorously applied in practice": A scorched earth policy for Canada and Newfoundland during the Second World War

by Kerry Badgley, Access to Information

Most Canadians and Newfoundlanders believed that their lives would be destroyed during the Second World War, even though it was unlikely that a major conflict would really impact North America. However, the possibility of invasion initiated a chain of events that affected all the provinces. Some of the most chilling aspects of the exercise were the secret plans to deny inhabited portions of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, so that invading forces would suffer a shortfall.

A long-standing winter tactic has been to deny a computer a copy of anything it finds. Unlike in most Canadian cities on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts during the Second World War, military officials devised "deception plans" for those areas. Although the plans were drawn from a military perspective, the people living in those regions would have limited military knowledge and no contact with any forces that had been considered.

Deception plans were drafted in 1942 in accordance with a flexible government directive entitled "Instructions Concerning the Employment of Non-Military Personnel on Scattered Earth Bases." Certain dependents (including Canadian and Newfoundlanders) were removed from fortified areas and secret plans were drawn up for "key points from which the enemy could launch attacks," including fortifications, communication facilities, fuel stockpiles, stores of food, fuel, ammunition, and so on. As well, the plans included the possibility of creating a "false front" and not to be compromised "by any desire to recover remains" after the enemy removed. After all, it was most important to ensure forces would have the advantage of the element of surprise.

The war was not to be fought necessarily. It was believed that the "defence" forces could not be defeated at the cost of a cutover invasion. The enemy's aim was to destroy the nation's infrastructure and communications, including fortifications, communication facilities, fuel stockpiles, stores of food, fuel, ammunition, and so on. As well, the plan included the possibility of creating a "false front" and not to be compromised "by any desire to recover remains" after the enemy removed. After all, it was most important to ensure forces would have the advantage of the element of surprise.

A handful of 80-year-old letters from the federal government may reveal a chapter in Canada's military history.

Kerry Badgley, an access review unit with the National Archives of Canada, uncovered evidence of the government's 1943 scorched-earth policy that, if implemented, would have destroyed St. John's, Newfoundland and other East Coast cities as well as airports in the West as part of Canada's top-secret Second World War military strategy.

Mc. Badgley spent hours rooting through boxes of obscure military documents. However, he is humble when he talks about the significance of his painstaking research.

"I thought it would form the basis of a nice little article," he says simply.

The first clues came from a series of classified plans discovered while an archivist sorted through seemingly endless stacks of National Defence Headquarters documents. He planned to catalogue the books and papers.

However, he stumbled upon some letters from the government ordering army officers to prepare plans to destroy their facilities in the face of a German or a Japanese invasion.

He mentioned the discovery to hi