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The team of German 'scientists' who came to Anticosti Island in the autumn of 1937 posed for this photo at the conclusion of their visit. Their advertised purpose was to conduct a survey of the timber resources, but some suggested they were military and naval officers.

## THE GERMAN ATTEMPT TO PURCHASE ANTICOSTI ISLAND IN 1937

by Captain(N) (ret'd) Robert H. Thomas

**A**nticosti Island dominates the mouth of the St. Lawrence River and, from the earliest period of French settlement, was considered important to the security of the colony. Louis Jolliet acquired the island in 1680 and, until the 20th century, a succession of settlers and entrepreneurs attempted to make a success from various fishing, trapping, logging and agricultural enterprises. The most famous of these was Henri Menier who purchased the whole island in 1896 and attempted to set up a self-supporting, almost feudal, seigneurie. Despite grandiose plans to exploit the pulpwood capacity of the island, the enterprise was shaky at best and, when Menier died in 1906, it quickly collapsed.

In 1918, when German submarine activities off the North American coast were causing havoc, the issue of defence was raised by Captain Martin-Zédé, the Director-General of Anticosti Island.<sup>1</sup> The Naval Secretary considered the threat to be minimal, however, and no action was taken. Two decades later the issue was to be raised again in a more dramatic fashion.

Gaston Menier, Henri's heir, sold the island to the Wayagamack Pulp and Paper Company in 1926.<sup>2</sup> Wayagamack then established the Anticosti Corporation in conjunction with the St. Maurice Valley Corporation and the Port Alfred Pulp and Paper Company. The

Corporation prospered until the paper market collapsed at the start of the Great Depression. As part of the restructuring of the industry in Canada which followed, the Consolidated Paper Corporation Limited was formed in 1931, taking over the Anticosti Corporation. However, operations on the island were only kept afloat by hosting tourists and sport fishing expeditions through the Depression years.<sup>3</sup> Consolidated Paper was willing to sell the island and received offers from Canadian, American, British, French and Belgian interests. The one which was to provoke controversy came in the summer of 1937.

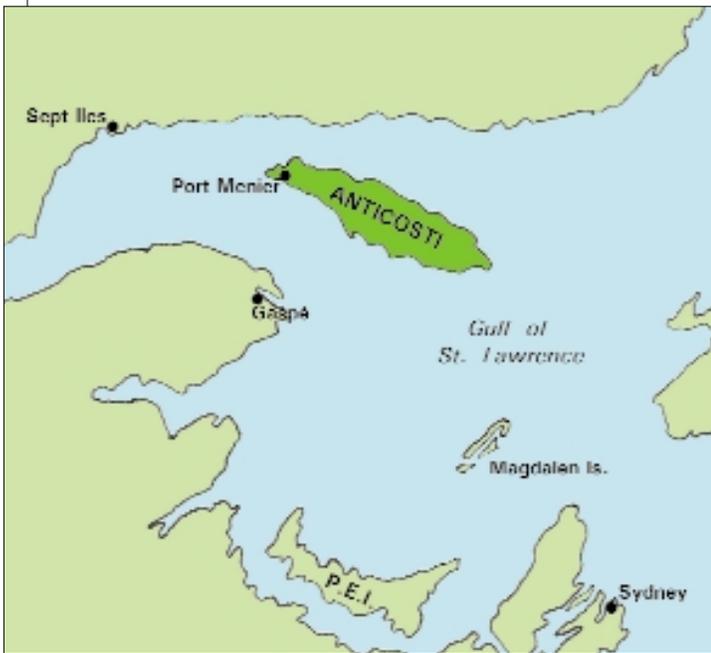
An option to purchase the island, obtained by a Montreal financier on 29 July 1937, was transferred to Alois Miedl of Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup> That fall, a survey team of thirteen Germans traveled to the island to examine the forest and port facilities for exporting wood. They conducted extensive surveys, collected wood samples over a period of several weeks, and departed rather suddenly, leaving some of their possessions behind.<sup>5</sup>

The first public disclosure was a headline article in the *Montreal Gazette* on 2 December 1937, announcing

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“Germans Negotiating Purchase of Anticosti”. It described how a consortium of Dutch and German capitalists planned to buy the island and build a sulphite mill, noted the strategic location of the island and provided a brief history.<sup>6</sup> The following day, a letter was sent to the Solicitor-General by William Glyn,<sup>7</sup> who claimed to be a newspaper correspondent who had represented many newspapers in Britain, the United States and Canada, and had been an international correspondent for over four years in Europe. He was staying at the Mount Royal Hotel in Montreal along with the survey team and claimed to have overheard their conversations about Anticosti.

Glyn requested an “immediate, complete and thorough investigation of the activities of L.J. Belnap, President of the Consolidated Paper Corp.” and of two other officials involved in the negotiations, with a view



Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

to charging them with treason. Glyn claimed that the survey team were agents of Hitler and that most were naval, military and fortifications experts. He identified their leaders as Dr. Wollert (sic) and Captain Mueller, and claimed they were confidants of Hitler. The wording of his letter indicated that Glyn may have been the source for the *Gazette* article. Glyn also wrote to J.S. Woodsworth, the leader of the CCF, who passed a copy to the Minister of National Defence on 11 December. The Solicitor-General’s copy was referred to the RCMP on 18 December.

In the meantime, the article had aroused considerable interest. H.D. Langlais, Member of the Provincial Parliament for Isles de la Madeleine, wrote to the Deputy Minister of Defence on 3 December, suggesting that the federal government should buy the island.<sup>8</sup> Letters came from the public as well, contributing to the controversy.<sup>9</sup> The Premier of Quebec, Maurice Duplessis, called Anticosti Island a strategic outpost and claimed that it would be defended while the export of raw material would be prohibited.<sup>10</sup>

The controversy, less than two years after Germany had re-occupied the Rhineland, quickly stirred the government into action. The fear of war with Germany was growing in England and security issues had been prominent at the Imperial Conference in the spring of 1937. On 8 December 1937, the Deputy Minister of National Defence wrote to the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) (Major General C.E. Ashton), the Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) (Rear Admiral P.W. Nelles) and the Senior Air Officer (SAO) (Air Commodore G.M. Croil) asking if the newspaper concerns over Anticosti Island should be considered by the Department or the government.<sup>11</sup> The same day, the Director Military Operations and Intelligence (DMO&I) raised two concerns over Anticosti Island with the CGS. If the developments took place, would they in any way restrict access to the raw materials necessary for national defence? Also, would establishment of such interests result in an undesirable concentration of possible enemy nationals in or near localities of national importance? He concluded that no action was required as no threat was posed. Exports could be prohibited and settlement could be controlled.<sup>12</sup>

The CNS supported a proposal to present a Joint Staff Memorandum on Anticosti Island. Nelles was less certain about the lack of a threat and stressed the requirement for surveillance of any development “as use of Anticosti Island as a base of supply of personnel or material by a foreign raider, surface ship or submarine would be most dangerous”.<sup>13</sup> This view was supported by an article in the *Globe and Mail* the same day which noted the intention of the Dutch/German syndicate to acquire timber resources, but suggested that this was a screen for Nazi ‘National’ purposes.<sup>14</sup>

The Memorandum, submitted on 11 December 1937,<sup>15</sup> noted that exploitation of natural resources would not affect national security. The island was considered to be no more strategically placed than Newfoundland, the Magdalenes or Cape Breton and therefore demanded no special attention. The report recommended that it should not be settled in “undesirable numbers” by possible enemy nationals. Should the purchase go through, works should be kept under surveillance.

Based on the Memorandum, Escott Reid, Legal Advisor to the Department of External Affairs, prepared a memorandum for the Prime Minister on 14 December 1937.<sup>16</sup> Reid reviewed the history of the island and downplayed the security threat. He noted that share control of a Canadian corporation by alien interests was perfectly legal and was “duplicated in innumerable instances in Canada”. There was nothing the Federal government could do to prevent or control the transfer of property if it involved a Quebec corporation. On the other hand, the government could expropriate all or part of the island for defence purposes or, in the event of war, take control of the whole island. Reid recommended that no expropriation action be taken and that the RCMP should “keep in touch with developments at Anticosti, reporting from time to time to the President of the Privy Council”. The Privy Council reviewed the memorandum and decided that no action was required.

This did not put an end to the public controversy. Letters and articles continued to appear in the *Globe and Mail*, *L'Action Catholique*, the *Gazette* and *The London Times* in late December and early January. The *Gazette* reported on 4 January 1938 that Dr. Heinrich Woollert, the head of the German survey team, had left Canada the previous day without confirming the results of the survey or any related negotiations. The report also noted the concerns that had been raised over the strategic location of the island at the start of the Great War.

The continuing public discussion led the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, O.D. Skelton, to request that Mr. Belnap (President of Consolidated Paper) meet with him and report on the situation. Meeting in Ottawa on 19 January,<sup>17</sup> Belnap stated that Anticosti Island held 15 million cords of pulp wood which was far more than Consolidated required and it did not intend to develop the resources. The Company had received frequent, generally inadequate, offers from Belgian, French and American companies. The latest syndicate represented mills in Holland, Belgium and Germany, with the latter being predominant. The pulp would be used for writing paper and textiles. The syndicate wanted both a steady supply of pulp wood and access to Canadian capital. The development would involve twelve to fifteen million dollars and provide up to 2500 jobs in a chronically depressed area. The company considered it a straight-forward business deal and had extended the deadline to the summer of 1938. With this meeting, the controversy might well have expired.

The German occupation of Austria on 11 March 1938 raised international tension and Anticosti Island returned to public attention. During the debate on Supply, the Defence Minister, Ian Mackenzie, referred to a German "desire either to secure raw materials or to establish a military base, and one is as alarming as the other".<sup>18</sup> This now provoked concerns in the US as well as Canada. Alfred N. Phillips, Congressman for Connecticut, wrote on 7 April to Sir Herbert Marler, Head of the Canadian Legation in Washington, asking for details of the possible purchase of Anticosti Island, and whether the island could be made suitable for a naval or aeronautical base.<sup>19</sup> Marler replied a week later, assuring Phillips that there was no deal in place. He offered no views on the military potential of the island, stating that he was "not qualified to give an opinion".<sup>20</sup>

Obviously concerned about the issue, Marler wrote to Skelton the same day, asking to be kept informed of developments. Skelton replied on April 21, confirming that the deal was off, and stating that there was never an intention to sell the island to the German government. An article in the *Globe and Mail* on 18 April 1938 supported this view, noting that Premier Duplessis had made a definite statement that foreign interests could not get a foothold on the island. Nonetheless, a week later Skelton wrote Marler again, this time to say that the deal might not be terminated.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the German government entered the debate in April. In a "wholly unofficial and confidential enquiry", the President of the Prussian Cabinet Council,

Field Marshal Goering, wrote to Prime Minister Mackenzie King.<sup>22</sup> He asked if the purchase of Anticosti Island was contrary to Canadian law, and emphasized the employment advantage to Canada. He assured King "that this proposition is of a purely economic character and that the only purpose of the syndicate is the production of lumber. Any rumours about interference with sovereign rights and prerogatives or



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Timber was indeed the prime natural resource of Anticosti Island, as seen in this 1938 photograph.

with military works rests on fancy." Given the high purchase price, he wished to be informed of the Canadian government's position.

King replied to Goering's inquiry on May 12,<sup>23</sup> informing him that there were no current federal restrictions on the export of forest products, but that there was no guarantee that there would be none in the future. He described the Act passed by the Quebec Legislature which prohibited the export of unmanufactured wood outside the province and alluded to the rights of the provinces to legislate in their own interests.

The annual general meeting of the Consolidated Paper Company was held on 27 April 1938.<sup>24</sup> Belnap supported the proposed deal as beneficial to shareholders, as the company could not develop the island at the time and did not need all the available pulpwood. The European consortium was expected to put in \$14 million by 1942, creating 2000 jobs during development and 5 to 6000 when operational.

The statements at the annual general meeting and the resultant press coverage spurred Glyn into action again. In a wild diatribe addressed to J.S. Woodsworth,<sup>25</sup> he reviewed the information he had previously provided to the government, taking credit for alerting the press in London, New York and Toronto. He repeated the claim that all members of the survey team were naval and military experts, and that some were direct confidants of Hitler. He implied that Belnap supported the sale because he had "a couple of German

sons-in-law". The Prime Minister, on receiving a copy of the letter, wrote to Premier Duplessis on 10 May, asking him for any conclusions reached on the sale of Anticosti. Duplessis replied a week later, giving assurances that the Québec government would safeguard the best interests of the province.<sup>26</sup> In the meantime, Skelton replied to Woodsworth, acknowledging receipt of the Glyn letter. He advised him that the matter was under consideration by both the Federal and Quebec governments and the question continued to be closely followed.

Woodsworth now brought the issue back to Parliament. On 17 May 1938,<sup>27</sup> clearly unsatisfied by Skelton's response, he asked the Prime Minister if it was in the general interest for Anticosti Island to pass into the control of a foreign company. King replied that the government was aware that various departments had

as Der Fuehrer's key man in many important missions, among others as his personal agent at League of Nations gatherings in Geneva." The article claimed that Gerhardt had been on staff at the University of Western Ontario and had accompanied Hitler to Rome for meetings with Mussolini, and had then traveled to New York, Quebec City, Montreal and Ottawa. Erich Windels, the German consul in Ottawa, claimed in the press not to know him and, in a letter to Skelton<sup>31</sup> (replying to a telephone call the previous day), he forwarded a detailed list of the members of the Anticosti Expedition, complete with their technical qualifications and addresses. The leader — Woollert — was identified as a chartered accountant.

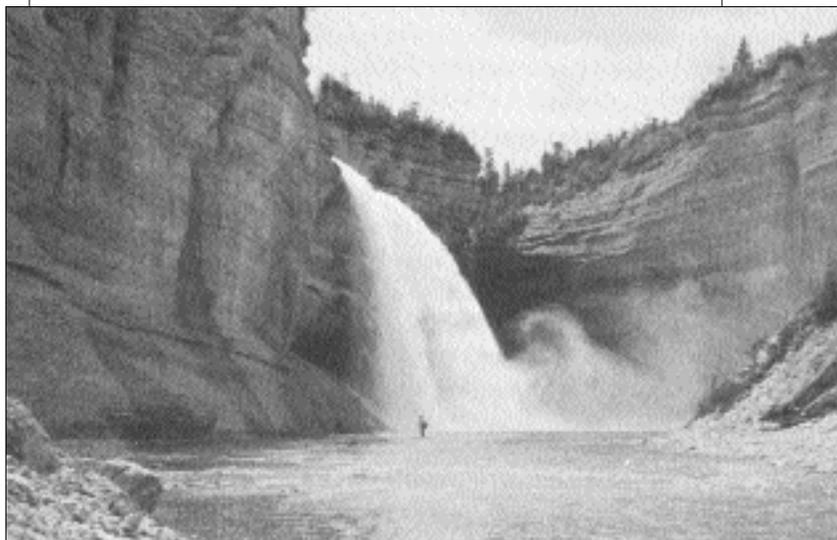
The 'Gerhardt' controversy continued for two weeks. On June 3, Karl Rudolph Gerhard of Montreal was identified as the mystery man.<sup>32</sup> He turned out to have immigrated to Canada in 1930, lived in Ontario until 1934 and then moved to Montreal. He had become a Canadian citizen in 1937. He had taught languages at Western and had been President of the *Deutscher Bund* prior to becoming a Canadian citizen. He had visited Germany for three months in 1936. Both he and Premier Duplessis denied that they had ever spoken to each other.

The government clearly had enough of the lingering controversy. O.D. Skelton set up an interdepartmental committee involving External Affairs, Defence and Justice to look into the affair.<sup>33</sup> Members included Skelton, J.E. Read and L.C. Christie from External Affairs. Ashton, Nelles and Croil along with Colonel H.D.G. Crerar, DMO&I, and Commander H.A.C. Lane, Director of Naval Intelligence and Plans, represented National Defence. Committee meetings were held on

6 June and 13 July, and on 15 July a meeting was held with the lawyer for Alois Meidl.

Mackenzie wrote to the Prime Minister on 18 July,<sup>34</sup> proposing that a survey of Anticosti Island be carried out. He suggested a destroyer take the survey party to the island with a public announcement. This was done and a report was submitted on 1 August 1938 by Commander H.T.W. Grant, Commanding Officer of HMCS *Skeena*. Grant reported on conversations with H.E. Graham, Manager of the Anticosti Corporation, who indicated that the German who reported on harbour facilities was expert in fortifications and had been connected with them at Heligoland, Ostende and Zeebrugge. Members of the German party had appeared to be strangers to each other. While the Germans were enthusiastic, they had paid no attention to the timber growth. An aerial survey had been carried out using five chartered planes.<sup>35</sup> Further survey action by the Navy was reported on in the *Montreal Gazette*.<sup>36</sup> A coastal patrol was carried out by HMCS *Venture*, assisted by a seaplane from RCAF Station Dartmouth.

The Report of the Interdepartmental Committee was submitted on August 15, 1938.<sup>37</sup> It provided a comprehensive review of the whole episode. Miedl had been



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A view of Vaureal Falls, one of the many picturesque spots in the interior of Anticosti.

been making inquiries, and that the interests of the country were being safeguarded.

On May 26, during the debate on Supply for the Department of External Affairs, Woodsworth raised the question again,<sup>28</sup> asking King for more details on Anticosti Island. He saw it as a Quebec responsibility but suggested Canada might take it over as public property. King assured the House that the situation was being watched by both the Federal and Quebec governments, and stated that it would not be in the interest of Canada to let it slip into foreign hands. The Leader of the Opposition, R.B. Bennett, then introduced concerns over the makeup of the German survey party, clearly based on Glyn's allegations. He suggested that the solution might be to expropriate the island and then permit the harvesting of pulpwood, thus restricting the possibility of undesirable development.<sup>29</sup> He then claimed that "Hitler's personal representative" had been in Montreal and Ottawa the previous weekend, claiming to have called on Premier Duplessis.

This statement started another flurry of speculation in the press. The *Toronto Star*<sup>30</sup> claimed that a Dr. Emil Gerhardt was among the German 'experts' who studied Anticosti Island and that he was "said to be well known

granted two options to purchase — the first had expired and a second, extended to give more time for examination, was due to expire on 15 September 1938. In his testimony, Belnap stated that the Miedl proposal was the only substantial one received. He pointed out that it would have been open to Miedl to have gained control of the island by acquiring Consolidated Paper stock at a lower overall cost than the proposed purchase price.

The plan of the Europeans was to establish a Quebec corporation, welcoming Canadian capital investment. A business plan had been prepared, anticipating expenditures of \$14 million by 1942 and exports of 600,000 cords per annum, intended for making newsprint and for building purposes. Insofar as national security was concerned, assurance was given that, “governmental authorities would be given every facility for access and inspection in order to determine that only commercial and industrial operations were being carried out”.<sup>38</sup> The report concluded that, “there was no evidence....to indicate that the project has other than a commercial purpose”. It further noted that although the German government was facilitating the financing, the purpose was commercial and was part of the Four-Year Plan for economic development.

External Affairs also noted that the only legal method by which Canada could block the sale would be by imposing a general embargo on the export of pulpwood. This would cripple the industry and, in any event, was in contravention of the Canada-Germany Trade Agreement of 1936.<sup>39</sup> Further, this would contradict the Canadian position, taken at the League of Nations in 1937, that her raw materials were readily available for world commerce.

Should the sale proceed, it was the opinion of the Committee that the operation should be kept under surveillance, but that could best be done by the RCMP. There was no support for public acquisition of the island, calling it “a strange use of defence appropriations”. In any event, if war came there was provision in law to seize alien enemy property.

When the option to purchase quietly expired in mid-September, the controversy disappeared from Parliament and the press. The Munich Agreement on 29 September 1938 followed and, once Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the focus shifted elsewhere.

In May 1940, the security of Anticosti island was raised one last time. Belnap reported through a friend that a strange message had been sent to one of his regular fishing visitors advising that reservations should be canceled.<sup>40</sup> Nelles was concerned and wrote the

Minister, suggesting that a military garrison be established.<sup>41</sup> The CGS advised against a garrison, considering air and naval patrols to be sufficient.<sup>42</sup> At the 78th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, it was decided that the Air Detection Corps should be required to report the movement of suspicious persons and ships as well as aircraft, and that an RCMP constable should be placed on the island. One platoon from the Sydney garrison was earmarked for dispatch to the island if the need arose.<sup>43</sup>

On the night of 11/12 May 1942, the first sinkings in what was to be a summer-long U-Boat campaign took place between Anticosti Island and Gaspé. Captain E.S. Brand, Director of Naval Intelligence, prepared a precis



A scene along the Jupiter River, near the island's south coast.

on Anticosti, confirming findings of the various surveys.<sup>44</sup> He stated that a patrol had been carried out in November 1939 by HMCS *Laurier* with two RCMP constables which confirmed that no submarine base had been prepared and no cache of food or fuel had been left by the German survey party. Events in the Gulf of St. Lawrence now focused on the U-Boat threat and the expanding Battle of the Atlantic — Anticosti Island slipped from public scrutiny.

The whole episode provides an interesting insight into the security environment in the prewar period. The sensational response in the press appears to have been generated from the pen of the mysterious Mr. Glyn who, for whatever reason, was believed in the highest and most influential government positions. Intriguingly, there is no record of any attempt by the government to contact him directly to verify his allegations. Despite this apparent oversight, the allegations were taken seriously, clearly affected by the fear of war and the apprehension felt over German intentions in Europe. The Army, Navy and Air Force responded carefully and quickly. In the final analysis, however, every indication is that the attempts to purchase Anticosti Island were of a purely commercial nature.

1. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539. Letter Captain G. Martin-Zédé to C.J. Doherty, Minister of Justice, July 9, 1918.
2. Donald MacKay. *Anticosti: The Untamed Island*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1979, p. 87.
3. "Consolidated Paper", *Pulp & Paper Canada*, 82:11, (1981).
4. *ibid.*
5. McCormick, Charlie. *Anticosti, St-Nazaire-de-Chicoutimi: Les Éditions JCL, Inc, 1979*, pp. 139-140. See also Lejeune, Lionel and Jean-N. *Anticosti: L'Époque de la consolaire 1926-1974*, Saint-Hyacinthe: Éditions JML, 1989, pp. 88-90.
6. "Germans Negotiating Purchase of Anticosti", *Montreal Gazette*, December 2, 1937, p. 1.
7. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539. Letter William Glyn to Solicitor-General, December 3, 1937.
8. *ibid.* Letter H.D. Langlais to LCol Laflèche, December 3, 1937.
9. *ibid.* Letter Miss A. Edith Giles to Minister of Militia and Defence, December 6, 1937.
10. "Prohibits Export of Pulpwood Cut in Quebec Domain", *Montreal Gazette*, December 7, 1937. See also Harold Dingman. "Seize Island in Case of War, Says Minister", *Globe and Mail*, December 7, 1937.
11. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539 Memorandum DM to CGS, CNS and SAO, December 8, 1937.
12. *ibid.* Memorandum DMO&I to CGS December 8, 1937.
13. *ibid.* Memorandum CNS to CGS, December 10, 1937.
14. "Hands off Anticosti", *Globe and Mail*, December 10, 1937.
15. PAC RG 25, Vol. 1849, File 1937-914. "Memorandum by the Joint Staff Committee, Department of National Defence, Respecting the Proposed Purchase by German Interests of Anticosti Island", December 11, 1937.
16. *ibid.* Memorandum for the Prime Minister, "Sale of Anticosti", December 14, 1937.
17. *ibid.* Memorandum for the Prime Minister. "Sale of Anticosti", January, 19, 1938.
18. Hansard. March 24, 1938, p. 1656.
19. PAC RG 25, Vol 1849 File 1937-914. Letter Alfred N. Phillips, Jr. to the Honourable Sir Herbert Marler, April 7, 1938.
20. *ibid.* Letter Marler to Phillips, April 14, 1938.
21. *ibid.* Letter Marler to Skelton April 15, 1938. Reply letter Skelton to Marler April 21, 1938. Letter Skelton to Marler April 28, 1938.
22. *ibid.* Copy of letter Goering to Mackenzie King, April 8, 1938.
23. *ibid.* Draft letter King to Goering, 12 May, 1938.
24. "Belnap Discusses Anticosti's Sale," *Montreal Gazette*, April 28, 1938. See also "Belnap Backs sale of Island," *Financial Post*, May 7, 1938.
25. PAC RG 25, Vol. 1849, File 1937-914. Undated copy of letter William T. Glyn to J.S. Woodsworth. Forwarded to O.D. Skelton on May 10, 1938.
26. *ibid.* Letter King to Duplessis May 10, 1938.
27. Hansard, May 17, 1938, p. 3188.
28. Hansard. May 26, 1938, pp. 3264-5.
29. *ibid.* pp. 3266-8.
30. R.W. Lipsett. "Delegate of Fuerher Sent to St. Lawrence Ottawa is Informed", *Toronto Star*, May 27, 1938. See also Harold Dingman. "Says Deal is Purely Economic", *Globe and Mail*, May 28, 1938, "Rumour Mystery Man in Canada From Germany", *Ottawa Citizen*, May 28, 1938, and "London Still Doubts Gerhardt's Identity", *Toronto Star*, May 28, 1938.
31. PAC RG 25, Vol. 1849, File 1937-914. Letter E. Windels to O.D. Skelton, June 1, 1938.
32. "Nazi Post is Denied by Karl R. Gerhard", *Montreal Gazette*, June 3, 1938. See also "Gerhardt Link With Anticosti Held Nonsense", *Montreal Gazette*, June 9, 1938, "'I Am Gerhardt' Declares Karl Gerhardt of Montreal", *Toronto Star*, June 10, 1938, and Hansard. Statement by Fernand Rinfret, Secretary of State, June 1, 1938, p. 3434.
33. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539. Skelton Memorandum June 4, 1938, and Note to File July 13, 1938.
34. *ibid.* Memorandum Mackenzie to King, July 18, 1938.
35. *ibid.* Intelligence Report on Anticosti Island, August 1, 1938.
36. "Anticosti Island to be Fortified as Outpost for Quebec, Montreal", *Montreal Gazette*, August 2, 1938. See also "Dutchman Retains Anticosti Option", *Montreal Gazette*, August 16, 1938.
37. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539. "Report of Interdepartmental Committee Respecting Anticosti Island", August 15, 1938.
38. *op. cit.* p. 8.
39. *op. cit.* p. 16.
40. PAC RG 24, Vol. 2559, HQS 2539. Letter H.E. Whipps to Major L.S. Yuill, Deputy Chief Cable Censor, May 20, 1940.
41. *ibid.* Memorandum Chief of the Naval Staff to Minister of National Defence, May 24, 1940.
42. *ibid.* FD 739 Memorandum DMO&I to CGS, May 29, 1940.
43. *ibid.* Minutes of the 78th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, June 13, 1940.
44. *ibid.* Memorandum Director of Naval Intelligence to Director of Air Intelligence and Director of Military operations and Intelligence, May 16, 1942.

**The Atlantic Council of Canada  
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