

# Canada's Role in Vietnam

*What was Canada's true role in Vietnam? - Exactly as publicly stated in non-support role, or alternative objective (lied to the public).*



## Stage VI

**Darshan Shah**

**Mr. Bronzi Rm 201**

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*“Canada has always been a warrior state. It has fought or involved itself in war proudly, often reluctantly, and sometimes covertly. Some wars were noble pursuits and others just good business. Sometimes forgotten, and even at the time widely denied, is that among Canada’s wars was the Vietnam War, the slow-motion tragedy that revealed the devil’s trick at its wildest.”*

- John Boyko

The Vietnam War was one of the longest, most detrimental wars in history with roughly 3.7 million deaths. Lasting twenty years, the Vietnam war finally ended in 1975 considered as a lost war for the United States and its allies with South Vietnam falling to the North upon the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. The war initially began in 1954 as Northern Vietnam forces were looking to unify the entire country under a single communist leader backed by other communist allies while Southern Vietnam forces had plans that aligned with western ideals. The United States feared the domino theory, which led them to publicly announce their participation in the war and back Southern Vietnam forces. On the contrary, Canadian Prime Minister(s) St. Laurent and Pearson made similar public statements that also addressed the communist fear.<sup>1</sup> So why did Canada only participate as peacekeepers? Or did they? What was Canada’s true role in the Vietnam war? This has been a question that many historians over the years have sought an answer to; was their role exactly as publicly stated, or did they have an alternative objective? In this case, Canada played identity politics to manufacture an image of itself that was not accurately portrayed, or in other terms, created a hidden agenda. Though Canada’s role in

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<sup>1</sup> Boyko, John. *The Devil’s Trick: How Canada Fought the Vietnam War*. Toronto: Knopf Penguin Random House. 2020. p.22.

Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) was publicly disclosed as neutral and as peacemakers, this essay will argue; however, Canada's true role in Vietnam consisted of sending off ground troops to Indochina alongside the Americans, the passing of vital information to the United States to back them in the war effort, and manufacturing war materials for use in Vietnam.

To begin, Canada's true role in Vietnam was deeply intertwined with the sending of Canadian soldiers to Indochina. Hopper argues, many Canadians deployed along with American soldiers aiding the American effort.<sup>2</sup> With Canada not being 'involved' with the war, this was technically forbidden since Canadian citizens were prohibited from fighting in any foreign war under the terms of the 1937 Foreign Enlistment Act, yet many still did it.<sup>3</sup> In fact, a national organization of veterans called the Canadian Vietnam Veterans Coalition, concluded there were about forty-thousand Canadian participants throughout the years 1958 to 1975, many of whom served in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> This not only displays a lack of upholding the law, but also raises the question as to whether the Canadian government can be trusted to tell the truth. According to Boyko, not a single soldier was charged for disregarding that 1937 law.<sup>5</sup> Does that mean the Canadian government was supporting the sending of Canadian troops? Or were they simply not aware of the leaving troops? The former being the correct response, signifies, Canada's true role in Vietnam consisted of allocating Canadian troops among American forces in Vietnam.

Through further research, Canada's true role in Vietnam can be shown through the passing of vital information, supporting the Americans militarily. Throughout the war, Canada has been found guilty of many secret operations and missions that have aided the Americans in

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<sup>2</sup> Hopper, Triston. "Canada rejected U.S. requests to join war in Vietnam, so how did so many Canadians die there?" <https://nationalpost.com/news/canadas-secret-war-the-forgotten-canadian-role-in-vietnam>. 2021. Line 106.

<sup>3</sup> Boyko. p.121.

<sup>4</sup> Congressional Record 140. "Canadian Vietnam Veterans". (January 27, 1994).

<https://www.govinfo.gov/cotnent/pkg/CREC-1994-01-27/html/CREC-1994-01-27-pt1-PgH12.htm>. Date Accessed 11 December 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Boyko. p.123.

the war effort. During the war, Canada was a part of the International Control Commission (I.C.C.) alongside Poland and India. Even with the fact, Canadian I.C.C. officials are to be involved with neutral grounds and attempting peace negotiations along with watching grounds for conflict, many Canadian officials provided valuable intelligence for the Americans.<sup>6</sup> In May 1965, Canadian I.C.C. commissioner, David Jackson, reported to the American embassy from Hanoi, listing the information he uncovered from his area such as trench and shelter constructions along with aircrafts that could be seen on a daily basis.<sup>7</sup> This information gave the Americans an insight of what was going on in the Indochina battlefield without being binded to their own government, more simplistically, having spies. This conveys the advantage Canada gave the United States and allies because espionage solves the lack of understanding in war, allowing one side to have the upper hand.<sup>8</sup> As the war began to escalate in 1964, the “Americans began getting increasingly concerned about the insurgency in South Vietnam which was threatening the stability of the South.”<sup>9</sup> This led to Blaire Seaborn, a Canadian diplomat, going to Hanoi on a secret mission to deliver messages on behalf of the Americans, collecting information for them.<sup>10</sup> This secret mission for the United States clearly shows Canada’s involvement in the war other than singularly as a peacekeeper for the I.C.C.. Not only did Canada feed Americans information, but also took on missions for them and displayed the same domino theory fear as the United States. These actions were not publicly disclosed and would not have been uncovered had not President Johnson “let slip that there were people, not linked to his government, who

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.61.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.61-62.

<sup>8</sup> Langwald, Katharina. “The importance of Western and Soviet Espionage in the Cold War.” <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/14/the-importance-of-western-and-soviet-espionage-in-the-cold-war/>. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Seaborn, Blaire. “A top-secret mission to Hanoi during the Vietnam conflict.” [www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/a-political-and-diplomatic-balancing-act](http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/a-political-and-diplomatic-balancing-act). 2003. Date Accessed 7 October 2021. 4:00 min.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 4:10.

were negotiating with the North Vietnamese on his behalf.”<sup>11</sup> Allowing the interpretation, Canada’s role in Vietnam was more than what was publicly revealed and the Canadian government acted as a spy to back the American war effort.

Lastly, Canada’s true role in Vietnam was made up of manufacturing war materials for use in Indochina. During this time, Canada had yet to announce their role as neutral peacekeepers, and were completely underground about their role in Vietnam. Through uncovered actions, in just four years, Canada “sent \$61.2 million worth of arms, aircraft, and other military supplies to France” which, according to Boyko, they knew full well ended up in Indochina.<sup>12</sup> The sending of military equipment and supplies is the highest level of involvement; not only does it allow for the mental and physical advantage in a conflict, but also provides the military forces the materials needed to fight, communicate, move and live. In essence, it fuels the conflict and allows for its continuation, even if Canada was only ever meant to be a ‘peacekeeper’. In 1959, the Defense Production Sharing Agreement was signed by the government of Canada with the United States. By the time the United States withdrew their forces in 1973, “US defense procurement in Canada totalled at least \$3.5 billion.”<sup>13</sup> Documents from the U.S. Department of Defense found by Sam Noumoff and his group “show the Canadian manufacturers and the Canadian government are involved in filling American defense contracts for shipment to Vietnam,” the location being clearly indicated on the contracts.<sup>14</sup> Tying two and two together, it can be concluded that Canada’s true role consisted of supplying military equipment and resources for the entirety of the war.

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<sup>11</sup> Boyko. p.63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.22.

<sup>13</sup> Rhéaume, Charles. Cautious Neighbour Policy: Canada’s Helping Hand in the Winding Down of the Vietnam War, *Cold War History*, 11:2, 223-239. 2011. p.224.

<sup>14</sup> Noumoff, Sam. “Canada Supplies the Vietnam War Machine.” <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/supplying-the-war-machine>. 1975. Date Accessed 31 October 2021. 0:10-1:00 min.

Despite the Canadian government's public claim, Canada had a huge role throughout the entirety of the Vietnam war. Starting with having nearly forty-thousand Canadian soldiers in Indochina, following up with Canadians doing spy work for American intelligence, and ending with manufacturing war materials for Vietnam. This contribution contradicts their official position as neutral, being heavily involved with the American backed South-Vietnamese forces. This questions the Canadian government's authority and as Amit Kalantri puts it, “authority is not a power, it is a responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> This lack of responsibility states more than enough, leaving behind the thought: can the Canadian government be trusted? Or will they continue to keep the Canadian people under the radar? Publicizing only what they deem appropriate for the false identity that has been created. This leads into the question, what else has the Canadian government swept under the rug throughout Canadian history?

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<sup>15</sup> Kalantri, Amit. *Wealth of Words*. Publication N/A.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6740333-authority-is-not-a-power-it-is-a-responsibility>.

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