

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**G. W. L. Nicholson.** *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 676 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-4617-2.

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Canada's official history of World War I is not in fact a new book but instead marked its own fiftieth anniversary in 2014. However, the centenary of the war marks its republication with the Carleton Library Series, and although the book's main text is identical to that of its original form, the Carleton Library Series provides a very valuable thirty-six-page introduction to the volume.

Canada's World War I was a far bloodier conflict than is perhaps imagined. The country suffered 58,000 military deaths, meaning a fatality count comparable with the US experience in Vietnam. However, Canada's World War I deaths were compressed into four years of combat and were absorbed by a population of under nine million, which was barely 5 percent the size of the US population during the Vietnam War. The burden of the war grew increasingly unpopular and coincided with harsh measures that included censorship through the War Measures Act of 1914 and internment of large numbers of German Canadians and Ukrainian Canadians on the assumption that their loyalties were suspect. Boastful promises by prime minister Sir Robert Borden about the size of a Canadian contingent required both revised estimates of the size of a sustainable Canadian Corps and the institution of national conscription, which in turn led to serious riots across eastern Canada during the last months of the war. The war's official history carefully dealt with these topics as little as possible, because, as the book's new publishers note, they did not fit the narrative (p. xxxiv).

The introduction acknowledges that official histories of wars are often controversial, and most are ponderous

multivolume compilations. Those of Britain, Germany, France, and the United States are each extensive multivolume collections, whereas despite its heavy wartime exertion Canada's official history is described within a single volume of six hundred pages. However, as an official history, naturally the work was drawn into the political struggle for memory after a conflict, and in Canada's case the writing of its official history was stymied on at least three occasions. Initiated at the behest of the soon-to-be Lord Beaverbrook when the war was at its height, the project quickly fell prey to larger political intrigues within the country. Canada's senior soldier, Sir Arthur Currie, rose to prominence in part with the help of defense minister Sir Sam Hughes, but a falling out between the two men and Hughes's own dissentious break with the Borden government helped create a situation in which Canada's highest-ranking soldier distrusted the Canadian War Records Office and created his own Canadian War Narratives Section to prevent the official organization from writing what he feared would be an unflattering portrayal of him as a commander. Interwar efforts at writing were cut short by the outbreak of World War II, when Canada's military historians were sent to record the nation's service in that conflict. Eventually, one of the participants in that effort, Gerald W.L. Nicholson, was charged with authoring the nation's World War I history. The resulting single-volume tome was received with near universal acclaim (p. xxxiii). Its principal message was that Canadian nationhood was a product of the war effort.

Canada's official history aimed to recount the raising, training, combat, and demobilization of the Cana-

dian Corps. Although the book implies the nation's coming of age and Nicholson himself saw the war as part of a national narrative in which we have become at least a middle power in world affairs (p. xxviii), the author was also careful to contextualize Canada's actions by providing brief overviews at the start of each chapter, recounting the war's larger campaigns and trends, even when Canadian troops were not involved. As an official history, the book sometimes underplays some issues that might be expected otherwise to receive extensive treatment. Of particular note, in addition to the domestic turmoil and strain noted above, was a series of nearly disastrous gaffes in acquiring suitable equipment and weapons for the troops. These problems were a major financial drain and encumbrance through the war's first months, and they are mentioned. However, noting that equipment proved unsatisfactory and that when manufacturers conformed closely to the British standard the result was a much improved product (p. 28) is much less attention than readers might expect in a book that is not an official history. That said, when writing in the 1960s, Nicholson avoided the contemporary shortcoming displayed by the Canadian Broadcasting Company when for the war's semicentennial it recounted eyewitness accounts in order to fit the state broadcaster's preconceived message that the soldiers were lions led by donkeys.

Readers interested in World War I may be especially interested in the coverage of Canada's participation in the first battles involving poison gas at Ypres during 1915, the ways in which techniques such as the use of trench

raids and anti-trench mines were adopted and adapted by both sides, and Canadian participation in the major Entente offensives of the second half of the war. The book usefully includes an array of detailed fold-out color maps that complement the descriptions of complex battles. As the history notes, sometimes the complexity of the battles involved the fact that the massive and growing use of artillery fire could change the landscape itself and erase terrain features, with the result that units misidentified objectives like hills and mine craters. Readers interested in the war's aftermath will likely take note of the book's latter sections that deal with the demobilization process, the use of Canadian medical personnel in theaters where the Corps itself was not employed, and Canadian participation in anti-Bolshevik operations on the Russian periphery during 1918-20. The official history provides an informative if less than vivid description of these interesting events.

In conclusion, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* effectively accomplishes the job of the official history. It provides a concise account of the actions of a nation at war, particularly of its armed forces, yet it does so in a way that offers some considerable detail regarding many tactical actions and the winning of Victoria Crosses for gallantry, often awarded posthumously. The volume itself has a complex history, which the Carlton Library Series helpfully describes, and the work as a whole provides a rare single-volume official account of a nation's military exertion in the Great War.

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