

Jonathan Fennell. *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 932.

In July 2002, The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada Association dedicated a plaque at Point 67, south of Caen, Normandy, for the regiment's role in Operation Spring, 25 July 1944. After a brief synopsis of the disaster that befell the unit, there is an epitaph. It reads,

“In memory of the men of The Black Watch of Canada and their comrades who fought for the liberation of Europe and the hope of a better world.”

The final part of that sentence carries meaning beyond the popular expression that Canadian servicemen and women fought for our freedom. *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* by Jonathan Fennell, Senior Lecturer at King's College London, tackles this subject head-on. Exactly what was the better world that Commonwealth soldiers were fighting for? Were they simply motivated to defeat the Axis powers and restore the pre-war and pre-depression status quo? Or did their motivation come from something greater? As Fennell demonstrates, victory was not enough: “For the ordinary citizen soldier, the war was, at heart, about building a better post-war world at home” (p. 19). The war shaped these soldiers and, in turn, they shaped postwar societies across the waning British Empire.

This core idea spans from multiple “key interlocking strands,” as Fennell calls them. The first is the cross-national scope of the book. The British and Commonwealth Armies “were purposely designed to fight as a multinational team and they must be studied accordingly in that light” (p. 5). Although most of the chapters in the book are organized both chronologically and by campaign, the experiences of soldiers in the Australian, British, Canadian, Indian, New Zealand, and South African armies receive coverage.

Fennell weaves two further strands within and between each of these institutions. *Fighting the People's War* is not simply a single volume operational history of the Second World War campaigns of the British and Commonwealth armies. Fennell also aims to establish the relationship between the state, the home front, and the soldier at

the front. Four chapters deviate from the great battles and campaigns by providing a fresh backdrop on events occurring off the battlefield: “Mobilisation,” “The Great Imperial Morale Crisis,” “Remobilisation,” and “Soldiers and Social Change.” They are arguably the most important chapters in the book for two seasons.

First, they set the stage for new appreciations of battlefield performance across the war’s major campaigns. A great example of this is the relationship between the New Zealand Furlough Mutiny and the performance of the 2nd New Zealand Division during the second and third battles of Monte Cassino. Soldiers in the British Commonwealth expected their respective states to maintain the principle of equality of sacrifice. After fighting in the Mediterranean between 1941 and 1943, veteran New Zealand troops returned home. Most refused to leave, arguing that capable men with jobs in the war industry should now do their bit. In the end, only 13 per cent of the 6,000 troops furloughed returned to fight in Italy. This meant that the 2nd New Zealand Division forfeited many of its veteran soldiers during a tough battle. It also meant that those who remained were hardly in the mindset that giving their lives for victory was worthwhile. Fennell, therefore, identifies poor morale, stemming from New Zealand’s failure to remobilize its people for war, as an important factor in the failure at Cassino.

Poor morale could manifest itself in other ways. Of interest to Canadians, Fennell examines the case of First Canadian Army in Normandy. “Something appeared to be wrong with First Canadian Army,” Fennell writes after his discussions of Operations Totalize and Tractable (p. 543). These operations failed to close the Falaise Gap from the north as rapid as General Bernard Montgomery hoped, permitting tens of thousands of German troops to escape. Fennell argues that while command and control had a role in this setback, a serious drop in Canadian Army morale also played a part. Friendly fire incidents involving the US Army Air Forces and RAF Bomber Command added to a situation that saw untested armoured divisions paired with an exhausted 3rd Canadian Division and a 2nd Canadian Division that had sustained heavy casualties in its first battles. It is, however, interesting that Fennell has not given much consideration to evidence that historians have underestimated the

strength of the German forces arrayed against these offensives.¹ In spite of new scholarship on the subject, C.P. Stacey's assessment of these operations continues to influence non-specialists.

These critical chapters also offer new perspectives on the attitudes of British Commonwealth troops toward the war effort. Fennell shows how the British state largely alienated its soldiers by failing to engage with their hopes for the future. Morale reports told Winston Churchill that “‘the nearest thing’ that the ordinary soldier had to a conscious ‘war aim’ was ‘to make sure that he will have a home and a job and what he regards as a fair deal after the war’” (p. 237). Yet Churchill, even after the urging of his Labour Party deputy, Clement Attlee, refused to consider social reforms until the war ended. Instead, army education through the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), stepped in to fill the gap and helped “the soldier ‘operationalise’ his emerging social and political consciousness” (p.639). In large numbers, the soldiers came to support the expansion of social services and believed that the principles of fairness and justice should underpin all government policy.

This leads to the third key strand Fennell identifies: a democratic approach to history. Most histories of the Second World War either discuss the great commanders and politicians, or they examine the coal face of war using selected letters, diaries, and memoirs of those who fought. Fennell's approach is different. To gauge the morale of the Commonwealth Armies over time and to understand how the troops' thinking evolved, he uses 925 censorship summaries based on 17 million letters sent by soldiers during the war. He also relies on forty-four morale reports published throughout the war, along with statistics on sickness, battle exhaustion, desertion, away without leave, and self-inflicted wounds. These sources, Fennell argues, allow historians to democratize the history of the war by getting at the experience of the average soldier. Fennell provides the reader with a solid overview of the strengths and weaknesses of these sources in the first chapter. He also provides further methodological explanations in four appendices, offering scholars a great starting point for conducting their own inquiries with these resources.

Perhaps Fennell's most eye-opening conclusion in the book is related to the role of the state in society, democracy, and the soldier

¹ Gregory Liedtke, “Canadian Offensive Operations in Normandy Revisited,” *Canadian Military Journal* 8, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 61.

as a political actor. The overwhelming evidence of the censorship summaries suggests “that soldiers were deeply interested in politics and the state of the home front” (p. 255). Fennell examines the voting behaviour of troops across the Commonwealth and finds that the closer an individual was to combat duty the more likely he was to vote for a party advocating for the expansion of social services and working towards a more equal and socially just society. In Canada in 1945, this meant that the Liberals and the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) together garnered the support of over 66 per cent of armed forces voters. Of those stationed in Northwest Europe, nearly 39 per cent voted CCF, beating Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King’s Liberals by nearly 10 points. The governing party likely suffered from its fumbling over conscription but the Progressive Conservatives (PC) did even worse. Only 25 per cent of servicemen in Northwest Europe put their faith in the PCs (p. 634). In general, Fennell found that some soldiers expressed the opinion that “too much Gov[ernmen]t control will rob the future ex-servicemen of the liberty for which they are now fighting.” Yet these sentiments were rare and the left’s narrative “resonated powerfully with servicemen in the Army” (p. 642).

Fennell’s study, reaching 700 pages of text and nearly 200 of notes and bibliography, is extensive but not all-encompassing. For instance, the author deals solely with the regular army, so special forces like the Commandoes, the First Special Service Force, or the Chindits do not factor into the analysis. Nor do the members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, or similar Commonwealth women’s army services. Also missing from the analysis are the experiences of half a million colonial soldiers and 43,000 members of the Irish Free State who soldiered with the British Army. These omissions, necessary to keep an already lengthy study manageable, offer profound gaps (especially of colonial troops and women) for scholars to fill in the future.

One gap that Canadian military historians will find disagreeable is Fennell’s decision to leave certain battles, like Hong Kong and Dieppe, out of scope. The absence of the disaster that befell the Canadian Army at Dieppe is particularly curious, considering the damage it must have caused to the morale of the 2nd Canadian Division. That said, Fennell has given us a direction and methodology that can help remedy this.

In addition to being an excellent single-volume history of the Second World War campaigns of the British and Commonwealth Armies, *Fighting the People's War* should receive broad attention. Military leaders interested both in the impact of morale on the battlefield and in working with allies, each with their own domestic politics to consider, will be well-served by this study. Furthermore, policymakers and political leaders will find the relationship between the state, the home front, and the soldier enlightening. Historians seeking to better connect the home front with the battlefield will find Fennell's approach both refreshing and valuable. This public historian is grateful to Jonathan Fennell for providing an understanding of the better world for which British and Commonwealth veterans fought and died between 1939 and 1945.

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