

## Review of "Canada in NATO, 1949-2019" by Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky

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## Book Reviews



Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky. *Canada in NATO, 1949-2019*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. Pp. 328.

In this masterful study of Canada's contribution to the NATO alliance, two leading experts in the field, Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky, unravel the country's engagement within the international defence pact. Based on a thorough understanding of the Canadian and international literature, they provide well-honed experience in assessing claims, in guiding the reader through complex debates and in telling this intricate history.

Canada emerged from the Second World War as a major economic power, but also with anxiety over sharing North America with the new superpower. Its soldiers, diplomats and politicians studied how the country might meet international security threats while strengthening ties to the United States, while also retaining its sovereignty. It was a balancing act. One way to combat Canada's isolation on the continent, believed internationalists like Louis St. Laurent and Lester B. Pearson, was to see Canada play a role in the fragile postwar Western Europe. War-ravaged and riven with grief, Western Europeans were susceptible to the insidious effects of communist agitators who actively undermined Europe's brittle democracies. But in preliminary talks to create a military coalition that would include Britain, the Benelux countries, France and other willing nations, Pearson had said in 1948 that this new pact "should not be a merely negative anti-Soviet military alliance but should be the basis for a positive liberal and democratic counter-offensive" (p. 13). Canada had some success in shaping the North Atlantic Treaty, which was signed in Washington on 4 April 1949 to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but it was, nevertheless, primarily a military alliance.

Despite the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, where Canada mobilised significant naval and land forces, with some 30,000 Canadians serving in the United Nations-led war, it also rearmed to send land, sea and air units to Western Europe as part of NATO. “Serious as is the Korean situation,” warned A.D.P. Heeney, the undersecretary of state for external affairs, “Korea is but a ‘side show’ in the overall struggle between the U.S.S.R. and the Western world” (p. 42). Jockel and Sokolsky offer keen insight into the role of NATO military forces in the 1950s, with Canada ready and willing to fight under the notion of collective defence. Twelve squadrons within the 1st Air Division, the 27th Infantry Brigade and dozens of warships patrolling the seas were all part of Canada’s share of the robust defence against communism. “Canada is the only smaller country in the position of having to face the necessity of devoting a considerable portion of her total defence effort to immediate defence,” remarked Minister of National Defence Brooke Claxton, “and, in addition, having a separate force in Korea, 7,000 miles away from our west coast and another force in Europe 2,000 miles away from our east coast, with the coasts themselves 3,000 miles apart” (p. 57). Even more challenging—and costly—Canada could not station its forces on its own territory as did most of the NATO members.

From the 1950s, Canadian political and military leaders struggled to purchase key weapon systems to match the Soviet threat, which cost billions and drew away from other domestic social programs. The complexity of nuclear weapons had to be negotiated, too, with military forces preparing to survive such an attack. The Progressive Conservative government of John Diefenbaker from 1957 to 1963 was bedevilled with the decision to arm the Canadian armed forces in North America with such weapons, which ultimately contributed to the government’s downfall. When Lester B. Pearson was elected prime minister in 1963, he adopted nuclear weapons, allowing them to be deployed on Canadian soil and overseas. They would likely have been used in the event of a full-scale war against the communist Warsaw Pact forces. In Western Europe, the Canadian brigade, rated one of the best in NATO, would be in the forward zone to fight, fall back and try to survive before reinforcements arrived or the war went nuclear. With the Soviet brute force offensive seemingly unstoppable, these were grim prospects for Canada’s fighting service personnel and their families that were stationed in European bases, although the

authors rarely delve into the experience of individuals, preferring to stay at the political, strategic and operational level.

One of the key themes running through this fine history is the ebb and flow of Canada's engagement with NATO. Despite high defence spending in the 1950s and into the mid 1960s, Pierre Trudeau's government from 1968 questioned Canada's place within NATO. With Europe stronger and better able to defend itself, especially with the incorporation of West Germany into the alliance, Trudeau and his ministers sought to cut defence costs. "We had no foreign policy of any importance," lamented Trudeau in 1969, "except that of NATO" (p. 94). In Europe, the air force had been allowed to wither, but the sea and land forces remained strong—and expensive. France had already proved a quarrelsome ally and left the NATO structure (but not the alliance), and Trudeau tried to negotiate an exit, or at least a significant reduction in military forces. He failed. The West Germans erupted in anger at the thought of being abandoned by Canada, especially the fear that such an action might be the precedent to allow the Americans to reduce their essential military support. German officials put enormous pressure on Trudeau, who retreated from the idea of drawing down Canada's armed forces and was even pressured to purchase 128 Leopard II battle tanks. A chastised Liberal government publicly claimed that Canada's involvement in NATO allowed it a voice in international matters, although some critics smirked that with a war against the Soviets likely to go nuclear, it was a case of "no annihilation without representation" (p. 66).

The authors offer a revealing understanding into Canadian weapons systems and the procurement of tanks, warships and new fighters. Ottawa was always juggling alliance duties with budgetary restraints and a desire to support regional defence industries. The results for procurement were long delays and mounting costs, with the armed forces usually using obsolete weapon systems to the detriment of combat capability. From the 1960s, peacekeeping became an important mission of Canada's armed forces, offering a pivot away from NATO because it helped to distinguish from the disastrous American war effort in Vietnam, and because it was relatively inexpensive. But the NATO commitments were always there. In the 1980s, when the Brian Mulroney government tried to repair some of the damage wrought under Trudeau's Liberals by increasing defence spending and promising new weapons systems, it also hoped that

a robust military would result in more influence among Europeans and the United States. It was difficult to measure such an impact, as it has been throughout Canada's devotion to the alliance, but more spending did not appear to equal a stronger voice. However, attempting to reduce our forces always led to howls of outrage. The Progressive Conservatives were initially hawkish on NATO, but they also faced their own financial constraints and tried to gradually disentangle from some of the expensive alliance obligations.

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union provided Canada with an opportunity to end its long military service in Western Europe, closing bases in 1994, much to the anger of European allies. Canada's reputation took a hit, but, as the authors note, re-engagement in the nasty ethnic war in the former Yugoslavia where Canada's professional military took a leadership role, again raised the country's profile. To save innocent civilians from atrocities, Canada's soldiers fought the enemy—sometimes Serbians, sometimes Croatians—in a complex and chaotic environment as Yugoslavia's multiethnic federation violently fragmented. Members of the Canadian Forces were involved in keeping the peace, but they were not peacekeepers. In 1999, NATO again had to intervene when the Serbians began to wage war on the Kosovo minority: Canada's CF-18s took part in the limited bombing campaign against Serbia. Paul Heinbecker, a senior official at the Department of Foreign Affairs, called it a “war of values, a war for human security” (p. 184).

There is an excellent chapter on Afghanistan, with Canadian service personnel fighting in dangerous sectors where many European nations chose to remain in safe areas, exposing fault lines in NATO. Even though Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan remains only episodically explored in writing and an emerging historiography, the authors offer sensible judgements and link the long war back to Canada's history of standing strong within NATO. A chapter on the postwar Canadian participation in NATO-led operations in Libya, Iraq and Latvia rounds off this valuable study. Throughout this period, NATO's enlargement by bringing in former Warsaw Pact countries is nicely situated, an action that Canada strongly supported. All these engagements and actions are presented without the application of hindsight history from the authors, although they are willing to question choices made or avoided by assessing what historical actors knew at the time or clarity that they should have

pursued. Other historians may be more critical in the future, but they'll likely rely on this work as a guide forward.

This short, pithy and informed book will be the basis for future studies, a staple in university classrooms, and likely situated at the edge of policy makers' desks. I would have liked to learn more about how NATO drew off Canadian military capabilities from the defence of North America and especially the Arctic, or, in fact, how NATO planned to defend the North American Arctic if the Soviet Union was brazen or foolhardy enough to attack. President Donald Trump's questioning of NATO's value and the recent war in Ukraine has led to a new awareness of the alliance to which Canada is a founding member. These events are a reminder that while Canadians remain relatively safe from war, protected by the oceans, the Arctic and their proximity to the United States, Ottawa cannot remain aloof from bad actors and mad dictators seeking to destabilise Europe and inflict terrible suffering on the innocent. Canada's commitment to NATO remains a foundation of the country's defence and diplomacy, as well as its engagement with the unstable, fractured and dangerous world beyond its borders.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*