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Review of "Civilians at the Sharp End: First Canadian Army Civil Affairs in Northwest Europe" by David A. Borys

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David A. Borys. *Civilians at the Sharp End: First Canadian Army Civil Affairs in Northwest Europe*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. Pp. 268.

As the First Canadian Army moved across northwestern Europe with Allied forces in 1944-45 it encountered both civilians to liberate and Nazi German occupiers to remove. The Civil Affairs (CA) Branch focussed on the former, often over-looked encounters, that had significant implications on the latter. Serving as liaisons, they helped in various ways the populations of France, Belgium and the Netherlands in order to both minimise the suffering and to most effectively accomplish the military operations. After reaching Germany the Branch became a military government, themselves occupiers, with the goal of rehabilitating that war-torn nation. David Borys, in this excellent work, describes the CA operational mandate "to limit civilian interference in military operations and to quickly establish functioning political administrations to help support the on-going war effort" (p. 5). And he correctly emphasises the importance of flexibility: "Every new region Civil Affairs entered promised a variety of intriguing challenges and complicated tasks ... the social, economic, and political realities of his whereabouts forced him to manoeuvre within a complicated and uncertain environment" (p. 204).

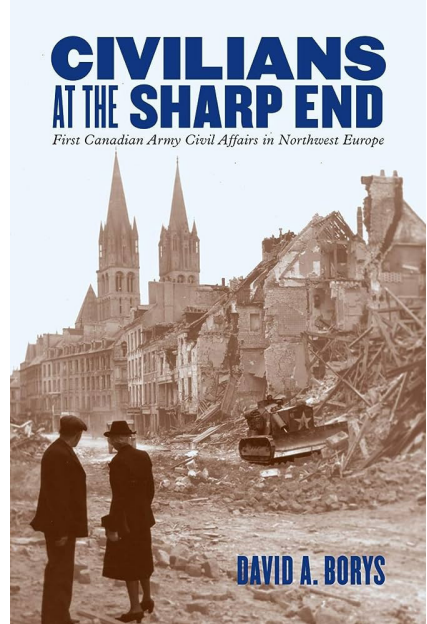
The first chapter describes how civilians had affected previous military operations, notably in South Africa, 1899-1902, the First World War, 1914-1918, and led to the creation of the Civil Affairs Branch as the Allies planned to invade Europe in the early years of the Second World War. CA was directly responsible "for ensuring that civilians would not interfere with military operations in northwest Europe and the Allies' ultimate goal of defeating Germany and bringing peace to the continent" (p. 4). Borys describes in more detail the experiences in Italy of the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories (AMGOT) that included many of the officers that would later play significant roles with CA in northwest Europe. Lessons were learned on dealing with issues related to communication, transportation and identifying disease. Two of the greatest challenges that emerged were (1) educating soldiers "on what exactly AMGOT was supposed to be doing and how AMGOT was supposed to be working within the structure of the larger invasion force" and (2) reconciling the "significant disagreement

over administrative policy between the British [seeking to include cooperative civilian officials] and the Americans [preferring a more direct, militarised approach]" (pp. 23-4).

In chapter two Borys describes activities in northern France in 1944 when Allies officially adopted the term Civil Affairs into the Field Service Regulations. Summarising it as a "crash course in Civil Affairs policies and practices" that provided valuable lessons, he focusses particularly on "how CA officers were able to cope with large-scale refugee movements during the battles for Caen, Falaise and the capture of the channel ports" (pp. 11, 45). The main objectives included preventing civilian collaboration with

the enemy, establishing law and order, caring for displaced civilians and combatants as well as protecting Allied property. In practice officers were to exercise administrative control and supervision, control the movement of thousands of civilians forced from their homes (limit disease and unrest). The cooperation with local civilians, particularly "mitigating the urban damage caused by Allied bombing" in Caen established a template "that proved invaluable for future encounters with civilian populations in urban environments" (pp. 9, 100).

Belgium would be a new theatre with different challenges and responses. At Caen and other French cities CA sought to remove civilians while in Antwerp the aim was to keep civilians working the docks to maintain supply; the key to this was morale, not easy in the context of German V-weapons. At the same time new obstacles emerged related to the "rampant black market," "ineffective Belgian civilian administration" and "uncooperative resistance groups" (pp. 11, 103, 118). Policies continued to be tweaked to adapt to the current situations at HQ of the 21st Army Group as "the most complex and extended Civil Affairs mission of the entire war" began in Holland, a mission that would involve both I and II Canadian Corps Civil Affairs for the first time (p. 142).



Some had predicted a speedy liberation, but complications created serious administration issues for both the new Dutch government and Civil Affairs. To problems of refugee movement and control were added coal distribution as well as the supply of food in the winter of 1944-45. Assistance involved more than simply bringing medicine, food and supplies to prevent mass starvation; many tasks involved unforeseen complications. CA officers "had to delicately balance civil administration and diplomacy and make authoritative decisions to save civilian lives. Civil Affairs maintained order and cohesion in liberated areas while balancing demands on military resources and manpower" (pp. 180-82).

Arrival in Germany on 8 February 1945 created another very new situation requiring another adaptation. Civil Affairs personnel became members of the "Allied Military Government." In the words of one CA officer, "the velvet gloves had been removed." Until Nazi Germany surrendered on 7 May the administrative and command structure remained similar. After, from 8 May to 15 June 1945 CA staff became part of Military Government in Germany. In order to be able to leave Germany as quickly as possible meant establishing an efficient and friendly government "on which the Allies could rely." This initially involved dealing with mostly local civilians and a few German soldiers who "eventually turned into a torrent of thousands of surrendered soldiers" and not all model citizens (pp. 7, 183-9).

Civilians at the Sharp End tells the story of Canadian Civil Affairs in Northwest Europe during the War and tells it extremely well. There are in fact several stories in this "messy interaction between soldiers and civilians" that ultimately, Borys concludes, "did not significantly hamper or interfere with Allied military operations ..." Successful prevention of disaster can easily be overlooked but should not be. Quantifying such success is not easy; we cannot precisely measure "evacuation schemes, civil defence preparation and effectiveness, as well as the beneficial effects of working relationships between civilian administrators and military officers" (pp. 12, 208). However, the subject deserves careful study of past failures and accomplishments, and this work is long overdue.

Why this work is long overdue is another story. The sources used are good and include the official histories, other relevant secondary sources as well as the under-used war diaries and the many reports on the activities of Civil Affairs. It may be assumed that a good official history will include all pertinent information in sufficient

detail, and undoubtedly C.P. Stacey and his team that worked on the *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, vol III*, completed a very good official history of operations in North-West Europe in 1960. But 1960 was 1960. Recent conflicts, including Canadian military experiences with international peacekeeping in the past sixty-three years, have highlighted the importance of effective liaison between soldiers and civilians as well as the dangers of poor relations. C.P. Stacey and his team did accumulate a lot of information and prepared a lot of fascinating reports that did not make it into the official histories; David Borys has rescued some excellent material from the fragile shelves of the Directorate of History and Heritage archives and made it available to students of Canada's remarkable participation in the Second World War. Highly recommended.

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