

WWII: Battle of the books

The following letter to Excalibur indicates the depth of feeling created by conflicting views of World War II. In response, Excalibur's Ira Nayman reviewed the two books in question and analyzed the different interpretations.

Dear Editor:

As I am a journalist rather than an academic, your newspaper is the appropriate (and only) forum in which to express my disappointment with the review of my book, *Deadly Allies*, which appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* Nov. 11 under York University Professor Jack Granatstein's byline.

My book is a detailed account of Canada's role in biological and chemical warfare research during and immediately after the Second World War. It has received excellent reviews and news coverage across the country and was deemed sufficiently important that CBC Radio International beamed a 20-minute review/interview on it around the world translated into 12 languages, including Russian.

On that same day, Granatstein dismissed the book in eight paragraphs in the *Gazette* with expressions like "shameless padding," "filler," "naive comments" and "efforts to sensationalize." These comments were not backed up. Granatstein even went on to say that "Bryden seems unaware that the Japanese were testing their own chemical and bacteriological weapons..."

If he had at least consulted the index to the book under Japan, it would have referred him to the pages he obviously overlooked.

But *Deadly Allies* is about atomic, chemical and biological weapons research in Canada, not Japan. Based on hundreds of Top Secret documents never before disclosed, it shows that Canada was a pioneer in the development and production of weapons utilizing epidemic diseases, infected insects, botulism and castor bean toxins, and new poison gases based on cadmium and fluorine. This work was carried on in Ontario, Quebec and Alberta and mainly

at the universities of Toronto, Queen's and McGill. Some of Canada's most prominent scientists were involved.

This is information that is tremendously important to all Canadians interested in peace and disarmament because it raised difficult moral and ethical questions in Canada's own backyard. The book proves that Ottawa supplied a false statement on Canada's possession of BW/CW weapons at a 1970 UN conference on disarmament and includes reaction from George Ignatieff obtained in an interview a few months before that distinguished Canadian diplomat died.

Granatstein does not challenge any of the book's findings. He just dismisses them in a few curt paragraphs.

The review in the *Gazette* concluded with a plug for Granatstein's own book this season, *A Nation Forged in Fire*. There is irony here. This book has no endnotes and little attribution for anything said in it. *Deadly Allies* has 38 pages of endnotes and every statement is backed up by an original document or taped interviews with the scientists involved.

I hope that students at this university will take the time to sample the content of *Deadly Allies* and compare it with Professor Granatstein's remarks. I feel that the subject matter is of vital interest to those in a university environment.

Readers also might find that *Deadly Allies* compares rather favourably with Granatstein's current book in terms of readability, originality of contribution and scholarship.

Yours sincerely
John Bryden



"Because the Second World War was fought against palpable evil, and thus was a sort of moral triumph, we have been reluctant to probe very deeply into its murderous requirements."

Paul Fussell,
"The Real War 1939-1945,"
The Atlantic (August 1989)

The 50th anniversary of the start of World War II, and the inevitable deluge of newspaper and magazine articles, television explorations and books about it came and went. But, questions remain.

In *Other Losses*, James Bacque claims that as many as a million German prisoners of war (POW's) died in American (and French) camps after the war, with the explicit approval of then-General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Outraged by the magnitude of the claim, most historians have rebuked it. Nonetheless, the evidence seems clear that German POW's were horribly mistreated with the full knowledge of America's European commanders.

What we seem to be witnessing is a competition between two fundamentally different views of history. On the one hand, there are the consequences of the axiom that history is written by the winners; only the facts that support the justness of the Allied cause are acknowledged, while all others are ignored. Although Granatstein and Morton admit that Canada was poorly prepared for World War II, that ill-equipped troops were often disastrously led, *A Nation Forged in Fire* fits firmly into this mold.

Then, there are the revisionists, who basically look for the facts the other group reports. This way of looking at the war may have begun a few years ago with the revelation that the Allies accepted Nazi war criminals into their countries to start up the cold war with Russia. Obviously, the further away we get in time from the event, the easier it is to see without ideological bias. Bryden and Bacque, among others, fit into this category.

The conflict between these two groups raises several questions. Are inhumane acts acceptable in the prosecution of a just war? At what point do we begin to mirror the barbarity of our enemies? Is a

democratic government justified in keeping such things from its own people? For what reasons? For how long? These are tough questions, and the two sides of the debate tend to answer them differently.

Nonetheless, it should be made clear that the two sides are complimentary, not mutually exclusive. There were heroes in World War II; there were brilliant tactics and amazing displays of cooperative effort. There were also acts of callousness, cruelty and stupidity, poorly thought out strategies and lives lost to poor equipment and field organization. Historians who desire to give an accurate account of the war have to contend with both sides.

This is not just a matter of academic debate. How we perceive history is one determinant of how we will act in the future. In determining the justness of Canada's involvement (or support) of current or future wars, it is important that we have Paul Fussell's descriptions to consider:

"You would expect frontline soldiers to be struck and hurt by bullets and shell fragments, but... you would not expect them to be hurt, sometimes killed, by being struck by parts of the friends' bodies being violently detached... At the botched assault on Tarawa Atoll, one coxswain at the helm of a landing vessel went quite mad, perhaps at the shock of steering through all the severed heads and limbs near the shore... More than a quarter of the soldiers in one division admitted that they'd been so scared they'd vomited, and almost a quarter said that at terrifying moments, they'd lost control of their bowels... In war, it is not just the weak soldiers, or the highly imaginative or cowardly ones, who will break down. All will break down if in combat long enough..."

A Nation Forged In Fire: Canadians and the Second World War 1939-1945
J. L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton
Lester & Orpen Denny

"Words like 'freedom' and 'democracy' tend to make Canadians blush and scrape their toes in the dirt in embarrassment. But the war against fascism was about freedom and democracy. There is too much naivety afoot these days, a feeling that no war can be a just war, that no cause can be worth dying for... The Second World War was a just war."

from *A Nation Forged In Fire*

A Nation Forged In Fire is an excellent primer on Canada's involvement in World War II. It is very well-written. The complex information is clearly organized. The paintings of battle, reproduced in full colour, are stunning. The photographs, although less dramatic, are usually quite interesting. And, the maps are kept to a minimum.

So, why was I dissatisfied? Part of it has to do with the coffee table nature of the book. I am offended by the concept of books written, not to be read, but to sit on somebody's table to give the appearance of having been read. But, that's only a small part of it.

The authors, York history professor J. L. Granatstein and Erindale College principal Desmond Morton, may have set themselves an impossible task, by trying to encompass Canada's entire involvement in the war in one volume. Ideas frequently suffer as a result.

It is commonly accepted the war was a great boon to Canada's economy; but the assertion that it led to greater acceptance of unions and the modern welfare state is, at best, problematic. Granatstein and Morton's argument is superficial; they simply do not prove their case. Moreover, in the absence of notes, the reader cannot find the original source of

the assertion in order to explore the issue further.

Furthermore, Granatstein and Morton do not seem prepared to accept Allied responsibility for the atrocities committed by its troops. The "terror bombing" of Hamburg, in which 50,000 civilians died, and more than a million became refugees, is given a scant three paragraphs. Apparently, the soldiers didn't question the morality of what they were doing, and, in any case, the Germans started mass bombing of civilians. Granatstein and Morton explore the moral implications of switching tactics from fighting soldiers to attacking civilians no further. Ironically, two pages later, the execution of Allied prisoners who had failed in an attempt to escape from a German Prisoner of War camp was described as murder. It is a strange moral judgement when 50,000 civilians are merely killed, but 50 soldiers are murdered.

To me, the best part of the book was the quotes from survivors, war journals and diaries. These brought an immediacy and humanity to the book that most histories, which concentrate on tactics, lack. Unfortunately, there weren't many. If somebody were to fill a volume with first-hand accounts of the war (as Barry Broadfoot did for the Depression in Ten Lost Years), they would be providing an invaluable service.

Ultimately, *A Nation Forged In Fire* doesn't even prove its main argument, that Canada was matured by its involvement in World War II, that the country "grew up" to take on its responsibilities as a middle power. True, Canada cut a lot of its ties to Britain. Canada also started taking positions on international, though largely inconsequential, boards and committees. But, it can be argued that Canada went from dependence upon Britain to dependence upon the United States with little or no period of true independence. Once again, the case is not adequately made.

A Nation Forged In Fire will prove invaluable for those looking for a brief overview of what Canada did in the Second World War. Those who want to explore any facets of the country's involvement in depth are recommended to look elsewhere.

Deadly Allies: Canada's Secret War 1937-1947
John Bryden
McClelland & Stewart

"No one would disagree that there has to be confidentiality in security, intelligence, foreign affairs and defence. But surely there must be a time limit. Secrecy is anathema to democracy, which requires that government be accountable to the people. If either elected or non-elected leaders can make decisions without anyone knowing about them, that principle is thwarted. It invites irresponsible, even criminal, actions if people can be sure that their deeds will never be scrutinized in their lifetimes. No free society can afford to give that kind of unqualified opportunity to anyone."

from *Deadly Allies*

One aspect of Canada's wartime involvement that rarely made it into the history books was the role the country played in chemical and biological weapons research. In *Deadly Allies*, *Toronto Star* editor John Bryden makes a damning case that Canada's role was a leading one.

Based on interviews with those involved, their private papers and such documents as the government has deigned release (and backed by 30 pages of notes), Bryden convincingly shows that:

* Canada mass-produced anthrax germs at Grasse Ile in the Saint Lawrence River (at a facility which still stands).

* Major open-air testing of both germ and chemical weapons was undertaken at Suffield, a military research station near Medicine Hat, Alberta.

* At least 1,000 Canadian soldiers were injured by

deliberate exposure to mustard gas at the hands of the British Army, which was reluctant to test it on their own soldiers.

Among the many noted scientists who worked on the research, one name stands out: Sir Frederick Banting. The Nobel Prize winner was so instrumental in motivating research in the early days of the war that one member of the National Research Council remarked, "When the time arrives to make known the details of Canada's war activities, it will be realized that Sir Frederick's work on insulin, great as it was, has been surpassed by the work he has done since the outbreak of hostilities."

I suspect there are a large number of diabetics who would disagree with that statement.

On the other hand, the federal government has determined that the time still has not arrived for Canadians to know about what Sir Frederick did: 50 years later, most documents relating to chemical warfare research are still classified.

Bryden does not make moral judgements; he doesn't have to. Clinical descriptions of the effects of mustard gas, anthrax, salmonella, plague, typhoid, cholera and other weapons on human beings, juxtaposed with lengthy debates on how best to employ them, are horrific enough. Unfortunately, Bryden's passionate prose style sometimes makes the book difficult to read.

The story of Canada's biological and chemical weapons research is similar to the American effort to perfect the atomic bomb; both involve interesting characters in a race with a definable enemy. But, the Americans could avoid the moral questions their research entailed because it was largely theoretical; the Canadians, because their research focused on the practical aspects of the deadliness of their weapons, had nothing to hide their consciences behind. It is surprising, then, that few objections were raised to the research.

This is an important book, not only because of what it tells us about our past, but because much of what it describes is likely still going on today. The more we know about it, the more we can see the moral implications clearly.

