

INTRODUCTION

If an ill-informed or indifferent electorate is a menace to our national safety, so, too, is an Army which neither knows nor cares why it is in arms.

Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), 21 July 1941.¹

In citizen armies, it matters enormously that soldiers should, as Oliver Cromwell put it, know what they fight for and love what they know;² the fundamentals of victory or defeat ‘often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors’.³ This study explores the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War, a fighting force, at its core, made up of contingents from Britain, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa.⁴ The book investigates both the material culture and history of great armies in a world war and also the political, social, and economic factors that influenced their behaviour and experience in the period running up to, during and immediately after the largest conflagration of the twentieth century.⁵

Not only can the behaviour of armies best be understood in their political and social context, but societies too can be more fully comprehended by assessing the conduct of citizens in military service to the state. War might ‘not appear a likely context in which to investigate wider societal issues’,⁶ but, conflict ‘can bring into the open so much that is normally latent’ and ‘concentrate and magnify phenomena for the benefit of the student’.⁷ War ‘speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions’, and can bring ‘reality to the surface’.⁸ The manner

2 / Introduction

and extent to which states make demands on societies and extract resources, both material and psychological, ‘can be instructive: the state’s new burst of energy and activity provides a flare of light enabling us to see its features more clearly’.⁹

The clarity that paradoxically can emerge from a study of the chaos of war can contribute to a deeper knowledge of the characteristics of any society. Thus, this book seeks to analyse the terms of citizen soldiers’ war participation and locate the history of the Army firmly within the broader domain of twentieth-century British and Commonwealth history.¹⁰ ‘Just as we search for the origins of war in the preceding years of peace, we should also consider how the origins of the domestic order may be found in the preceding war’.¹¹

When we look at the Second World War in this light, the story of the British Commonwealth, and its armies, reflects a dynamic and contested reality. In many ways, the conflict tore communities apart and created deep divides. While the ‘culture of wartime’ emphasised ‘the interdependency between the individual and the nation’, divisions of class, age, gender, ethnicity and race persisted, and, in some situations, were heightened as a consequence of the conflict.¹² In the United Kingdom, competing narratives about the meaning of the war led to the rejection of the pre-war status quo and the ‘political revolution’ encapsulated in Labour’s unexpected landslide victory in the 1945 general election. Similar dynamics were at play in other parts of the Commonwealth. On the defeat of Germany in May 1945, the South African Intelligence Corps conceded that ‘the celebrations unfortunately were not national or unanimous in character, indeed from all over South Africa there are reports of intense local dissention occasioned’.¹³ Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for India, noted in late 1943 that:

The fact cannot be ignored that, of all the united nations none has felt less moral incentive to co-operate in the prosecution of war than India. The Indian war effort ... is pretty frankly a mercenary undertaking so far as the vast majority of Indians are concerned ... we have to reckon all the time with strong forces which if not positively pro-Japanese, are certainly anti-British, or at best are indifferent.¹⁴

Fractures on the home front had profound implications for those fighting on the front line; they need as a consequence to be integrated into the history of battles and campaigns: ‘To maintain morale and enthusiasm

3 / Introduction

for the war effort, it was important for the state to propagate a sense of solidarity.' The English, Welsh, Scots and Irish of the British Army; the Australians of British, Irish and other ethnic origins of the Australian Army; the English and French speakers of the Canadian Army; the Punjabis, Madrassis, Bengalis and many others, of the Indian Army; the Pākehā (men of European descent) and Maori of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF); and the English- and Afrikaans-speakers and Africans of the South African Army, or Union Defence Force (UDF), believed that victory had to be about more than just defeating Germany, Italy and Japan and 'restoring society to its prewar and pre-Depression conditions'. It had to be 'about building an improved modern nation in the postwar world', about building, as some put it, a 'new Jerusalem'.¹⁵

Such issues lie at the heart of this book. Quite simply, socio-political factors were central to the performance of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War. The men who fought 'tended to worry far more about the affairs of their families' than about the war more generally.¹⁶ Many soldiers drafted into the Army 'had centuries of disillusionment behind them'.¹⁷ 'Many' more had been told by their parents of the 'unemployment from which the latter suffered after the last war'.¹⁸ The soldiers' own letters attest to the fact that for the majority 'the call from their homes' was 'stronger than comradeship'.¹⁹

The domestic implications of fractures on the front line were no less dramatic than the military implications of fissures on the home front. There can be little doubt that the state changed profoundly in all the Commonwealth countries as a result of the war.²⁰ In its most obvious form, Britain lost an empire and developed a fully functioning welfare state.²¹ If the political-military crisis of 1940 'had not undone Conservative predominance, England could easily have developed different constitutional forms and a different kind of democracy'.²² The great military defeats of 1940 to 1942 had consequences that extended far beyond the martial domain; the geopolitical, economic and social implications of military disaster were immense. Moreover, the soldiers' political beliefs, many of which emerged as a consequence of their experience on the front line, were instrumental to the socio-political changes that materialised post-war. Labour's victory in the British election of 1945 was dependent in no small measure on the votes and political influence of soldiers and their families. The story,

4 / Introduction

arguably, was little different for the Australian election of 1943. In New Zealand, the continuation of the great adventure in social citizenship that had been set in motion by Labour's victory in the 1935 general election hinged considerably on the voting preferences of the cohort of citizens who fought in the Second World War. The war nearly destroyed the unity of Canada and South Africa; in the latter case, the conditions for institutionalised apartheid were substantially shaped by the soldiers' experience on the front line. On the Asian subcontinent, the very character of partition and the birth of an independent India and Pakistan in 1947 were influenced by veterans of the war.²³

The book, therefore, in many ways, challenges familiar understandings of the Second World War and of war and political and social change in the twentieth century more generally. In scholarly, and particularly in public discourse, the conflict is still commonly portrayed as the 'people's war'; a time when citizens and subjects from across Britain and the Empire joined together united 'to save the world' against Nazism.²⁴ This was the message of contemporary propaganda, which readily evoked notions of 'equality of sacrifice' and national and Imperial unity against a common foe.²⁵ There is also a consensus that it was experiences on the home front rather than the battlefield that 'laid the basis' for important reforms, most notably the advance of the modern welfare state in the years following the end of hostilities.²⁶ The book confronts these perceptions and attempts a more nuanced and, where required, a more critical account. As a consequence, it is hoped that a deeper and more contextualised understanding of the place of the Second World War in twentieth-century British and Commonwealth history will emerge.²⁷

Writing a New History of the Second World War

Remarkably, there is to date no single-volume history of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War. Those few studies that have addressed these armies together, from the start to the finish of the war, have done so almost uniquely through the lens of manpower and mobilisation.²⁸ In contrast, this study sets out to integrate assessments of mobilisation, battle, campaigns and strategy, with considerations of the enormous geopolitical and socio-economic prelude to and consequences of the war. The book, it is argued, fills a significant gap in our understanding of the Second World War.

5 / Introduction

It has the potential to both disrupt prevailing orthodoxies and build bridges between existing accounts that have become siloed in national- and campaign-focused narratives.

The bedrock of this new study is of course the considerable literature on and around the topic. This body of work can be broken down into three broad categories: studies of national armies;²⁹ campaign and battle histories that address the British and Commonwealth Armies in multinational perspective;³⁰ and campaign and battle histories that focus on individual national contributions.³¹ As important as these works are to our understanding of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War, the book aims to go beyond a synthesis of the existing secondary literature.

To do this, the book makes use of a vast array of freshly discovered and underused primary sources to pursue a number of key interlocking strands. In the first instance, it fully embraces a cross-national methodology; the histories of the many components of the British world system make little ‘sense on their own’.³² The basis of ‘British power’ lay in combining the strength of its overseas components with that of the Imperial centre.³³ The British and Commonwealth Armies were organised and trained to take the field with standard establishments, equipment and procedures; there was a harmonised ‘language’ of war, as set out in shared doctrine, and a common staff system. They were purposely designed to fight as a multinational team and they must be studied accordingly in that light.³⁴

The book, therefore, addresses all the campaigns fought by these great armies: the war in the West and in the East. Too many of the most creative and well-researched analyses of the British and Commonwealth experience in the Second World War focus either on the conflict against Germany or the fight against Japan; David French’s seminal *Raising Churchill’s Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919–1945* is the most obvious example.³⁵ As Figure 0.1 shows, once Japan entered the conflict in December 1941, significant numbers of British and Commonwealth divisions fought in the Far East and the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA).³⁶ In the summer of 1940, the Empire had been able to assign the equivalent of just over twenty-three divisions to the Western theatres of war. It would take, due to commitments in the East, four long years before it could do so again, by which time the equivalent of an additional sixteen divisions were

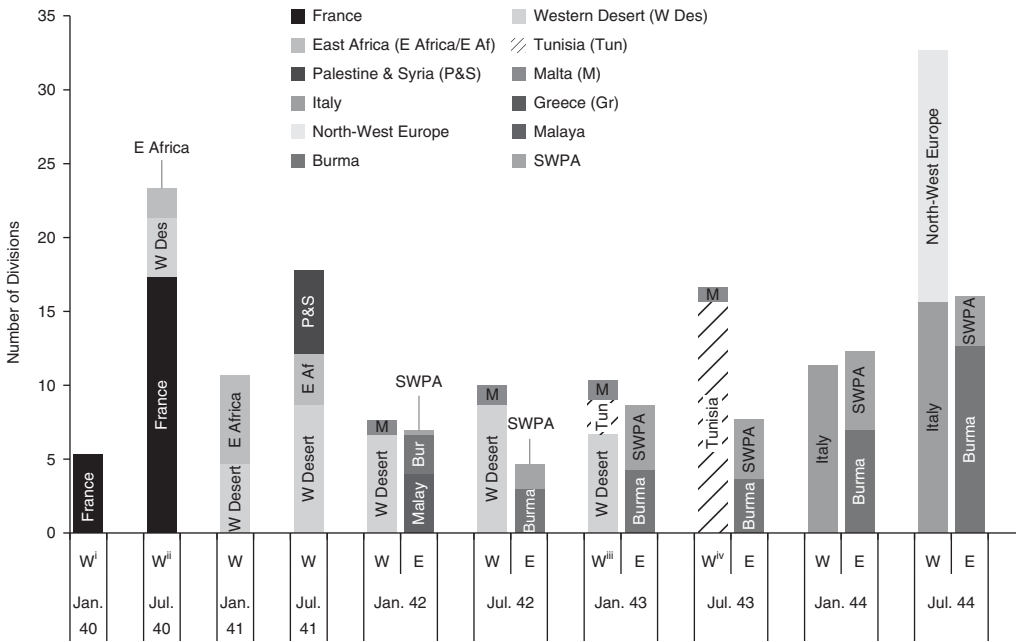


Figure 0.1 British Commonwealth divisions in fighting contact with the Axis, Western and Eastern theatres. ⁱ ‘W’ denotes Western theatre; ‘E’ denotes Eastern theatre.

ⁱⁱ Figure for France is for June 1940; by 4 June, 12½ divisions had fought in and been evacuated or captured at Calais. South of the Somme, during June, 4¾ divisions co-operated with the French, most of whom were captured.

ⁱⁱⁱ Strategic reserves in the Middle East (Cyprus, Syria, Iraq and Persia) are not included for January 1941.

^{iv} As the Axis threat had ‘not been removed on 1 July’, Malta is included in the July 1943 figures.

7 / Introduction

allocated to the fighting in Burma and the SWPA. The Second World War 'ought to be recognized as a global struggle, and particularly as an imperial one, in which apparently disparate British battles and strategic concerns formed part of one interconnected whole'.³⁷ Acknowledging this aspect of the conflict provides an opportunity to integrate analyses of the wars in the West and the East and to explore the complexities of waging a multi-front multinational global war.

The second key strand to the book is its integrative approach, not only in terms of the literature on the British and Commonwealth Armies in the war, but also in terms of the literature on the political, social and economic histories of Britain and the Commonwealth. In order to chart the military implications of fissures on the home front and the domestic implications of fractures on the front line, the book engages with wider accounts of war and social change and with the political and social histories of the Commonwealth. There is regrettably a 'long-standing division' between social historians of the Second World War and the practitioners of military history. In numerous accounts of social change during the war, 'servicemen are treated as some kind of invisible "Other" whose absence and needs shaped the lives and anxieties of those at home, but otherwise scarcely appear'.³⁸ This study seeks to build on recent work in this field and address this significant disconnect in the literature.³⁹

Finally, the book explores the British and Commonwealth experience in a perhaps more 'democratic' manner than that encountered in existing accounts. While the challenges faced by those in charge of the state and the military institution during the war are necessarily considered, the book takes seriously the agency of ordinary citizen soldiers embroiled in the conflict. Strategy can, and perhaps should, be understood as an iterative multi-level decision-making continuum where decisions on means and ends at each level of war and society can affect decisions on means and ends at all other levels. If we understand strategy in this manner, our comprehension of military and political dynamics is radically dependent on taking account of the often highly contextualised, contingent and interlinked decisions and behaviours not only of those at the top of any organisational or socio-political structure but also of those further down the 'chain of command'.⁴⁰ Social and political change is no less dependent on the contribution of ordinary citizens; the 'essence' of the democratic state is, after all, 'accountability to the general public'.⁴¹

Uncovering the Role of the Citizen Soldier

Studying the British and Commonwealth Armies in this manner poses substantial challenges. Thankfully, the increasing willingness of archives across the Commonwealth to allow digital photography of documents makes an integrated approach, based on extensive travel and primary research, possible – perhaps for the first time. Meaningfully incorporating the story of citizen soldiers into narratives about the outcomes of battles, campaigns and social and political change, however, is a far more intractable problem.

Whereas there is an abundance of sources available regarding the decisions and activities of those at the top of the strategic chain (much of which has been mined in the existing literature), considerably less survives from the bottom. The behaviours expected of soldiers by their political and military leaders exert ‘overwhelming dominance over the archival record’. Therefore, ‘the influence of an authority-generated model’ for understanding warfare, and history for that matter, ‘persists even in the most innovative works’.⁴² In this sense, it is not surprising that the role of Winston Churchill, and other war leaders, and the decisions of senior commanders in the field, dominate the history of the Second World War.⁴³ In a similar vein, it is records relating to the size of armies, the movements of men and machines and the productive capacities of combatant nations that mostly survive in archives. The accessibility of such records facilitates the portrayal of war as a complex game of chess, where the interplay between numbers, tactics and ruses decides the outcome of events.

The great military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, was not the first to criticise such a mechanistic and potentially deterministic understanding of history.⁴⁴ Military practitioners and theorists have long emphasised the relevance of the ordinary man in battle, of ‘unquantifiable’ and ‘intangible’ factors.⁴⁵ Scholars have addressed the challenge of integrating the ‘unquantifiable’ and ‘intangible’ into the history of war in a number of ways. Some works on, for instance, the German and American Armies in the Second World War, use attitudinal surveys to illuminate the experience of the citizen soldier at particular places and periods of time. Such studies, however, are few and far between and their findings are often highly contextualised; their relevance to understanding the attitudes and behaviour of combatants more generally in the Second World War is limited.⁴⁶ Most other studies use personal

9 / Introduction

recollections and memoirs to provide impressions of the mood of troops and dynamics within units, but these sources suffer from serious methodological shortcomings, not least the fallibility of individuals' memories, especially where interviews take place decades after the event; additionally, prevailing cultural and social interpretations of the meaning of events can often distort the recollections of historical actors. Contemporaneously recorded diaries or letters are more reliable as historical sources, but it is often difficult to amass a representative sample of such sources for an army. Moreover, as sources they tend by their very nature to be unrepresentative. Men 'who were predisposed to keep detailed accounts of their military service were generally better educated and more articulate than their comrades, which means that they were both more likely to be officers and also, perhaps, more likely to hold idiosyncratic views about the Army'.⁴⁷

This book circumvents these problems by leveraging the processes that the British and Commonwealth Armies themselves used for assessing the personal concerns of troops, their broad social and political perspectives, and their willingness to fight. It interrogates sources such as censorship summaries (of soldiers' mail) (see Appendix 1), morale reports (see Appendix 2) and official statistics on rates of sickness, battle exhaustion, desertion, absence without leave (AWOL) and self-inflicted wounds (SIW) (see Appendix 3).⁴⁸ Many of these sources are newly discovered or have been underused in existing accounts.⁴⁹ For example, 925 censorship summaries, based on 17 million letters sent between the battle and home fronts during the war, are used in this book. These remarkable sources cover the British Army from 13 June 1941 to 15 October 1945, the Australian Army from 13 June 1941 to 30 June 1945, the Canadian Army from 1 July 1943 to 15 October 1945, the Indian Army from 19 August 1942 to 30 September 1945, the New Zealand Army from 13 June 1941 to 30 September 1945, and the UDF, from 24 October 1940 to 30 June 1945. Operations covered include campaigns in the Middle East (most importantly in East and North Africa and Tunisia), in the Mediterranean (most importantly in Sicily and Italy), in North-West Europe (most importantly in Normandy, the Low Countries and Germany), and in the SWPA (most importantly in New Guinea).

The censorship summaries, which allow the soldiers' story in the Second World War to be told on a level broadly comparable with that of the great statesmen and military commanders, were compiled by

10 / Introduction



Illustration 0.1 A Soldier of 2/24th Australian Infantry Battalion writes a letter home from an advanced machine-gun post in New Guinea, November 1943. Soldiers' letters were used by the military authorities to produce the censorship reports that form a key part of this book.

assessing the contents of soldiers' letters – and just about every soldier in the Army wrote letters (see Illustration 0.1). The primary purpose of censorship was, of course, security. Soldiers were forbidden to record operational details, such as unit names, troop numbers, movements and casualties in their correspondence, lest such information fall into enemy hands.⁵⁰ The censorship reports were primarily designed to assess the effectiveness of the Army's efforts in this regard. They also, however, provided assessments of the soldiers' attitudes and levels of morale.⁵¹ Each day, the censors compiled a report for General Headquarters (GHQ) 'giving broad details of the mail examined during the previous day and forwarding any important submissions' or 'evidence of any abnormal conditions in any particular unit(s)'. The censors would also write directly to the commanding officers of units in order that any irregularities or problems discovered could be 'put right'. A weekly or bi-weekly composite censorship summary, or report, typically addressing a national contingent in an army, was then compiled