Canadian Military History

Volume 26 | Issue 2 Article 9

11-24-2017

"Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada Revised edition (Book Review)" by J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman

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J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman. *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*. Revised edition. Oakville, ON: Rock's Mills Press, 2015. Pp. 282.

J.L. Granatstein, one of the most prolific Canadian military historians, writes in *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, "[n]o single issue has divided Canadians so sharply as conscription for overseas military service in time of war" (p. v). The explosive nature of this question, along with the quality of the original book, now reissued in a revised form, may explain why historians have mostly stayed at arm's length from this still sensitive political and cultural topic. For this, Rock's Mills Press' effort to release a new edition of this critical work—first published by Oxford University Press (Canada)—is to be applauded.

Rather than an overview of the history of conscription from the early days of New France up until today, the reader is quickly plunged into a more particular study of the politics of conscription for overseas service in both World Wars. Using government records and private papers of key politicians, Granatstein and the late J.M. Hitsman examine conscription through the lens of political history rather than a strictly military-oriented analysis. They seek to explain the reasons leading to the decision to adopt conscription and measure the domestic damage of such a resolution on Canadian unity, especially given promises made by Prime Ministers Robert Laird Borden and William Lyon Mackenzie King prior to the World Wars that there would be no conscription for service overseas. As is well known, these promises were made primarily to the considerable French-Canadian minority. However, other men and families were keenly interested as well: many farmers, non-British immigrants, and other men of military age were also less than enthusiastic about compulsory service in overseas wars. The authors then turn their attention to Canada's top two political leaders, exploring the deepening pressures that led them to reverse course and approve conscription for military service overseas, thus breaking key electoral promises and threatening social harmony at home during the World Wars. In both conflicts, it was the logic of death and heavy casualties, along with slow voluntary recruitment, that created important shortages in Canadian infantry battalions. The English-speaking majority thought that conscription was necessary to keep fighting units at full strength. Yet it was also a matter of showing patriotism towards the Imperial "Mother

Country," as well as a way to compel the "disloyal" and "cowardly" French Canadians (and others) to share in the highest burden of war. Conscription therefore not only sharply divided French and English Canadians but also jeopardised the stability of the federal government. In return, it had minimal military results since the number of conscripts who reached the front in both wars formed only a small portion of the Canadian forces. Hence, Granatstein and Hitsman conclude correctly that the considerable long-term damage done to Canadian political life was not worth the price of compulsory service.

Shortage of infantry reinforcements in both wars were partly the result of heavy casualties as well as creeping and low voluntary enlistments over several years, but other factors were involved. In the Great War, much of the blame for the conscription crisis should be put on the politicians. In 1917, shortages additionally resulted from the pledge of Prime Minister Borden the prior year to raise the authorised strength of the Canadian army to 500,000 men. He did so intent on an Imperial and Allied commitment in the period of heaviest fighting, yet without any idea whether Canada—a country with a population of only 7.2 million—had enough manpower to sustain such an organisation. Political interference, the disorganised voluntary recruiting system established at the outbreak of war by Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Sam Hughes, and comparably inefficient military organisation in Britain, all this did not help. The fact that Borden also sought to exploit the issue for political advantage in the election of 1917 was disastrous. It would have lasting effects on Canadian political life in the next decades.

In the Second World War, the leading politicians showed they had learned some lessons from the First, shifting onto the military the weight of responsibility for the manpower shortages that became critical in 1944, the great killing year for Western armies only then breaching Hitler's *Festung Europa*. The Canadian Army—with a total force of almost half a million soldiers at the end of 1944—was not able to produce the 15,000 trained reinforcements necessary to keep its infantry units at full strength. This was partly the result of operating in two widely separated theatres, an extensive organisation in Britain, and a huge training establishment in Canada. It was also the consequence of the decision made by Prime Minister Mackenzie King to authorise a greatly enlarged army in 1942, even though Canada had already committed to a considerable air force, a

significant navy, and an extensive industrial and agricultural effort. He did so on the advice of the generals that large field forces could be kept at full strength through the voluntary recruiting system. The generals were proven wrong once casualties rose with constant battle contact with Axis forces. Forced to break his conscription promise in November 1944, Mackenzie King was nevertheless able to keep the country and his government united. This was due to his great political ability and the fact that he really tried to observe his promises to French Canada.

Granatstein's and Hitsman's original work was a well-written and thoroughly researched account, raising expectations for this new edition. Unfortunately, the revisions amount to no more than a new three-page-long introduction by Granatstein explaining why he does not agree with his original conclusions. In the past three decades, he turns his attention to the deleterious impact of manpower shortages on infantry units in the theatres of active operations. Failure of Canadian units to reach set objectives and greater casualties were the cold, hard results in the fighting zones. Therefore, Granatstein now believes that there was indeed a military necessity to adopt conscription in both conflicts, a position he believes most Canadian readers would not agree with. While this latest introduction is instructive about the shift in one scholar's views, it does not alter what we already knew about the central issue. Indeed, Granatstein had previously worked out this position with greater detail in other publications: one chapter in *The Generals*; his article "Conscription and My Politics" in *Canadian Military History*;[1] his chapter "Conscription in the Great War" in *Canada and the First World War*;[2] and one of his latest books the *Greatest Victory*.[3] Consequently, there is nothing fresh, new, or additionally important about this purported "third edition" and readers familiar with the first and second editions are thus advised to keep their loonies in their pockets.

Furthermore, the editing of this new volume is wanting, from unwelcome changes to the footnotes that introduce confusion, to

[1] J.L. Granatstein, "Conscription and My Politics," *Canadian Military History* 10, No. 4 (Autumn 2001): 35-38.

[2] Granatstein, "Conscription in the Great War," in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, David Mackenzie, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): 62-75.

[3] Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2014).

too many misprints and errors in both French and English. This is unfortunate. Such shortcomings interfere with the quality and mask the importance of the original work, on which serious researchers and readers should instead continue to rely.

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