

Canadian Military History

Volume 27 | Issue 2

Article 3

10-17-2018

"Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War (Book Review)" by Daniel Byers

Brian Bertosa

Recommended Citation

Bertosa, Brian (2018) ""Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War (Book Review)" by Daniel Byers," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol27/iss2/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Book Reviews



Daniel Byers. *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 324.

Most students of Canada's participation in the Second World War will be aware that our army overseas was comprised primarily of volunteers, but that conscripts had to be sent to Europe late in the war due to higher-than-expected casualties after the Allied invasion of France. Nothing more than the title of *The Conscription Crisis of 1944*, a classic from 1961,¹ is needed to indicate how momentous this decision was at the time, not only for the army but for the nation as a whole. But the title of that book, or the exasperated outburst by Minister of Munitions and Supply C.D. Howe at the height of the cabinet debates on the subject, "Conscription or no Conscription, but for God's sake let us make up our minds" (quoted on p. 228), can lead to the impression that conscription was only introduced in 1944. However, with initial training lasting four months in basic and advanced training centres, pulling men off the streets in November of 1944 was not going to meet the army's immediate need for reinforcements.

Nevertheless, the government was able to order the immediate dispatch of 16,000 trained personnel because conscription already existed in Canada, and had done so since the passage in 1940 of the National Resources Mobilization Act, or NRMA. These NRMA men, of whom almost 160,000 were to serve during the war, formed an army

¹ R. MacGregor Dawson, *The Conscription Crisis of 1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

parallel to, and in many ways separate from, the volunteer army. Daniel Byers, associate professor of history at Laurentian University, has chosen to refer to them as a “zombie army,” in reference to the ubiquitous contemporary nickname for the conscripts inspired by the unthinking automatons of films of the 1930s. The NRMA originally forbade conscripts from serving overseas, therefore most of them were assigned to home defence units, but in 1942, during the so-called “first conscription crisis,” the geographic limitation contained in the act was lifted after a national plebiscite.² After that, conscripts were posted further and further afield in the Western Hemisphere, including participation in the U.S.-led invasion of Kiska in the Aleutians, until the decision was finally taken to use them in Europe.

Canadian conscription in the Second World War has formed the subject matter, in whole or in part, of a number of fine monographs and articles in the decades since 1945.³ As Byers points out in his introduction, however, these have directed their attention mainly to the political wrangling surrounding the decision to send conscripts to Europe as reinforcements, as well as to the related question of whether the pressure exerted by many in the army’s hierarchy in favour of doing so constituted a “revolt of the generals.” In *Zombie Army*, the focus is primarily on the workings of the nationwide system of conscription set up under the NRMA and the experiences of the conscripts once they entered that system. It is certainly the first monograph that can make that claim, and as such represents a major contribution to the historiography of this subject. In addition, however, constituting a second emphasis almost as important as the first, Byers has chosen to re-examine the high-level deliberations and debates on conscription, not only in late 1944 but throughout the war, through the lens of the NRMA, revealing the ways in which the presence of tens of thousands of trained personnel at home affected decisions regarding the volunteer army overseas. This two-pronged approach has allowed Byers to produce by far the most complete

² It was at this time that Prime Minister Mackenzie King uttered his famous statement, “not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary” (quoted on p. 109); once again giving the impression that conscription in Canada did not yet exist.

³ Mostly in part, as far as monographs are concerned: besides Dawson, the only other book that I am aware of that deals exclusively with this subject is J.L. Granatstein’s *Conscription in the Second World War: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), which does not, however, exceed eighty-five pages of main text.

account to date of conscription in Canada during the Second World War.

After a brief introduction, the first chapter gives an overview of Canadian conscription up to 1939, focusing primarily on the First World War, providing essential context for the extreme reluctance of the Mackenzie King government to send conscripts overseas during the second. Of the seven remaining chapters, some deal with the NRMA, others deal with policy planning for the army overseas, and some discuss both. With respect to the NRMA, the author's sources are primarily archival—including a complete reading of the war diaries of all the basic training centres for the period 1940-42—but he has also included material drawn from novels, memoirs, and letters written by former conscripts, oral histories, and even some interviews to provide first-hand accounts. We learn that conscription began as a universal programme of thirty-day training camps set up across the country, but the limited military usefulness of this scheme led to the decision to increase the training period to four months, thereby aligning it with the programme for volunteers for overseas service. With volunteers and conscripts training side by side, many NRMA men decided to "go active," but for those that did not, a combination of blandishments and threats were often employed to get them to change their minds. Some of this included verbal and even physical abuse;⁴ one case, in which a conscript was beaten unconscious, led to a formal court of inquiry.

In those parts of the book dealing with manpower planning, Byers writes for the beginner, providing a great deal of background to bring the reader new to the subject up to speed. There is no need to reinvent the wheel here, and so the author relies primarily upon published secondary accounts, some of them decades old, for this purpose. But when he comes to discussing the importance of the NRMA in the planning of policy for the overseas divisions, his sources are almost exclusively archival, including the minutes of the Cabinet War Committee and the Mackenzie King diaries. He explains that in the early days conscription allowed the army to release

⁴ The methods described here are reminiscent of the treatment meted out during the First World War to conscientious objectors whose requests for exemption were denied; see Amy J. Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 89-97 for the worst examples.

members of the militia, who had been mobilised for the protection of key infrastructure, back to their civilian employment. As increasing numbers of conscripts were assigned to home defence duties, more and more volunteers for the “Active” army were able to be released from these units and sent overseas. Moreover, voluntarism was high at first among the NRMA men, but as early as 1943 it was becoming clear that the supply of volunteers for overseas service, whether conscripted first or not, would soon be exhausted. By this time, what Byers refers to as the “big army” of five divisions in Europe was already in place, the planning for which, much earlier in the war, had been based on overly optimistic estimates of the capacity of the voluntary system to fill its ranks. Action in Sicily, Italy, and northwest Europe quickly demonstrated that the army’s casualty estimates were also overly optimistic, and before the end of 1944 the prime minister was forced to repudiate his 1939 promise to the country that conscription would not be imposed for service overseas.⁵

Events after the decision to send conscripts to Europe are treated in an epilogue. There it is explained that, with almost all of those in the country willing to volunteer having done so by late 1944, the ranks of the conscripted at that stage were comprised primarily of those most adamant in their refusal to serve overseas. The news of the government’s decision to employ conscripts as reinforcements was greeted in some cases by protest marches and sit-down strikes—technically, a state of mutiny—by conscripts on home defence duties. Photos from these incidents grace the front and back covers of the book. Of the 16,000 conscripts earmarked as reinforcements, over one-quarter never made it to the troopships, having absented themselves in transit. Of the 9,667 who reached the front, two-thirds did so after hostilities had ended. Only 2,463 served in operational units, of whom 232 were wounded, 69 were killed, and 13 taken prisoner.

As I have come to expect from the books in the *Studies in Canadian Military History* series from UBC Press and the Canadian War Museum, the standard of production is very high, with virtually no typographical errors. A very helpful aid to the reader is the full text of the National Resources Mobilization Act, 1940, printed as an appendix. It should be pointed out that there is no bibliography, with sources cited in full only on first appearance in the 63 pages

⁵ “So long as this government may be in power, no such measure will be enacted” (quoted on p. 34).

of endnotes. A more substantive omission from this study is an examination of the experiences of those conscripts that eventually made it to the front lines. With a subtitle of *The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War*, I certainly expected a more serious treatment of that topic than the one and a half pages devoted to it in the epilogue. Although Byers assures us that “there is very little evidence with which to assess their [the conscripts’] combat performance” (p. 237), Patrick Dennis’s new *Reluctant Warriors*, examining the role of Canadian conscripts during the “Hundred Days” offensive of 1918,⁶ suggests that more could be done. But Dennis’s book, as well as a number of other recent monographs on specialised aspects of manpower in the First World War, suggests that the time may have passed when it would have been reasonable to expect the whole story in one volume with respect to conscription in the Second World War. In any case, there is a certain justice in ending the narrative where Byers did. Once the NRMA men made it to Europe, the policy was to break them up and send them to the front as anonymously as possible. Serving as individuals alongside members of the volunteer army, where they would “stand, or fall . . . on how they prove themselves as soldiers,”⁷ by no means did they any longer constitute a “zombie army.”

BRIAN BERTOSA, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

⁶ Patrick M. Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

⁷ General H.D.G. Crerar, commander, First Canadian Army, quoted on p. 236.