

Ellin Bessner. *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II*. Toronto: New Jewish Press, 2018. Pp. 358.

Ellin Bessner's *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* makes a compelling contribution to our understanding of how this country's diverse Jewish population responded to the cataclysms of the Second World War and the genocide of European Jewry. The central tenant of the book is that Canada's Jews did their duty, outstandingly so, during humanity's darkest years, overcoming both Nazism abroad and antisemitism at home. From a wartime population of 168,000, 17,000 Canadian Jews served and 450 were killed. *Double Threat* personalises this tremendous effort, introducing us to many of these men and women and venerating their sacrifices. The book's singular focus on those in uniform overlooks alternate Canadian Jewish reactions to the conflict, but it will serve as an essential touchstone for others who wish to further explore Canadian Jewish military history.

The narrative touches on virtually every campaign and service capacity, contextually structured around the Canadian Jewish community's dual goals of defeating Nazi Germany and decisively securing the full rights of citizenship. Canadian Jewish leaders, primarily represented in the book by the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), firmly believed that an exemplary community war record was key to obtaining equality. Coming to the aid of European Jewry was the other central factor in the Canadian Jewish war effort, but this was hardly a concern of the government or much of the general public and the book spotlights the shameful persistence of antisemitism in the military.

The narrative first confronts contemporary canards that Jews were not enlisting in the "appropriate" numbers. Even as recruiters routinely rejected exceptional applicants, numerous Canadian Jews changed their names and kept their religion a secret just to get into the fight, especially in 1939-40. The army was comparatively open to Jewish enlistment, though, as Bessner explains, 6,000 determined volunteers eventually made the Royal Canadian Air Force the most "Jewish" branch of the military.

Double Threat is particularly valuable on what was unique about Jewish service. It includes a section on what religious adherence Jewish volunteers decided to record on their identification discs—a question of paramount concern in the confrontation with genocidal evil. Victory

meant something special for Jewish veterans as well, and Bessner's writing about the liberation of Bergen-Belsen (curiously without any mention of the exceptional Toronto war artist Aba Bayefsky) and the assistance provided to Holocaust survivors by Canadian Jews in uniform is profoundly gripping.

Double Threat compliments more general works on the history of the Canadian Jewish community, while providing much more detail about wartime service.¹ The book is organised thematically, and while operational historians will find little new material, there are many moving personal stories. Readers may be familiar with prominent Jewish volunteers like David Croll and Ben Dunkelman, but Bessner's journalistic skills allow her to tell a much more comprehensive story via an impressive use of sources, including dozens of interviews. Veterans and their families generously shared letters and individual anecdotes with the author, and they are liberally excerpted, with the usual caveats that accompany such heavy reliance. Collective figures are also presented so that readers learn that ten Canadian Jews served in the Battle of Hong Kong, about thirty at Dieppe, ninety in the merchant navy, etc. Separate chapters cover Jewish communists in uniform, some of whom enlisted after enduring internment, Jewish servicewomen, and decorated Jewish heroes.

The overall tone is celebratory, and while the narrative does not completely shy away from less savoury topics like venereal disease, there is far less detail on those. Moreover, considering that the eligible Jewish male enlistment rate was actually below the national average, the major absence from the work is more information about those Jews who chose not to serve. One Canadian Women's Army Corps veteran, Montreal native Evelyn Bloom (née Bernstein), is quoted stating that enlisting was "not a Jewish thing to do" (p. 109)—a perception that demands to be further explored, particularly in light of Gerald Tulchinsky's and J.L. Granatstein's analyses of the same subject.²

¹ See especially Irving Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990); Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, Third Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998); and Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

² Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews*, 376-380; and J.L. Granatstein, "Ethnic and Religious Enlistment in Canada During the Second World War," *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* 21 (2013): 174-180.

Likewise, while it is proudly revealed that sixteen rabbis served, there is little scrutiny of the role played by Jewish religious authorities, an oversight given the respectful attention paid to the more secular efforts of the CJC. And how did the Haredim, a not insignificant portion of the Jewish population, respond to the war? Was there division within families over potentially breaking with their beliefs, even for such a noble cause? While there are occasional general references to parents' unsuccessful efforts to prevent children from enlisting, regrettably, *Double Threat* does not really say. Zionism receives little attention as well, though there is a brief section on Canadian Second World War veterans, both Jewish and Gentile, who fought as *Mahalnikim* in the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli War, further underlining the work's focus on a community war effort entirely devoted to this country.

Overall, the book balances scholarly heft and general accessibility and its finest contributions come when it moves away from cataloguing individual combat actions to examine broader social experiences, including the Herculean work of the CJC War Efforts Committee and the Young Men's Hebrew Association. The narrative also reveals that smaller Jewish communities provided more volunteers per capita than Montreal, Winnipeg, and Toronto. Doing so sharply accelerated their demise, however, as veterans from rural Cape Breton, Saskatchewan, and similar locales settled in those same larger centres after the war. Chapter 12, "Keeping the Faith," is especially captivating on collisions between Jews and the majority society. Bessner thoughtfully explores how Jewish volunteers, by and large first or second generation Canadians from observant homes, contended with mandatory church parades and mess fare; it was not exactly easy to keep kosher in a Royal Canadian Navy corvette. Nevertheless, even such a strong section sidesteps the full range of these consequences, and the notable lack of attention given to war brides conveniently avoids confronting the controversial subject of intermarriage.

Most importantly, as *Double Threat* makes abundantly clear, significant Jewish military participation forced wider society to confront its bigotry: serving side-by-side belatedly convinced the majority that Jews were Canadians too. Indeed, the Jews who fought for Canada in the Second World War—and their families—became notable contributors to the same society that had initially wanted nothing whatsoever to do with them.