

J.L. Granatstein

**Ethnic and Religious Enlistment in Canada During
the Second World War**

Trying to calculate which groups of Canadians provided the men and women who served in the Canadian armed forces in the Second World War is no easy task. We have gross numbers that indicate that 1.1 million, or 10 percent of the total population of 11 million, donned a uniform at some point in the war. We know that roughly 750,000 served in the Canadian Army, 250,000 in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and 100,000 in the Royal Canadian Navy. Some 50,000 of these enlistments were women. But there is no readily available data on how long men and women served, whether men were called up under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) and volunteered—or not—for service before enrolment, or if they joined the RCAF or RCN on receiving call-up notices for the Army.

None of this should be surprising. We still do not have clear data for the composition of the Canadian military contribution in the Great War almost a century after it occurred. We do know that some 620,000 were enlisted for the Great War, and we know that some 100,000 of that number were conscripts called up under the Military Service Act of 1917. It is well known that the British-born made up two-thirds of the First Contingent mobilized in 1914. It is less well known that the tendency of the British-born to enlist in the largest numbers persisted throughout the war, and an extraordinary 228,170 of the 470,000-odd British-born Canadian men of military age, or 48.5 percent, enlisted. It was not until the end of the war in November 1918 that Canadian-born soldiers made up a majority (51.4 percent) of the men who served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), a figure that included the hundred thousand conscripts. English-speaking Canadian-born men generally were slow to enlist, and we know that some regions—the Maritimes and Eastern Ontario—were very slow in generating volunteers. Of 2.82 million eligible Canadian-born males, 318,728 men or 11.3 percent enlisted or were conscripted.¹ More than two-thirds of the 1,811 officers in the First Contingent, however, were Canadian-born, almost all coming from the Militia or the Permanent Force. These men would get most of the senior positions in the Canadian Corps at the front throughout the war.

Francophone enlistment is harder to calculate with precision. Professor Serge Durflinger calculated that French Canada supplied approximately 15,000 volunteers during the war. Most came from the Montreal area, though Quebec City, western Quebec and Eastern Ontario provided significant numbers. A precise total is difficult to establish since attestation papers did not require enlistees to indicate their mother tongue, and men who enlisted in one town or city were not necessarily from that place (something that applied across Canada). Though French Canadians comprised some 30 percent of the Canadian population, they made up only about 4 percent of Canadian volunteers. Less than 5 percent of Quebec's males of military age served in infantry battalions, compared to 14–15 percent in Western Canada and Ontario. Moreover, at least half and likely substantially more of Quebec's recruits were English-speaking and nearly half of French-Canadian volunteers came from provinces other than Québec. The best guess is that at most 50,000 francophones served in

uniform in the Great War, a number that includes conscripts.

In other words, those Canadians who had the most recent ties to Britain were the most eager to serve. Thus, the English-speaking with long histories in Canada were less eager, and the French-speaking with no tie to Britain and no love for British imperialism were less eager still.²

Until some dogged researcher searches each and every Great War personnel file, of ethnic Canadians we can find nothing in detail and almost nothing that one might confidently call factual. Historians suggest that ten thousand naturalized Ukrainian-Canadians served.³ Vancouver Public Library records indicate that approximately 300 Chinese-Canadians served.⁴ The Jewish Virtual Library offers that it is believed that more than a thousand Jewish officers and 4600 Jewish soldiers served in the CEF, and some one hundred died in the service while 84 were decorated. Certainly there were Danes (one won the Victoria Cross), Germans, Italians, blacks, Japanese and First Nations soldiers in the CEF,⁵ alongside substantial numbers of Americans and British citizens recruited in the United States. Dr. Richard Holt's exhaustive dissertation research has found more than ten thousand enlistments among men from some 15 countries between 1914 and the end of 1916, and he has estimated that some one thousand blacks joined the CEF, including 440 from the West Indies.⁶ But until Jonathan Vance's long-term project to go through all the Great War personnel records is finished, there remain huge gaps and almost none of the ethnic or religious group claims can be accepted as factual.

When we look at the Second World War, the task of identifying service in the Canadian forces by ethnicity and religion is even more difficult. No one has yet done the research that can provide the clarity Dr. Holt's dissertation does for World War I. We do know that the Canadian-born made up a substantial majority of enlistments. The best estimates are that French Canada saw 150,000 or so of its sons join the forces or about one in seven of all enlistments, a much higher ratio than in the Great War. This took place notwithstanding marriage courses offered by parish churches in Montreal in the summer of 1940 to help young single men avoid being called up under the NRMA by getting married.⁷ We also know that the 65,000 NRMA "zombies" in late 1944, the diehard group that resisted service overseas until the King government compelled them, were mainly French-speaking and "ethnic."

One senior officer who grappled with the question of trying to persuade NRMA men to "convert" to volunteers for overseas service was Brigadier W.H.S. Macklin. He noted in May, 1944 that he had had almost no success in persuading francophones in the Regiment de Hull to volunteer, and he added that "The great majority [of NRMA soldiers in other units] are of non-British origin—German, Italian, and Slavic nationalities predominating. Moreover most of them come from farms. They are of deplorably low education, know almost nothing of Canadian or British history and

in fact are typical European peasants....” The NRMA men included a large number of English-speakers though their ethnic origins remain unclear; many were likely of British origin.⁸ Daniel Byers’ detailed research on the composition of the NRMA men generally supports Macklin’s observations on ethnicity, though not necessarily his commentary.⁹

We also know that several ethnic groups, in some cases despite the fact that Canada was at war with their nation of origin, claim that their men enlisted in very high proportions. Italian-Canadians apparently served in large numbers, even though the Fascist Mussolini regime had had substantial numbers of supporters in Canada before 1940. Prof. John Thompson’s claim that some 700 interned Italians in Canada had sons serving in the military must be incorrect, given that Canada interned only 586 Italians (to January 1941) and had released 105 of them by that date.¹⁰ Ukrainian-Canadians were badly divided between Communist and anti-Communist leanings, and the former had little incentive to serve when Hitler and Stalin were allied; large but indeterminate numbers nonetheless served, though Ukrainian Canadian organizations that campaigned for a “yes” vote in the April, 1942 conscription plebiscite were badly embarrassed when constituencies with large Ukrainian populations voted “no.”¹¹ Polish-Canadians, with many good reasons to enlist if they had old country ties, also apparently served in substantial numbers.¹² “Hundreds” of blacks are said to have joined,¹³ as did 3,090 status Indians or 2.4 percent of males, a figure that does not include non-status or metis males.¹⁴ About six hundred Chinese-Canadians served, or so Chinese cultural groups claim, even though they were not called up under the NRMA until 1944 nor allowed to join the RCAF until October 1942 or the RCN until March 1943.¹⁵ We also are told that, while Mennonites and Hutterites were excused military service, some 3,000 Mennonites did enlist.¹⁶ But all this information is fragmentary, and none is based on anything more than self-collected material and much propagandistic, breast-beating hearsay. It can be nothing more until all the personnel records are searched.

Jewish-Canadians have been particularly assiduous in speaking of their record of service. The Jewish Virtual Library claims that approximately 17,000 Jews served in the Canadian forces in the Second World War, 10,440 in the army, 5,870 in the RCAF, and 570 in the RCN, or some one in five of the male population. Some 421 died in service and 1,971 were decorated.¹⁷ The on-line Museum of Jewish Soldiers World War 2 has slightly different numbers, noting that 16,883 served, 429 died, and 200 were decorated (the definition of decorated likely varies wildly) of an inflated population estimate of 240,000.¹⁸ Gerald Tulchinsky, much the most reliable collector of data, cites the Canadian Jewish Congress’ figure of 16,441 men and 279 women who served, 39.1 percent of Jewish men of military age. This, he notes, did not compare very favourably to the 41.4 percent of all Canadian men who served.¹⁹ The *Canadian Jewish News* in 2010 nonetheless called it “one of the higher rates of enlistment” with about one-fifth of the adult population in uniform.²⁰ It has also been suggested that

the true enlistment numbers might be higher as some Jews did not declare their religion, not wanting “Jewish” or “Hebrew” to appear on their military identification discs lest they be captured by the Nazis, preferring “OD,” for “Other Denominations.”²¹ All this data again are not wholly reliable, as the discrepancies suggest.

Jews had more reason than most Canadians to enlist, given Hitler’s war of extermination against Europe’s Jews, and Jewish organizations, eager to counter claims by anti-Semites that Jews were not doing their part, worked hard to encourage enlistment. They had some success, though the claims that Jews enlisted above their proportion are wrong, as Tulchinsky has correctly noted and as ought to have been obvious to others. If French-speaking Canadians enlisted well below their share of the population, as they did, and if ten percent of the total Canadian population joined one of the armed services, then Anglo-Canadians must have enlisted in higher numbers than all or almost all ethnic or religious communities. In other words, Canadians of British origin made up the lion’s share of enlistments, exactly as in the Great War, though now most were Canadian-born.

Not surprisingly, the most thorough account of the Jewish enlistment record is that by Tulchinsky in his *Canada’s Jews*. He noted that Jewish participation in the Army (especially its combat units) and in the Navy was below national levels. Jews constituted 1.5% of Canada’s population in 1940, but provided 2.6% of its airmen, 1.4% of its soldiers, and 0.7% of its sailors.²² Peter Usher has explained well the reasons for high RCAF participation,²³ but Tulchinsky was the first scholar to venture into the reasons why enlistment by service and corps varied. The RCN initially appeared to refuse to enlist Jews, and the RCAF’s physical and education standards were very high at the outbreak of war. Except for a few regiments, the army took almost anyone, it appears, but Jews, apparently with more education than the norm, tended to be pushed toward—or perhaps chose—non-combat roles. Many served in front line units, however, and some like the later backroom politico Eddie Goodman in the Fort Garry Horse, the later Canadian historian Joe Levitt in the Governor General’s Foot Guards, and businessman Ben Dunkelman in the Queen’s Own Rifles had distinguished records. Nonetheless, the death rate for all Canadian servicemen was 4.08 percent; for Jews in uniform, it was a much lower 2.61 percent.²⁴ In his unsparing but sympathetic account, Tulchinsky (using Byers’ data) added that of the 16,441 Canadian Jewish men enrolled, 21.2 percent were home defence conscripts or “Zombies,” 2.2 percent of the total of all men who served in the NRMA. This compared to Jews’ 1.46 percent of the total population. This, he notes, was the highest percentage for any religious denomination.²⁵ Tulchinsky rather bravely also added that in the Jewish community “there were those with little concern for the fate of European Jews and no strong enthusiasm for fighting Nazis.”²⁶

Let me venture a very personal word here. There are, of course, an infinite number of reasons why men and women volunteer—or do not—for military service. Some

are single and believe themselves unfit, some married with children; some are fearful, some conscientious in their objection to war. I recognize all these factors. In my immediate family of Toronto-born and immigrant Jews, however, very few of the men served and, so far as I know, no women worked in war factories or other war-related jobs. One uncle on my mother's side was drafted into the U.S. Army and served in Europe where he was wounded and shell-shocked; one cousin joined the RCAF, I think to avoid conscription into the army, and served in Canada. On my father's side, neither he nor his four brothers served, although at least three were certainly eligible in terms of age; one of my uncles is said to have altered his birth certificate to increase his chances of avoiding the NRMA call-up. Another uncle by marriage was a home defence conscript and remained in Canada. I thought this a shameful family record in a war against Nazism, and I agree entirely with both Barney Danson's comment, "How could any [such] Jew look himself in the mirror?" and in Ernest Sirluck's remark, also as quoted by Tulchinsky, that "Jews had a special stake in this particular war and in the defeat of Nazism..." Sirluck also believed, as I hope I would have, that "as a Jew I should be in the dangerous shooting part of the war."²⁷ I have no doubt at all that this kind of reasoning led me to go to the Collège Militaire Royal and the Royal Military College and to join the army in 1956 when I turned 17.

Certainly more research is needed on the composition of the Canadian armed forces during the Second World. Tulchinsky's books on Canadian Jewish history are models of the work that is needed, fine history that is sympathetic but notably clear-eyed in judgment. We need much more such work.

1

Richard Holt, "Filling the Ranks: Recruiting, Training, and Reinforcements in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918," PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2011.

2

Based on J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Copp Clark Pitman: Toronto, 1985).

3

Frances A. Swyripa, "Ukrainian Canadian," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 15, December, 2013. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/ukrainian-canadians/>

4

Chinese-Canadian Genealogy. "Chinese-Canadians in World War I (1914-1918)," *Vancouver Public Library*, 2012. www.vpl.ca/ccg/WW1.html

5

Richard Holt, "First Nations Soldiers in the Great War," *Native Studies Review*, XXII (1913).

6

Holt diss., 194, 198

7

Bilan du Siecle. "Début d'une course au mariage pour éviter la mobilization," *Université de Sherbrooke*, www.bilan.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/pages/evenements/20679.html

8

Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, 205-7.

9

Daniel Byers, "Canada's Zombies: A Portrait of Canadian Conscripts and Their Experiences During the Second World War," in Bernd Horn, ed., *Forging a Nation: Perspectives on the Canadian Military Experience*, (St Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 2002), 159.

10

J.L. Granatstein, *A Man of Influence: Norman Robertson and Canadian Statecraft, 1929-68* (Ottawa: Denau 1981), 90; J.H. Thompson, *Ethnic Minorities During World War II* (Ottawa: CHA, 1991).

11

Thomas Prymak, *Maple Leaf and Trident: The Ukrainian Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988); Bohdan Panchuk, *Heroes of Their Day* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1983); Thompson, *Ethnic Minorities During World War II*.

12

Aloysius Balawyder, *The Maple Leaf and the White Eagle* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1980).

13

Black History Canada, www.HistoricaCanada.ca,

14

Directorate of History and Heritage, NDHQ, *Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military*, chap. V.

15

Chinese-Canadian Genealogy. "Chinese-Canadians in World War II (1939-1945)," *Vancouver Public Library*, 2012. www.vpl.ca/ccg/wwii.html

16

Thompson, *Ethnic Minorities During World War II*.

17

www.JewishVirtualLibrary.org/source/vjw/canada.html

18

The Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War 2, www.jwmww2.org/show_item.asp?levelid=65034

19

Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008), 376. The reliability of the CJC figures is, in my opinion, questionable.

20

April 29, 2010.

21

Ontario Jewish Archives. "Taking Care of Business: Labour and Business in Jewish Toronto." www.OntarioJewishArchives.org/exhibits/jcmm/military.html. As late as 1956, my nameplate at the College Militaire Royal de Saint-Jean identified me as "A Eng Heb" or "Army, English-speaking, Hebrew."

22

Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews*, 380.

23

Peter Usher, "Jews in the Royal Canadian Air Force, 1940-1945" *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes*. Vol. 20 (2012[2014]): 93-114. Mr Usher kindly sent me his paper.

24

Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews*, 377.

25

Ibid.

26

Ibid., 374

27

Ibid., 373.