

Letter to the Editor

This letter to the editor is in response to Mark Celinscak's excellent article, "The Holocaust and the Canadian War Museum Controversy," Vol. 26, 2018 which I came across recently online. I had earlier read his book Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp, 2015. The purpose of this letter is also to elucidate or possibly add information that might offer additional insight into events leading to the Holocaust gallery uproar in 1988 at the Canadian War Museum.

The War Museum had been starved for funds since its opening in 1967. Governments and the bureaucracy allowed neglect to such an extent that wood had to be recycled for displays. Necessary photocopying had to be taken to sympathetic bureaucrats at National Defence. The original version was to be a Holocaust Gallery primarily but also include a display on the contributions of Jewish Canadian servicemen and women. In exchange for this display space, money would be raised from the Jewish community for this exhibition and the expected large surplus from donations would be used to pay for refurbishing the entire war museum. There had been an Anne Frank travelling exhibit in 1993 which had increased visitation. Several leaders of the Friends of the Canadian War Museum had strongly opposed providing space at the museum on the grounds it had nothing to do with the purpose of the museum, which was to tell the story of Canada's military history. A CWM consultative or advisory committee with representatives from the Legion, Veterans Affairs, National Defence as well as prominent Canadian military historians, had been allowed to stop meeting as it was not deemed essential and cutting it was a way to save money. Members of the Ottawa Jewish community warned staff a military museum and a Holocaust gallery should be kept apart, not together.

One of those leading the charge to "save" the war museum was the distinguished Canadian Veteran "Cliff Chadderton", Director of War Amputations of Canada, who oversaw a coalition of other veterans' groups. Chadderton had gained considerable experience denouncing the CBC mini-series "The Valour and the Horror" produced by the McKenna brothers. The newspapers and military magazines such as Scott Taylor's Esprit de Corps soon became replete with denunciations from veterans and those whose family members had fought on behalf of this country or had some connection with Canada's military past. The political heat became white hot.

The Senate subcommittee Veterans Affairs held hearings and called witnesses to testify live on CPAC (Parliamentary channel) as to what had transpired. It was surprisingly learned that the gallery had grown in size from 2,000 to 6,000 feet to become the largest exhibition gallery. Other stories deserving recognition in the displays would have to be put aside. This justifiably angered those whose stories had been omitted for lack of space.

The late Professor Desmond Morton had described the Holocaust Gallery as a proposed “gallery of horrors.” He feared it would attract those mainly wanting to see a horror show. Early in the discussions, there had been a proposal that the Holocaust Gallery have a separate entrance at the rear or on the side of the building where supposedly visitors could purchase separate tickets. Someone wisely advised that having visitors to the military history areas going through the front door and others entering the Holocaust Gallery through the back door might not be a good idea.

Professor Martin Celinscak in his book, Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp, 2015, has carefully documented the presence and experiences of hundreds of Canadians who were among the camp’s liberators. Professor Celinscak deserves credit for researching and pointing out the early presence of members of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion as well as Canadian members of the Special Air Service (SAS) in the British Army who liberated Belsen. Among the British forces liberating Belsen were also Canadians servicing in CANLOAN, Canadian officers on loan to the British Army.

Many Canadian service personnel, such as Cliff Chadderton, had fought in North-West Europe but only relatively small number of Canadians were directly involved in liberating camps like Bergen Belsen. As this was not strictly a military operation, it was not mentioned or included in the Official Histories. Thus, during the Senate hearings, veterans could claim honestly that to their best knowledge it was not a part of Canadian military history.

One of the key lessons from this unsuccessful project which gained national exposure was the failure of museum leaders to judge or gauge Canadian public sentiment and veterans’ reactions. Herodotus in his “History of the Greek and Persian Wars” depicted it as a battle for freedom. He wrote that veterans from the Greek side would fight to maintain that depiction as to what had happened. Canadian veterans were no exception as witnessed by their outrage over a bomber panel in the new Canadian War Museum.

Some twenty-five years have passed since the Holocaust Gallery controversy. A good number of the veterans involved are now deceased. A new generation has emerged with different perspectives and attitudes. The Holocaust Gallery controversy demonstrated that a thin veneer of civility exists in Canadian society that can be very easily fractured.

Although Professor Celinscak was able to find over a thousand Canadians in the military who encountered Belsen, the need to mention the Holocaust in some form in a display at the Canadian War Museum ought not to have been based strictly on the number of Canadian service personnel who were there. There ought to be some

insight as to the causes of the Second World War, including Nazi ideology and the consequences of that ideology which was implemented, leading to the terrible deaths of many millions. The Canadian military and the Second World War is about more than just every military engagement included in wartime Canadian Official Histories. Museum visitors deserve some insight as to why Canada went to war as well as what this country was fighting for.¹

There seems to be some puzzlement as to the positive reaction in Britain to a Holocaust Gallery established at the Imperial War Museum as compared to Canada and its proposed gallery at the Canadian War Museum. I would argue that Britain and Canada have quite different histories, particularly social and military history. The Imperial War Museum was not neglected to the same extent as the Canadian War Museum. Different parts of the country also have different views of their history. A Museum of Human Rights was acceptable and welcome in Winnipeg. The Battle of the Plains of Abraham is not viewed in the same light throughout Canada. Similarly, the War of 1812 is not looked at the same in Canada and the United States. Had Distance from the Belsen Heap been published in 1998, it would not have changed the minds of veterans, public opinion, or opposition to the proposed gallery. The book is, however, a welcome addition offering a substantive, documented scholarly historical account that would have helped quell the charge that there was absolutely no Canadian military connection with the liberation of Belsen.

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Bibliography

Canada Senate, "Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs", Issue 3-Evidence-Afternoon meeting (2 February 1998).

Celinscak, Mark. Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Endnotes

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See Mark Celinscak, Distance from the Belsen Heap, p. 25.