



Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War by Jonathan Fennell.

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There are plenty of books on British ground forces in World War II, from the venerable official histories to notable current studies by such historians as David French, Jeremy Crang, and Alan Allport,¹ among others. Nor have the armies of the Commonwealth countries been neglected: besides official histories produced by Canada, Australia, and New Zealand there are excellent scholarly works by, for example, Terry Copp, John McLeod, and Tarak Barkawi.² But until now, as noted historian John Fennell (King's College London) points out (xxiv), no one has tried to write a single-volume comprehensive history of these armies.

The wisdom of such an effort is obvious: the “British” war effort was manifestly an imperial one, with divisions from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India making vital contributions. They were deployed everywhere from the fields of northwestern Europe to the deserts of North Africa, the jungles of south Asia, and the southwestern Pacific. They served alongside British troops and sometimes comprised the bulk of the Allied forces facing Axis armies in theater. Fennell’s stress on the commonalities of their experiences also helps reveal their critical significance in the postwar world.

Thus, the author’s history of the men serving in the ranks reveals “socio-political factors ... central to the performance of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War,” as well as key developments on the home front (3). The result is a more nuanced take on the notion of the Second World War as a “people’s war,” showing the influence of discrete national circumstances on a given country’s degree of commitment.

The issue of morale lies at the center of the book. Contrary to older criticisms of failings in military leadership and doctrine, Fennell argues that the British Army in 1939 was a highly professional force that had “identified the key intellectual and doctrinal aspects” (32) of the upcoming conflict, including the value of mechanization and combined-arms action. The immediate problem lay with training: the British simply did not rehearse for war on a large enough scale throughout the ranks. The mobilization of forces just before the war gave the trained professionals too little time to absorb and quickly ready large numbers of untrained men, further widening the gap between theory and practice.

With the outbreak of the war, the British and their Commonwealth allies had to “face some harsh truths about the cohesion of the Empire” (53), most specifically the disunity that pervaded

1. Respectively, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919-1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2000), *The British Army and the People's War* (Manchester: Univ Pr, 2000), and *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War 1939-1945* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2015).

2. Respectively, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945* (Toronto: Univ Pr, 2006); *Myth and Reality: The New Zealand Soldier in World War II* (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986); and *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2017).

their societies owing to the global economic depression of the 1930s. This mattered most in the armed forces of Commonwealth countries, which were composed entirely of volunteers, while the British had introduced conscription from the outset. Though Britain assumed the lead in military operations, recruitment within Commonwealth countries was entirely the responsibility of their respective governments. Loath to strain a fragile commitment to the war with conscription, they struggled to maintain the forces they provided at the start of it.

This problem worsened as the war raged on. While the Battle of France (10 May–25 June 1940) supercharged Britons' commitment to the war, this came at the price of increased expectations for a more equitable society. In the absence of threatened homelands, morale was especially conditional among the Commonwealth forces, who suffered heavily from the uneven nature of their training:

The “laissez-faire” doctrine in the British Army asked a lot of the men who were tasked with adapting to, controlling and conquering the vast array of challenges they might face in a battle environment. In order to meet these challenges, all officers and men had to be superbly trained. This, however, was rarely the case for most of 1940, 1941, and 1942, as the troops who fought in Europe, North Africa (with the possible exception of [Operation] “Compass”) and the Far East were handicapped by a training regime that was inadequately prepared for war. (220)

The resulting—in Fennell's terms—“Great Imperial Morale Crisis,” contributed to the poor performance of British and Commonwealth ground forces throughout the first half of the conflict.

To mitigate this crisis, the British made doctrinal adjustments and upgraded training. General Bernard Montgomery instituted battle drills in the 8th Army and adopted a firepower-intensive “Colossal Cracks” approach to combat. Troops were better prepared to fight while being required to play more limited roles than before. Similar efforts by Field Marshals Thomas Blamey in the southwestern Pacific and William Slim in Burma had similar good effects on soldiers' morale and battlefield performance.

With the refined application of the lessons of the first half of the war, the path towards the victory campaigns of 1945 was opened up. In the West, once the formidable natural barriers of the “Gothic” and “Siegfried” lines had been breached, Eighth Army and 21st Army Group broke through German defences and destroyed enemy formations in massive battles of annihilation. In the East, a now highly trained and motivated Fourteenth Army was able to reap the rewards of the doctrinal revolution of 1942 and 1943. In Operation “Capital,” it outmanoeuvred and outfought a much larger Japanese force than was ever encountered by the Americans in the Pacific. Citizen armies without an ideological underpinning had been superseded by new armies motivated by professional pride and martial conviction. The transformation of the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War was complete. (690)

The last part of Fennell's book concerns the postwar effects of soldiers' service in their home countries. These were most visible in national elections, as the bill came due for political parties that soldiers considered insufficiently committed to egalitarianism and fairness. While Winston Churchill was the most famous casualty of this sentiment, he was not the only one; Fennell argues that South African premier Jan Smuts's defeat in his country's general election was in part a product of the servicemen's vote. He sees social cohesion as a determinative factor in the overwhelming endorsement of the British Labour Party's “New Jerusalem,” the South African apartheid regime that united Afrikaners and English settlers, and the efforts by Indian Army veterans to ease the tensions stemming from Partition in 1947.

The author makes good use of morale reports introduced by the adjutant general Sir Ronald Adam, censorship summaries of soldiers' letters, and sickness reports, not to mention his meticulous archival research and thorough command of the relevant secondary literature. His deliberate concentration on the fighting man leaves less space for discussion of topics like military equipment and support services, or special forces and the Home Guard. None of this lessens Jonathan Fennell's achievement. *Fighting the People's War* will serve for years to come as the standard work on the British and Commonwealth forces in the Second World War. It deserves the widest possible audience.