KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WAR IS A MUST — BUT WHAT WE MUST KNOW IS LESS CERTAIN

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KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CANADA'S ROLE IN THE WORLD WARS

Over the past decade, the Government of Canada has made considerable investments in enhancing knowledge about Canada's role in the two World Wars. Promoting Canada's military history has been a government priority and substantial funding has been set aside to commemorate Canada's military exploits. Nearly half of all Canadians think it is important for citizens to possess a good knowledge about the First and Second World War. They select such knowledge over other critical areas as knowledge, Confederation and Aboriginal issues. Amongst these three issues, the two World Wars are the principal choice across the entire age spectrum and are especially dominant for the youngest cohort. As observed below, it is amongst English Canadians that feeling is strongest that knowing about the two World Wars is a must.

According to a 2009 survey done by the firm Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, six in 10 Canadians believe they have a good knowledge of World War II (approximately one in five believe they have a strong knowledge). The youngest and oldest cohorts report the highest levels of knowledge, though for the latter it is more a lived history than a learned one. There is also a substantial gap on the basis of gender with women (50%) reporting far less knowledge of the conflict than men (70%). On the basis of mother tongue, francophones are least likely to report a good knowledge of the Second World War (45%) while a clear majority of Anglophones (62%) and Allophones (65%) report such knowledge.

According to surveys conducted for Veterans Affairs Canada, seven in 10 Canadians say they are knowledgeable about the role that Canada's military has played in peacekeeping missions and

TABLE 1

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR ALL CANADIANS TO POSSESS A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE FOLLOWING:										
	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	French	English	Other
World War I and II	50%	50%	43%	48%	44%	55%	57%	41%	55%	43%
The 1867 Confederation	42%	28%	31%	44%	38%	51%	52%	35%	44%	42%
Aboriginal History/ Issues	38%	34%	30%	36%	33%	47%	45%	36%	39%	36%

SOURCE: LEGER MARKETING FOR THE ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

conflicts such as the World Wars, the Korean War, and the War in Afghanistan. A higher percentage (82%) takes pride in the role that Canada's military has played in peacekeeping missions and conflicts. As knowledgeable as they purport to be, some 55% of Canadians indicated they were unaware of the ongoing 75th anniversary of the Second World War (2014-2020). That noted, a clear majority of Canadians (83%) said it is at least moderately important that the anniversary be commemorated (with 61% saying it is very important).

Knowledge is conditioned on either the lived experience of a historic event or era, or on exposure to information about it that can be secured through several platforms. In the year prior to a 2013 ACS-Leger survey, 48% of Canadians reported having often or sometimes heard something about either the First or Second World War. Age was an important factor in this regard, as one-third of those under 35 reported having heard something versus nearly three in four over the age of 65. Some 38% said that they either often or sometimes read a book or essay, 32% saw a film or documentary and 15% visited a museum or exhibit on the World Wars.

The good news is a substantial majority (82%) expressed at least moderate interest in learning more about Canada's veterans, with 26% saying they were very interested in learning more.

KNOWLEDGE OF WWII FUELS PATRIOTISM

In January 2014, Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff General Tom Lawson stated in an internal memo (later reported in the *Globe and Mail*) that commemorations of military history build a "greater understanding that Canada's development as an independent country with a unique identity stems in significant part from its achievement in times of war" Leaving aside the issue of the veracity of that observation, it is clear that exposure to information about Canada's role in the First and Second World War contributes to a greater sense of pride in Canada's history and strengthens attachment to the country. As observed below, those who have often or sometimes heard about Canada's role in the World Wars, read about them or visited an

exhibit on them are far more likely to express pride in Canada's history than those who have rarely or never heard about these conflicts. It's also true that greater exposure to information about Canada's role in the World Wars results in a higher endorsement of the view that serving with the military is an act of patriotism.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE THAT STRONGLY AGREE THAT THEY ARE PROUD OF CANADA'S HISTORY BY THE DEGREE TO WHICH THEY HAVE OFTEN, SOMETIMES, RARELY OR NEVER HEARD, READ OR VISITED A MUSEUM EXHIBIT ABOUT CANADA'S ROLE IN WWI OR WW II

Strongly agree In general I am proud of Canada's history	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Over the past year heard about Canada's role WW1 and WW2	74%	48%	33%	30%
Over the past year read something about Canada's role WW1 and WW2	76%	53%	35%	32%
Over the past year visited a museum exhibit about Canada's role in WW1 and WW2	66%	56%	44%	39%

SOURCE: LEGER MARKETING FOR THE ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

THE NARRATIVE AROUND CANADA'S CONTRIBUTION TO WORLD WAR II

We've established that there is a relatively high self-assessment of knowledge on the part of Canadians about the First and Second World Wars and the country's role in the conflicts. There is also a healthy degree of interest among Canadians in learning more. But it is important to examine what citizens actually know and the extent to which such knowledge is an accurate reflection of what transpired during that era.

There is a substantial literature that describes Canada's involvement in the Second World War. A few examples of readily accessible Canadian sources of information with succinct summaries illustrate the relative importance of Canada's role in the conflict. The Canadian Encyclopedia points out that "The Second World War was a defining event in Canadian history, transforming a quiet country on the fringes of global affairs into a critical player in the 20th century's most important struggle. Canada carried out a vital role in the Battle of the Atlantic and the air war over Germany, and contributed forces to the campaigns of Western Europe beyond what might be expected of a small nation of then only 11 million people."

The Canadian Battlefields Foundation notes that "from a population of only 11.5 million, slightly more than one million Canadians served in uniform during the conflict. Overseas, following the tragedies of Hong Kong (December 1941) and Dieppe

(August 1942), Canada's army distinguished itself in Sicily (July-August 1943), Italy (September 1943 to February 1945), and the invasion and campaign in Normandy (June 6 – August 22, 1944), and throughout the campaign to liberate northwest Europe until victory in May 1945. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) grew 50-fold to a force of nearly 100,000 and played a crucial role in winning the Battle of the Atlantic and maintaining open the vital sea lanes to Britain in the face of a determined German submarine offensive. The RCN also served in the Mediterranean, Caribbean, Pacific, and Arctic. At war's end it had become the world's third-largest navy. From a meagre force of largely obsolete aircraft in 1939, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), which enlisted almost 250,000 men and women during the war, came to be an essential player in the Allies' gaining air superiority in Europe and in mounting devastating bomber raids against enemy targets."

Veterans Affairs Canada offers a somewhat more tempered description of the country's role in the Second World War. It declares that "while the great powers 'made more significant contributions' to the war effort; for a country of only 11 million people Canada's contribution was remarkable. At war's end, Canada had become a significant military power with the world's third largest navy, the fourth largest air force and an army of six divisions. Canada had grown significantly through the ordeal of war and assumed new responsibilities as a leading member of the world community."

Certain non-Canadian data bases offer a somewhat different conclusion in assessing Canada's role. One American source (http://ww2db.com/country/canada) on World War II, which cites the "Armchair Reader on World War II" as its source, lists Canada as a "Minor Member Nation or Possession". By "possession," it means belonging to the United Kingdom. It is pointed out that, "Despite the lack of military strength, she had great war potential. When Britain declared war on Germany, Prime Minister Mackenzie King called for Parliament debates on whether Canada should also join in the war beside Britain. On September 10, 1939, Canada produced a declaration of war for the approval of King George VI of the United Kingdom, which was approved immediately." It then goes on to provide much of the same information that is provided by the Canadian Battlefields Foundation.

Some 75 years after the start of World War II, a significant majority of Canadians agree that "Canada's soldiers played a very important role in the victory of the Allied Forces in the Second World War." That view is held by over eight in ten Canadians, with 52% *strongly* in agreement. Although there is a difference in opinion on the basis of age, much of this can be explained by the lesser degree of knowledge about the role of Canada in the Second World War.

If indeed there is a consensus amongst Canadians as regards the importance of Canada's role amongst Second World War allies, there is evidence of some uncertainty as to whether the contribution is widely acknowledged. A May 2012 survey conducted by U.K. pollster Lord Ashcroft amongst 1,007 children in Great Britain aged 11 to 18 reveals that when asked about Britain's allies in the Second World War, not a single one gave Canada as a response. Respondents were unprompted and allowed to give more than one response, and offered the following list: America/USA 61%, France 44%, Russia/Soviet

Union 13%, Australia/New Zealand 9%, Italy 7%, China 2%, Germany 2%, Japan 1%, Other 7% and Don't Know 21% Canada's absence is notable and perhaps even more surprising because of its strong ties to Britain.

MILITARY PRIDE AND MYTH ABOUT DOMESTIC UNITY

There is good reason to be proud of Canadian soldiers in World War II independent of the assessment of our role on the global stage during that era. But there is a risk that the effort to make Canada's role in the First and Second World War so central to a unifying national historic narrative is distorting our recollection of the domestic debates of the period — both the lived experience (in the case of World War II) and the learned one.

Surprisingly, the majority of Canadians surveyed incorrectly conclude that "World War II rallied all Canadians behind the Allied war effort". That view is held by some 51% of Quebecers and 70% of Ontarians. This impression is clearly incorrect, as in both the First and Second World War there were divisive debates over military participation. In the Second World War, a referendum on conscription produced a most polarizing outcome between English and French Canada, with the latter firmly opposed to forced military service. Paradoxically, even though they were more likely to have lived through some of the Second World War, the oldest segment of Canadians surveyed is more likely to agree that all Canadians rallied behind the Allied war effort. A further irony is offered in the table below, which implies that the more one gets information about the Canadians' role in the war effort, the more one believes that the country was firmly united at that time.

The myth of domestic unity during the Second World War is closely tied to the idea that Canada played an important role. In other words, those who are most persuaded of the importance of the country's role are also the most persuaded that the country was united by the experience of war. The myth, therefore, appears to be somewhat self-serving. Those most likely to disagree about the importance of Canada's role in World War II are correct in observing that the country was not united at that time.

TABLE 3

AGREE THAT CANADA'S SOLDIERS PLAYED A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE VICTORY OF THE ALLIED FORCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR BY AGE COHORT

	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Net Agree	81%	65%	69%	76%	81%	91%	94%
Net Disagree	6%	12%	8%	9%	4%	2%	1%
I don't know	13%	22%	21%	15%	14%	6%	4%

TABLE 4

AGREEMENT THAT WORLD WAR 2 RALLIED ALL CANADIANS BEHIND THE ALLIED WAR EFFORT BY AGE

	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Net Agree	63%	43%	55%	55%	64%	75%	80%
Strongly agree	27%	11%	18%	26%	29%	34%	40%
Somewhat agree	36%	32%	37%	29%	35%	41%	40%
Somewhat disagree	11%	12%	13%	9%	11%	10%	10%
Strongly disagree	3%	5%	3%	4%	4%	2%	3%
I don't know	22%	38%	28%	30%	21%	11%	7%
I prefer not to answer	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%

TABLE 5

CANADA SOLDIERS PLAYED A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE VICTORY OF THE ALLIED FORCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

World War 2 rallied all Canadians behind the Allied War effort	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Strongly agree	48%	8%	2%	7%
Somewhat agree	35%	54%	32%	11%
Somewhat disagree	7%	18%	33%	20%
Strongly disagree	2%	3%	15%	46%
I don't know / prefer not to answer	8%	17%	18%	16%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

CONCLUSION

There are likely many Canadians who won't acknowledge when there is a disjunction between contemporary pride in past achievements and assumptions of a historic sense of solidarity. A revisionist and/or ahistorical narrative that allows the perpetuation of myths will risk undercutting the credibility of the entire story. In the case of the contribution of Canada to the military effort in the Second World War, there is no need to neglect the domestic disunity that prevailed during that era to honour the contribution of the country's veterans in the 1939-45 conflict. It is sufficient that there is a contemporary recognition of the country's war veterans. There is also no need to elevate the already significant contributions of our country to mythic proportions. Canadians can feel quite good about their contribution without this kind of exaggeration. Veterans Affairs Canada is right to point out that "while the great powers 'made more significant contributions' to the war effort; for a country of only 11 million people Canada's contribution was remarkable." In the final analysis, making that acknowledgement detracts nothing from the genuine role played by the country's soldiers in the conflict.

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