

## Remembrance Day too little understood

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Tuesday, Canadians will pause for two minutes of silence at 11 a.m. to honour those who fought and those who died in Canada's wars and peace operations. Some 116,000 of our countrymen and women died in the armed forces and upwards of two million wore uniforms in the 20th century and the first years of the 21st. But how many Canadians know this? How many understand why we stand in silence on November 11?

The Dominion Institute, the Toronto-based historical charity, regularly publishes polls on Canadians' historical knowledge, and their latest offering, released on Nov. 7, asked what Remembrance Day was intended to commemorate. Astonishingly, only 46 per cent knew that it marked the end of the First World War. Four in 10 thought it marked the end of the Second World War and one in six that it commemorated D-Day, June 6, 1944. Presumably the latter group believed June falls in November each year.

When they were asked which countries Canada fought against in the First World War, only 16 per cent could name Germany and Austria from a list of five countries. Two in 10 thought Canada fought against Russia, 15 per cent believed we went to war with Japan and eight per cent thought Canada fought France. To top off the poll's dismal results, 37 per cent of Canadians thought the United States entered the First World War before Canada, and 45 per cent of those aged between 18 and 34 thought the same.

How can this be? Every newspaper in the nation features stories on Canadians' war experiences in November. The television and radio stations broadcast countless documentaries and Veterans Affairs Canada labours long and hard to ensure we understand the significance of Remembrance Day. But the Dominion Institute poll makes it very clear that Canadians simply have no understanding of a very large part of their history and heritage.

The problem lies in the schools and universities. Military history is a pariah field for Canada's historians and most Canadian universities offer none at all, neither Canadian nor any other. There are exceptions such as the universities of Calgary, New Brunswick, Western Ontario, and Wilfrid Laurier University, but most colleges have dropped military history entirely -- along with most Canadian political history and any study of the nation's foreign policy or relations with the United States.

Naturally enough, most of the public and high school teachers trained by Canada's historians offer nothing to their young students, either. There might be a reference to Canada's wars, but very often it is only to talk of wartime abuses of civil liberties -- the internment of Ukrainian-Canadians in the First World War or the evacuation off the West Coast of Japanese-Canadians in the Second World War -- or to focus on women's role in wartime or French Canada's resistance to conscription. All these are important subjects that ought to be taught, but they are not the central story of the Canadian wartime experience. And what is that story? In 1914, Canada was a colony that went to war automatically when Britain decided to fight. Some 620,000 Canadians joined the army, and the Canadian Corps' four divisions fighting in France and Flanders played an extraordinary role in defeating the German army. More than 60,000 Canadians died in that war and another 172,000 were wounded.

Yes, there were divisions and abuses, but many of those who served and many historians since believed Canada's Great War effort was the crowning achievement of the Canadian people.

In the Second World War, the story was the same -- but larger. From a population of 11 million, more than 1.1 million men and women served, almost all volunteers. The First Canadian Army of five divisions played an important role in Italy and northwest Europe, the Royal Canadian Navy built itself up from nothing in 1939 to become the third-largest navy in the world, and the Royal Canadian Air Force, one quarter-million strong, ran the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and provided squadrons that served in every theatre of war. More than 45,000 men died, and 53,000 suffered wounds. There is more to the Canadian story, in other words, than abuses of civil liberties.

Canada continued its role after 1945. Canadians served in Korea, in almost all of the United Nations peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions, and in Kosovo and now in Afghanistan. This nation's men and women have paid in full so that those of us at home can live in freedom and at peace.

We need to remember, but it becomes harder to do so as time passes if our schools and universities cherry pick at history and leave out much of the most important material. Provincial education ministers should do their job better and ensure Canada's history is taught, but they won't unless parents -- and voters -- demand that they do so.

Historian J.L. Granatstein was director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum, and is the author of *Who Killed Canadian History?*