

Audience and the Battle for the History of the Second World War in South Africa

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There are essentially three audiences for military history. In the first instance, there is the **general public** that reads largely for pleasure. This readership wants a good story, one of bravery, persistence in adversity, and resilience in overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. Such narratives might earn support and respect for the armed forces, and, more widely, meet goals in nation-building. The story, if written by an official war historian, is often sanitised. The second is the **academic audience**, which comprises scholars, most of whom are university-trained and possibly university-based. This readership is critical and engages with the past in order to gain a better understanding of its complexity and significance in a wider context. The third is the **military audience**. Uncritical in the scholarly sense, this readership focuses on professional military development. Battle-oriented, theirs is the quest for objective knowledge and the distillation of easily-understood “lessons”, which might be objectively used to improve performance. For them there are definite, hard, military outcomes. If not, the effort in writing history is in vain.¹ This paper uses South Africa’s official history programme of the Second World War to examine these oft-competing domains and finds that, with increasing education and growing military professionalism, there should be more accord between them in future.

South Africa’s wartime prime minister, General J.C. Smuts, recognised the importance of creating a record of his country’s role and participation in the Second World War. Having learned a number of “lessons” from the 1914-18 conflict, a section called War Records, later War Histories, was created within the Military Intelligence Branch and placed under the watchful eye of John Agar-Hamilton. Agar-Hamilton, who had been a professor in the Department of History at the University of Pretoria, hand-picked a number of fellow historians, whom he recruited from the universities. These men were commissioned and attached as historical recording officers (HROs) to each of the South African formations. Their responsibilities were threefold: (1) they had to ensure that every unit in the Division kept a war diary, as fully as possible, and that these were submitted to Divisional Headquarters every month; (2) they had to collect historical information (local newspapers, propaganda pamphlets, photographs) and supplement the war diaries whenever possible with interviews; and (3) they had to “make history” for the formations to which they were attached.² These tasks might be captured as the raking in of historical material, and the working up of this material into a first history (a kind of framework from which later historians would benefit). However, as Jeffrey Grey has noted, ‘collecting records was one thing; the quality of what was collected was quite another.’³ This gave the historical record officers agency and, from May 1945, they were additionally tasked to assist the various units and formations with the compilation of their respective unit and formation histories of the war years.

Their assistance was, however, not always well received. In fact, the official and public responses to their work illustrates nicely the contest between the three audiences: popular, military, academic. The battle for the history of the war played out in the fields of research and

¹ Stephen Morillo and Michael F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), pp 6-7.

² Axelson, ‘Preface’, Taranto to the Alps, C2, BC1263 Axelson Papers, UCT.

³ Jeffrey Grey, “Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clío”: the rise and fall of Union War Histories’, *Scientia Militaria*, vol. 30, no 2 (2000), p 262.

publication, as well as in the design of the military history curriculum at the South African Military College. High-ranking military officers did not like the more “academic” brand of history, which was, in many respects, was the opposite of the more traditional, institutionalised type: their truth was theirs and not sanitised, their approach was broad rather than parochial, and, tending to avoid individual and regimental ephemera, they told a larger story that also touched on the war’s impact on civilian people. Moreover, their history was no memorial to fallen comrades, for those that did not return – this they left to the regimental historians – but rather a broader sweep, telling the story with width and context. Much military history is produced by soldiers. By the men *who were there*. The HROs were there. But they were not *fighting* soldiers and, for officers, they seemingly did unorthodox things. They did not steer away from distasteful details, they did not fanfaronade high-ranking officers, and they interviewed men and women regardless of role or rank. For these military moguls, the HROs mostly did not speak with an *authentic* voice.

This paper will examine the War History Section and place the work of the HROs, and their attempts to construct narratives of the “real” war, within this context. I shall do three things:

- broadly outline the South African historiography of the war;
- analyse the work done by the HROs against the background of the environmental and organisational constraints imposed upon them; and
- examine the official and public response to their work, highlighting its meaning and longer term significance.

Of South Africa’s historical recording officers, Eric Axelson was the most prolific. He not only drafted several manuscript histories of the 6th SA Armoured Division, but also kept an activity log for his section, which was later reworked into a memoir, and he maintained a lively, informative correspondence with Agar-Hamilton, and fellow recording officers, which extended well into the post-war years. Their wartime correspondence is detailed and enjoyed a relatively rapid turnaround. The original material is in the custody of the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town and forms the basis of the research for this chapter, supplemented extensively by material from the Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria.