Museums as conflict zones: the Canadian War Museum and Bomber Command

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Abstract

This paper examines a recent controversy at the new Canadian War Museum over its exhibition on the Allied Bomber Offensive campaign in the Second World War. Although recent surveys of the public's attitudes towards museums suggest that the public both trusts museums to get the story right and thinks museums are good places to deal with controversial topics, in this case the Museum found itself under attack. In the end, despite generally positive reviews from historians called in to review the display, the Museum was forced to make changes after a Parliamentary sub-committee demanded it do so. The paper argues that the Museum's inability to withstand such intense pressure can be attributed to a number of factors, including its ambiguous nature as a war memorial museum.

Full Text:

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The Canadian War Museum has rewritten a controversial part of its exhibit on Allied bombing campaign during the Second World War. Bomber Command's aim was to crush civilian morale and force Germany to surrender by destroying its cities and industrial installations. Although Bomber Command and American attacks left 600,000 Germans dead, and more than five million homeless, the raids resulted in only small reductions in German war production until late in the war. The wording of the original text angered veterans, who eventually appealed to a Senate subcommittee to get it changed. The Senate subcommittee consulted with historians and found the panel to be factual, but it said the museum ought to change it. Area Bombing by Day: Bomber Command and the Daylight Offensive, 1944–1945. The Balance Sheet: The Costs and the Gains of the Bombing Campaign. Bercuson discusses his role in the controversy over the panel text about the Combined Bomber Offensive at the new Canadian War Museum. Arguing the the original text was not wrong, but reflected older scholarship, he concludes by observing that no serious scholar, whether a single author or a museum staff, should be saved from the age-old processes of historical review, revision and re-writing to reflect more recent research when it is more accurate.