The German assault on Canada an example of history largely unknown

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Canada was invaded during the Second World War. That's a largely forgotten or unknown aspect of Canadian history that many erroneously view as dull.

Rudyard Kipling knew a few things about teaching history. "If it was told in the form of stories," he famously declared, "it would never be forgotten."

Books in The History of Canada Series illustrate the truth of Kipling's theory. The idea is to relate the most intriguing episodes in Canada's story, rather than trying to depict the entire era. For example, Dan Snow's, Death or Victory, describing the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and the fall of New France; Christopher Pennington's, The Destiny of Canada, the story of the Fenian Raids and the push towards Confederation; and John Lownsbrough's, The Best Place To Be, the story of Expo 67 and the tremendous optimism of Canadians during the 1960s.

The Penguin Canada books select extraordinary events that perfectly illustrate the drama and vivacity of Canadian history. It is replete with rich and compelling tales that many failed to learn during their high school days. Roger Sarty's War in the St. Lawrence is a perfect example, shedding light on a period of the Second World War of which most Canadians are wholly unaware.

Many Canadians today are shocked to learn the extent to which Canadian home waters were invaded by Hitler's underwater sea wolves between 1942 and 1944. They crept stealthily through the Cabot Strait and the Strait of Belle Isle, and into the St. Lawrence River. Here and in the Gulf, they sank more than 20 ships, their marauding costing hundreds of lives. They terrorized Canadians living on both shores of the river who witnessed fiery explosions and burning ships. It was the first invasion of Canadian territorial waters since the War of 1812.

Civilian vessels were also targets during the Battle of the St. Lawrence. In one horrific incident in October 1942, the submarine U-69 attacked the ferry SS Caribou. She was sailing between North Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, when torpedoed. The tragic loss of 137 men, women and children stunned Canadians. Some 43,000 civilians had already been killed at home in Britain during the Blitz, but our non-combatants had considered themselves personally invulnerable to the ravages of war.

The war in the St. Lawrence River was eventually won. Technological advances in radar and sonar, RCAF air patrols, innovative naval tactics and the rapid growth of Canada's naval sea power all contributed. How many of us know that Canada once operated the third-largest navy in the world?

In 2024, an Ipsos poll conducted by Historica Canada unveiled some interesting and revealing facts about Canadians' lack of knowledge of our own history. Eighty-two percent of respondents failed to correctly answer half of the 30 true or false questions in the quiz. Nine in 10 young Canadians failed.

In his 1905 book, The Life of Reason, the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana famously wrote that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That is true. However, it is also true that those who do not comprehend our past can have little understanding, let alone appreciation, for the institutions that teach, govern, nurture and protect us today.

Over the space of the past 2,000 years, the importance of knowing history has been considered in different ways. Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher, saw it as a sign of maturity. "To be ignorant of what happened before you were born", he told the ages, "is to be a child forever."

Winston Churchill saw history as a guide to navigating the future. We'll leave you with Churchill's words. "The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward."