NATO spokesman Jamie Shea: the education of a war propagandist

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" ... the conflict of truth versus truth hid, in reality, a struggle between two forms of propaganda."—French Intellectuals and the Great War 1914-1920 , *PhD thesis by Jamie Shea*

NATO spokesman Jamie Shea has become something of a media personality. ITV recently ran a programme featuring his home life, portraying him as an ordinary, if highly successful, family man eager to get back to playing football with his son once the war in the Balkans was over. This was a sympathetic portrait of a man whose daily task it is to brief the media on bombing raids that have laid waste to a small Balkan country and killed thousands of civilians, including the very Kosovan refugees they were ostensibly to protect. It was remarkable not only for its hypocrisy, but also in raising the public profile of a type of functionary whose name would usually be known only to reporters and whose private life is a matter of interest to no one.

But Jamie Shea is a new kind of spokesman. He is a man trained to fight the media war just as a military specialist is trained to operate the lethal technology of modern warfare. His education for this role goes back to his university days at Lincoln College, Oxford, where Shea was a postgraduate student. He was awarded a doctorate for his thesis entitled *French Intellectuals and the Great War 1914-1920*, which was based on literary accounts of World War I. This thesis throws an interesting light on the early development of Shea as a war propagandist.

Shea's aim in his thesis is not to deal objectively with the problem of the literary representation of war. That problem has a long and distinguished history going back to Stendhal's account of the battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, in which his young hero discovers that far from being glorious the personal experience of war is chaotic and meaningless. It was a view of war that was to influence Tolstoy in *War and Peace* and all subsequent war literature. But genuine literary criticism is not what interests Shea. His thesis is devoted to attacking those writers who criticised the First World War, satirised the generals who sent men to be slaughtered in thousands and challenged the ideology of nationalism.

Comparing press accounts of the war with those written by soldiers, he comments, "patriotic literature, fulfilling France's needs of the time, was met with embittered, sarcastic rejoinders filtering through from the trenches. As a result, the conflict of truth versus truth hid, in reality, a struggle between two forms of propaganda." For Shea there is no truth, only different forms of propaganda.

The selection of literature dealt with in Shea's thesis is very limited because he restricts himself to those writers who had personal experience of combat. This decision excludes, for example, Marcel Proust, one of the greatest writers of the period, who observed French society between 1870 and the 1920s with a merciless eye. The fact that 2,000 French writers died in the First World War and countless others returned from the war psychologically damaged is perhaps the single most important mechanism of selection. But it is one that Shea does not see fit to mention.

Shea's particular target is Henri Barbusse's wartime novel *Le Feu* [*Under Fire*] with its graphic account of trench warfare. *Under Fire* contains all the attributes that Shea finds obnoxious in First World War literature. He complains, "The novel's consecration by the Prix Goncourt in 1916, its appearance in a single Flammarion edition and its automatic translation into English and German enabled *Le Feu* to win the ideological 'battle of the truths' during the war itself." He continues, " *Le Feu* has become an official history of the Great War. It has the status of the truth." He rejects as propaganda "the image of eternally suffering, victimised *poilus* [ordinary French soldiers] being forcefully coerced into slavery by unscrupulous rulers. To what extent, however, does this sentimentalist, pacifist vein in war literature, reinforced by the integral pacifist texts of the thirties and supported by such foreign successes as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Good Soldier Schweik* and the war poetry of, for instance, Wilfred Owen, genuinely represent the 'truth'?"

Shea has a problem with the truth. The word rarely appears in his thesis without inverted commas around it. Stendhal and Tolstoy were concerned to convey the truth of war and that has remained the goal of all serious artists. The poets and novelists of the First World War were confronted by a new phenomenon—total war. They strove to find a valid literary means of depicting it and capturing the experience of the soldiers who went through it. Shea is repelled by their honesty. He does not, as one might expect in an academic thesis, bring evidence to bear against the accounts of war that he dislikes so intensely. He simply denies their veracity.

He writes that an account of a massacre of German prisoners of war in Barbusse's later novel *L'Enchaînements* "can be dismissed as untrue, pending the confirmation of proven historical fact. Yet even if it were true, and we must not allow our knowledge of the barbarities of the Second World War to obscure our understanding of the First, such an example would still run the risk of claiming generality for what must have been a unique, extremely exceptional occurrence."

Here we can already recognise the Jamie Shea of NATO press conferences who one day denies that a NATO bomb has killed civilians, the next says it was a rare mistake and the next justifies it. Pilate-like he asks, "What is truth?" and washes his hands in public when NATO bombs hit hospitals, trains and refugee columns.

At their best the writers of the First World War produced works that have a lasting artistic significance. One cannot read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the war poetry of Wilfred Owen or Barbusse's *Under Fire* without being moved. Shea cannot find any works of similar literary worth that praise or glorify the war. He is obliged to turn for support to the work of literary critic Jean Norton Cru who, in his book *Temoins*, published in 1929, criticised accounts of front-line warfare such as that of Barbusse, claiming that they were not written from experience. In passing it should be noted that Barbusse experienced seven months of heavy fighting in Artois and Picardy, during which he was mentioned in despatches. When his health broke down he remained with his unit as a stretcher bearer, which was in many ways even more dangerous than the role of a front-line soldier. He was hospitalised and returned to the front three times before being invalided out in 1917. *Under Fire* was written

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both in the trenches and while he was in hospital. Shea does not mention any of this in his thesis.

Cru divides the First World War writers into categories according to how he rates them as eyewitnesses. His A-list does not include any notable authors. But Shea relies on him to condemn *Under Fire* as "Macabre literature, but literature which is empty of thought and without the least basis in reality." ("Littérature macabre, mais littérature pensée à vide, sans le moindre fondement du réel.")

Using Norton Cru's book had the added advantage for Shea that it was virtually unobtainable in British university libraries at the time, making it very difficult to check just how much of Shea's supposedly original work had been lifted from Cru. It is one of only two authorities cited by Shea as a reference. This is a remarkably thin bibliography for a PhD thesis by normal academic standards. Shea's enthusiasm for mass slaughter and his antipathy towards the opponents of war clearly must have won an appreciative hearing in the highest academic circles.

The most significant of Shea's borrowings from Cru is the simplistic notion that an eyewitness account is the only valid one in literature and that the more experience a writer had of the front the better he would understand the nature of the war. This is laughably crude. Ever since Stendhal, writers have known that the eyewitness who participated in the events was the least able to understand the course of an individual battle let alone the entire war. The understanding of a battle or a war can only come from synthesising many sources of information. For a novelist there is always a conflict, which must be resolved fruitfully if the book is to succeed, between this wider knowledge and portraying in a truthful manner the experience of participants, which is always fragmentary.

Shea criticises First World War writers for being ideologically motivated because they attempt to set their personal experience of battle within the context of a meaningful analysis of the war. Yet he makes no attempt to analyse what ideological currents influenced French writers in 1914. He merely condemns them for not reporting the bare facts of their front-line experience. Had they done so, what they wrote would certainly not have been literature, nor would it have been true, since the truth of war consists of more than an account of the day-to-day experience of combat.

The most notable omission from Shea's thesis is any reference to the Dreyfus case, which was still the great issue overshadowing French literature on the outbreak of World War One. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused of selling secrets to the Germans in 1895 and condemned to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. At a time when anti-Semitism was being cultivated by the far-right monarchist and clerical parties, Dreyfus became a scapegoat for the failure of the military because he was of Jewish origin. When evidence of his innocence emerged the military suppressed it and protected the real culprit. The author Emile Zola spoke out in Dreyfus's defence. In an open letter to the president, Zola accused leading generals and the war office of having knowingly kept an innocent man in prison. He was charged with libel and had to flee the country. Dreyfus was not finally exonerated until 1906.

The Dreyfus case divided French society and French literature. Some writers like Anatole France, who had always stood aloof from politics, aligned themselves with Zola. At Zola's funeral France described Zola's stand as "a moment in the conscience of mankind". Marcel Proust was among those who circulated the petition of the intellectuals in support of Dreyfus the day after Zola's open letter appeared. Dreyfus's supporters recognised that the persecution and scapegoating of a man because of his religious background was a challenge to the principles on which the first French republic had been founded. The French revolution of 1789 had established that any one could be a citizen of France, whatever his ethnic origin or religion, provided he accepted the constitution. Other literary figures like the novelist Maurice Barrès and Leon Daudet were violently opposed to Dreyfus being freed. For Barrès the fate of an innocent individual was of far less importance than the reputation and prestige of France's generals.

French literature of the twentieth century is impossible to understand without reference to this background. Although Shea's thesis deals with the years between 1914 and 1920, the formative experiences of the majority of men who fought on the front and wrote about it were in the years when the Dreyfus affair was at its height. From 1914 they had a personal taste of the ineptitude and hardened class hatred of generals from the same military elite that had sentenced Dreyfus. More than one in four French men between the ages of 20 and 30 died in the First World War.

The Dreyfus case is part of the truth of the First World War and so is socialism. In Barbusse's *Under Fire,* a soldier says, 'there is one figure that has risen above the war and will blaze with the beauty and strength of his courage ...Liebknecht!'

Karl Liebknecht was a leader of the Marxist Social Democratic Party in Germany. He refused to vote for war credits in parliament and was imprisoned for speaking out against the war. He was among a minority of Social Democrats, among them Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, who maintained a principled opposition to the war.

For Shea all opposition or criticism of the First World War is sentimental pacifism. He takes no account of the range of opposition that existed and is expressed in literature. In *Under Fire* Barbusse gives a much more objective picture. He does not attempt to make every soldier speak like a Marxist. His soldiers are a realistic collection of men who express varying views. But to imagine that Liebknecht's stand had no influence on French soldiers would be entirely unrealistic.

Even if Shea were so steeped in philistinism that he could not deal with subtleties of literature it would have been a simple matter to compare the literary accounts of the First World War with those of historians. No historians are cited in Shea's thesis. The reason is not hard to find. They generally confirm the picture of senseless slaughter that is conveyed by the novels and poetry of the period.

One historian has written of the First World War, "The periodic attempts to achieve a breakthrough in the land war merely confirmed the futility of hurling unarmoured human flesh against the devastating firepower of the machine gun and heavy artillery. The casualty figures of the abortive offensives reached almost suicidal proportions: in the battle of the Somme from July 1 to November 18, 1916, the Germans and British lost 400,000 each and the French 200,000. The reward for the combined Anglo-French casualties of over 600,000 was a maximum advance of about seven miles. In the same year the Germans conducted a ten month siege of the French fortress of Verdun at a cost of 336,000 men while the French army's successful defence was paid for with 350,000 lives. At Passchendaele in 1917 over 370,000 British soldiers perished in order to gain forty-five square miles of mud and shell holes."*

Under Fire describes in terms of the experiences of one small group of men this futile slaughter over tiny strips of land. Barbusse writes of individual deaths, "Little Godefroy—did you know him?—middle of his body blown away. He was emptied of blood on the spot in an instant, like a bucket kicked over", of "woods sliced down like corn-fields" at Verdun, of dead "heaped up like a wood-pile". An historian must present the bald casualty figures. In its different way each approach is just as shocking and just as true.

Reading through Jamie Shea's thesis is a sobering experience. It is always tempting to believe that no educated person could doubt the horrors of war in the twentieth century. It is the leitmotif of our age, one which is founded on experience, borne out by historical research and given profound literary expression by talented artists. But here we find a student exploring how the truth of war can be concealed. His academic efforts ensured him a job with NATO, where he could put the theory that truth is only another form of propaganda into practice. His thesis shows that Dr. Shea is a war propagandist by vocation as well as occupation.

* William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth Century World: An International*

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History, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 56

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