

# The Centenary of the First World War:

## An unpopular view<sup>1</sup>

Gary Sheffield

We are delighted to have an original article by Gary Sheffield in this edition of *The Historian*.

Gary Sheffield is Professor of War Studies, University of Wolverhampton. He is a specialist on Britain at war 1914-45 and is one of Britain's foremost historians on the First World War. He has previously taught at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and Birmingham University. Many of his articles and books are used by A-level Students and undergraduates as set texts for learning about and understanding the popular arguments of the First World War in particular around leadership, command and the role of Douglas Haig.

At the start of 2014 he was engaged in the debate around the teaching of the First World War in schools. He has also publicly disagreed with other prominent historians on whether Britain was right to enter into the war. Over the next four and a half years Professor Sheffield will be one of the historians whose knowledge and sound scholarship of the First World War will be a guide for negotiating some of the debates that will be raised by the centenary.

I have recently returned from leading a party to the Western Front battlefields of the First World War. In these parts of France and Belgium, it is impossible to avoid the large number of 'silent cities', as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries have been called. All are beautifully maintained, somehow always succeeding in being oases of calm no matter where



they are to be found. They contain row upon row of white headstones, each inscribed with a name, a religious symbol, usually a cross, a regimental badge, and often a personal inscription placed by a grieving family – all except the 'unknowns'. It was Rudyard Kipling who suggested 'the haunting formula that in its variations can be found on 180,000 headstones, "A Soldier of the Great War Known Unto God"<sup>2</sup>. The fact that I have lost count of the number of times I have visited such cemeteries does not make each individual experience any less moving. Overwhelmingly, these are the graves of young men, and I sometimes find the heart-breaking personal messages too much to bear. It isn't the grand, 'he died for King and Country' inscriptions that move me, but the simple ones – 'Husband to ----, father of----', or 'A much loved son'. As

German infantry cross the Place Charles Rogier in Brussels as civilians look on following the invasion of Belgium in August 1914.

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the father of a son who, had been alive a century ago would have been of precisely the right age to join the army and go off to war, sometimes I find visiting war cemeteries almost unbearably poignant. It certainly forces one to ask the simple question whether fighting the war was worthwhile.

In this year of the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, reading newspapers, watching TV programmes, and listening to or reading some novelists and some historians it would be easy to assume that the answer to this question is a straightforward 'no'. For many years now, the popular image of the First World War in the UK has been of a pointless and futile

**THE  
KAISER'S INSULT**

On August 19th, 1914, the Kaiser issued the following Order to his Army:

**"It is my Royal and Imperial Command that you concentrate your energies, for the immediate present, upon one single purpose, and that is that you address all your skill and all the valour of my soldiers to exterminate first the treacherous English and walk over General French's contemptible little Army."**

Fling the Kaiser's insult back in his teeth by making the "little" Army BIGGER—you can't make it BRAVER.

**ENLIST NOW**

**WHO** made these little Islands the centre of the greatest and most powerful Empire the world has ever seen? *Our Forefathers*

**WHO** ruled this Empire with such wisdom and sympathy that every part of it—of whatever race or origin—has rallied to it in its hour of need? *Our Fathers*


**WHO** will stand up to preserve this great and glorious heritage? *We will*

**WHO** will remember us with pride and exultation and thankfulness if we do our duty to-day? *Our Children*

JUSTIFY THE FAITH OF YOUR FATHERS,  
AND EARN THE GRATITUDE OF YOUR  
CHILDREN

**ENLIST TO-DAY!**

**YOUR COUNTRY'S CALL**



Isn't this worth fighting for?

**ENLIST NOW**

conflict, and British generals were little better than murderers of their own soldiers, forcing them to mount hopeless, suicidal assaults. This view was encapsulated in the 1989 BBC comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth*, to such an extent that the name 'Blackadder' has become shorthand for this perspective on Britain's Great War. So deep-seated is this view that to put forward a contrary argument, as I have frequently discovered in a three-decade academic career, is to encounter resistance, anger, and outright hostility that often manifests itself in personal abuse. So I have chosen my title carefully: the view I put forward here is undoubtedly unpopular with many people. My research and reading of the scholarly literature has led me to believe that received wisdom is wrong. The First World War was, for the UK, a just war that was forced upon it by the aggression of a brutal, militarist, expansionist state bent on achieving hegemony by military conquest. The vast majority of the British people understood what was at stake and supported the war.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the place to make these arguments in any detail.<sup>4</sup> Having said that, it is worth mentioning that the debate over the origins of the war has once again become controversial, with Christopher Clark's influential book *The Sleepwalkers* explicitly arguing that it is wrong to attempt to assign blame to individual powers for the outbreak of the war.<sup>5</sup> This view has aroused considerable opposition among scholarly historians, and the mainstream position, which I share, remains that the leaders of Germany and Austria-Hungary bear the vast bulk of responsibility for unleashing war in the summer of 1914.

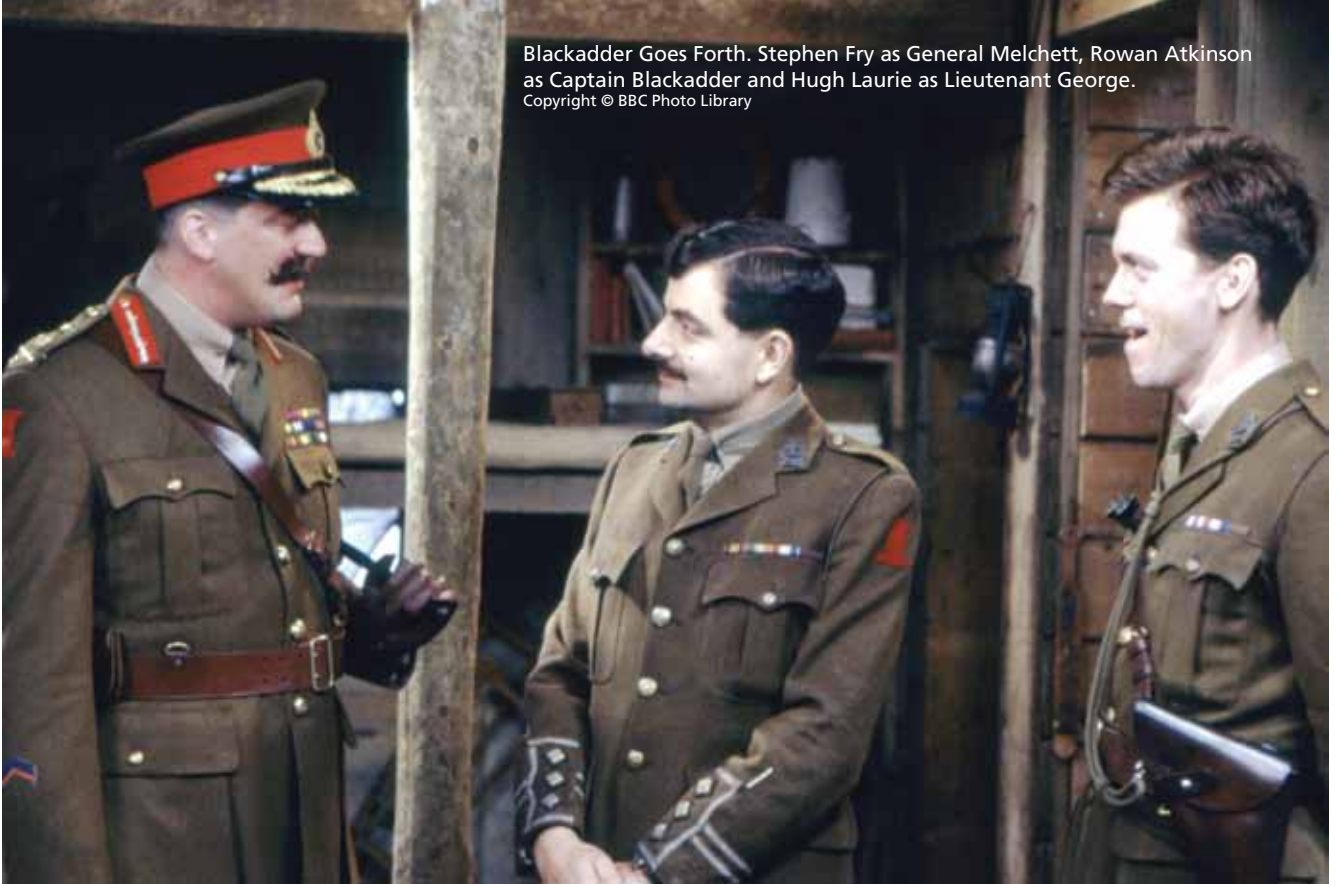
Another factor to bear in mind is that anyone who is tempted to dismiss the First World War as 'futile' because of its origins should look at what happened when the war got under way. Although Clark states 'none of the prizes for which the politicians of 1914 contended was worth the cataclysm that followed',<sup>6</sup> Germany's attempt to achieve hegemony was a direct and grave threat to British security at the national level. Individuals also felt threatened. Adrian Gregory has pointed out that even the poor had something to defend, 'a way of life which was felt to have been an improvement on what had gone before' (working-class standards of living had improved significantly over the previous few decades).<sup>7</sup> The 250,000 Belgian refugees who arrived in Britain – the largest such influx in British history – were a constant reminder of what might happen if Germany won the war. In August to October 1914

5,521 Belgian and 906 French civilians were murdered by the German army, a deliberate use of terror to cow the population of the invaded countries. As two modern French historians have commented, French and Belgian citizens in occupied territories were subjected to 'a genuine reign of terror'.<sup>8</sup> In March 1918, when Germany appeared to be on the point of defeating the British and French armies, the French Ministry of the Interior reported that 'the labouring and thinking mass... understands clearly that a peace without victory would be for France an irreparable disaster'.<sup>9</sup> British sentiments were identical. Timing was important. German military success on the Western Front occurred just a few weeks after the punitive Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was imposed by victorious Germany on vanquished Bolshevik Russia. As ghastly as the war was, a German victory was regarded as being worse than continuing the fight.

Today, the gravity of the threat faced by Britain during the First World War tends to be forgotten, or dismissed. Amazingly, a century on from its outbreak, it can still seriously be contended that the First World War was futile. The meaning of



Belgian refugees entering Holland, autumn 1914  
© IWM (HU 52449)



the war, or whether it had any meaning at all, is still being bitterly contested. In January 2014 Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, intervened in this debate by weighing in against the 'Blackadder' view of the war. In the right-wing newspaper the *Daily Mail*, he criticised 'Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths by attacking Britain's role in the conflict'.<sup>10</sup> Gove got the history broadly right, but by politicising the debate in this way he did the cause of understanding the First World War a distinct disservice. He was also factually inaccurate. Historians are not divided in their views on 1914-18 along ideological lines. I was one of the historians set up by Michael Gove in opposition to the likes of Professor Sir Richard Evans, whose views on the Great War, and politics, he dislikes. My politics, however, lay on the Left, not Right.<sup>11</sup>

It is nothing new to suggest that poets and novelists have been more influential in shaping popular views of the First World War than historians. The children's writer Michael Morpurgo is a recent case in point. The author of *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful*, both of which have been turned into popular films, Morpurgo's work will have far greater influence on non-specialists' perceptions of the Great War than anything I am likely to write. I am not for one moment denying his right to put forward his perspective, or the right of authors to spin imaginative fiction out of real-life events. However I look at his work from the perspective of a historian who works from a basis of fact, not fiction. Take something Morpurgo

British soldiers eating hot rations in the Ancre Valley during the Battle of the Somme, October 1916.  
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wrote in *Private Peaceful*. Denouncing the British Army's disciplinary regime, he attacked the execution of two soldiers 'for simply falling asleep at their posts'.<sup>12</sup> To put it no more strongly, this comment displays a lack of understanding of the realities of trench warfare. For a man to fall asleep at his post was not a trivial matter. It was a very serious offence which could have endangered the lives of his comrades: a sleeping sentry could allow an enemy raiding party into their trenches, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

In fact, only two men were executed for sleeping at their posts. They were Private Thomas Downing and Private Robert Burton, both of 6th Somerset Light Infantry, who were shot in

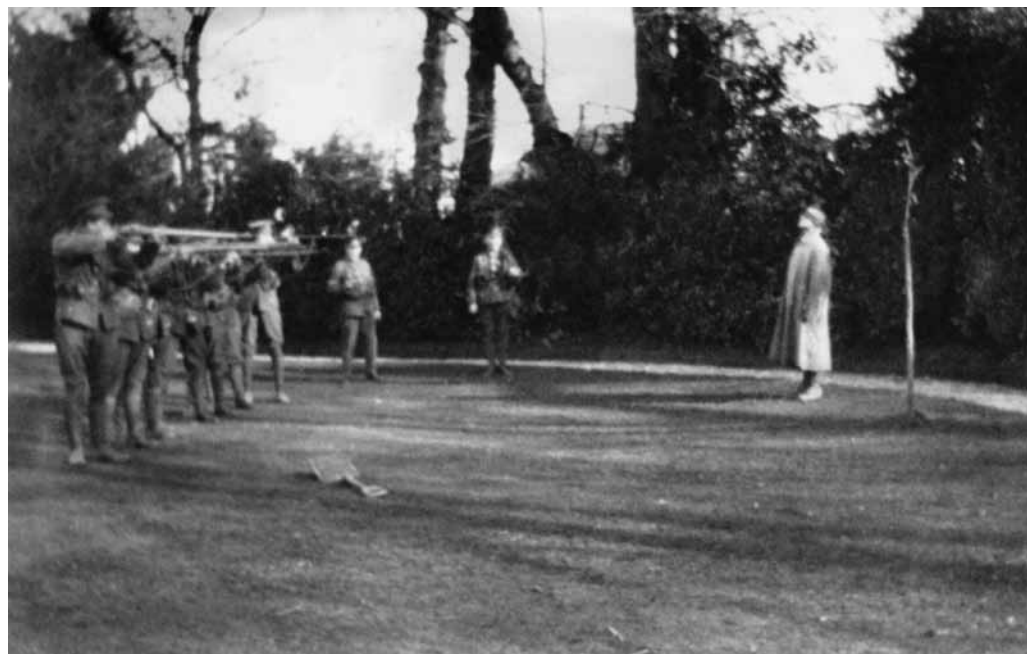
Mesopotamia in February 1917. It is clear that these men were executed *pour encourager les autres*. Lieutenant-General Marshall wrote of Burton: the 'actual fact... [he was found] sitting down shews [sic] such a want of appreciation of his duties as a sentry, *responsible for the lives of his comrades* [emphasis added]'; that the sentence should be carried out. Historians Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson have commented that Marshall was being over-zealous.<sup>13</sup> In fact, a common practice in the trenches was for sympathetic officers to deliberately wake up dozing sentries.<sup>14</sup> What is so often missing from fictional accounts of the First World War, and much popular history, is that executions in the British

army were rare events. They tended to be used as an extreme method of maintaining discipline, or graphically demonstrating to the mass of soldiers the possible penalties. Out of the 5 million plus men who served in the army in 1914-18, only around 350 were executed. Around 90 per cent of men sentenced to death were not actually executed, their sentences being commuted. This was a 'managed figure', it has been argued, the military authorities believing it would deter malefactors 'without appearing excessively harsh'.<sup>15</sup>

By modern-day standards, the fact that some men who were executed were suffering from psychiatric wounds ('shell-shock', in the parlance of 1914-18) is shocking, as is the rudimentary and unfair nature of some of the courts martial. Yet we need to have a sense of historical perspective. The army of the First World War needs to be judged by the standards of the age, not of our own time. We can deplore the way soldiers were treated, but it is profoundly ahistorical to apply twenty-first century mores and sensibilities to individuals and organisations which were the products of a very different society, a century ago. The fact that the First World War is – just – within living memory can blind people to that simple fact.

The centenary of the First World War, and the sheer volume of coverage it is being given in the media has led a number of public figures whose credentials for pontificating on the Great War are not readily apparent to do just that. In May 2013, a letter from a group of actors, musicians, poets and politicians was published in the *Guardian*, a liberal-left British newspaper. It ran on predictable lines, and in some circles became known as the 'Luvvies' letter'.<sup>16</sup> Cultural figures setting themselves up on experts on the history of the First World War have brought about criticism from historians and other knowledgeable commemorators.

Michael Morpurgo has gone on record that he opposes celebration of the First World War, particularly any events around the centenary of the outbreak (in August 1914) that engender any 'sense of national pride – flag-waving'. In some ways, I have sympathy with his position. The outbreak of war is certainly nothing to celebrate, and nationalism in any form I find unhealthy. But to regard the First World War as, in Morpurgo's words, simply as 'a holocaust of a war in which 10 million people died' is to ignore the vital issues of why Britain went to war, and why the British people, with remarkably little dissent or coercion, stuck at it until victory was



achieved. It also disregards the opinions of men who fought in the war. Much recent research has demonstrated that the idea of widespread disillusionment and pacifism among former soldiers is a myth.<sup>17</sup> Morpurgo's view that it would be appropriate to wear white poppies alongside red ones prompted one tweet that declared: 'My granddad (R[oyal] A[rtilery] 1914-18) would have kicked his arse'.<sup>18</sup> The evidence suggests that this former soldier would not have been alone in being angered by and rejecting Morpurgo's viewpoint.

To differentiate between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' involves semantics that I do not propose to explore here, but I see no contradiction in opposition to the former and celebrating, in a non-

triumphalist way, the British national achievement in playing a leading role in defeating Imperial Germany's bid for hegemony in 1914-18. After all, celebrating the UK's role in defeating Nazi Germany is uncontroversial, as we saw during the 70th anniversary commemorations of D-Day which took place in June 2014. Because we tend to see 1914-18 through the distorting mirror of 1939-45, the gravity of threat posed by the Kaiser's Germany to Britain has been almost entirely forgotten. If it is right to celebrate victory in the Second World War, it is also right to celebrate victory in the First. Bizarrely, when the Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced in 2012 the events that the UK Government had chosen formally

Battle of Albert. British soldiers with wounded German prisoners at La Boisselle, 3 July 1916.  
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to commemorate, the list included such defeats as the First Day on the Somme but ignored the great Allied victories of 1918 which ended the war. As Professor Peter Simkins has observed, such historical illiteracy is akin to commemorating the Second World War by marking Dunkirk and the fall of Singapore but not D-Day.<sup>19</sup>

To return to where I began: only a fool would deny the sheer horror and waste of the First World War. I defy anyone to visit a war cemetery on the Western Front, read the ages on the headstones and the messages from grieving families, and remain unmoved. Our horror and revulsion at mass death should not be allowed to obscure the true meaning of the war. That Britain and her allies won the First World War, and not Germany, is a fact of the utmost significance. The world that emerged from the First World War was imperfect. A world in which Europe was dominated by a victorious German empire that stretched from the Channel to the Ukraine in which liberal democracy had been extinguished would have been far worse. Unpopular as it undoubtedly is to say so, between 1914 and 1918 Britain fought a defensive, just war.<sup>20</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> This article is based on is based on the keynote lecture given at the 'Writing the First World War' conference held at the British Library on 14 April 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> David Crane, *Empires of the Dead* (London: William Collins, 2014), pp.175.
- <sup>3</sup> An equally unpopular view is that, far from it being composed solely of murderously incompetent donkeys, the British military leadership undoubtedly made mistakes which had bloody consequences, but grappled successfully, under conditions of appalling difficulty, with unprecedented changes in warfare. By 1918 the British army was a highly skilled instrument of war which took the lead in defeating the German army in open battle in the greatest series of battles in British history. There is a large literature on this subject. See e.g. Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: the First World War – myths and realities* (London: Headline, 2001; revised e-book edition, Endeavour, forthcoming in 2014); Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: the British Third Army and the defeat of Germany in 1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> For this argument, see Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2013 [2012]), p.560.
- <sup>6</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p.561.
- <sup>7</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.280.
- <sup>8</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: understanding the Great War* (London: Profile, 2002), pp.57–58.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.300–1.
- <sup>10</sup> [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html)
- <sup>11</sup> See Gary Sheffield, 'Dealing with the "Blackadder" view of the First World

War: the need for an inclusive bi-partisan centenary', [www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C52D3C5B606225/#.U4SvffldU04](http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C52D3C5B606225/#.U4SvffldU04)

- <sup>12</sup> [www.privatepeaceful.net/#ifinding-private-peaceful/crg9](http://www.privatepeaceful.net/#ifinding-private-peaceful/crg9)
- <sup>13</sup> Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British military executions in the Great War* (London: Cassell, 2001) p.138.
- <sup>14</sup> G.D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: officer-man relations, morale and discipline in the British Army in the era of the First World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) p.88.
- <sup>15</sup> Gerard Christopher Oram, *Military Executions During World War I* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.9.
- <sup>16</sup> *Guardian*, 21 May 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> See for example Dan Todman, *The First World War: myth and memory* (London: Hambledon & London, 2005).
- <sup>18</sup> @litagentdrury, tweet, 2 Apr. 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> [www.westernfrontassociation.com/news/newsflash.html?start=65](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/news/newsflash.html?start=65)
- <sup>20</sup> For this argument, made by a prominent academic theologian, see Nigel Biggar, 'Was Britain Right to Go to War in 1914?' *Standpoint*, Sept. 2013, <http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/5143>

Professor Gary Sheffield holds the Chair of War Studies at the University of Wolverhampton. His book *A Short History of the First World War* is to be published by Oneworld in September 2014.

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A German Infantry Division which had fought on the Eastern Front marching through the city of Berlin during a parade of front line soldiers to mark their return from the war. The placard shows the battles in which Infantry Regiment 150 had fought during the war. The photo belies the reality of German military defeat on the Western Front © IWM (Q 110891)