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Jay Winter

## **Shell-shock and the Cultural History of the Great War**

The term 'shell-shock' has never before been examined in comparative historical perspective. This is a surprising omission, since the term was invented during the war, and has served as a prism through which much of the cultural history of the 1914–18 war has been viewed.

'Shell-shock' is an essential element in representations of war developed while the conflict was going on. The term, among many others, informed a language which contemporaries used to frame our sense of the war's scale, its character, its haunting legacy. Cultural history, in one sense, is the study of narratives of meaning; any cultural history of the 1914–18 war must evaluate and locate in context the various narratives, including 'shell-shock', relating to psychological injury and traumatic remembrance during and after the conflict.

'Shell-shock' was a term of mediation, but one with a quicksilver and shifting character. It stood between soldiers who saw combat and physicians behind the lines who rarely did, between pensioners and medical boards, between veterans and families often unable to comprehend the nature of the injuries that men bore with them in later years.

The following articles examine this complex phenomenon in two ways. The first is by locating it within medical discourse and medical practice. The crucial question is how did physicians, physiologists, neurologists and others come to an understanding of psychological breakdown during the first world war? How much did professional discourse determine diagnostic practice and prejudice?

This aspect of our enquiry is linked to a second interrogation, which explores the way the term 'shell-shock', and all it conveyed, managed to carry with it a specific set of attributes describing not a physical injury, but a new kind of war. My claim is that 'shell-shock' — in some places and not in others, and only under certain circumstances — turned from a diagnosis into a metaphor.

'Shell-shock' was a term which took on a notation which moved from the medical to the metaphysical. In one set of contexts, the term had a very specific location, documented in medical files, in asylum records and by pension boards. But it also had another life, one which, in its ambiguous quality, has received less attention in a comparative context. My central argument is that the term 'shell-shock' was a specifically Anglo-Saxon representation not solely of damaged soldiers, but more generally of central facets of the war itself. To compare the different terms used in different languages, developed both during

and after the war to diagnose and describe psychological disabilities among soldiers, is to disclose some striking variations. Only by making such comparisons can we fully appreciate the richness of different national traditions and perceptions within the overall cultural history of the Great War.

I want, therefore, to suggest that the term 'shell-shock' has been central to some representations of the Great War, and emphatically not to others. One objective of these articles is to find out why this is so. In the English-speaking world, the term 'shell-shock' imaginatively configured a particular question, one related to how differences in degree — the size of the war, its scope, its scale, its repercussions — became differences in kind. 'Shell-shock' thereby in some places became a metaphor for the nature of industrialized warfare, a term which suggests the corrosive force of the 1914–18 conflict *tout court*, and in peculiarly compelling ways. Why did this linguistic form, this medical metaphor, take on this resonance only in parts of the world disfigured by the war?

In this comparative project, we must at all times examine and respect national differences. 'Shell-shock' as metaphor has a set of meanings in English which may simply not be translatable. Perhaps this is one area in which, as Salman Rushdie has it, a culture is defined by its untranslatable words. The precise term does not exist in the same form in French or German. Why this is so, is another question I wish to examine.

As an initial hypothesis, the following argument may serve as a point of departure for the broader comparative history that has yet to be written. I want to suggest that the relative *insignificance* of veterans' movements in British political history may help to account for the greater *significance* of 'shell-shock' as metaphor in narratives of the war experience.

It is a commonplace that British veterans' movements played no significant role in interwar political life. Some elements carried on, and tried to perpetuate in politics the 'soldierly spirit', as Wilfred Owen ironically put it. But the political space at local and national level, occupied by *anciens combattants* in France and Germany, did not exist in Britain.

While the political meaning of military service became a dominant motif in interwar political discourse in France and Germany, in Britain, the veterans' movements faded away at national level. To be sure, many ex-soldiers highlighted how deep was the imprint on their lives of their time in uniform. Harold Macmillan, Anthony Eden and Clement Attlee reminisced about the Great War at the drop of a hat. But they did so as individuals, not as part of a veterans' movement. The presence of old soldiers at the local level was more complex, but it still had few of the features of the world of sociability inhabited by their German and French counterparts.

As Antoine Prost has shown, on the Continent, in their organizational life, these men were living out the convictions forged before 1914 and deepened during the war itself. Here, too, the British case displays continuities. There

were deep similarities between the language and comportment of the British Legion and pre-1914 friendly societies. Both manifested the generosity of spirit of the Protestant voluntary tradition. When others tried a different kind of mobilization, more Continental in character, as in Mosley's New Party and his British Union of Fascists, with its uniforms, parades and salutes, it found no purchase among veterans, and was quickly consigned to the political oblivion it deserved.

One hypothesis to test is, therefore, that 'shell-shock' is a term which helped people to conjure up the long-term effects of war service in a political culture unprepared to provide a special place for ex-soldiers and sailors. Everyone knew that the war was traumatic; the question is, what was the appropriate language in which to express that fact? In Britain a political discourse was unavailable for the expression of the soldiers' point of view about the damage the war had caused to many of the men in uniform, whether or not they were physically disabled. The term 'shell-shock' denoted a violent physical injury, albeit of a special kind. That injury was validated by the term, enabling many people and their families to bypass the stigma associated with terms like 'hysteria' or 'neurasthenia' connoting a condition arising out of psychological vulnerability. 'Shell-shock' was a vehicle at one and the same time of consolation and legitimization.

And those suffering from 'shell-shock' needed all the help they could get. Time and again government actuaries, civil servants and ministers applied as narrow as possible an interpretation of what constituted a war-related injury. In Britain, the responsibility of establishing that a disability was war-related rested with the soldier; in France, the burden fell on the state to prove that the injury was *not* war-related. If ex-soldiers and their families in Britain had a grievance, it was hard to know where they could turn. Their position within postwar British society was by and large non-political.

This powerful residue of early traditions in British history — in which social values derived from participation in the associative life of civil society and not primarily from dialogue with the state — must be related to the tardiness of universal suffrage, only achieved in 1929. The peculiarities of the British are also to be seen in the relatively low status of the profession of arms, tolerated, and occasionally honoured, so long as it resided primarily in naval power. Popular opinion located the navy and its weapons far away from mainland Britain. The nastiness of the military was, of course, not something that needed emphasis to anyone with Irish connections. The ugly civil war between 1918 and 1921, waged by irregulars on both sides who had fought in the British army during the war, further distanced military virtues from civic values in Britain. These special features of British historical tradition may help to account for the evolution of different linguistic forms in which a sense of the traumatic nature of the war was expressed.

And what a successful linguistic form it is. 'Shell-shock' may describe a kind of English genius of linguistic compression, in which a host of allusions are fused in two simple vertical syllables. Compare the alternatives: *Kriegs-*

*hysterie, choc commotionnel, choc traumatique, hystérie de guerre.* None carries the dramatic, alliterative, time-specific, yet universal echoes of 'shell-shock'. I wonder how many other such additions to our vernacular vocabulary have arisen from an article published (by Myers in 1915) in *The Lancet*? Here again, medical discourse and cultural discourse, at least in Britain, form one continuum on account of the war.

Outside the political arena and the medical world, what terms and images informed the British discourse of the trauma of the war? One way to understand the significance of the discourse of shell-shock is to identify its socially-ascribed class character.

Many accounts attest to the variation in the incidence of paralysis among enlisted men and neurasthenia — or what we might describe as 'nervous breakdown' or 'combat fatigue', to use the second world war notation — among their officers. This distinction is ascriptive. But it has been used time and again to describe a real difference in reactions to the terrifying conditions of combat.

I wonder if this social distinction in symptoms of psychological stress is present in different armies? If it is not, then this argument follows. One way of understanding the significance of shell-shock within the British vocabulary of the war is to see it as the language of the officer corps, the 'Lost Generation' whose casualty rates were well above those of the men they led. 'Shell-shock' is therefore a code to describe the shock of the war to the ruling élite, whose sons and apprentices, being groomed for power, were slaughtered in France and Flanders.

This is not the place to rehearse the evidence supporting the view that in Britain the 'Lost Generation' was a palpable social phenomenon. There was a social structure of casualties such that the higher up a man was in the social structure, the greater were his chances of becoming a casualty of war. The notion of a 'Lost Generation' was therefore a demographic reality which expanded to provide a symbol to social élites of the effect of the war on both their own social formation and British society as a whole, which many of them took to be interchangeable.

Whatever their perceptions, though, it is true enough that in a host of ways Britain has never recovered from the shock of the 1914–18 war. The war poets and novelists who wrote of 'shell-shock' provided a poetic way of making that point. It is a point that has been located imaginatively in one section of British society — the middle and upper classes who provided the men of the officer corps who manifested 'shell-shock' and wrote about it in enduring prose and poetry.

Those works of literary men like Owen and Sassoon, of the poet/musician Ivor Gurney, have lasted. They are part of the history of shell-shock because they have told later generations what it was. Individual memories fade away, but cultural representations endure. But there were others who suffered, to

whose voices we must also attend. Fortunately, British society is made up of many groups beyond the élite. It is necessary to supplement this argument by pointing out how deeply engraved the notion of 'shell-shock' is in non-élite family narratives. Here I do not believe that the British experience is different from that of Continental survivors of the war. Family narratives everywhere made room for the disabled in body and mind.

But such is the stratified nature of British society, and the powerful cultural position of élites, that a language derived from the poetry and memoirs of young officers has come to stand for a much wider phenomenon. It is unclear to what extent non-élite narratives of what Samuel Hynes so eloquently calls 'The Soldiers' Tale' shared a common syntax and grammar with élite narratives. But my hunch is that while class variations exist, national forms of narrative about shell-shock persist. Since 1918, most British men and women have encoded their narratives about psychological trauma among ex-soldiers in a distinctive set of representations, amplified in poetry, prose, plays, and later on film, in school curricula, on radio and television. It is a varied body of images, but within them, the notion of the 'shell-shocked' soldier is iconic.

Relatively recently, and to her credit, the working-class novelist Pat Barker enlarged the *dramatis personae* of shell-shocked soldiers in her *Regeneration* trilogy. She added to the Owens and Sassoons the entirely mythical figure of Billy Prior. True, the 'hero', Rivers, is a Cambridge don, but Prior stands among the rest, an officer, though emphatically not a gentleman. A school-mistress from a poor area in the north-east of England has told a truth we need to bear in mind. Trauma is democratic; it chooses all kinds of people in its crippling passage. The history of shell-shock, properly configured, is not the history of the officer corps, but the history of the war itself.

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