

The three Georges: George Bernard Shaw, George Steer and George Orwell as witnesses to twentieth century war

The well-known English writer Dr Samuel Johnson, compiler of the first English Dictionary, said in the eighteenth century:

In war-time people only want to hear two things: good of themselves and bad of the enemy. And after war, I do not know which is to be feared the more, garrets full of scribblers who have learned to lie, or streets full of soldiers who have learned to rob.

I wish to talk today about three scribblers of the twentieth century who went to war as writers and witnesses. All are British and all happen to share the name George.

The first is **George Bernard Shaw**, the polemical playwright. He was born in Ireland in 1856, the year the Crimean War ended, and died in 1950, the year the Korean War started. The second is **George Lowther Steer**, born in South Africa in 1909, five years before the First World War, died in 1944, during the Second World War. My third is **George Orwell** (whose real name was Eric Blair) born in India in 1903, two years after the Boer War ended, who fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side, and died, like Shaw, in 1950, the year when I was born.

I link their dates to wars because British history has been shaped by war. The global British Empire was expanded and sustained by war. Winston Churchill thought that the story of the human race was war, and that peace only existed in “brief and precarious interludes”. The British are not militaristic, but they are martial. Sad to say, in the entire twentieth century, there was only one year out of the hundred, 1967, when no British soldier died on active service in some part of the world.

I say this in a peace conference in Gernika because, whether we like it or not, the reality is that there is always war somewhere on this planet. There are twenty wars going on elsewhere right now. But the history of war here is not like Britain’s. Here in the Basque country, the great tragedy is the civil war of 1936-39 and the long repression that followed. Spain was neutral both in the Great War of 1914-18, and in the Second World War of 1939-45. But those two World Wars – ten years in total – which killed 60 million people worldwide, marked Britain very deeply. Every village has a war memorial to the fallen. Every year we remember them on 11th November, and we wear a red poppy (so common across France and Flanders) to recall the dead.

In both world wars, German aircraft bombed English cities. The first British civilian ever to be killed by a bomb from the air was Sam Smith of Great Yarmouth who died in January 1915. That was 22 years before Durango and Guernica. In the UK, 1400 civilians were killed by aerial bombing in WW1, and 64,000 in WW2. (We paid back with compound interest, however. In the Second World War, British and American bomber aeroplanes killed over 1 million German and Japanese civilians.) The First World War began in July 1914 in between the Serbians and the Austrians, and then spread to involve the Germans, the Russians, the French, the Belgians, the British, the Turks and the Italians. All of the above brought in their empires and colonies so that more than 40 nations and some 70 million combatants became involved in a world war.

George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw thought the European war in 1914 was quite absurd. One of his earliest articles criticised the Militarists and Junkers on *both* sides, the Entente and the Central Powers. “No doubt”, he wrote in his autumn 1914 pamphlet *Common Sense about the War*, “the heroic remedy for this tragic misunderstanding is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvests in the villages and make a revolution in the towns.” But he realised that this was “not a practicable solution.” Expressing this independent and critical idea, however ironically, did not make Shaw popular. Everybody is supposed to step in line in war-time and become part of the prevailing melodrama and propaganda.

I must say something here about ‘propaganda’. The word does not carry such bad connotations in Catholic countries, from its original use as ‘propagation of the faith’. Propaganda now means advertising, publicity, marketing, persuasion. It means the shaping of opinion. In Protestant countries, however, where people feared Italian intrigue, Popish plots, the Spanish inquisition etc, long before the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century made such use of it, there is a horror of propaganda, and people equate it with lying and dishonesty, the very opposite of truth. This is particularly so with Anglo-Saxon journalists, I find. For my part, I do not always share this belief. We should perhaps purge the word propaganda of purely negative connotations and see it as a branch of rhetoric, or a means of influencing opinion. In this wider sense, all journalism is propagandistic.

Writers and journalists are good at expressing their own opinions, and so they are often useful in shaping the opinions of others, too. In wartime, if writers could not

pick up a gun, they could at least take up a pen. “The pen is mightier than the sword” we are told. George Bernard Shaw was a pugnacious and belligerent writer who spoke his mind. He was critical and sarcastic, and kept a cool head. Being Irish, he was not blinded by British patriotism. People hated him for not being part of the herd. And yet Shaw was not a traitor or on the side of the enemy. He thought it was most important to prevent wars starting, but once it was underway and millions of men were mobilised, he had no doubt at all about what the outcome should be. German Prussianism had to be defeated.

None of the three Georges I am talking about were Pacifists. Shaw always defended the rights of Conscientious Objectors even though he did not agree with their position. Shaw hated war, but he was fascinated by it. “Fascinate” was the word he always used and “fascination” in its old sense means being subjected to hypnotic power or a witchcraft spell. Shaw said that the only thing that could make men unite was the one thing that they all knew to be wrong, and that was war.

In January 1917, at the age of 60, George Bernard Shaw went to the Western Front, the trenches that ran across France, from Belgium to Switzerland, in order to see conditions for himself. Here was the prophet and sage with a long white beard, looking like Don Quixote in khaki uniform, being escorted by a military press-officer who was formerly a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian*. Shaw wore a British “tin-hat”, one of the first Brodie steel helmets against shrapnel. (Typically, Shaw called it “the helmet of Mambrino” [el yelmo de Mambrino, del *Quijote*].) In the front-line, Shaw found plenty of socialists and peace-loving progressives, people who hated the war. But did they fly the white flag, put their hands up and surrender, or allow themselves to be killed when the Germans attacked? Not a bit of it. They fought harder than anyone else, because they knew that the only way to dictate the terms of the peace was not to be conquered. It is fear that makes men fight, Shaw thought, including the fear of what will happen if you lose.

Shaw published three articles about his trip, in March 1917, under the title *Joy-Riding at the Front*. They are propaganda that is well worth reading:

There is at home a childish sort of conceit that imagines it to be possible for a member of a nation to say “I don’t hold with war” or “I don’t hold with [politicians, countries, causes]” or what not, and to refuse to help in the war accordingly. But that does not survive a day at the front. When war overtakes you, you must fight, and fight to win, whether you are the aggressor or the aggrieved, whether you loathe war as the kingdom of hell on earth or regard it as the nursery of all the virtues. It is not that you

must defend yourself or perish; many a man would be too proud to fight on those terms. You must defend your neighbour or betray him: that is what gets you.

George Lowther Steer

“If good men do nothing, evil triumphs.” Solidarity is also the principle that took the journalist George Steer to war, I believe. That and his Oxford University education. Oxford is famously the home of lost causes, and Steer’s Oxford tutor in Greek was a hedonistic libertarian called Maurice Bowra who passionately believed in the rights of small nations to govern themselves. There are literary precedents for this sort of idealism. The great romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, died trying to free Greece from the Ottoman Empire. Steer also admired T.E.Lawrence, trying to free Arabs from Turks in the Great War.

Steer grew up in the 1920s believing that the League of Nations was a force for good. “Collective security”, nations working together in solidarity, was meant to deter aggression and keep the peace in the 1920s and 30s. But it did not stop Japan invading China or Italy invading Abyssinia. Like Shaw, George Steer believed that you should do everything to prevent wars from starting, but once the cause was staked on the sword, you had to go through war resolutely. Steer called war “the foulest of things”, but he too thought, like Shaw, that you could not walk away and leave others to do the dirty work, however filthy and contaminating it might be.

Steer was different from Shaw in that he was not primarily a writer of fictions but a professional journalist who worked for serious newspapers like *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. When he went to Ethiopia in 1935, to Euzkadi in 1937, to Finland in 1940 he identified with the small nation under attack and told their story with sympathy. He wrote with passion, with pity and fury and scorn, about the massacres and the destructiveness he observed. He wrote with admiration of the courage and decency he saw in people’s resistance. This rhetoric, forcefully directed to achieve an emotional reaction, we may also call propaganda.

Some people think that journalism can be and should be “objective”. Speaking as someone who has been a journalist for the past 25 years, I do not believe in “objective” journalism of this kind. We are not scientists looking at ants. People have thoughts and feelings but they also have judgements, based on ethical, moral or aesthetic standards. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), in its list of editorial values, never uses the word “objective”. They say that you should try to be

“impartial” and “fair”, which is not quite the same thing. I quote: “Due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles, nor is it necessarily achieved by a mathematical approach which balances each view by an equal and opposing one.” You are not expected to be neutral in the face of evil. I would add that amid the folly and cruelty of war it is hard to remain “balanced”. Just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there are very few “objective” journalists under fire.

The reporter’s job is to be accurate and truthful and honest about what he or she sees or hears or experiences. The reporter is like a witness in court who has sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth of what he or she knows. The journalist does not have to be an eyewitness of an event, but can play an important role by being among the first persons to arrive in the aftermath and to speak to eyewitnesses or survivors and to take notes, at the time. Those contemporaneous notes or drawings or pictures are incredibly valuable. Things change over time; perspectives shift, people forget. But accurate reporting of news is the first draft of history. George Steer said, in *The Tree of Gernika*, that the reporter is “a historian of every day’s events ... and as a historian must be filled with the most passionate and most critical attachment to the truth, so must the journalist, with the great power that he wields, see that the truth prevails.”

Some people nowadays object strongly to anyone saying “the truth”. There is not one single truth, such relativists say, only many truths, and all of equal value. Others state that truth does not and cannot exist. (Such people are merely saying “do not believe me”, so I never do.) Journalism is always more practical than theoretical and in trying to put together stories about actions and consequences in the real world it is closer to police-work than philosophy. Leaving aside whether the verities are eternal or not, or all viewpoints are covered or not, even post-modernists should concede that some stories are not just more persuasive, but more true than others.

For example, there is a bronze statue of George Steer in this town because he told the truth of what he saw and heard in Gernika on 26th and 27th April 1937. As you know, many official lies were told about the destruction that happened here – stories that Red separatists or “Basque Bolsheviks” put land-mines in the sewers and poured petrol on the buildings and used dynamite to blow up the houses etc, etc. On the other hand, George Steer stated clearly that a fleet of German and Italian aeroplanes had bombed Gernika repeatedly, as indeed they had. Although he was calumniated and

threatened, George Steer's first draft of history has been vindicated by History. Nobody now denies that Gernika was bombed. But this truth was denied, and lied about, for more than forty years.

George Orwell

The third George, George Orwell, is the most famous English writer to attack the big lies and the grand illusions of the 20th century. He was an honest man who was an enemy of Imperialism, Fascism and Communism. Like Shaw, the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984* tried to stay critical, and like Steer, he tried to find out and tell the truth. Orwell is important in the history of this country because he came to fight for the Spanish Republic and was wounded, shot through the throat by a 7mm Spanish Mauser bullet, fired by a Nationalist sniper, on 20 May 1937. He then saw the repression of the POUM in Barcelona by the Stalinists and he later wrote *Homage to Catalonia*. At the end of that book, Orwell called the Civil War "an appalling disaster", but the slaughter and suffering did not induce in him disillusionment and cynicism:

Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings. And I hope the account I have given is not too misleading. I believe that on such an issue as this no one is or can be completely truthful. It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes, and consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan.

George Orwell was finishing *Homage to Catalonia* in January 1938, the same month as he was reviewing George Steer's *The Tree of Gernika* for Time and Tide magazine, together with Arthur Koestler's *Spanish Testament*. That review (reseña) begins "It goes without saying that everyone who writes of the Spanish War writes as a partisan". He also says of Steer that it is "not at all clear what he has seen with his own eyes." Note the same phrases. I believe that Orwell's reading of *The Tree of Gernika* strongly influenced the ending of *Homage to Catalonia*, which is fitting, as they are the two best contemporaneous books by Englishmen about the Spanish Civil War. Consider the famous end of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*:

Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood; the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen – all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of

England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.

“...the roar of bombs...” Orwell got from Steer’s book. Spain was a warning, a wake-up call to the deep, deep sleep of England. Three years later, the very same kinds of bombs that were used here in Gernika were falling on London and other British cities. Buckets of sand stood in the streets ready to smother the same shiny silver incendiaries that fell on Gernika.

Orwell also believes you cannot remain “neutral” and “objective” before the atrocities of war. You will get dragged in. Quoting Nietzsche, he says “he who fights against dragons becomes a dragon himself”. His review of Steer and Koestler ends:

And the horror we feel of these things has led to this conclusion: if someone drops a bomb on your mother, go and drop two bombs on his mother. The only apparent alternatives are to smash dwelling houses to powder, blow out human entrails and burn holes in children with lumps of thermite, or to be enslaved by people who are more ready to do these things than you are yourself; as yet no one has suggested a practicable way out.

The Georges versus The Dragon

In the Second World War, the three Georges were not neutral. George Steer became a soldier and went to help liberate Ethiopia, and as we know died in India fighting the Japanese. George Orwell had a strange dream in 1939. He dreamed that a huge war was coming, and that he would be a patriot in that war, and would defend his country and what he saw as its values. The next day, he read in the papers of the Nazi/Soviet pact, the alliance of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Now his worst nightmare had come true, he turned his pen on the totalitarians like a machine gun.

Ironically, the war brought out the best in Orwell: his integral puritanism, and his intelligent patriotism. (“Patriotism has nothing to do with conservatism” he wrote, while affirming “the spiritual need of patriotism and the military virtues”. These would include courage, discipline, endurance and humour.) Like Shaw in the First World War, Orwell saw quite clearly that the first duty was to win the war against a ruthless enemy. “We cannot win the war without introducing Socialism, nor establish Socialism without winning the war.” Like Shaw, he found that soldiers often had a saner view of war than civilians: that it was a disgusting business, but it was a necessary work that could not be hypocritically left to others. Just like Shaw, Orwell found that non-combatant civilians were far more emotional and felt more hatred than

the fighting soldiers. (Hatred for the enemy if they were patriots, hatred for their own side if they were pacifists. Orwell noted “the one-eyed pacifism that is peculiar to sheltered countries with strong navies”.)

I will end with some thoughts of George Orwell’s from 1944. Orwell was not a sentimentalist, nor was he politically correct. Indeed some of his opinions are brutal in their honesty. When he asks “Why is it worse to kill civilians than soldiers?” (As I Please, 19 May 1944) and “Why is it worse to kill a woman than a man?” (As I Please, 14 July 1944) he does not give the conventional answer. In August 1944, Orwell was writing that there are far worse things you can do than drop bombs on your enemy. “War damages civilisation not by destruction ... nor by slaughter...but by stimulating hatred and dishonesty. By shooting at your enemy you are not in the deepest sense wronging him. But by hating him, by inventing lies about him and bringing children up to believe them... you are striking not at one perishable generation, but at humanity itself.”

So, I suspect that the answer of George Bernard Shaw, George Steer and George Orwell to the conundrum of Samuel Johnson is simple. We should fear the writer who has learned to lie more than the soldier who has learned to rob.

And we should salute the journalists who have been imprisoned or murdered for refusing to lie, and for trying to tell the truth.

Askerrik asko. Thank you very much.

Nicholas Rankin
26, Doyle Gardens
Willesden
London NW10 3DA
England, UK.