

## War, Propaganda and the Intellectual: A Gramscian Approach to Bernard Shaw's "Common Sense About the War" (1914)\*

### Savaş, Propaganda ve Aydın: Bernard Shaw'un "Savaş Hakkında Ortak Akıl"ına Gramscici Bir Yaklaşım

Atalay GÜNDÜZ\*\*

#### Abstract

This essay aims to read Shaw's "Common Sense About the War" (1914) within the context of the British and German intellectual's public declarations on the war. Both British and German governments demanded their intellectuals to defend their war to the public and to the world. Declarations made by significant figures of both nations affirm the narrative told by the political body. This is a Gramscian reading which takes Gramsci's observation on the role of intellectuals: "intellectuals play a major role in the struggle for hegemony". Shaw's "Common Sense About the War" was just that act "in the struggle for hegemony." Challenging the "common sense" views of his times, Shaw attempted to urge the public to be more critical and questioning about their patriotic and ethnocentric positions on most vital issues such as war. In Gramscian terms, he invites the public to use "good sense" rather than the taken for granted "common sense". Shaw uses the phrase "common sense" in his title to invite the public to "common sense" leaving aside their romantic, idealised views on the war and its causes. Despite their ideological differences, British public figures such as Kipling, Bennett, Wells, Christabel Pankhurst and Doyle among others seemed all to be united at that time of war under the banner of patriotism. Shaw's text in this sense contests the hegemonic discourse of the time.

**Keywords:** "Common Sense About the War", Bernard Shaw, First World War, Propaganda, Gramsci

#### Özet

Bu makale Shaw'un "Savaş Hakkında Ortak Akıl" (1914) başlıklı kitapçığını İngiliz ve Alman entelektüellerinin savaş ile ilgili yayınladıkları bildirilerin ışığında okumayı amaçlamaktadır. Hen İngiliz hem de Alman hükümetleri daha savaşın başlangıcında aydınlardan başlattıkları savaşı savunacak bildiriler yayınlamaları talebinde bulundu. Her iki ülkenin de önde gelen yazarları, sanatçıları ve bilimcileri tarafından yayımlanan bu bildirilerin hemen hepsi siyasi yapının anlatsını doğrular ve destekler ve onunla uyumlu nitelikteydi. Bu makale Gramsci'nin entelektüeller üzerine gözlemlerini başlangıç noktası olarak kabul eden Gramscici bir okumadır. Gramsci entelektüellerin rolü üzerine şöyle bir saptamada bulunuyor: "entelektüeller egemenlik mücadelesinde büyük bir rol oynarlar." Bernard Shaw'un "Savaş Hakkında Ortak Akıl"ı da işte bu "hegemonya mücadelesinde" böylesine önemli bir rol oynamayı hedefleyen bir metindir. Döneminin "ortak akıl" sayılan fikirlerini sorgulamaya açan Shaw, savaş gibi en hayati bir konuda yurtsever ve etnik merkezli pozisyonları konusunda, halkı çok daha sorgulayıcı ve eleştirel olmaya davet etmektedir. Gramscici bir anlatımla Shaw halkı pek sorgulanmadan kabul edilen "ortak akıl" ("common sense") yerine "akıselim" ("good sense") kullanmaya davet eder. Shaw "Savaş Hakkında Ortak Akıl" başlıklı eserinde işte bu çok sorgulanmayan ortak akıla müdahale ederek onun sorgulanmasına kapı aralamaya çalışır. İnsanlara savaş ve savaşın başlangıcı hakkındaki romantik, yüceleştirilmiş görüşlerini bir kenara bırakmaları çağrısında bulunur. İdeolojik farklılıklarına rağmen İngiltere'de Kipling, Bennett, Wells, Pankhurst ve Doyle gibi bir çok ünlü siyasetçi, yazar ve aydın yurtseverlik şemsiyesinin altında buluşmuştur. Shaw'un çıkışı bu ortak akla meydan okuyan ve onu tartışmaya açan önemli bir metindir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** "Savaş Hakkında Ortak Akıl", Bernard Shaw, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Gramsci, Propaganda

#### Introduction

The established government has no more right to call itself the State than the smoke of London has to call itself the weather. (Shaw, Fabian Tract 2, 1884)

The eminent Shaw scholar Laurence (1985) states that *Common Sense About the War* (1914) is the most courageous text that Shaw composed in a writing career of more than seventy years. (p. 239) Shaw was almost the Don Quixote fighting against the windmills in his daring and impossible task of challenging the consolidated structure of feeling of his time. With the declaration of the war, the British propaganda machine started to control the press and most of

\* An earlier version of this article was presented at 4th BAKEA International Western Cultural and Literary Studies Symposium October 7-9, 2015.

\*\* Doç. Dr., Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü, atalaygunduz@hotmail.com.

the intellectuals and authors subscribed to the nationalist and patriotic rhetoric without any sign of criticism towards the national conduct. Ponsonby (1928, p. 15) explains the situation with the following words: "Facts must be distorted, relevant circumstances concealed, and a picture presented which by its crude colouring will persuade the ignorant people that their Government is blameless, their cause is righteous, and that the indisputable wickedness of the enemy has been proved beyond question". Any subversive utterance or criticism was due to be interpreted as open treason, collaboration with the major enemy: Germany. As Ponsonby (1928, p. 15) states, people were in such a state of mind that "A moment's reflection would tell any reasonable person that such obvious bias cannot possibly represent the truth. But the moment's reflection is not allowed; lies are circulated with great rapidity. The unthinking mass accept them and by their excitement sway the rest". It was at such a stage that Bernard Shaw aged 58, with a past record of the conquest of the London stage with plays like *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Misalliance* (1910) and *Pygmalion* (1912) and most importantly with an incomparable reputation as a public figure whose name was a household word, published "Common Sense About the War" as supplement to the *New Statesman* on the 14th of November 1914.<sup>1</sup>

What does Shaw argue in the pamphlet? The most significant point for Shaw is the responsibility of the starting of the war. Shaw believes that Germany cannot be the sole responsible party in the war. According to Shaw (1914), there were basically three reasons why Britain was as guilty as Germany in the responsibility of the war. Firstly, the British Junkers were as war lovers as the German ones, if not more, and that unless the British public understands their own part at the start of the war it would be impossible to make a lasting peace. (Shaw, 1914, p. 12-13) Shaw also observes that since 1871, the absolute French defeat to Germany, England was extremely afraid of the German power. Starting with the anonymous publication of the Battle of Dorking (1871), the "invasion literature" had swept the British imagination. For more than forty years the English public was obsessed with a German invasion threat. (Clarke, 1995, p. 1-2) The third point Shaw (1914, p. 14-15) raises is the imperialist ambitions of both nations. Shaw describes the British attitude and likewise the German on the issue crystallized in Kipling's idea of the "White Man's Burden", very problematic as it disastrously romanticizes empire and unable to see the human cost and injustice behind it.

Some of the other points Shaw (1914) criticize are the general British "militarist myopia", the illusion that war can solve the problems between nations (p. 16); British public's "intellectual laziness" which leaves them devoid of self-criticism and always makes them feel that they are absolutely right in all circumstances and that their opponents are always wrong and unjust. (p. 18) According to Shaw this attitude never helps peace and always lead to wars. In "Diplomatic History of the War" Shaw argues that the way things evolved since 1870s the war was inevitable for Europe as all the powers bound themselves with secret agreements and they all had their hidden agendas. (p. 19-20) Shaw also disapproves of the way the British government had given a blank cheque to France which might have given France incentive to start a war with Germany encouraged by the British support. (p. 29) The treatment of the Belgian refugees, how the families of the soldiers were neglected, the support of British

<sup>1</sup> *New Statesman* was founded by Fabian intellectuals Sidney Webb, Beatrice Webb, with support from George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells. 103 years after its foundation it is still "required reading across the political spectrum while being celebrated for the quality, independence and authority of its journalism and ideas" in the words of the journals website. <http://www.newstatesman.com/about-new-statesman> For further information on Shaw's relation to *The New Statesman*, see Holroyd, 1989, p. 318-322 and p. 351-352 particularly at the time of the publication of the pamphlet. Also see Hyams for a detailed history of the first fifty years of the journal.

<sup>2</sup> As Collins (2008), Ponsonby (1928), Welch (2012) and many others reveal with rigorous documentation, who started the war was the most significant issue at the beginning and at the end of the war when sides met to settle the accounts. Collins devotes the first three chapters of his *World War I: Primary Documents on Events from 1914 to 1919* to the issue, discussing it from both sides' perspectives and arguments.

government to the “tyrannical Russian tsar”, the responsibility of the working class, the recruitment system, the liberal hesitation that encouraged the German invasion of Belgium were all among Shaw’s points of discussion and criticism.

### The Gramscian Common Sense

Even the phrasing, particularly the use of one of the most significant Gramscian terms “common sense” in the title invites a Gramscian reading of Shaw’s “Common Sense About the War” (1914). The term “common sense” having such a central position in my reading deserves a closer look. Before proceeding with how Gramsci conceptualizes the term, I would like to dwell on the uses of “common sense” in the Oxford English Dictionary:

1. An ‘internal’ sense which was regarded as the common bond or centre of the five senses, in which the various impressions received were reduced to the unity of a common consciousness. (Within this definition we get sense of direct, objective, unobstructed environment where the agent receives the messages without any exterior intervention.)
2. a. The endowment of natural intelligence possessed by rational beings; ordinary, normal or average understanding; the plain wisdom which is everyone's inheritance. (This is ‘common sense’ at its minimum, without which one is foolish or insane.) †Formerly also in pl., in phr. besides his common senses: out of his senses or wits, ‘beside himself’ .<sup>3</sup>
- b. More emphatically: Good sound practical sense; combined tact and readiness in dealing with the everyday affairs of life; general sagacity.
- c. Ordinary or untutored perception. Obs.
- d. As a quality of things said or done (= ‘something accordant to or approved by common sense’).
3. The general sense, feeling, or judgement of mankind, or of a community.
4. Philos. The faculty of primary truths; ‘the complement of those cognitions or convictions which we receive from nature; which all men therefore possess in common; and by which they test the truth of knowledge, and the morality of actions’ (Hamilton Reid's Wks. II. 756).

In Gramscian terms however “common sense” is basically “the uncritical and largely unconscious way in which a person perceives the World” (Simon, 1991, p. 64). “Common sense” is the taken for granted quality of certain views. This definition is most directly connected to the third definition in the dictionary: “3. The general sense, feeling, or judgement of mankind, or of a community.” When a view becomes “common sense”, it does not exist as a view any more; but it becomes the way the thing is.

Gramsci’s project aspires to detect the resisting areas in people’s “perception of the world” and transform these areas into consciousness and thus gain the consent of the masses for the revolution. Consequently, when one analyses the elements of common sense and traces back from the culture’s taken for granted values to the original sources of his or her beliefs, superstitions, intuitions, or his prejudices, one gains the consciousness or self-awareness:

The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. To criticize one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. (Gramsci, 1991, p. 326)

According to Gramsci, “prejudices of all past historical phases” is a much bigger obstacle before the revolution than the state’s repressive structures (the law courts, the police, the army and prisons) because the masses are usually afraid of a change. Therefore, the first goal that must be achieved is to gain the “moral and intellectual leadership” of the society or to gain the hegemony. In the Gramscian framework, intellectuals play a major role in this struggle for hegemony. Furthermore, “as agents within cultural and social institutions they mediate

---

<sup>3</sup> Within the context of this definition, Shaw’s common sense invites the English speaking world to think out of the influence of the newspapers and the propaganda machine, which blinds the public and provide them with distorted answers.

between the interests of power (the owners and controllers of the means of production) and those social groups who serve the interests of the class in power” (Gramsci, 1991, p. 164).

Within this theoretical framework, Shaw’s “Common Sense About the War” is an attempt to gain “the moral and intellectual leadership” of the society. As Sassoon (2012) notes Gramsci’s use of the “common sense” is quite different from the English usage (p. 273) which has a quite established status crystallized in Thomas Paine’s use of it in the title of his revolutionary work *Common Sense* (1776). Shaw uses the phrase in the way Paine uses it to state a quite obvious case which has been blurred and distracted by politicians and newspapers. Still, I think both Paine and Shaw contest the “common sense” of their era in the way Gramsci uses the term, so they contest the “common sense” views of their times and offer an alternative “common sense” supporting their cases with quite convincing and hard to dispute arguments.

Shaw was not the only one to attempt such an intellectual leadership. In fact, the belligerents were keenly aware of the fact that to win the war and neutral countries to their sides of the story, they wanted to make sure that their intellectuals, artists, scientists, writers and all other public figures declare their solidarity with their countries. Nationalism and patriotism were on the rise in all European countries.

### **The War Craze in Europe**

To investigate what is held as “common sense about the war” and aspects of contestation that challenge these seemingly natural and invisible opinions, let us talk about how the declaration of the war was received in different capitals of the belligerent powers by the general public. Howard (2002) gives a striking description of the mood of the age from various perspectives. He describes how the “outbreak of war was greeted with enthusiasm” in the cities of most of the countries in war. Yet, there were also those who did not participate in that general mood. Howard states that especially in agrarian France the war was greeted with “stoical resignation” since “workers who were called up and had to leave their land to be cultivated by women and children”. On the other hand, in most places people were supportive of their governments without much criticism. Thanks to national educational programmes in the preceding one century or so states had been able to indoctrinate their citizens at an extent without parallel in the history “forming loyal and obedient citizens.” Darwinism was utilized by the nationalist ideologies to claim their national superiorities thus legitimizing the invasion and subjection of different countries and nations. (p. 27-28) Yet the war resulted in loss only but few could anticipate at the beginning.

The First World War or the Great War and its subsequent the second world war changed the way people saw the world. That great confidence in progress through science and reason shattered drastically. Although most people were very romantic about the war at the beginning, they soon realized that the new developments of technology had made the war destructive and mortal in a scale unprecedented in the human history. Darlington who had started his career as drama critic in 1910s observes that:

Although the nation have been warned often enough that Germany would not hesitate to start a war, nobody had really believed it, and soon after the incredible truth had been assimilated there came another equally unlocked for, that this was not a professional soldier’s war of the old romantic pattern, but citizens’ war of a new kind ever even been visualized before, and a utilitarian kind at that. This was something for which the new breed of realist dramatists had been no more prepared than their audiences—except for Bernard Shaw, and he was now talking a brand of detached common sense which sounded dangerously like treason to an overexcited and wholly bewildered public. (qtd. in Luckhurst, 2006, p. 302)

It was hard times for people like Shaw who had not lost their “sanity” with the “war craze”. Howard states that even the intellectuals, who might have been expected to be more critical of such nationalist fervour and the apocalypse ahead, welcomed the war: “Artists,

musicians, academics, and writers vied with each other in offering their services to their governments... In the democracies of Western Europe mass opinion, reinforced by government propaganda, swept along the less enthusiastic..." (Howard, 2002, p. 28) It was at such stormy times that Shaw tried to invite the public to take a more detached and cool headed position and question what they know and how they know it.

### **Rival ideologies: Socialism vs. nationalism**

Capitalism was not the only rival ideology for socialism in the beginning of the twentieth century. Discussing a relatively less well-known Marx text "The List Critique" (1841), Szporluk (1991, p. 5) draws attention to one of the most significant binary oppositions of the nineteenth century politics between socialism and nationalism: "The most urgent and significant item on Marx's political agenda was the call for a revolution of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie." On the other hand, Marx was not the only one with a good idea about how to build a better future for the people. There were rivalling ideologies: "What was he to do when List came along with his absurd assertion that the most important task for the Germans was to unite against England so that their nation might equal and surpass her rival economically, culturally, and politically?"

Just below the larger than life bust of Marx' in the Highgate Cemetery is the most famous Marxist epigram inscribed on his tombstone: "Workers of the world unite"<sup>4</sup>, obviously a call rivalling all the nationalist calls that invite people to unite under the banner of nationhood. In the very beginning of his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson (1983, p. 1-2) suggests that the wars among Marxist regimes such as Cambodia, Vietnam and China in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the Soviet aggressions against Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan reveal that Marxist internationalism was not much heeded by Marxist regimes which seemed to act in their own national interests. Anderson (1983, p. 3) further observes that "the 'end of the era of nationalism'" much prophesied by Marxists is not "remotely in sight"; on the contrary "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time". Yet, when Shaw (1914, p. 2) suggests a "heroic remedy" to stop the war "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", he is offering a Marxist perspective to the war. Anderson (1983) explains why he calls nations "imagined communities" in a much cited passage thus:

...it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (p. 7).

When Shaw makes a connection between the "Junkers" or "militarists" of both Germany and Britain, he makes a similar point. According to Shaw, when you talk about a united nation as if there are no inequalities, as if all the interests of the community are common and the worries and problems shared by all "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" you are not talking common sense. I think it is due to that point that Shaw raises the issue of "junkierism". Making such a distinction and stating that these "junkers" or "militarists" exist both in Germany and England, Shaw claims that the starting of the war cannot be solely blamed on Germany, and that certain elements in both countries are as responsible as the other if not more. In a letter to the *Daily Citizen*, a paper sponsored by the Trades Union Congress on 26 November 1914,

---

<sup>4</sup> Down at the bottom of the tombstone inscribed: "The philosophers have only interpreted the World in various ways, the point is to change it."

---

twelve days after “Common Sense” was published, Shaw chides the editor for siding with the capitalist press against Shaw explaining his intentions in the Common Sense.<sup>5</sup>

### War and Propaganda

In their introductory chapter entitled “Justifying War: Propaganda, Politics and the Modern Age” to the multi-authored book of the same title, Welch and Fox (2012, p. 1) observe that in modern times, as soon as war starts the fighting parties, “in order rapidly to mobilize opinion, invariably begin publishing accounts of how the war has been caused. They do so because the issue of responsibility is one of the key elements in the propaganda battle for ‘hearts and minds’”.

In that, connecting the British “militarist” classes with the responsibility of the starting of the war, Shaw questions the propaganda machine that the British government employed as soon as the conflict breaks out. According to Welch (2012, p. 71), First World War has a “unique position” as the war which began “with the promise of honour and nationalistic glory” but “ended after four bloody years of trench, air and naval warfare with much doubt as to whether the sacrifices had been justified and worthwhile”. Far from glorifying soldiers and battles like some of his contemporaries<sup>6</sup>, Bernard Shaw refused to take a romantic<sup>7</sup> view of war or soldiers even from the very beginning of his career. In his fourth play *Arms and the Man* (1894), Shaw mocks the heroic type dramatized in the character of Sergioff and the business minded “chocolate cream soldier” Bluntschli. Nor are the soldier characters in the following plays have a different turn: his Napoleon in *The Man of Destiny* (1897), General Burgoyne in *Devil’s Disciple* (1897) are in any significant manner different from Bluntschli or Sergioff; nor the Inca’s views on soldiers very flattering: “Napoleon lacked versatility. After all, any fool can be a soldier: we know that only too well in Perusalem, where every fool is a soldier. But the Inca has a thousand other resources. He is an architect” (Shaw, 1931, p. 837).

So when the war broke in the summer of 1914 Shaw was rather sceptical about showing his absolute loyalty to his own country and the representation of the war as was expected by the society. Shaw was not a perfect patriot and O’Flaherty of the *O’Flaherty VC* (1915) perhaps best summarises Shaw’s attitude towards the issue when he comments on his mother’s ardent Irish patriotism:

O’FLAHERTY [sympathetically] Yes, sir: she’s pigheaded and obstinate: theres no doubt about it. She’s like the English: they think theres no one like themselves. It’s the same with the Germans, though theyre educated and ought to know better. Youll never have a quiet world til you knock the patriotism out of the human race. (p. 823)

As is also evident in his earlier play *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904), Shaw does not draw his Irish nationalist characters for the best and does not give them the best speeches in the play, he rather saves his best for internationalists cosmopolitan characters like Father Keegan. (Gündüz, 2013) Shaw sees patriotism more as a divisive social element rather than a unifying

<sup>5</sup> “I have stood for a brave and straight democratic fighting case; for open democratic diplomacy, for full civil rights, and a fair livelihood for the soldier and his dependents, for clean hands and clean mouths, and the discarding of the dirty lies and rancours that are invented and fomented to take the attention of our people off speculators in shoddy khaki and refreshment contractors who bribe sergeants to wink at the supply of uneatable food even to our troops training at home...and for an energetic pushing of the interests of Labour and democracy now that a formidable emergency has at last given serious men the opportunity of making themselves heard again.” (Shaw, 1985, p. 161-62)

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion how British men of letters took war see Adrian Barlow’s *The Great War in British Literature* (2000).

<sup>7</sup> For a brief description of how war was romanticized both in Germany and Britain see Holroyd, 1989, p. 343. Literary man with high reputations from both sides such as Rupert Brooke and Thomas Mann made their best to promote and glorify war.

one which can be rather easily and conveniently exploited by the “junkers” of all nations to serve their own ends. According to Shaw (1914), nationalism is a delusive tool in the hands of the Junkers of both nations to blind peoples to their own close circumstances:

Divided Against Ourselves: ..governing classes who in the peacetime cooperate in “the organized legal robbery of the poor” and to that “end would join hands with the German Junkers as against the working class in Germany and England...nothing would persuade the working classes that those who sweat them in commercial enterprise are any more considerate in public affairs, especially when there is any question of war, by which much money can be made for rich people who deal in the things most wanted and most highly paid for in war time: to wit armaments and money (p. 55).

So national unity is just a myth and not everyone makes the same great sacrifice and that some even profit from the war. Not national affiliations but class affiliations ought to count for the working classes. Addressing the members of the British, German and French patriots, Shaw (1914, p. 46) invites them to unite under the banner of socialism: “your Union Jacks and tricolours and Imperial Eagles are only toys to keep you amused and there are only two real flags... the red flag of socialism and the black flag of Capitalism, the flag of God and the flag of Mammon”. In his *Socialism and Superior Brains* (1993), Griffith makes an acute observation on how Shaw saw the Irish question in general and Irish nationalism in particular:

Nationalism was the ideology of irrational nonsense: of separatism, of racial purity and superiority, of hearts enchanted to a stone by hatred of the English. In later years, subsequent to the Easter Rising, Shaw had not a good word to say for Sinn Fein, founded as it was on the romantic delusion ‘that the world consists of Ireland and a few subordinate continents’. Sinn Fein was singled out for special attention when in 1916 he said he had ‘attacked the romantic separatism of Ireland with every device of invective and irony and dialectic (p. 197).

I think the passage testifies that Shaw was quite consistent on his views on nationalism and it was not his particular dislike for English politics that he spared his anti-nationalist sentiments. The real danger is not other nations like Germany for Shaw “the danger is created by inventing weapons capable of destroying civilization faster than we produce men can be trusted to use them” (qtd. in Griffith, 1993, p. 227).

### **Shaw’s Ordeal With the Anti-German Sentiment**

Feeling himself a foreigner<sup>8</sup>, as an Irish man, despite his 42 years in London, the German speaking world was probably another home for the cosmopolitan intellectual artist playwright, Shaw. Shaw had very close cultural, business and personal relations with the German speaking world at the time the war broke. On August 4, 1914 as soon as Shaw heard that Great Britain declared war on Germany, Shaw sent a telegram to his German translator Siegfried Trebitsch saying:

YOU CAN DO NOTHING BUT REPORT YOURSELF BY TELEGRAPH AS RETURNING AT FIRST OPPORTUNITY WHAT A HIDEOUS SITUATION CIVILIZATION TEARING ITSELF TO PIECES INSTEAD OF STANDING SOLID AGAINST THE COMMON ENEMY IN THE EAST<sup>9</sup> YOU AND I AT WAR CAN ABSURDITY GO FURTHER MY FRIENDLIEST WISHES GO WITH YOU UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES [sic.]. (Shaw, 1985, p. 243).

For Shaw Germany and Austria had a special place as he was first recognized in the German speaking world in the first decade of the twentieth century through Trebitsch’s translations. It was this recognition abroad which drew the attention of the London stage to his work. (Weiss, 1986, p. 12) In his “What I Owe to German Culture” (“Was ich deutsche Kultur

<sup>8</sup> “I shall retain my Irish capacity for criticising England with something of the detachment of a foreigner” (“Common Sense”, p. 11).

<sup>9</sup> Here “East” refers to Russia, as Shaw points Russia as a threat to European civilization in many different instances. (Weintraub, p. 27-28)

verdanke”) published in German translation of his *Dramatische Werke* (1911)<sup>10</sup>, Shaw wrote “I have been so steeped in German music and consequently in German poetry, all my life (having indeed learned more of my art as a writer for the stage from Mozart than from Shakespeare, Moliere or any other literary dramatist) that I cannot help believing to know German” (qtd. in Drocking, 2009, p. 285). To top all these Shaw’s ever most popular play *Pygmalion* made its world premiere in Trebitsch’s translation in Burgtheater, Vienna on 16 October 1913.

“In war truth is the first casualty” a quotation attributed to Aeschylus and often quoted by politicians and scholars, explains Shaw’s motivation in composing his “Common Sense About the War”. Yet Shaw (1914, p. 11) contends that he waited more than four months before he expressed his opinions on the war as he thought that at the break of war it would not be realistic to expect people to be cool minded to listen reasoning and discussion of points from a detached perspective: “They felt in that solemn hour that England was lost if only one single traitor in their midst let slip the truth about anything in the universe. It was a perilous time for me. I do not hold my tongue easily”.<sup>11</sup> Shaw being Shaw always ready to express the most radical thoughts and unconventional ways of thinking in writing of course had a hard time to keep quiet for so long. One thing that Shaw found particularly disturbing about the war was that people who would be quite sensible during the peace would lose their sense of fairness as soon as the war starts. Shaw witnessed the war craze spread in light speed as soon as the war starts: “A very typical middle-aged Englishman ‘after a fairly attempt to say unconcernedly ‘I suppose we shall have to fight them’ suddenly became spitefully hysterical and changed ‘them’ into ‘those swine’ twice in every sentence’.” (Holroyd, 1989, p. 345) Those “hysteric” sentiments naturally led to an enmity against German nationals who lived in England. In his *Journey to Heartbreak* (1973, p.31), Weintraub describes the anti-German sentiment in England even on the first days of the war with stories of how German nationals were fired from their jobs as teachers or nurses, hunted down, assaulted and deported; even German musicians such as Beethoven, Wagner and Strauss were removed from concert programs with chauvinistic feelings.

### **British Authors Defend England’s War**

It was in such an atmosphere at the beginning of the war, “reinforced by government propaganda” artists and intellectuals of all colours were “offering their services to their governments”. Two months before Shaw published his particular “Common Sense About the War”, on September 17, 1914 fifty-three leading British writers<sup>12</sup> from very different political affiliations, even those with strong sympathies for German culture “agreed that Great Britain could not without dishonor have refused to take part” in the war. The way they see the role of England in this war was represented as: “British representatives were throughout labouring whole-heartedly to preserve the peace of Europe, and their conciliatory efforts were cordially received by both France and Russia” (“British Authors”, 1914, p. 82-83). One of the major and first points that Shaw would object to and challenge in his pamphlet. According to this view, England was forced to fight as “she had pledged herself to maintain the neutrality of Belgium”. Within this frame of mind, Germany was seen as the sole responsible party, the sole offender who started the war. Germany was accused of “without even the pretence of a grievance against

<sup>10</sup> Brockington calls it a “strategic response to circumstances” (p. 285).

<sup>11</sup> The piece is not Shaw’s first work on war, he had already written *Arms and the Man* (1894), *The Man of Destiny* (1895), *The Devil’s Disciple* (1896-7), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and some other plays which refers to the ongoing wars indirectly if not set in one of them. Yet in none of these plays Shaw assumes the tone he assumes in “Common Sense About the War.”

<sup>12</sup> The signatories included literary celebrities such as Arnold Bennett, GK Chesterton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, Thomas Hardy, Henry Arthur Jones, Rudyard Kipling, John Masefield, Gilbert Murray and HG Wells among others.

Belgium she made war on the weak and unoffending country she had undertaken to protect...carried out her invasion with calculated and ingenious ferocity..." (p. 82).

Furthermore, that Germany was also guilty of war crimes was very widely publicized in England. The British intelligentsia found it difficult to comprehend how their German colleagues of distinguished learning and culture could justify all these atrocities with the excuse that they have built such a sophisticated and refined culture: "...German culture and civilization are so superior to those of other nations that all steps to taken to assert them are more than justified..." ("British Authors", 1914, p. 83).

The national self-image of the British intelligentsia is quite positive, on the other hand. According to them, the British act with chivalrous design unlike the brutish Germans: "That destiny, and duty, alike for us and for all the English speaking race, call upon us to uphold the rule of common justice between civilized peoples, to defend the rights of small nations, and to maintain the free and law-abiding ideals of Western Europe against the rule of "Blood and Iron" and the domination of the whole Continent by a military caste" ("British Authors", 1914, p.83).

### **German Science Defending German Politics**

On the other camp the Germans had quite another story to tell: in "To the Civilized World" they start with talking about "Germany's hard struggle for existence". They refused to admit that "Germany is guilty of" starting the war. On the contrary, Germany "did her utmost to prevent it". Especially, according to these distinguished scholars and scientists "Wilhelm II shown himself to be the upholder of peace and often enough this fact has been acknowledged by our opponents." According to the German professors there were basically six unfounded accusations directed to Germany which were not "true":

1. Germany caused the war.
2. Germany trespassed neutral Belgium.
3. The life and property of Belgians were injured by German troops.
4. German troops treated Louvain brutally.
5. German warfare pays no respect to international law.
6. German militarism is a threat to civilization.

First of all, they reject the assertion that Germany started the war. They claim that, "it has been proved that France and England had resolved to on such a trespass, and it has likewise been proved that Belgium had agreed their doing so." How that was proved is not dwelt upon in the article though. Note the use of the passive voice which gives the register a scientific tone and ambiguity as to the agent of the sentence. They also deny that "the life and property of even a single Belgian citizen was injured by German soldiers without the bitterest self-defense having made it necessary; for again and again. The professors promise that Germany "shall carry this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven and a Kant is just as sacred its own hearths and homes." Thus the authority of poets, composers and philosophers are used as a guarantee of the Germany's humanity and righteousness. In a way these most distinguished names are evoked to legitimate the German claims for civilization. It is also interesting that none of these names were alive, which might give them a chance to repudiate such an association or evocation.

In 1914 September "Appeal of the German Universities" was published by distinguished schools from Tuebingen, Berlin, Bonn, Breslau, Erlangen, Frankfurt, Freiburg, Giessen, Goetingen, Greifswald, Halle, Heidelberg, Jena, Kiel, Königsberg, Leipzig, Marburg, Muenchen, Münster, Rostock, Strasburg to Wuerzburg. In the text, Germany was defended against accusations of barbarity stating that the mere recognition of Germany's excellence in culture, science and arts should testify to their "just cause" and sense of decency even in the

war time. German universities urge the people who “have had an opportunity of watching and appreciating the German people in peaceful labor, their industry and uprightness, their sense of order and discipline, their reverence for intellectual work of every kind and their profound love for sciences and arts” (p. 187-188) to be more sensible on the causes of war. They expect their side of the story to be heard and appreciated. The appeal suggests that the German universities are in absolute harmony with the political leaders of Germany and that they believe that Germany was wrongly accused for “barbarous atrocities and senseless vandalism” (p. 187) which cannot be committed by the armies of such an “advanced” and “civilized” country. The German are exempt from any inhumanity or cruel trespasses, if we follow the same logic. The German self-image furthermore asserts that “nothing is stamped upon their minds more deeply than reverence and admiration for artistic, scientific and technical creations of the human mind” (p. 188) as a result it is absurd to claim that “German Army is a horde of barbarians and a band of incendiaries who take pleasure in levelling defenceless cities to the ground and in destroying venerable monuments of history and art.” According to the German universities their nation was “compelled to fight not only for its power but for its existence and its entire civilization”. The close proximity in these two appeals reveal the common-sense quality of these ideas, justifications and legitimizing discourses in the time of war especially at the beginning of it.

British scholars replied to these German appeals stating that they find it hard to believe how the German scholars could turn a blind eye to the fact that the German army “deliberately destroyed or bombarded such monuments of human culture as the Library at Louvain and the Cathedrals at Rheims and Mianes” (p. 189).

### ***Shaw Against the Grain***

Shaw’s stance on the war in “Common Sense About the War” made neither parties happy. For instance, on bombarding “monuments of human culture” like the Cathedral in Rheims, Shaw has a rather realistic and pragmatic attitude: “I am one of the two or three people in Europe who really care about Rheims; but if I were a military officer defending Rheims I should have to put an observation post on the cathedral roof; and if I were his opponent I should have to fire on it, in both cases on pain of being court-martialled and perhaps shot” (qtd. in Weintraub, 1973, p. 59). According to Shaw, the chauvinistic press with their ardent efforts in anti-German propaganda miss the real point: “If this war goes long enough there will not be a cathedral left in Europe; and serve Europe right too! The way to save the cathedrals is to stop fighting, and not use them as stones to throw at the Germans. I won’t sign” (p. 59). With this comment Shaw questions the taken-for-granted common sense view of the British intellectuals on the “cruelty and barbarity” of the German soldiers. This counter-hegemonic discourse which resists the zeitgeist of the period was extended and systematized in “Common Sense About the War”. Shaw directs his attacks on the Militarists of both nations and calls the English to recognize that they cannot be totally innocent and the Germans completely guilty at such a moment. According to Shaw (1914, p. 2), the real enemies of both German and British publics are the ones who caused the war. He does not save the Germans from his criticism at all. He just invites the British public to be more critical, to be aware of the media manipulation on the subject. According to Shaw, the British Foreign Office distorts facts, sometimes exaggerating and sometimes avoiding them. For Shaw, the only way to avoid wars is for people to become aware of their illusions created by the manipulation of the governments and media (Shaw, 1914, p. 15).

In “The Common Sense About the War”, Shaw believes that both the German and English were prejudiced against each other and although they both seemed to unite against each other what they did was to hate each other’s worst and most brutal aspects: German Junkerism and its British counter-part British Militarism. Funnily enough, they both rejected having such a class as they picture themselves in romantic and chivalrous colours. According to the British

public, they were fighting for the protection of the neutrality of Belgium, a most noble and altruistic act. And the Germans believed that England, France and Russia had decided to exterminate the German race, thus they were giving a fight of survival and it would be most imprudent waiting to be attacked rather than having the upper hand attacking first and gaining an advantage. The solution according to Shaw is that: “both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather their harvests in the villages in the towns and make a revolution in the towns” (Shaw, 1914, p. 12). Shaw attempts to take the conceit out of the British patriots who believed in the innocence of Britain: “...no more nonsense about the Prussian wolf and the British Lamb, the Prussian Machiavelli and the English Evangelist...” (Shaw, 1914, p.15). For Shaw, both nations are “incorrigibly pugnacious and inveterately snobbish peoples, who have snarled at one another for forty years with bristling hair and grinning fangs, and are now rolling over with their teeth in one another’s throats” and for the peace of the world in the future they “are to be tamed into trusty watch-dogs” (Shaw, 1914, p. 15).

Shaw also criticizes the fact that the British Foreign Office gave her allies France and Russia a “blank cheque”. He asks: “Just consider what the blank cheque means. France’s draft on it may stop at the cost of recovering Alsace and Lorraine. We shall have to be content with a few scraps of German colony and the heavy weight championship. But Russia? When will she say Hold, enough? Suppose she only not wants Poland but Baltic Prussia? Suppose she wants Constantinople as her port of access to unfrozen seas, in addition to the dismemberment of Austria? Suppose she has the brilliant idea of annexing all Prussia....?” These are heavy questions to be answered.

### Conclusion

Starting with his first play *Widowers’ Houses* (1892), one of the major themes of all Shaw plays is to face realities. In that, most Shaw plays, very similar to Ibsen plays for that, are based on the disillusionment of the protagonists. For instance, in *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, we admire Vivie Warren to be brave enough to pursue the truth about her mother’s, Mrs Warren’s profession; although she knew that the truth would be rather bitter and would cost her the support of her mother. Similarly, Barbara the protagonist of *Major Barbara* goes through a disillusionment with the Salvation Army and draws herself another path afterwards; Nora of Ibsen’s *A Doll House* realizes that her husband was not the man she took him to be. Still, despite the heart breaking truth; Vivie, Barbara and Nora are stronger as they get to learn the truth. Shaw tries to do a similar thing with the “Common Sense”, drawing attention to a very important point stating that the English people should not let the government presume the role of a lamb and expect to be treated like a victim at the peace talks and diplomacy. What is wrong with such an attitude is that, it would not leave any room for negotiation or understanding of other parties. In a paradigm where England is a mere victim, the logic necessarily leads us to the conclusion that her opponents must be complete barbarians and that they should be punished accordingly. Shaw invites British diplomatists and public to make a long-lasting peace which would not be breached at the first conflict. In a way, at the beginning of the first world war he was warning the public for the subsequent wars if peace was not made properly and fairly.<sup>13</sup>

I have pointed out only a few examples from a very lengthy text of 80 pages given as supplement to the *New Statesman* on the 14th of November 1914 and *The New York Times* the next day on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1914. Shaw’s “Common Sense” created a rather feverish debate. Shaw attracted fierce criticism from his fellow writers as well as politicians and suffragette allies like the Pankhursts. Weintraub gives a few striking examples of these harsh responses to his piece: “playwright Henry Arthur Jones told Shaw that England was his mother and that Shaw had kicked her deathbed....The Prime Minister said privately that Shaw should

<sup>13</sup> One instance of such a case of disinformation was the sinking of Lusitania. Ponsonby 121-125.

be shot, J.C. Squire more publicly recommended that he be tarred and feathered, and a cartoon appeared showing Shaw as a mixed breed of Irish terrier and a German dachshund...” (Weintraub, 1973, p. 60-61) On November 25, 1914 issue of Punch Shaw was attacked by an anonymous satire:

You chide the Prussian Junkers, yet proclaim  
 Our statesmen beat them at their own vile game.  
 Thus, bent on getting back at any cost  
 Into the limelight you have lately lost,  
 And, high above war's trumpets loudly blown  
 On land and sea, eager to sound your own,  
 We find you faithful to your ancient plan  
 Of disagreeing with the average man,  
 And all because you think yourself undone  
 Unless in a minority of one.  
 Vain to the core, thus in the nation's need  
 You carp and cavil while your brothers bleed,  
 And while on England vitriol you bestow  
 You offer balsam to her deadliest foe.

In this bitter satire, I think, the really significant point made about Shaw is his insistence of feeling “undone/ Unless in a minority of one”. The writer does not recognize how much courage it takes to express these views at the time of war, rather he thinks that Shaw’s anti-nationalistic views cannot be sincere or serious and they can only be explained by Shaw’s “conceit”, yet Shaw is himself aware of the fact that he would be ostracized and punished for his criticism at such a time.

Bernard Shaw did not participate in the *Zeitgeist*. Instead, he directed his attacks on the Militarists of both nations asking them to question how they come to know what they know. According to Darlington, he was talking a “brand of detached common sense which sounded dangerously like treason to an overexcited and wholly bewildered public.” (qtd. In Luckhurst, 2006, p. 302) Contesting the hegemonic ideology of his times, Shaw instigated a highly vigorous discussion in which he often found himself alienated and demonized even by his own intellectual and political peers.

For Shaw (1914), the war had started and there was nothing more to do about it as it had already begun to claim its own toll. It had to be fought and won. Yet the war could not last forever and it had to stop at some point due to lack of resources; human resources, munitions and provisions: “even soldiers know that you cannot make ammunitions as fast as you you can burn it” (Shaw, 1914, p. 37). Shaw’s most fundamental objection to the public opinion of the time was the general acceptance on the innocence of the British politics and the absolute guilt of the German Junkers: “Now I foresee a certain danger of our being taken by surprise at that congress, and making ourselves unnecessarily difficult and unreasonable by presenting ourselves to it in the character of Injured Innocence” (Shaw, 1914, p. 12). Shaw believes that no lasting peace can be established with such an attitude.

Shaw (1914, p. 57-60) concludes his pamphlet proposing seven points, seven principles that should be taken into consideration by the British public and policymakers: First of all, England and France must win the war without relying on Russia, this could be the only victory for the western Europe. Also, England should not expect to “smash or disable Germany”. This cannot be done without killing all the German women. “Without peace between France, Germany and England” there could be n peace in the world. Furthermore, war as a solution must be forgotten and “shut up” as a possibility, the militarist culture should be abandoned. Moreover, for Shaw “neither England nor Germany must claim any moral superiority.” Another point is that Militarism is not peculiar to Germany, it has its counterpart in England as well.

Shaw also claimed that it should be admitted that German atrocities are just a myth used by the propaganda bureau to direct the public opinion and no other army behaved better at the time of war. Shaw asked for social improvements and concluded his remarks with a note saying “We must free our soldiers and give them homes worth fighting for.”

And Shaw had foreseen, and many historians of the second world war agree, that Germany was held responsible for the war and they were asked to pay such a huge price that “Germany’s resentment of the treaty of Versailles would help Adolf Hitler’s rise to power” (Eubank, 2004, p. 7). The German dissatisfaction and feeling of injustice would lead to the second World War which was much more destructive and fatal than the first one.

### Bibliography

- About the *New Statesman*. (2016, Dec. 30). General format. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/about-new-statesman>.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Appeal of the German Universities. (1914). *The New York Times Current History of the European War: What Men of Letters Say. 1(1)*. The New York Times Company: New York, 187-188.
- Barlow, A. (2000). *The Great War in British Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- British Authors Defend England’s War. (1914). *The New York Times Current History of the European War: What Men of Letters Say: 1(1)*. New York: The New York Times Company, 82-86.
- Boutroux, E. (1914). Germany’s civilized barbarism. *The New York Times Current History of the European War: What Men of Letters Say: 1(1)*. New York: The New York Times Company, 160-169.
- Clarke, I. F. (Ed.). (1995). *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914: Fictions of Future Warfare and of Battles Still-To-Come*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. Retrieved from Questia.
- Collins, R. F. (2008). *World War I: Primary Documents on Events from 1914 to 1919*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Retrieved from Questia.
- “Common sense”. Oxford English dictionary.
- Drocking, G. (2009). *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siecle*. Peter Lang. Retrieved from Google Books.
- Eubank, K. (Ed.). (2004). *The Origins of World War II* (3rd ed.). Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson. Retrieved from Questia.
- Gramsci, A. (1999). *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. Forgacs, D. London: Lawrence & Wishart. Retrieved from Questia.
- Griffith, G. (1995). *Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw*. New York: Routledge. Retrieved from Questia.
- Gündüz, A. (2013). GB Shaw’s citizens of the world in John Bull’s Other Island. *Celal Bayar University Social Sciences Journal*, Vol:11, 3-27.
- Holroyd, M. (1989). *Bernard Shaw Volume II 1898-1918: Pursuit of Power*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Howard, M. (2002.) *The First World War: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.
- Hyams, E., & Freeman, J. (1963). *The New Statesman: The History of the First Fifty Years, 1913-1963*. London: Longmans. Retrieved from Questia.
- Luckhurst, M. (2006). A wounded stage: Drama and World War I. *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880 – 2005*. Malden and Oxford: Blacwell Publishing, 301-315. Retrieved from Google Books.

- Ponsonby, A. (1928). *Falsehood in War-Time, Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company. Retrieved from Questia.
- Sanders, M. L. (1975). Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War. *The Historical Journal*: 18(1), 119–146.  
Retrieved from: [www.jstor.org/stable/2638471](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638471).
- Sassoon, A. S. Ed. (2012). *Gramsci'ye Farklı Yaklaşımlar*. Trans. Mustafa Kemal Coşkun, Burcu Şentürk et al. Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları.
- Shaw, B. (1985). Call you this discipline? *Agitations: Letters to the Press 1875-1950*. Ed. By Dan H. Laurence and James Rambeau. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, pp. 160-63.
- Shaw, G. B. (1914). Common sense about the war. *The New York Times Current History of the European War: What Men of Letters Say . Vol. 1. No. 1*. The New York Times Company, New York, 11-60.
- Shaw, G. B. (1931a). O'Flaherty VC. *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*. London: Constable. Retrieved from Questia.
- Shaw, G. B. (1931b). The Inca of Perusalem. *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*. London: Constable. Retrieved from Questia.
- Shaw, G. B. (1985). To Siegfried Trebitsch. *Bernard Shaw Collected Letters 1911-1925*. Ed. Dan H. Laurence. New York: Viking, 243.
- Shaw, G. B. Trebitsch, Siegfried. (1986). *Bernard Shaw's Letters to Siegfried Trebitsch*. Ed. Samuel Abba Weiss. Stanford University Press, Retrieved from Google Books.
- Simon, R. (1991). *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction*. London: Lawrence & Wishart. Retrieved from Questia.
- Szporluk, R. (1991). *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx Versus Friedrich List*. New York: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from Questia.
- To the civilized world: By professors of Germany. (1914). *The New York Times Current History of the European War: What Men of Letters Say: 1(1)*. The New York Times Company, New York, 185-87.
- Weintraub, S. (1973). *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918: Journey to Heartbreak*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Weintraub, S. and Weiss, Samuel Abba. Ed. (1986). Introduction. *Bernard Shaw's Letters to Siegfried Trebitsch*. Stanford University Press, 3-17. Retrieved from Google Books.
- Welch, D and Fox, J. (2012). Justifying war: Propaganda, politics and the modern age. *Justifying War: Propaganda, Politics and the Modern Age*. Ed. David Welch and Jo Fox. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-20.
- Welch, D. (2012). War aims and the 'Big Ideas' of 1914. David Welch and Jo Fox (Eds). Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 71-94.