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The Great War of Words

Tim Cook

John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War I* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001)

Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myth and Realities* (Headline Book Publishing, 2001).

The Great War was a cataclysmic event that dismantled Empires, transformed the nature of warfare, and produced a final butcher's bill of more than ten million dead and twice that many wounded and maimed. With the war raging for more than four years and involving, by its end, almost every country in the world, its legacy continues to be debated more than eighty years on. Two scholars, one an American professor of English, John Mosier, and the second, a British professor of War Studies, Gary Sheffield, have recently offered new and ambitious overviews of the Great War.



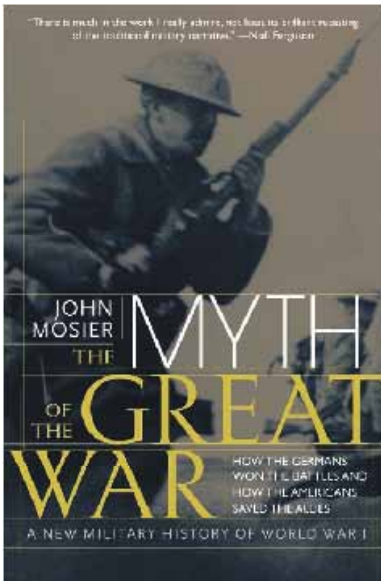
applied to revisionist histories such as this, but it is also a phrase that reviewers sometimes use when they are unsure about the validity of the conclusions and arguments. Those with a passing interest may indeed find Mosier's book thought-provoking, but those who have studied the war in detail will only find it aggravating and inept history of the worst kind. There are problems with *The Myth of the Great War* at every turn: it is poorly structured, promises but fails to offer convincing conclusions, and contains countless errors of fact and interpretation.

John Mosier's *The Myth of the Great War* commences with an introductory passage on how the conflict has been misunderstood over the last eighty years. There is no doubt that the Great War has unleashed a great war of words over the last century, and not all of them useful, but one always grimaces when an author claims to reveal a "great deal that has been ignored or suppressed by other historians." (Preface). Since Mosier offers some questionable statements in his notes on sources, it would seem, however, that he too has only a tenuous grasp on the historiography.

Mosier's provocative series of theses are that the United States saved the Allied war effort after Britain and France had bungled their way through almost four years of fruitless campaigns; that the Germans were consistently victorious in battle; and that the Allies, in order to cover up their gross incompetence, willfully misrepresented their operational failures. Astonishing to this reviewer, others have described this book as thought-provoking. That may be a statement

In this supposed general history of the war, there are bizarre gaps. For instance, there are two detailed chapters on France and Germany at the beginning of the book, but nothing on Russia, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and only the briefest of references to Great Britain. Having chosen to ignore most of the major belligerents, the next chapter starts in August 1914. There is also no attempt to outline the complex factors that led to war, an area of scholarship that has been pregnant with detailed studies in the last two decades. This type of episodic narrative is prevalent throughout the book: Mosier has decided to tell only parts of the story. While it is fully acknowledged that all authors must limit the extent of their coverage, Mosier seems only to highlight those historical events that show the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) or the French Armies in the worst possible light. The historical narrative is episodic, unbalanced, and, for the most part, unfair.

One of Mosier's key points of contention



is the untrustworthy contemporary documentary and statistical evidence issued by the Allies. Having examined the propaganda of the time, Mosier observes that it, not surprising for nations engaged in death struggles, was untruthful. Indeed it was, but Mosier seems blissfully unaware that historians have written for decades about the flawed nature of the

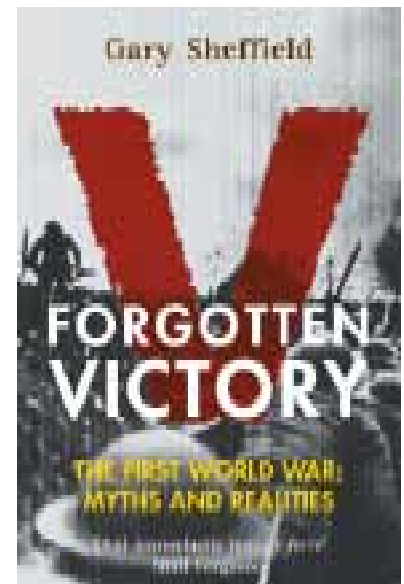
wartime propaganda discourse. To use an account from a British or French newspaper (or German for that matter, although Mosier never does), and to call it biased and obfuscating is not terribly revealing. Having set up straw-man arguments, Mosier knocks them down, and then claims an original interpretation of the war. Mosier is continually drawing conclusions that he suggests are new, which in fact have been in print for years.

This weak historical approach is endemic throughout *The Myth of the Great War*, but few sections are so partisan as the assessment of the fighting efficiency of the national armies. Desperate to support his thesis on the superiority of German soldiers, Mosier ignores anything that might disprove his case. The question of the French and German bloodbath at Verdun in 1916 is a strong case in point where Mosier presents the German operations as a tour de force. The nearly equal casualties by the end of the ten-month battle, to say nothing of the unending horror of the fighting as depicted by countless frontline soldiers, both French and German, should have been enough to rattle Mosier's assumptions. They do no such thing, and so his conclusions of the fighting and aftermath at Verdun are among the most ludicrous in the book, and perhaps in print (225).

While the French are held up as incompetents slaughtered at the hands of the German elite army, so too are the British. At every turn, Mosier attempts to denigrate the BEF. Mosier writes, for example, that the March Offensive "virtually finished [the BEF] as an offensive force" (319). Mosier can posit such ludicrous statements

since he misunderstands and downplays the string of British operational victories in the Last Hundred Days. As part of his argument that no British force had ever made "any real gains other than what was fabricated by propagandists," Mosier might well cast his eyes to the Canadian Corps, which fought as part of the BEF, and their victories at Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917) and Passchendaele (October-November 1917). But it was not just the Canadians who succeeded in battle and it is clear that many British units, and not just elite ones, were, by the last half year of the war, continually driving the Germans from their entrenched positions on the Western Front. Unfortunately, that would not fit into Mosier's thesis of the inept Allied forces, and so it is conveniently left out. But even Mosier seems quite at a loss to explain how this German army of super-soldiers could have been defeated on the field of battle. Instead of rethinking his anti-British stance, he simply ignores the contradictory evidence that effectively undercuts his flawed thesis.

Having unconvincingly denigrated the fighting efficiency of the Allied armies and presented mundane observations about the propaganda of the time, Mosier overplays his hand in arguing that the Americans won the war. There is no doubt that the Americans had a very important psychological impact on the German High Command after their troops began to cross the Atlantic in greater numbers towards the end of 1917, but their tactical impact on the battlefield was not nearly as important. Mosier offers no distinction, instead arguing that the Americans won the war through their battlefield exploits. However, Pershing certainly did not have command over "most of the Allied fighting strength" by July 1918, and there are few who still believe that Pershing was the leader of men that Mosier purports, elevating him to a position that was "unique among the senior commanders of the war" (306-7). There is no doubt that the Americans had a significant impact on the war, but Mosier offers no new evidence



to convince the reader that they won the war for the Allies.

In the end, Mosier supports none of the claims that he promises in his introduction; instead, this is a rehashing of outdated, superseded concepts that fails to push the historiography in new directions. Moreover, as an overview summary it is so unbalanced and prejudicial in its assessments that readers must be alerted to its complete unreliability as a useful historical text.

Gary Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory* is a much stronger work and a valuable contribution in appraising and summarizing the new Great War scholarship. As a professor of War Studies at King College and a leading expert on land warfare in the twentieth century, Sheffield has absorbed the enormous outpouring of writing on the war, and has provided a convincing re-appraisal, primarily, on the role of the British Expeditionary Force. Sheffield bravely tackles long-standing beliefs and offers a re-evaluation of the BEF in battle; a discussion on the evolution of the war-winning combined arms doctrine; a more positive presentation of Sir Douglas Haig; one of the best accounts in print of the all-important year of battle, 1918; and several insightful chapters on how the Great War has been remembered and conceptualized over the twentieth century.

The opening line: "The First World War was a tragic conflict, but it was neither futile or meaningless," sets the tone for the book. As opposed to Mosier who presents the war in absolutes, Sheffield is well aware of the complexities and debates that have raged unceasingly for decades. Throughout this work, Sheffield sensibly lays out the historiography and weaves his way through the contested ground. There are no easy answers, and some of the most difficult questions have involved the fighting efficiency of the British armies. While Sheffield describes the terrible slaughter of trench warfare, he also explains why the British soldier continued to endure more than four years of deprivation and destruction. It was a war that the men of the British Armies had to fight, in conditions on the Western Front, for the most part, that were not of their choosing, as the Germans were almost always in the enviable position as defenders. There is no doubt that the British soldiers suffered in the steep learning curve of battle, but

by 1918, once those lessons had been learned, they were the most efficient and effective fighting force on the Western Front.

And what of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the principal braying ass leading the lion-like British soldiers to their doom? That at least is how he has often been portrayed over the years. While Sheffield does not completely rehabilitate Haig, he tries to put him in the context of the war and the decision-making system of the British High Command. Haig may not have been a brilliant general, but a survey of all generals, be they French, Russian, German, or American, reveals that few if any could be classified as geniuses. Does that mean all the generals were donkeys? Perhaps a more sympathetic assessment is needed to account for the enormous technological and doctrinal challenges facing all armies. Haig's strategy of attrition, which has been thoroughly condemned over the years, indeed seemed senseless and costly. It certainly resulted in terrible casualties. But modern wars fought by million-men armies of similar combat capability, and supported by the full resources of a nation, or several nations, will not result, with few exceptions, in a quick victory or low kill rates.

Forgotten Victory is a challenging work that drives the historiography in new directions, forcing the reader to confront and redress long-standing beliefs about the Great War. Not all will agree with Sheffield's analysis, and this reviewer is not persuaded, for instance, by his conclusion of the Somme battles as being a British success or at least less harmful to the British than the Germans. But, there are enough provocative and innovative ideas to make this book required reading for any serious student of the Great War. Moreover, Sheffield's crisp writing style and masterful synthesis of complex arguments makes *Forgotten Victory* an ideal text for any undergraduate course.

In the Great War, it was the British rather than the Americans who made the greater contribution to victory, and indeed, in this case, they continue to do so in the Great War of Words.

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