

Masculinity and PTSD: Violence among Veterans in the BBC Series *Peaky Blinders*

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This essay reflects on cinematic history and the recurrent portrayals of Post-Traumatic Stress Survivors depicted as violent criminals, most recently in the popular British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television series Peaky Blinders (2013-2022). Suffering the effects of World War 1, a group of veterans build a criminal empire throughout the industrial complex of Birmingham. Tommy Shelby (Cillian Murphy) and Arthur Shelby (Paul Anderson) mitigate the effects of “shell shock” through their own ascendant behavior. Tommy is inward dwelling and stoic, while Arthur outward facing and violent. What in a contemporary sense is toxic, becomes validated in times of impending war. Tommy acts under the authority of Prime Minister Winston Churchill in an assassination attempt on British Fascist Oswald Mosley. In season 6 the Shelbys prepare to battle Adolf Hitler at the advent of World War 2. Character profiles in the series support hegemonic masculinity theory, where men practice domination over other disenfranchised men and hold hierarchy over women. Peaky Blinders provides a unique insight into the cinematic trope of PTSD survivors as capable, violent gangsters. War wasn’t the choice or intention, but continued violence becomes the cure for those coping with the ravages of military conflict.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, BBC, Peaky Blinders, World War 1, Post-Traumatic Stress

“You didn’t need all them tablets...just needed another fuckin’ war.”¹ Tommy Shelby (portrayed by actor Cillian Murphy) depicts this scene for the popular British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) series *Peaky Blinders*. He was speaking to the psychologically ravaged Barney Thompson (depicted by actor Cosmo Davis), a World War 1 colleague who holds a reputation as one of the deadliest rifle snipers in the British army.² Set in 1929, Thompson’s residence is an asylum for the insane. He had succumbed to the effects of incessant battles, no longer able to function in society. The “tablets” Shelby referred to were most likely barbiturates. Shelby’s drug of choice was opium.

Shelby has need of Thompson’s services as part of an assassination attempt on Sir Oswald Mosley (played by Sam Claflin), who was leading an insurrectionist movement for British Fascists.³ A breach of fealty among family members thwarted the attempt. Thompson took a bullet to the back of the head before he released his own sniper’s round into Mosely’s brain. In the next

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¹ Otto Bathurst, “Peaky Blinders,” *Season 5* (BBC, September 22, 2019).

² Neela Debnath, “Peaky Blinders Season 5: Who Is Barney? Why Did He End up in the Asylum?,” *Express.co.uk*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1178532/Peaky-Blinders-season-5-Barney-Thompson-asylum-Cosmo-Jarvis-WWI-solider-Tommy-Shelby>.

³ Charlotte McIntyre, “Peaky Blinders Plot Hole: Huge Oswald Mosley Inaccuracy Exposed - Did You Spot It?,” *Express.co.uk*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1300397/Peaky-Blinders-plot-hole-Oswald-Mosley-inaccuracy-mistake-Tommy-Shelby-season-6-BBC>.

scene Shelby is distraught and dangerous, stumbling through a field holding a loaded handgun to his head.

Peaky Blinders has attracted a global audience. The BBC confirmed a combination of television viewing and online streaming at 6.2 million viewers during Season 5.⁴ That marks a substantial increase from its average viewership of 3.3 million when first aired in 2013.⁵ *Peaky Blinders* increased its viewership through a “Netflix original” status in the United States. Disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein acquired U.S. television and on-demand distribution rights, then brokered those rights to Netflix. The entertainment streaming company retained U.S. distribution while severing the Weinstein relationship in 2018.⁶ *Peaky Blinders* will conclude with Season 6 and will feature events leading into World War 2, following delayed production schedules operating amid the United Kingdom’s virus crisis.⁷ The BBC telecast new episodes in February 2022, while Netflix followed soon after with U.S. distribution.

There exists a cinematic trope of war-ravaged soldiers, leveraging toxic masculinity to become successful, violent gangsters. Learned traits of war provide a framework for marginalized men to act out as aggressive and criminal, adapting to account for one’s own well-being.⁸ The rhetorical use of scripting, scenes and gender dynamics demonstrate manifestations of masculine behaviors bred in war culture, then actualized upon return to society. Media depicts war as violence, then depicts actors as celebrated in hyper masculine portrayals. Females scripted into the plot must exhibit counter-masculine characteristics through logic, reason and compassion. Family patriarch Elizabeth Gray, aka Aunt Polly (Helen McCrory, who passed away in 2021⁹) was a villainess who controlled the *Blinders* and played a key confidant when Tommy needed counsel and advice. In the sixth and final season, the plot must adapt to McCrory’s death; Aunt Polly becomes collateral damage in a drug deal and ends up in a body bag. Female characters in the series are “good” and react to the violent atrocities inflicted by their men. Aunt Polly is the voice of reason, but succumbs to the violent effect of her clan. It was Aunt Polly who put a bullet in the heart of inspector Major Chester Campbell (Sam Neill).¹⁰

In her rhetorical work on veterans framed through the Vietnam war, author Susan Jeffords suggests a “debriding” took place. In a medical sense, it is the removal of foreign matter until only healthy tissue remains. Jeffords contends that in a cultural sense, the debriding of war stigma allowed a regeneration of masculinity, enforcing patriarchal definitions and values. Despite a shameful defeat, Vietnam veterans found themselves validated through the failed actions of politicians and bureaucrats. This essay builds on Jeffords work, reflecting on a debriding that never occurred: The recurrent, eternal effect of war lived out through PTSD experiences. In the sense of *Peaky Blinders*, veterans find no reprieve from a war they “won” and instead validate through warrior

⁴ Kimberly Bond, “Peaky Blinders Gets Its Highest Audience Figures Ever,” *Radio Times*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/peaky-blinders-gets-its-highest-audience-figures-ever/>.

⁵ “Peaky Blinders: ‘Gloomy’ Finale Wins over Critics (Just),” *BBC News*, September 23, 2019, sec. Entertainment & Arts, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-49795757>.

⁶ Q.V. Hough, “Why BBC’s Peaky Blinders Is Still A Netflix Original,” *ScreenRant*, October 4, 2019, <https://screenrant.com/peaky-blinders-bbc-netflix-original/>.

⁷ Manori Ravindran, “‘Peaky Blinders’ to End After Sixth and Final Season,” *Variety* (blog), January 18, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/tv/global/peaky-blinders-final-season-6-1234887398/>.

⁸ Carol Harrington, “What Is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does It Matter?,” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 345–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X20943254>.

⁹ Lucy Needham, “Helen McCrory Hid Illness to Keep Working but Tragically Missed Peaky Blinders,” *mirror*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/how-helen-mccrory-hid-illness-26338146>.

¹⁰ “Inspector Campbell,” *Peaky Blinders Wiki*, accessed March 12, 2021, https://peaky-blinders.fandom.com/wiki/Inspector_Campbell.

machismo in new social settings. Violence proves essential to survive while at war; now the macho male as violent gangster is successful once again.

This essay also holds a similar position as Jeffords regarding films depicting the “bad soldier” as a useful government asset. Jeffords notes many cinematic war heroes are atypical, as few follow orders. Those who deferred to authority while active in military - then went rogue afterward - prove to be in high demand for clandestine military tasks. Soldiers who are ruthless and trained to kill, find that behavior condoned when seen as advantageous in covert government actions. The miscreants are no longer at odds with the system. They have created a new system, a new hierarchy. The elite emerge as leaders while those less capable to lead, assume the ranks of a new type of soldier and again take orders. Some are calculating and cunning; others kill and maim. Masculinity as refined through military service is not unidimensional. It grows, can fester, and filters through traumatic stress triggered by personal experience. Finally, the actions and adaptations made by veterans are many times misunderstood. This is the case over decades, within the film and cinematic industries. The realities of suffering vets may not be relatable to writers and directors who have not experienced military conflict and its enduring effects.

Soldier as “Violent Man” in Film and Television

Films depicting gangster violence are frequently associated with the trauma of war. There is a storied history of character depictions where the skills and psychology of war are appropriate and advantageous in business and communities. Prior to *Peaky Blinders*, another popular television series employed the trope of World War 1 soldiers as unstable, violent threats in society. Home Box Office featured the series *Boardwalk Empire* from 2010 to 2014. Two key characters in *Boardwalk* were Jimmy Darmondy (Michael Pitt) and Richard Harrow (Jack Huston), who were traumatized World War 1 veterans attempting to assimilate during the Roaring 20’s in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Both become proficient as gangsters, through uninhibited violence. One stereotypical trope specific to war veterans is their association with, and love for, weapons of war. Dormondy was proficient with his Mark 1 Trench Knife, issued to World War 1 soldiers starting in 1918. It was a brutal cutting instrument with brass knuckles integrated into the handle. Dormondy kept it neatly packed away inside a scabbard in his boot. Several scenes showcase the Mark 1’s use, where violence was the solution to conflict.¹¹

Harrow, much like *Peaky Blinders*’ Barney Thompson, was the U.S. version of a sniper with little regard of conscience in killing. He exemplified the physical, as well as psychological, effects of war. A war injury disfigured Harrow. Bomb fragments cratered the left side of his face, cheekbone, upper jaw and eye. As was common in the era, he hid this horrific damage with a formed tin plate molded to his face, then painted to match his skin tone. Dormondy and Harrell formed a bond while recovering in an Army hospital. They discussed Harrell’s persistence during the war; Harrell recounted lying in wait three days to put a bullet into a German sniper, just below the eye. The pair adapted in the only way they supposedly knew how, through a transition into the gangster lifestyle. Richard supported Jimmy by killing Jimmy’s enemy, Liam (Sean Weil) an Irish gangster from Chicago. Jimmy was sitting with Liam in a restaurant while Richard calmly aimed and fired from a hotel window across the street. The kill shot entered just below Liam’s right eye.¹² What is

¹¹ “Mark I Trench Knife | Boardwalk Empire Wiki | Fandom,” accessed March 21, 2021, https://boardwalkempire.fandom.com/wiki/Mark_I_trench_knife.

¹² “Liam Irish Gangster,” Boardwalk Empire Wiki, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://boardwalkempire.fandom.com/wiki/Liam>.

practical in war, remained relevant in everyday actions in society. Jimmy eventually died at the hand of series lead Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi). Richard justified Jimmy's execution style murder by stating "Jimmy was a soldier. He fought. He lost."¹³

Other premier films associated the acts of gangsters related to World War 2. An example is the depiction of mafia boss Michael Corleone in the epic three-part movie trilogy *The Godfather*. Michael enlisted after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. He joined the Navy and fought in the battles of Guadalcanal and Peleliu. Corleone received the Navy Cross for bravery in battle, but a disabling wound forces his discharge. Silent, soft spoken, strategic and unforgiving, the youngest brother in the Corleone patriarchy became its future leader. Michael had his brother Fredo executed for breaking the family confidential trust. The strict mafia code prevailed. Murder, even that of a sibling, seems justified as part of the post war experience.¹⁴

More recently, Martin Scorsese directed *The Irishman*, based loosely on the book *I Heard You Paint Houses* by Charles Brandt. Netflix featured the movie in limited release in 2019. The film featured the character Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro), a World War 2 veteran who enlisted in the military in 1941 and was engaged in atrocities associated with 411 days of active combat. He was involved in summary executions of German soldiers under orders from his commanding officers. He killed countless Nazis and later employed these talents as a hitman, one who will act as ordered. Sheeran became numb to the concept of death. It was a "hard covering" akin to a lead shell.¹⁵ *The Irishman* posits it was Sheeran who murdered union leader Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino). This film also depicts the gray area between government actions and justified behavior. Sheeran is complicit in a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) plot to transport weapons as part the Cuban intervention.¹⁶

The Vietnam Veterans of America recognized the 1976 Martin Scorsese film *Taxi Driver* as an epic and realistic depiction of PTSD behavior. Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) played a psychotic and violent former U.S. Marine.¹⁷ Other films have depicted the psychological ravages of the Vietnam War both on the battlefield (Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now* and Oliver Stone's 1986 *Platoon*) and through post-war social settings (Michael Cimino's 1978 *The Deer Hunter*). There were five cinematic treatments of *Rambo*, films that depicted a Vietnam vet who could not transition into a peaceful society. John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) was a broken and emotional man, mentored by his commanding officer Colonel Sam Trautman (Richard Crenna). The terrors of Vietnam, then rejection by the America he returned home to, took Rambo to the breaking point. He existed in a state of self-loathing, stripped of faith in humanity and his Higher Power in God. He was a metaphorical time bomb waiting to explode. Each *Rambo* film showcased the violence and bloodshed that occurred when a war-torn soldier acts out.¹⁸

The actions and activities of traumatized veterans in films originate in fictional interpretation, loose application of historical knowledge, or character development through personal experiences

¹³ "Boardwalk Empire" Bone for Tuna (TV Episode 2012) - IMDb, accessed March 8, 2021, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2403479/characters/nm1658935>.

¹⁴ "World War II," The Godfather Wiki, accessed March 27, 2021, https://godfather.fandom.com/wiki/World_War_II.

¹⁵ Hannah McKennett, "The True Story Of 'The Irishman,' The Small-Time Mobster Who Said He Killed Jimmy Hoffa," All That's Interesting, October 27, 2019, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/frank-sheeran>.

¹⁶ Alejandro De La Garza, "The True Story Behind The Irishman | Time," October 31, 2019, <https://time.com/5715408/irishman-true-story-movie/>.

¹⁷ "'Taxi Driver' Turns 35 | Vietnam Veterans of America," accessed February 27, 2021, <https://vva.org/arts-of-war/feature-films/taxi-driver-turns-35/>.

¹⁸ "John Rambo," Rambo Wiki, accessed February 27, 2021, https://rambo.fandom.com/wiki/John_Rambo.

of the writer or director. Violently explicit scenes balance the tones of war, validating or justifying the battles that continue in the mind of the psychologically wounded soldier.

Post-Traumatic Stress through “War Culture” Masculinity

The term “soldiers’ heart” in the Civil War had new implications in World War I. Army psychiatrist Charles Myers was the originator of the term “shell shock” based on exposure to artillery bombardments.¹⁹ The Great War brought a new dimension to battle, where the extended effects had upended society and brought despair and sadness into the psyche of its soldiers. With relentless bombing came a juxtaposition in hierarchy. Battles served as an equalizer among social status. Education or standing meant little, while experience to survive meant everything.²⁰ One faction of war veterans became despondent and self-demeaning, struggling to fit back into society. One might envision the stereotypical soldier who cowered under a table when triggered by the sound of a backfiring car. For other veterans, facial expression became a blank, emotionless stare. This representation further exhibits a disorientation and detachment from reality, prompted by ruthless acts of violence causing death.²¹ Other returning soldiers lashed out, rather than retreat. They adhered to warrior mentality, which attached the soldier’s role to the larger military structure. This is a prescribed behavior where men have power and control.²² What was an act of survival can manifest in society through practices and attitudes where men hold power over women and over other men, most often those in minority groups or settings. Men who have actuated their fears into actions may gain identity through interactions based on patriarchy and power.²³ And in the case with the Shelby’s in Birmingham, socially marginalized men in urban slums will emphasize force through power.²⁴

Soldiers who have been socialized into military culture exhibit emotional stoicism and autonomy.²⁵ In a modern sense, we understand more regarding the ravaging effect of war experience. Those affected by PTSD experience a psychiatric response to war combat, through the threat of serious injury or death. It holds effect over all races, ethnicities, cultures and nationalities. When one considers the PTSD effect of rape, terrorism and horrific accidents, projections indicate 1 in

¹⁹ Benjamin Russell Butterworth, “What World War I Taught Us about PTSD,” *The Conversation*, November 8, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/what-world-war-i-taught-us-about-ptsd-105613>.

²⁰ Luke Ryan, “Frames of War: ‘Peaky Blinders’ and a Crushed Post-WWI Society,” *SOFREP*, January 12, 2018, <https://sofrep.com/news/frames-war-peaky-blinders-crushed-post-wwi-society/>.

²¹ Matt Allen, “BBC Sounds - Obsessed With... - The Dark, Emotional Forces That Haunt Tommy Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* Are Still Prevalent 100 Years On...,” *BBC*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/14fK3CnYGqryd95SkcVr89B/the-dark-emotional-forces-that-haunt-tommy-shelby-in-peaky-blinders-are-still-prevalent-100-years-on>.

²² Patricia A. Resick, Candice M. Monson, and Kathleen M. Chard, *Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD: A Comprehensive Manual*, *Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD: A Comprehensive Manual* (New York, NY, US: The Guilford Press, 2017).

²³ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Gregory M. Herek, “On Heterosexual Masculinity: Some Psychical Consequences of the Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Sage Focus Editions, Vol. 88 (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1987), 68–82.

²⁵ Catherine J. Herrera, Gina P. Owens, and Brent Mallinckrodt, “Traditional Machismo and Caballerismo as Correlates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Psychological Distress, and Relationship Satisfaction in Hispanic Veterans,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 41, no. 1 (2013): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00024.x>.

11 individuals will suffer with PTSD symptoms in their lifetimes. It's common for PTSD survivors to experience disturbing thoughts, flashbacks, anger, fear or detachment from loved ones and society. Biological changes in the brain trigger PTSD, many times associated with memory processing. Research indicates PTSD manifests through both prior life experience, then experience occurring post PTSD event. It is best conceptualized through individual "self" in the context of time, rather than triggered by one specific (or series of) events.²⁶

Modern PTSD treatment practitioners agree there is an association between toughness through emotional stoicism and PTSD constructs such as self-efficacy. Those with great inexpression of emotion held more severe PTSD symptoms. Emotionally stoic soldiers were also more likely to have negative effects in relationships and hold misgivings about one's sexuality.²⁷ There was a tendency to express hypermasculinity following trauma. Soldiers can feel a loss of control through trauma, then feel compelled to "man up" through masculine acts. Research indicates veterans engaged in violence and hyper sexuality to avoid the perception they might be gay.²⁸

Many depictions in film and television feature the warrior culture and identity learned and taught through the hierarchy of military service. There is high adherence to traditional masculine norms; punishment comes to those who deviate. A masculine allegiance pushes to the highest level, where mental toughness is paramount. Those who incur physical or mental injuries, then lose control, are perceived as weak. However, those who feel powerless and hopeless can become traumatized. As military men, weakness is antithetical to the male definition of sexual dominance and power. Wounded men took pride in self-reliance and the perceived ability to handle mental health issues independently. There exists a desire to exhibit emotional control and self-reliance.²⁹

The lead character developed for *Peaky Blinders* managed to portray the façade of stoicism and control, while attempting to conceal the remnants of war. This is the culture depicted, men barely in control, yet assuming great notoriety and social status. War was hell, but war was also the newfound opportunity. What we saw was a group of war-ravaged men who adapted self to the shift in society, set in the cultural context. The actions of the Shelby family illustrate warrior bravado; related violence manifests much like a military organization. Many of those in the Shelby's extended cohort group were former war mates. There are recurring memories of fighting to stay alive, emotionally stuffed by some, while violently acted out by others.

Power, Plots and Patriarchy

The authenticity of setting for this successful BBC series came through series creator Steven Knight, raised in Small Heath (a southeast suburb in Birmingham). His father George was the son of a canal boatman, who worked in the local car factory. Later his father returned to a former

²⁶ Elizabeth C. Neilson et al., "Traditional Masculinity Ideology, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptom Severity, and Treatment in Service Members and Veterans: A Systematic Review," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 21, no. 4 (October 2020): 578–92, <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000257>.

²⁷ Catherine J. Herrera, Gina P. Owens, and Brent Mallinckrodt, "Traditional Machismo and Caballerismo as Correlates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Psychological Distress, and Relationship Satisfaction in Hispanic Veterans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 41, no. 1 (2013): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00024.x>.

²⁸ Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender* (Florence, KY, US: Taylor & Frances/Routledge, 1997), 223–42.

²⁹ Denise M. Eckerlin, Andrea Kovalesky, and Matthew Jakupcak, "CE: Military Sexual Trauma in Male Service Members," *The American Journal of Nursing* 116, no. 9 (September 2016): 34–43, <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NAJ.0000494690.55746.d9>.

occupation, shoeing horses in city stables and scrap merchants' yards. When Knight sat in those scrapyards as a boy in the 1960's, he envisioned the world of the *Peaky Blinders*.³⁰ Characters, voices and inflections in the series were crafted after characters Knight would hear conversing among the scrap piles. Realistic reference to mannerisms came through a local criminal gang. According to Knight, his recollection was of dapperly dressed men, groomed impeccably, with guns at their sides. The miscreants drank whiskey and beer out of jam jars.

Knight later met with Royal Marine Commandos who were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Portions of their recollections played into the design of characters Tommy and Arthur Shelby.³¹ He also drew on experiences through an uncle, who had served in war and witnessed brutal hand to hand combat. On one occasion, his uncle recounted two soldiers gouging each other's eyes out. Knight believed a fury lives inside men who were part of military conflict. His writing for the series focused on the theme of men returning from war, walking into a wilderness.

An impetus for portraying the Shelby family as successful was Knight's reaction to a long history in British television, where the working class are pitiful. From Knight's point of view, wealth is more than a bank account; it is what one is wearing that builds the perception.³² Shelby served as a walking showcase for the city's top haberdasheries. He explained, "I don't pay for suits. My suits are on the house or the house burns down."³³ In the opening scene in Season 1, episode 1 Tommy Shelby loped along the dank, dark streets of Birmingham atop a majestic black stallion.³⁴ There was a hierarchy evident in the social construct of the setting. This well-groomed man rides above the muck and mire of the filthy streets. Women pictured in custodial roles gazed up as Shelby passes. This was a ruthless, powerful man, once a gentle equestrian but now validated through his successful participation in, and return from, war. Considering Birmingham's blight, there was an increased probability of exaggerated and possibly destructive masculinities. When socially marginalized men live in urban slum settings they many times emphasize force and power.³⁵ There was a uniqueness in the lead actor's hairstyle.

When filming began, Knight required actors to conform to a hairstyle popular among World War 1 soldiers. Shaved hair on the back and sides fought off lice; what was under the cap, was of no concern. Cast members were at first reticent to groom to the script, but the style became highly popular and spawned a cultural trend. A choice in fine apparel is most likely the designator for being a "Blinders." A more romantic notion accentuated in the series indicates the gang had razor blades nested in their flat hats. The accessible weapons sliced the foreheads of their adversaries, causing blood to pour down and blind them. Historians remind us razor blades were a luxury item in that era and weren't readily accessible.³⁶

³⁰ Meilan Solly, "Who Were the Real 'Peaky Blinders'? | History | Smithsonian Magazine," October 15, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-were-real-peaky-blinders-180973328/>.

³¹ Allen, "BBC Sounds - Obsessed With... - The Dark, Emotional Forces That Haunt Tommy Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* Are Still Prevalent 100 Years On..."

³² Andrew Billen, "Steven Knight on His Childhood Glimpse at the *Peaky Blinders* World to Working with Brad Pitt," Royal Television Society, August 29, 2019, <https://rts.org.uk/article/steven-knight-his-childhood-glimpse-peaky-blinders-world-working-brad-pitt>.

³³ "*Peaky Blinders*" Episode #1.3 (TV Episode 2013) - IMDb, accessed February 26, 2021, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2471506/characters/nm0614165>.

³⁴ Otto Bathurst, *Episode #1.1*, Crime, Drama (Caryn Mandabach Productions, Tiger Aspect Productions, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2013).

³⁵ Herek, "On Heterosexual Masculinity."

³⁶ Solly, "Who Were the Real 'Peaky Blinders'? | History | Smithsonian Magazine."

In the world of *Peaky Blinders*, the ravages of war became a precursor for opportunity. In the fictional account, Shelby fought in the Battle of Somme, a brutal encounter that claimed 57,000 British troops in the first day (notables who were in that battle include J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis). Young fighting men (and women) adapted, coped with fear and repressed lingering terror. The trauma generated cunning, violence and an incessant desire to win at all costs. As Mr. Shelby so aptly stated, he would “continue (to fight) until I find a man I cannot defeat.”³⁷ This became the tragic trope. An expression of being, creating characters in a figurative sense who can love, or kill, with reckless abandon. It was a cliché of violence as the solution, a necessity for anyone who rose out of the poor industrialized class into power, riches and wealth. The formula seemed authentic in context of rough and tumble 1920’s Birmingham.

There are also tropes related to the Shelby’s Irish heritage. Debbie Ging, writing in *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema*, confirmed the trope of Irish men as masculine. They hold a strong association through their identity to the land. In times of crisis, an Irish man might be either loquaciousness or silent. Men form a “bromance” when acting out in violent actions. Criminals and socially marginalized men define the underclass. They show as both charismatic and sociopathic.³⁸ There were also stereotypical references to the Shelby’s gypsy origin. Much maligned and often the brunt of slurs, a prejudice existed throughout the series. During the second season “Aunt Polly” visited a psychic gypsy medium to connect with her lost daughter. The séance brought spirits to life, something reinforced when Tommy Shelby had recurrent visits from the spirit of his murdered wife Grace (Annabelle Frances Wallis).³⁹

Haunting musical compositions, set outside the historical context, frame the violent world of *Peaky Blinders*. An eclectic mix of musicians supplemented the mood with songs by the White Stripes, Arctic Monkeys, Johnny Cash, Radiohead and PJ Harvey.⁴⁰ The show’s theme “Red Right Hand,” depicts the vengeful hand of God in John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Knight suggests the “Hand” may refer to communists or to unionists from Ireland.⁴¹ Australian artist Nick Cave and his band the Red Seeds provided the lyrics, aptly depicting the psyche of Tommy Shelby, who was some days angel but other days adversary. The pounding rock beat was aggressive, building tension until violent scenes reached crescendo:

*You'll see him in your nightmares you'll see him in your dreams
He'll appear out of nowhere but he ain't what he seems
He's a ghost, he's a god you're one microscopic cog
In his catastrophic plan designed and directed by his red right hand*⁴²

³⁷ Calvin James, *Thomas Shelby | The Man I Can't Defeat | Peaky Blinders*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVXZWQ16SNY>.

³⁸ Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³⁹ M Ross, “Peaky Blinders Season 2: 8 Crucial Questions That Need Answering after Episode 1 | Metro News,” October 3, 2014, <https://metro.co.uk/2014/10/03/8-crucial-questions-from-peaky-blinders-series-2-episode-1-4888980/>.

⁴⁰ Ben Allen, “Peaky Blinders Music – All the Songs on the Soundtrack for Seasons 1-5,” Radio Times, October 18, 2019, <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/peaky-blinders-soundtrack-music-songs/>.

⁴¹ Hardeep Phull, “The Unlikely Story behind ‘Peaky Blinders’ Theme Song,” *New York Post* (blog), June 22, 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/06/22/the-unlikely-story-behind-peaky-blinders-theme-song/>.

⁴² “Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds – Red Right Hand Lyrics | Genius Lyrics,” accessed March 25, 2021, <https://genius.com/Nick-cave-and-the-bad-seeds-red-right-hand-lyrics>.

War is hell, and some argue it brings out the worst in masculine males. This led to plot lines destructive to both the gang, as well as others.⁴³ Though war justifies continued violence, it is important to note the BBC series depicted a *between* war saga. While men lived through the 1920's, fascist regimes of the 1930's were falling into formation. "State sanctioned violence" incited the Nazi movement and also within the resistance. As *Peaky Blinders* moved into its sixth and final season, Mr. Shelby has formed a warm working relationship with British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (in sequence played by Andy Nyman, Richard McCabe, Neil Maskell). "Was it you who killed that Ulsterman intelligence officer? I forget his name," inquires Churchill, regarding the murder of Major Campbell. When Shelby states that it was his Aunt Polly who performed the task, Churchill comments that he "really must come up to Birmingham someday and have a dinner with your family. They sound interesting."⁴⁴

A commonality among Shelby and Churchill was valor in fighting during the Great War. Both men recognized Campbell did not fight. Violence and murder are not only for the soldier, but also the politician; it was Churchill who indirectly authorized the assassination order on Moseley, through battle weary Tommy Shelby.

Peaky Blinders doesn't deny the violent tendencies of shell-shocked soldiers. But what it did so well is showcase how the psyche processes, then expresses those violent manifestations. The cold stoicism and alienation from emotion indicate a greater level of PTSD and hypermasculine behaviors.⁴⁵ There are different manifestations of post-traumatic stress. Medical professionals group those behaviors into negative changes in thinking and mood, avoidance, or changes in physical and emotional reactions.⁴⁶ This can be internalized resulting is an emotionally remote and stoic individual. Tommy was inwardly dwelling, speaking in quiet tone with level head. He is prone to violence through strategy, cunning and ultimately taking power, and life, from his adversaries. Others are explosive, exhibiting uncontrolled physical and emotional outbursts. Arthur depicts the actions of an outward facing survivor.⁴⁷ He attempts to manage his rage. The need to harm boiled just under the surface, always ready to pour out like metaphorical molten lava. The trope is of a man who survived as valiant fighter, rather than coward. Arthur also turned to drugs to dull the demons. Liquor and rampant use of cocaine revved his psyche, making him animalistic and dangerous.

In one vicious scene, Arthur boxed in a ramshackle gym, fighting bare knuckle with a teenage sparring partner. He knocked the boy unconscious. We stared aghast at a tight shot of Arthur's face as if locked in stone, looking down at the boy while unleashing punch after punch. In a later scene, the boy's mother (Mrs. Ross, played by Erin Shanagher) demanded retribution. She came into the Shelby corner bar and fired a round from a handgun at Arthur. "He was a boy who got into the ring with a fucking animal," said a despondent Ross, after missing her target. "Somebody

⁴³ George S. Larke-Walsh, "'The King's Shilling': How *Peaky Blinders* Uses the Experience of War to Justify and Celebrate Toxic Masculinity," *Journal of Popular Television* 7, no. 1 (March 2019): 39–56, https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.7.1.39_1.

⁴⁴ Phillip Etemesi, "Peaky Blinders: Winston Churchill's 10 Best Quotes," ScreenRant, August 22, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/peaky-blinders-winston-churchills-best-quotes/>.

⁴⁵ Neilson et al., "Traditional Masculinity Ideology, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptom Severity, and Treatment in Service Members and Veterans."

⁴⁶ "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - Symptoms and Causes," Mayo Clinic, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>.

⁴⁷ Larke-Walsh, "'The King's Shilling.'"

has got to stop you people.”⁴⁸ As always, Tommy had a solution. He handles the matter and comforts Arthur by assuring Mrs. Ross would receive ongoing remuneration as compensation. Life could proceed as normal.

Tommy and Arthur demonstrate a determination to adapt to society through extreme self-management, while finding difficulty in intimate relationships. There were scenes where the brothers placed themselves in high risk sexual encounters, which made them feel emotionally alive.⁴⁹ Hegemonic masculinity theory suggests men legitimize power through crude political or physical dominance to ensure submission.⁵⁰ Hegemonic men might organize culture through an inequality among genders, a hierarchy of masculinity, and the prioritization of male patriarchy through power, ideals and interactions.⁵¹ When under stress, characters in the series often abused hard liquor. Chronic alcohol use disorder is highly associated with PTSD. Risky drinking is a symptom of traumatized veterans.⁵² Both psychological profiles served the series and fed the plot. Tommy seldom engaged in personal violence, yet is ruthless and would mastermind the demise of anyone who got in the way of family. Arthur would often be directed by Tommy to coordinate and perform executions and assassinations. There had been a war, now a new battle emerged. These soldiers continued to fight.

There is a specialized version of cultural appropriation among gangsters, where men (and women) might attempt to kill each other one day, then collaborate the next—when the relationship led to financial rewards or increased power for both parties. The Shelby’s proved to be both cross-cultural and inclusive. In a climactic closing scene, Arthur Shelby fired close range into a stunned Luca Changretta (Adrien Brody), who is a visiting Italian mafioso bent on destroying the *Peaky Blinders* criminal empire. The Shelby’s held no prejudice in killing the mob leader and were equal-opportunity murderers. The plot also indicates an anti-nationalistic framework, when the Shelby’s undercut Changretta by forming an illegal liquor trade alliance with Chicago-based underworld boss Alfonso Capone.⁵³ Ultimate allegiance lie not in nationality, but rather numbers. There are also gangster alliances between gypsies and Jews. Alphie Solomons (Tom Hardy) was a rum runner who became one of the most popular characters in the series. The war culture depicted is grim; Alphie was a captain in the First World War, where a dispute with an Italian soldier resulted in Alphie driving a six-inch nail up the Italian's nose.⁵⁴ He character is a violent and unpredictable master negotiator, who fronted his illegal liquor business in Camden Town through a bakery. The

⁴⁸ “Mrs. Ross,” Peaky Blinders Wiki, accessed March 12, 2021, https://peaky-blinders.fandom.com/wiki/Mrs._Ross.

⁴⁹ Suzanne E. Decker et al., “Themes in Experiences of PTSD Symptoms and Relationships among Male Veterans with Risky Sexual Behavior,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. 7 (October 2020): 678–86, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000569>.

⁵⁰ Rachel Jewkes et al., “Hegemonic Masculinity: Combining Theory and Practice in Gender Interventions,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17, no. sup2 (October 16, 2015): 112–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1085094>.

⁵¹ R. Jewkes and R. Morrell, “Sexuality and the Limits of Agency among South African Teenage Women: Theorising Femininities and Their Connections to HIV Risk Practises,” *Social Science & Medicine*, Gender and health: Relational, intersectional, and biosocial approaches, 74, no. 11 (June 1, 2012): 1729–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.020>.

⁵² Justin L. Engasser et al., “Public Implementation of a Web-Based Program for Veterans with Risky Alcohol Use and PTSD: A RE-AIM Evaluation of VetChange,” *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 122 (March 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2020.108242>.

⁵³ Molli Mitchell, “Peaky Blinders: Who Is Luca Changretta? Is Changretta Based on a Real Gangster?,” *Express.co.uk*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1277962/Peaky-Blinders-cast-who-is-Luca-Changretta-real-life-gangster-Adrien-Brody-season-4>.

⁵⁴ “Alfie Solomons,” Peaky Blinders Wiki, accessed April 1, 2021, https://peaky-blinders.fandom.com/wiki/Alfie_Solomons.

plot depicts war veterans disloyal in their business commitments. Alpie did business with Tommy but also conducted business with Tommy's rivals. In fact, Alpie later assisted in an attempt on Tommy's life.

But bad men can champion good causes. Alpie was a benefactor within his Jewish community and gave generously to charities that help the blind. Tommy was a major donor to a local orphanage. The trope softened our judgment and led us to accept these violent bad men, through their philanthropic contributions. The end of Season 4 concluded in a dueling scene, where Tommy supposedly shot and killed Alpie. In a surprising plot twist, Alpie returns from the dead in Season 5 where he played a major role supporting Tommy in an assassination attempt on Oswald Mosley, the anti-Semitic leader of the British Union of Fascists. The treacherous Jew and the Gentile Gypsy may be untrustworthy, but gangster sensibilities prevail in this unholy union.⁵⁵

Season 6, the final installment in the television series, experienced a delay due to the coronavirus pandemic. In 2021, filming commenced on the Scottish Coast and across northern England. Episodes resumed on the BBC in February 2022. Knight has informed viewers they will see the Shelby's "set on a path to war" in the runup to World War 2. After the series concludes, Knight will produce a motion picture as epilogue to the entire episodic run.⁵⁶ What will remain constant are unpredictable plotlines throughout each episode. Men who are troubled, broken from the past, yet finding great opportunity in illegal profiteering with some time reserved for special clandestine operations in the name of Churchill. The cast of characters may be copacetic one moment, but betrayers the next. PTSD manifestations – be it inward dwelling or outward facing – become effectual and sometimes noble.

Conclusion

The trope and context of *Peaky Blinders* may prove authentic and necessary. Set in the 1920's, little was known on how to adapt one's crushed psyche after crawling off the battlefield. How were shell shocked veterans to respond? The "treatment" was to survive. Anything less than staying alive indicates a form of conversion therapy that does not fit the time or circumstance. In the case of the *Peaky Blinders* the confrontation never ended. There was only a short interlude, where the gangster life pacified the need continue in combat within society.

While some write and produce scripts that romanticize the violent war survivor, few have given themselves to fully understand the effects of post traumatic stress. In the 2009 Afghanistan war film *Brothers*, actor Tobey Maguire did a full immersion into veterans living through PTSD. This search for truth, honesty and meaning led to a more holistic and representative portrayal. "I was influenced by watching Tobey do that," said film co-star Jake Gyllenhaal. "So, I started to do that (authenticate the character) too."⁵⁷ A large gap remains between depicting the character and living the experience. One who has never engaged in battle cannot comprehend the horrors of war. Most cannot fathom the need to fight as animals to stay alive. The ultimate trope may writers and directors who cannot comprehend stereotyping those who can. Those who have not fought to live, might

⁵⁵ Fay Watson, "Peaky Blinders: How Did Alfie Solomons Become a Gangster? Tragic Backstory Explained," Express.co.uk, October 18, 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1190976/Peaky-Blinders-Alfie-Solomons-backstory-season-5-Tom-Hardy-series-BBC-Netflix>.

⁵⁶ Tom Nicholson, "When Is 'Peaky Blinders' Season 6 Out? Rumours, Teasers, and Everything You Need to Know," Esquire, March 10, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/latest-news/a29498284/when-is-peaky-blinders-season-6-out-rumours-teasers-and-everything-you-need-to-know/>.

⁵⁷ Eric Sullivan, "Jake Gyllenhaal Reconsiders," Esquire, February 17, 2022, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a39008068/jake-gyllenhaal-interview-2022/>.

not presume to know how men of war perceive their futures. Rather than analyze and judge, we might observe and attempt to understand. These are not disadvantaged men, cowering from the horrors of war. They continue to perform as trained. As circumstances shift and the environment changes the relentless soldier marches on, devising ways to defeat his opponent. The traumatic stress encountered becomes an asset. It is no longer a liability in the greater society.

At the time of this writing, the world is again at war. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is playing live and has become the new global pandemic, one of hate that leads to destruction and death. Just as in Tommy Shelby's day, there is a new military adversary. Factions draw territorial lines and citizen soldiers join the battle. Women join the cause and defend against the oppressor. The fight to survive remains the same. Will the outcomes from these atrocities create a modern version of traumatism, where each individual retains their disordered demons? Must each of these soldiers continue the fight and however brutal, oppose through a resistance? No matter the era, the discourse of war requires adaptation. Hegemonic masculinity might be adapted to be inclusive, where all genders and identities earn the right to rage. The transition back to "normal" may not be a reality for many.

Tommy Shelby will let the battle resume with able opponent Oswald Mosley and the anti-Semitic British fascists. If he wins that conflict, Adolf Hitler looms in the distance. It's dangerous and will take ruthless actions to succeed. More men, women and children will die. But this ongoing conflict stops the pain. Alcohol, opium, it was not enough to numb the terror of their dreams. Tommy, before the war, was a smiling lad who loved horses. Now he is a master assassin performing service for his queen. Just as it had been for sniper Barney Thompson, pharmaceuticals were not enough. These characters "just needed another fuckin' war."