

Short Author Bio

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Veterans, Veracity, and Depictions of Violence: An Examination of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Germany's Interwar Period, and the Interplay Between the Two

In 1929 Erich Maria Remarque published *Im Westen nichts Neues*, later translated to English as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, amid a time of great change in European culture. Germans were experiencing a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the outcome of the war and the state their nation had been left in; veterans were struggling in a society which found many of them a hindrance, a political obstacle or a painful reminder of the past; and a growing far-right faction was searching for ways to take advantage of the current socio-political situation. The increased reflection on the war meant that German society had certain expectations about what aspects of a novel were necessary for it to be seen as authentic and thus acceptable as part of the cultural discourse on war.¹ Consequently, Remarque found it necessary to write and market *All Quiet* in a way that rang true to the public but which also effectively argued against the nationalistic, militaristic narratives that dominated war novels and public discourse surrounding the war at the time.² At the same time, Remarque attempted to address the oft-asked questions about what the war had meant and how it had shaped the current era.³ When published, *All Quiet* generated opinions from all sides of the political spectrum and from various international audiences for its depiction of wartime trauma (seen either as humanizing or insulting), its pacifist themes (seen either as inspirational or threatening) and the uncertainty of the novel's authenticity. Remarque's initial success in garnering attention and public discourse was eventually foiled by efforts to prove the novel and author inauthentic and to eventually ban the

¹ Schneider, "The Truth about the War Finally," 492.

² Schneider, "The Truth About the War Finally," 495.

³ Schneider, "The Truth About the War Finally," 495.

book in Germany. These tempestuous events represent the broader political and cultural changes surrounding Europe in the interwar period.

In the years prior to the publishing of *All Quiet*, Germans were experiencing a difficult period in their history which lay the groundwork for Remarque's eventual magnum opus. As Eksteins describes, a lingering trauma, a desire to forget and a sense of confusion all permeated society in the decade following the war, and for a time people preferred to live in the present or look to the future rather than dwelling on the past.⁴ However, war media was not entirely in the doldrums; Ernst Jünger, for example, was a contemporary of Remarque and a war novelist who had served on the front multiple times. While Jünger recognized the pain, misery, drudgery, and futility of modern warfare, he saw the harsh conditions not as a pointless march towards death but as an exacting gauntlet which strengthened the bonds between soldiers and made each of them distilled and simplified to their true and essential qualities, prepared to bravely serve their modern industrial fatherland without thought or question.⁵ Remarque acknowledged the connections soldiers form in *All Quiet*, saying "Formerly we should not have had a single thought in common—now we ... are so intimate that we do not even speak,"⁶ but questions the nature of this brotherhood in chapter eleven, calling it "...the desperate loyalty to one another of men condemned to death."⁷ It was this nationalistic and militaristic tone which Remarque encountered when reviewing books by Jünger and other war authors, and it was that tone which he wrote *All Quiet* in opposition of.⁸

⁴ Eksteins, "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War," 349.

⁵ Hewitson, "A War of Words: The Cultural Meanings of the First World War in Britain and Germany," 760-761.

⁶ Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front," 95.

⁷ Remarque, 272.

⁸ Eksteins, "The Fate of a War," 349.

A similarly zealous tone was present in the contemporary political landscape of the Weimar Republic. In 1929 the economy was worsening, coinciding with the tenth anniversary of the Versailles Treaty which many German nationalists blamed for all of Germany's troubles; the government declared that the anniversary of the Armistice, June 28, was to be a national day of mourning.⁹ In spite of this acknowledgment of the pain the war caused, Germany had no central national monuments for those soldiers lost in World War I; Germany were the losers in the Great War, and so it was difficult to honor the nation's fallen heroes in the same way other European nations did.¹⁰ For similar reasons, veterans in Germany were frequently left without support; in France and Britain, as Hewitson outlines: "...Since the post-war status quo was broadly acceptable and the supposed aggressor had been defeated, the sacrifices and blood-letting could be seen to be worthwhile, and soldiers could be thanked and reintegrated..."¹¹ In Germany, however, veterans did not receive ubiquitous national honor and support, and German society's attempts to move forward meant that many preferred not to acknowledge the physical and mental traumas their fellow citizens gained in battle, leaving some veterans lost, frustrated and disillusioned.¹² Remarque expresses this sense of alienation experienced by veterans' return to civilian life in *All Quiet*, when he says "I have been crushed without knowing it. I find I do not belong here any more, it is a foreign world."¹³ At times, the government's willful ignorance of veterans' plights extended to outright vilification of veterans suffering from PTSD, which was known at the time as shellshock or 'war neurosis.'¹⁴ Many psychiatrists and government officials

⁹ Eksteins, 359.

¹⁰ Schneider, "The Truth About the War Finally," 495.

¹¹ Hewitson, "A War of Words: The Cultural Meanings of the First World War in Britain and Germany," 758.

¹² Eksteins, "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War," 346.

¹³ Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front," 168.

¹⁴ Crouthamel, "Mobilizing Psychopaths into Pacifists: Psychological Victims of the First World War in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 205.

characterized war neurotics as indolent, nefarious, deceitful, or psychotic and some even accused them of being revolutionary enemies of the state, using these arguments as justification to withhold pensions, treatment, and potentially freedom and autonomy, alienating these troubled veterans further.¹⁵ Nationalists like Adolf Hitler were able to exploit this grief and anger, promising that they knew both the cause and the solutions. The public's new interest in discussing the war and how people had been changed in the aftermath presented Remarque with an ideal opportunity to influence the war discourse.

When *All Quiet* was published, there was a certain expectation in Germany about what qualities a novel needed to be seen as authentic and thus to be allowed to influence the public war discourse. In the age of modern war, it was acknowledged that the heroism of historical wars was long past, and that modern wars were painful, dirty, futile efforts to some degree; as such, for a novel about the war to be accepted, it needed to read as 'authentic,' an accurate, unbiased recounting of real experiences in the war. If a book was fictionalized or attempted to use the war as a means to critique contemporary society, it was viewed as literature and thus effectively outside of the war discourse.¹⁶ It was in this literary climate that Remarque published *Im Westen nichts Neues*. He had originally intended to write a trilogy examining the war's impacts on society and on veterans; however, after *All Quiet* was rejected by one publisher, Remarque worked with the democratic Ullstein Trust, which agreed to publish *All Quiet* but requested that Remarque remove sections of the novel exploring explicit anti-war sentiments and that he add sequences of war violence.¹⁷ These changes to the novel fit the book into the public's perception of true war novels, as did interviews and advertisements Remarque and Ullstein participated in

¹⁵ Crouthamel, 209-210.

¹⁶ Schneider, "The Truth," 492.

¹⁷ Schneider, 494.

where they implied that the novel was to some degree autobiographical and amateur.¹⁸ While Remarque and Ullstein may have successfully framed the book as lacking any political message, it's clear that Remarque's original intentions for the novel as a pacifist examination of how the war negatively impacted veterans still applies. This is apparent when Remarque, in the opening pages of the book, refers to "...a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war."¹⁹ Thus *All Quiet*, crafted both to fit the public's definition of an authentic, acceptable war novel and to deliver a covert pacifist message, spread both domestically and abroad and influenced discussion about the war, creating both critical and complimentary responses.

In Germany, with support from government propaganda, many still viewed the war as unfortunate but unavoidable.²⁰ Germany had lost the war, and this left many Germans, particularly veterans, wondering whether their sacrifices had been worth it. Consequently, *All Quiet*'s suggestion that the war had been pointless and millions had fought, died and lost for nothing was deeply troubling.²¹ German communists were also critical of the novel, but for different reasons; they believed that the trauma many experienced in the war was just an extension of the trauma the proletariat suffered under the oppression of capitalism. They accused Remarque of tacitly supporting fascism and imperialism by promoting pacifism rather than encouraging class warfare against the bourgeoisie.²² While the radical left's ideology may have clashed with *All Quiet*'s themes to an extent, the book was of particular concern to the far-right because, as Eksteins points out, "If the war had been an absurdity, then conservatism as a

¹⁸ Schneider, 493.

¹⁹ Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front," 0.

²⁰ Hewitson, "A War of Words: The Cultural Meanings of the First World War in Britain and Germany," 763.

²¹ Hewitson, "A War of Words," 758.

²² Crouthamel, "Mobilizing Psychopaths into Pacifists," 216.

mentality was an absurdity; then fascism, which glorified the 'front experience', was an absurdity.”²³ As such, the novel was heavily criticized in the press; as Kazecki describes, critics warned that the novel “...was about pacifism, the diminishment of soldiers’ sacrifices in the First World War, and the subversion of the spirit of the German Army and, consequently, of the German nation.”²⁴ Despite this vehement opposition, many in Germany did find value in the novel. The Social Democrats were especially enthusiastic about Remarque’s work, praising *All Quiet* for its frank depiction of the psychological damage the war inflicted, an aspect of the book which bolstered their position that war was not a romantic and heroic endeavor.²⁵ The Social Democrats reasoned that the most convincing argument for pacifism was a realistic glimpse of what armed conflict was truly like, and hoped that the unglamorous account of the front experience would have a positive influence on youth who were desensitized and indoctrinated towards violence.²⁶ These brutal depictions of what German soldiers suffered was also appealing to another demographic: people in France and England. During the war, European nations created exaggerated stereotypes of foreign nations as a means to dehumanize their adversaries and remove the incentive to play fair or show mercy; the British saw Germans as possessing "arrogance, barbarity, angularity, Prussianism, bullying, inhumanity, cleverness and many other traits,” according to Hewitson.²⁷ In contrast, Remarque’s depiction of German soldiers as begrudging cogs in the war machine who fought to stay respectable humans while suffering physical and psychological traumas evoked sympathy in many readers. Eksteins

²³ Eksteins, “All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War,” 355-356.

²⁴ Kazecki, “Laughter in the Trenches: Humour and Front Experience in German First World War Narratives,” 135.

²⁵ Crouthamel, “Mobilizing Psychopaths into Pacifists: Psychological Victims of the First World War in Weimar and Nazi Germany,” 213.

²⁶ Crouthamel, 213.

²⁷ Hewitson, “A War of Words: The Cultural Meanings of the First World War in Britain and Germany,” 749.

clarifies, “The great discovery that foreign readers said they made through *All Quiet* was that the German soldier's experience of the war had been, in its essentials, no different from that of soldiers of other nations.”²⁸ Remarque highlights the tragic bond soldiers from both sides shared in *All Quiet*, saying, “...Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony--Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy?”²⁹ Eventually, critics in Germany began questioning the truth and authenticity of *All Quiet*. Some questioned details, such as overly meticulous questions like whether horses bray or moan when injured.³⁰ More pointed questions were asked about whether Remarque and his publisher's claims - that he was a depressed veteran with no experience as an author and no political opinions to persuade the public with - were in fact true.³¹ In spite of the harsh critique, for a time *All Quiet* did well financially and in terms of changing public opinion; however, the efforts of its harshest critics, the National Socialists, eventually led to the book's downfall.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, National Socialists' critique of *All Quiet* was not based on in-depth analysis of the text of the novel. Twice, National Socialist newspapers received alleged firsthand descriptions of the front experience, which the papers praised as being genuine in contrast to the lies of Remarque; in both these instances, the descriptions were in fact excerpts from *All Quiet on the Western Front*.³² National Socialists critiqued *All Quiet* simply because their political enemies praised it as anti-war, which led them to believe that *All Quiet* was a socialist, Jewish conspiracy to slander the concept of the modern German war hero which had

²⁸ Eksteins, “The Fate of a War,” 360-361.

²⁹ Remarque, “All Quiet on the Western Front,” 223.

³⁰ Schneider, “The Truth About the War Finally,” 497.

³¹ Schneider, 495.

³² Kazecki, “Laughter in the Trenches: Humour and Front Experience in German First World War Narratives,” 150-151.

arisen during the Great War and around which Nazism was largely centered.³³ In truth, the National Socialists weren't particularly incorrect in their assumptions that *All Quiet* challenged their ideology; notions which *All Quiet* is centered around, visible in the line "The war has ruined us for everything,"³⁴ are near-opposites of the ideas Nazism was founded on, which could be summed up as 'the war has rebuilt us for anything.' The National Socialists' opposition to Remarque didn't stop with the novel.

All Quiet on the Western Front was adapted into an American film in 1930 by director Lewis Milestone, and was both financially and critically successful, finding popularity in the US, France, and Britain and winning two Academy Awards.³⁵ Like the book, however, the film generated controversy; it was banned by Mussolini's government in Italy,³⁶ and in Germany National Socialists also called for a ban, arguing that the film, like the novel, insulted the nation's image.³⁷ When a heavily-edited version of the film was eventually allowed to appear in German cinemas, National Socialists lead by future Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels protested the showing by buying tickets for one-third of the seats in the theater³⁸ and shouting threatening and anti-semitic exclamations fifteen minutes into the showing.³⁹ Goebbels proceeded to stand and deliver a speech in the theater, causing Marxists in the audience to begin brawling with the brownshirts, who released white mice and threw stink bombs. The police arrived and forcibly cleared the riot, which had spread to the square outside the theater, but 6000 National

³³ Kazecki, 136.

³⁴ Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front," 87.

³⁵ Eksteins, "The Fate of a War," 363.

³⁶ Eksteins, 363.

³⁷ Hewitson, "A War of Words: The Cultural Meanings of the First World War in Britain and Germany," 763.

³⁸ Hewitson, 763.

³⁹ Birgel, "Kuhle Wampe, Leftist Cinema, and the Politics Film Censorship in Weimar Germany," 45.

Socialists continued to demonstrate against the film over the next several days, forcing all demonstrations in Berlin to be outlawed.⁴⁰ Socialists and left liberals critiqued this demonstration, but days later the film was banned by Germany's right-leaning censorship board, supported by the Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Office. By getting the film banned, the National Socialists achieved two things: firstly, they solidified their party's presence in the media,⁴¹ and secondly, they created a reliable strategy to delegitimize the democratic institutions in Germany, which they proceeded to do until 1933.⁴² The Nazi party, which built a great deal of its ideology from the cultural and political climate of the Great War, maneuvered itself into power in 1933. Within months, *All Quiet on the Western Front* - the novel which for many captured the experience of the Great War and which had a major influence on the cultural depiction of the war - was symbolically burned along with other books which were deemed politically and morally un-German.⁴³ At the same time that *All Quiet* was outlawed because it was viewed as disrespectful to those who fought in the Great War, mentally disabled veterans - many of whom had supported their fellow veteran Hitler based on the assumption that he understood their experiences and would fight for them - were completely cut from welfare assistance, again with the rationalization that they were lazy, fraudulent enemies of the state.⁴⁴ Remarque and the National Socialists gained very different insights from their time in battle, but they, German veterans, and the population of Germany as a whole were majorly impacted by the

⁴⁰ Birgel, 45-46.

⁴¹ Kazecki, 136.

⁴² Schneider, "The Truth About the War Finally," 490.

⁴³ Eksteins, "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War," 363.

⁴⁴ Crouthamel, "Mobilizing Psychopaths into Pacifists: Psychological Victims of the First World War in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 219-220.

events that transpired in the Great War, an experience which irrevocably changed Europe and the world.

All Quiet on the Western Front, shaped by the tumultuous social and political climate of the postwar Weimar Republic, was originally intended to be more strongly anti-war, but even after being edited to fit society's perception of an acceptably authentic war novel, it had major influences on public discourse. The book's depiction of the trauma and struggle of German soldiers in the trenches was highly controversial, as were its pacifist themes, eliciting anger from some but empathy from others. Remarque was eventually criticized for his 'untrue' depictions of the war, and National Socialists who viewed Remarque's work as a threat successfully banned the novel and film adaptation. These events share clear parallels with the Weimar Republic's initial postwar impulse to ignore the war and move forward, followed by an increased cultural examination of how the war affected society, and finally by a fascist regime inspired by the war then taking power. While Remarque's novel may not have had the effect he originally intended, *All Quiet on the Western Front* had a meaningful impact far beyond the bounds of Remarque's contemporary culture, even influencing our modern understanding of the Great War and the interwar period which followed.

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