

Edlef Köppen's *Higher Command*: An important novel on the First World War

Clara Weiss
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In recent years, Edlef Köppen's novel about the First World War, *Higher Command*, has again become available in a number of formats in German. It has appeared as a hardback and paperback book, as an audio book, and as an e-book. The novel is also available free of charge in German from the Project Gutenberg web site. The book appeared in English in 1931 and has not been republished since then.

In view of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, *Higher Command* is very relevant reading.

The novel focuses on a 21-year-old student, Adolf Reisiger, who, like many others caught up in a surge of patriotism and enthusiasm for war, volunteers for military service in the summer of 1914. The novel describes his experiences: first on the Western Front in France and then on the Eastern Front for a few months, until he lives through the final defeat of the German army in the summer of 1918. By then, he has risen to the rank of officer, but all his initial enthusiasm for the war has evaporated.

Reisiger experiences the first gas attacks in France. At first, the soldiers regard them as just another of the military's technical innovations. The first reports of gas attacks are dryly received as "a lot of fuss about nothing", but the devastating consequences soon become apparent.

The novel's senior-ranking German doctor, who shows the soldiers how to put on gas masks, assures them, "Of course, we adhere to the rules of international law, which have frequently enough been outraged by those swine over there, but we are making it as hot a hell for them as we can." [Edlef Köppen, *Higher Command* (New York: J. Cape & H. Smith, 1931), p. 129]

A few pages later, Köppen languidly cites newspaper reports about a German gas attack on the French army: "The gas cloud swept over a sector of the front chiefly occupied by the French-Colonial Division between

Bixschoote and Langemark, and spread terror and confusion in their ranks. 15,000 cases of asphyxiation occurred, of which 5,000 terminated fatally." [p. 133]

Accounts of the mass slaughter during the war are conveyed in a simple and sober language. It is precisely this transparent narrative style that imbues the scenes of barbarity with such shocking force.

The description of one of the Allies' cavalry attacks, for example, is as masterful as it is unsettling: "Machine-gun fire sprayed amidst the plunging horses, whose shattered stumps dragged along the ground. Shrapnels bursting in the air, then shells exploding on the ground, sheets of sulphurous flame, columns of brown smoke, jets of bleeding intestines as thick as a man's arm, limbs and trunks of man and beast hurled skywards; such was the sight they witnessed all along the whole cavalry-front from Loos to the coal-dump." [p. 198]

Reisiger and his comrades are increasingly unable to see any sense in the mass slaughter. By 1917, at the latest, the soldiers are war-weary to the point of exhaustion. In these months, Reisiger is transferred to the Eastern Front. Shortly before this, he has been promoted to an officer rank, although he has published pacifist poems in the left-socialist newspaper, *The Action*, in 1916. Now, on the Eastern Front, he witnesses the mass desertion of the Russian soldiers. The Soviet government, which came to power under the leadership of the Bolsheviks in October, brings the war to an end a few months later.

But even after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, whose harsh conditions were forced upon the Soviet government, the German government continues the war. Reisiger is again commissioned to the Western Front, where the German High Command hopes to deliver the Allies a crushing blow. As an officer he is involved in the preparation of the offensive in the summer of 1918, which ends in a devastating defeat for the Germans. The relative strength of the Allies, now reinforced by American troops, has

grown to 7 million combatants, compared to 2.5 million on the German side.

After the German army is virtually overrun by the Allies, Reisiger deserts. He tells his superiors that the war was the greatest of all crimes and that he no longer wants to be part of it. On account of this, he is put into an asylum.

What makes *Higher Command* exceptional is that contemporary documents are woven into the narrative throughout the whole novel: excerpts from German newspaper articles, dedicated to maintaining the tide of war propaganda; statements from generals and Kaiser Wilhelm II; encyclopaedia entries; censorship ordinances; the call for peace, made by the Soviet government to the peoples of the world after the victorious October Revolution of 1917.

The battles, in which Reisiger participates, are not only reported from the narrator's perspective; their horror and significance is enhanced by the inclusion of pertinent newspaper articles and quotations from historical works that were written later.

This technique enables the author to reveal not only the striking contrast between the propaganda and the brutal reality of a war that destroyed the lives of millions of people. The reader also gains a rarely communicated insight into the contemporary political and cultural climate.

This almost documentary character of the novel largely succeeds in making comprehensible the tremendous shock to the consciousness and world view of millions of soldiers and civilians during the war. Many soldiers as well as civilians believed the propaganda at the beginning of the war. But the brutal reality of front-line warfare, mass poverty, hunger and the despair of families left behind obliterated these illusions in the prevailing order.

The author, Edlef Köppen, was born in 1893 and, like Reisiger, fought in the war for four years. During the 1920s, he worked as a radio editor and published poems. He wrote his strongly autobiographical novel in the late twenties. It appeared in 1930, two years after Erich Maria Remarque's famous *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

The onset of the global economic crisis in 1928 once again made the First World War a hotly debated topic in the Weimar Republic. In 1930, the book market began to be flooded with right-wing patriotic war novels, partly in response to Remarque's anti-war book, of which hundreds of thousands of copies were sold in the first few years.

These circumstances, as well as the overwhelming

popularity of Remarque's novel, pushed *Higher Command* into the background. Nevertheless, the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. The German writer Ernst Toller wrote: "Köppen's book must find hundreds of thousands of readers, in Germany and in all other countries."

Although the work then appeared in English in 1931, it has never become as well known as other anti-war novels either in Germany or abroad.

The Nazis burned the book in 1933. Köppen was able to publish some works in Berlin newspapers under a pseudonym, but he soon withdrew—as did many oppositional intellectuals—into the film industry. He started to work with the TOBIS film producer, but came into serious conflict with the Nazis when the film producer was subordinated to Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry.

Köppen refused to join the Nazi party and work on anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi films in the party's programme. In February 1939, a few months before the beginning of World War II, he died from the lingering effects of a war injury at the age of only 46. His novel was largely forgotten. It didn't appear again in German until the 1970s.

Although *Higher Command* is artistically different in every respect from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it in no way falls short of the literary quality of Remarque's famous novel. Under conditions in which the imperialist powers are again preparing for a world conflagration and the media are again beating the drums of war, *Higher Command* deserves a wide readership.



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