

All Quiet on the Western Front: A generation haunted by war

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As the centenary of World War I continues to be marked, the ruling elites of the various belligerent imperialist powers—the US, Britain, Germany, France, Canada and Australia—are showing their true colors through their jingoism, further police-state measures and preparations for new wars.

The majority of the world's population is hostile to those policies. However, official cultural life has offered no analysis of or opposition to the past quarter-century of war. Nor is it capable of bringing forward the anti-war artistic and literary heritage of the 20th century, which reflected the tremendous opposition of wide layers of the working class, as well as writers, artists and intellectuals, to war and the capitalist system that produces it.

The horrors of the First World War generated the work of poets and authors such as Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, Henri Barbusse (*Under Fire*, 1916), Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929), Robert Graves (*Good-Bye to All That*, 1929), Charles Yale Harrison (*Generals Die in Bed*, 1930) and Dalton Trumbo (*Johnny Got His Gun*, 1939), as well as that of countless lesser known artists. Many of these works had a wide following.

All Quiet on the Western Front (*Im Westen nichts Neues*), by Erich Maria Remarque, arguably remains the book most clearly identified with the anti-war novel as a genre. Remarque's book treats the role of those who promoted the war and led the youth to the slaughterhouse, the miseries of trench warfare and the similarities between the suffering soldiers in the various armies.

The novel, published in 1929, launched Remarque into the national and international spotlight, as a result of both the book's mass popularity and the political debates it triggered within Germany. Remarque's brutally honest depiction of German society during wartime proved incompatible with the extreme right-wing ideologies of the growing Nazi party and the German military.

In 1930 the Nazis organized protests to disrupt screenings of the novel's film adaptation (directed by Lewis Milestone) and attacked audience members. After they came to power, the Nazis burned copies of the book and the Hitler regime revoked Remarque's German citizenship in 1938.

Considering the depth of the reaction, it may seem surprising that Remarque did not write *All Quiet* with any particular political purpose. Nor apparently did he anticipate how the novel would be received. Somewhat conscious of his own naiveté, Remarque supposedly told German writer Thomas Mann after the Nazis had consolidated their rule, "It is more by good luck than good judgment that I am on the side I now stand on, but I know it happens to be the right one."

There are weaknesses in the book, and Remarque's political vagueness no doubt played a part, but as a whole the novel is a tremendously honest attempt to understand World War I and the impact it had on his generation.

In his brief introduction, Remarque states, "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not

an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war."

The novel introduces Paul Baumer, a 20-year-old German soldier who joined the army as part of his generation. Baumer, who narrates the novel, expresses a thorough-going pessimism about the possibility of ever leading an ordinary life after the war, as he witnesses his childhood friends die in the fighting.

Expressing his disconnect from his pre-war life, he states, "Our early life is cut off from the moment we came here, and that without our lifting a hand."

Baumer experiences despair. He and his fellow soldiers neither buy into the official propaganda—which blames foreign countries for the war—nor do they feel they have anything to gain by fighting. At one point, Baumer explains that "there is nothing [with] which one can properly counter" the argument that things would be better without the war, "because that is the limit of their [the drafted soldiers'] comprehension of the factors involved."

Baumer lashes out at the petty German bureaucrats who have become "convinced that they were acting for the best—in a way that cost them nothing." This includes Baumer's schoolmaster, Kantorek, who encouraged all the students to enlist, as well as the town's postman, Himmelstoss, who is promoted to corporal and zealously torments the new recruits as part of their training. One of the most memorable elements of the novel (and the film) is its indictment of those who criminally lied to and misled Remarque's generation.

When not harassed by officers and bureaucrats, Baumer's group is primarily concerned with surviving the war. Stanislaus "Kat" Katczinsky, a 40-year-old cobbler, becomes a father figure to them because of his ability to locate food to steal since the army does not provide them with enough.

The scale of the war drive is so immense that it impacts and damages every aspect of German society. On leave, Baumer is exposed to life behind the lines where the total mobilization has also produced a food shortage.

Even his personal relationships are strained. Baumer's father frequently asks uncomfortable questions about his experience at the front. The war has driven a wedge between Baumer and all those who have not witnessed the fighting firsthand. He explains, "When I see them [civilians] here, in their rooms, in their offices, about their occupations, I feel an irresistible attraction in it, I would like to be here too and forget the war; but also it repels me, it is so narrow ... They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand, whom I envy and despise."

At the same time, there is a commonality among all the participants in the war. Describing the awfulness of combat, Remarque observes in the novel, "All men of my age, here and over there, throughout the whole world see these things; all my generation is experiencing these things with me."

In one of the novel's most memorable episodes, Baumer is trapped in a shell-hole along with a French soldier he has just killed. He sorrowfully addresses the corpse, "Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. 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?"

After the publication of his powerful novel, Remarque received thousands of letters from soldiers around the world thanking him for sharing his account of the war and revealing the likeness of their experiences.

Remarque's approach to his generation, and all those who served in the war, was rooted in a type of humanitarian internationalism without much political content. His views were incompatible with militarism and extreme nationalism, but fell short of explaining some of the larger events of his era.

This weakness would become more prominent in his sequel to *All Quiet, The Road Back* (*Der Weg Zurück*, 1931), which follows soldiers from the same company as in the earlier book during the 1918 revolutionary uprisings in Germany.

Remarque hints that the Nazis drew support from a different generation, too young to have experienced the war. He is at a loss, however, to explain how soldiers who fought side by side during World War I can be battling each other in the streets, as many join in the revolutionary struggles and others fight to suppress them.

The strengths and weaknesses of Remarque's work stem in part from his personal approach to the great events of his time. Baumer, and Ernst in *The Road Back*, function to a certain extent as stand-ins for the author, whose own understanding of those events was limited.

Born Erich Paul Remark in June 1898, he was raised in a conservative, Catholic working class family in the small city of Osnabrück in western Germany. His father worked as a bookbinder. Remarque excelled at school and expressed a love for literature.

When the war broke out in August 1914, Remarque was 16 years old and, like many European youth, was initially swept up in the wave of patriotic fervor. He joined the Osnabrück Youth Corps, a militaristic cadet organization that practiced war games, and his first literary work was published in the organization's magazine.

Remarque began studying philosophy, and joined the "Traumbude" (Dream Den), a circle of young people—organized around poet and painter Fritz Hörstemeier—that discussed literature, music and art. In November 1916 Remarque—unlike his fictional counterpart Baumer—was conscripted into the German army.

While Remarque primarily worked fortifying positions behind the frontline and rarely engaged in combat, there is evidence that he actually experienced several events portrayed in *All Quiet*. These included heroically carrying a wounded soldier to safety, only to discover that the man had died of a separate injury.

Returning home to Osnabrück in 1919, Remarque expressed both patriotic and rebellious sentiments. He was arrested by military police for displaying medals he had not earned. Later, because of his role in a student protest, he was falsely accused of sympathizing with the Spartacist uprising.

After finishing his education, Remarque briefly worked as an elementary school teacher, before abandoning that career to pursue writing. The latter included taking on writing assignments for magazines focused on luxury goods.

At a time when many Germans were struggling to find employment and feed their families, Remarque was an exception to the rule. He had connections with extremely wealthy individuals and drove high-end cars. In 1925, Remarque moved to Berlin to write for the sports journal *Sport im Bild*, and the same year married actress Ilsa Jutta Zambona. In Berlin

he traveled in intellectual circles, befriending various artists, including dancer and future Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl.

In the fall of 1927, Remarque wrote a first draft of *All Quiet on the Western Front* over the course of a few weeks after falling into a state of depression as a result of his wife's infidelity. In later interviews, Remarque would state that the novel was the product of his coming to terms with the real causes of his mental state.

In his novel, Remarque tapped into the moods of wide layers of his generation who remained haunted by the war and many other Germans devastated by the economic collapse. Remarque assumed no one would be interested in his manuscript and kept it in his desk drawer for six months, only showing it to close friends, and his wife—who encouraged him to seek publication.

The publishing house S. Fischer Verlag picked up the novel and began a major promotional campaign. By the end of 1929, *All Quiet* had sold over 1 million copies in Germany alone, and hundreds of thousands abroad, and Remarque became the center of national and international political debate.

Unprepared for the reaction to his novel, Remarque retreated from the public eye to work on *The Road Back*. With the exception of a few brief passages in the new novel, he had little response to the Nazis' verbal attacks on him.

Two years later, after the Nazis banned and burned his books in May 1933, Remarque left Germany for Switzerland, where he owned a villa. He was forced to flee in the night after being warned by a friend with ties to the Nazi party that he was in danger.

Remarque's next work, *Three Comrades* (*Drei Kameraden*), the final installment of the trilogy that began with *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was not published until 1936. The novel, which follows three friends who run an auto-repair shop in Berlin in the late 1920s, is the weakest in the series. It focuses primarily on a love story against the backdrop of the Nazis' rise to power. As was the case with the previous installments, the main character, Robert Lohkamp, is a World War I veteran who served in Baumer's fictional company.

Remarque's youngest sister, Elfriede Scholz, accused of undermining the war effort, was arrested and executed by the Nazis during World War II. The court declared, "Your brother is unfortunately beyond our reach—you, however, will not escape us."

Remarque would go on to write various novellas and screenplays, most of them minor, frequently returning to the issues of World War I and its aftermath. He was repatriated as a German citizen after the war, but was largely isolated from German culture. Most of his work continued to have a significant following in the US. He died on September 25, 1970 in Switzerland.

All Quiet on the Western Front retains its power. One does not look to the novel to explain the driving forces of World War I, but rarely, if ever, has any work so sensitively registered the shattering impact of combat on the human psyche and personality. The current international situation in many ways resembles the period before 1914. Journalists and artists have done almost nothing to warn the population about the grave dangers. Remarque's attempt to represent war as he experienced it takes on a new importance.



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