

All Quiet on the Western Front: A strong anti-war film, and at the right time

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Directed by Edward Berger, based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque.

German writer-director Edward Berger's new film adaptation of the Erich Maria Remarque anti-war classic *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1928) is an impressive depiction of the horror of the First World War. More than that, it exposes the ruthlessness with which an entire generation were sent to the slaughter.

The film, produced by Netflix and also being shown in cinemas, reached number 1 on the streaming charts immediately after its release. It is also being discussed as a possible candidate for an Academy Award.

Remarque's book is justifiably regarded as one of the definitive anti-war novels. Not so much for its literary finesse or its examination of the political and social roots of the bloody conflict, but because it presents the reality of trench warfare from the perspective of the 17-year-old Paul Bäumer with brutal honesty, and in all its physical and emotional devastation.

The publication of the book ten years after the conclusion of the war proved to be political dynamite. The German government had long been working on rearmament, and Hitler's Nazi Party was doing everything in its power to encourage militarism and chauvinism. Under these conditions, the realistic depiction of imperialist war in Remarque's novel took on enormous significance.

The ultra-nationalist *Deutsche Adelsblatt*, official organ of the German nobility, for example, feared the book would awaken and strengthen a sentiment of "Never again war." The Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* described the novel as the "exultant apology of deserters, defectors, mutineers and shirkers," and conducted a ferocious campaign against the work and its author.

Lewis Milestone's ground-breaking, English-language film adaption of the novel (with Lew Ayres as Paul) was only passed by the German authorities in 1930 in a heavily censored form. Nevertheless, the Nazis organised a massive smear campaign, disrupting showings with stink and smoke bombs and blockading cinemas.

The year 2022 is certainly an appropriate moment in which to create a new film adaption of this material in a modern visual language, and so make it widely accessible to a new generation.

With the US-NATO war against Russia, tens of thousands of young people on both sides of the front are once again turned into mere cannon fodder in the interests of the financial oligarchies. Soldiers and civilians alike face being ripped apart and mutilated in combat and bombings, while the war threatens humanity as a whole with nuclear annihilation. Under these conditions, the official media and layers of academics attempt to downplay or even conceal entirely the ruthlessness and criminality of both world wars in the last century.

The re-emergence of militarism brings with it the renewed glorification of battle and the hero worship of 'warriors.' War reporting is limited for the most part to "embedded journalism" and mind-numbing propaganda. By contrast, Berger's film portrays the reality of combat. Through its

concentration on the circumstances in which ordinary soldiers find themselves, the new *All Quiet on the Western Front* is able to present a truly universal experience, of burning relevance today.

Even if the filmmakers deliberately stray from the novel's plot at times, they do manage to bring much of the book's overall mood to the screen. In the process, however, they largely relinquish character development. The focus here lies on the situation into which the young men are thrown and in which they must suddenly find their way. Through close-ups of physical gestures and facial expressions, the experience of the protagonists becomes palpable.

This *All Quiet on the Western Front* does not open with Bäumer, but with a fierce battle that occurs before he is called up. In its aftermath, the uniforms are taken off the fallen soldiers and the mud and blood removed in massive cauldrons. Dozens of seamstresses patch the uniforms back together in an enormous hall. When Bäumer is given such an outfit, he wonders about the name badge it still bears, which is then swiftly removed by an officer. The murderous machinery is now set in gear once again and the action of the film begins.

In the confrontation with this machinery, the viewer is not spared—its brutality is mercilessly portrayed, as in the Remarque novel. The camera does not cut away but maintains its implacable gaze when bodies are blown up, soldiers run over by tanks or burnt by flame-throwers. The agile camerawork during the battles brings the audience directly into the midst of the fighting.

The realistic presentation of the horrors of war is sustained by a detailed production design, by images of soldiers caked in mud crawling for their lives. A score, rather restrained for the war genre, which picks up the noises of the action or serves to foreshadow events, also underscores the horrors. Human sounds such as breathing, panting and moaning are clearly heard and feel close by.

It is in this setting that the protagonists move between full integration into the bloody machinery of war and their own humanity. This principal theme of the 1928 book is impressively dramatized through the remarkable acting of Felix Kammerer, as Paul Bäumer, and Albrecht Schuch as his fatherly friend Stanislaus "Kat" Katczinsky.

A number of sequences are especially memorable: for example, when Bäumer reaches the enemy trenches under a hail of bullets, killing French soldiers in a desperate fury and then, when sighting a young enemy, recognising himself. Or when Bäumer carries the wounded Kat back to camp in a superhuman effort, only to discover in the field hospital that he has been carrying a corpse the whole time, as Kat has already succumbed to his wounds. It is the desperate struggle against death.

Other key scenes from the Remarque novel are also well presented. During one battle, Bäumer seeks cover in a bomb crater and once there stabs a French soldier. Bäumer must lie in the crater next to the dying man, trying to keep him quiet. Gradually, the German youth becomes aware of how similar their situations are. He tries to stabilise the fatally wounded soldier, calls him comrade and promises the man he will return

his wallet to his family. This scene shows the panic and brutality, and at the same time the emotionally painful moments of remorse and empathy, that characterise daily existence at the front.

From the devastated Bäumer, making his way back to camp across the battlefield at night, the film cuts to the sumptuous evening meal of the ruthless General Friedrichs (Devid Striesow), a figure introduced by Berger and his screenwriters. This sequence underscores the fact that Bäumer is far closer to the ordinary French soldier than to the German general.

When Bäumer finally reaches the camp, he finds soldiers celebrating. One approaches him and shouts: “The fat pigs [the army’s general staff] have seen sense. They are finally negotiating. We will soon be travelling home, soldier.”

In these critical scenes, however, the principal weaknesses of this *All Quiet on the Western Front* also make themselves apparent. In the novel, the crater scene is the culmination of a process, the complex development of Bäumer’s doubts, which are largely absent in the new film. Thus, the home leave, in which the young recruit becomes aware of his deep alienation from militarised German society, has been eliminated, and the confrontation with Russian prisoners of war, toward whom Bäumer feels deep compassion, has also been excised.

In general, due to the radically “immediate” approach, one hardly learns anything about the thoughts and mental lives of the young soldiers. In Remarque’s book, the horror of war does not simply unfold in the misery of the trenches, but in the very scenes in which the youths attempt to come to terms with what they have experienced. When Bäumer lies to his terminally ill mother that everything is fine at the front or has to tell the mother of his comrade Kemmerich about the latter’s death, the reader is confronted with the deep psychological wounds that the war has inflicted on the younger generation.

It is precisely these experiences that cause Bäumer and his comrades the most difficulty because they evoke the humanity that is directly at odds with the reality at the front. “The dangerous moments that show us that adaptation is only artificial after all. Sometimes it suddenly bursts out, this dangerous, pent-up—as if from overheated steam boilers,” as the novel explains.

By omitting these central elements, Berger’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* not only loses tragedy and depth. The soldiers are reduced to mere victims of the war because the ability to resist inherent in many of the novel’s scenes is not conveyed. The soldiers’ dialogue is sparse and often incomprehensibly mumbled, while the general, for example, speaks in a manner fit for the stage.

It may be that Berger uses this as a device to express the soldiers’ speechlessness in the face of the horrors they have experienced, a condition that certainly has its place in the book too. But when immensely important discussions about the sense and nonsense of war, the hollowness of war propaganda and the equality of French and German workers are almost completely omitted, a dramatically different picture emerges.

This finds its clearest expression in what is probably the most telling change from Remarque’s original. Whereas his book ends in October 1918 with Bäumer’s death on a “quiet day” on the Western front and at least hints at the German revolution that will break out a month later (“If there is no peace, then there is revolution”), Berger shifts his film’s finale to November 11, the day the armistice takes effect.

His fictional General Friedrichs sends the soldiers, who are already celebrating the armistice, into a hopeless final battle 15 minutes before the ceasefire takes effect. A few refuse and are shot, but the great mass tramp apathetically and exhausted back into the trenches. Bäumer again gets caught up in the savage frenzy of the front, shooting and slaying Frenchmen who actually no longer want to fight, and engages in fierce hand-to-hand combat, in the course of which he is stabbed in the back

seconds before the end of the fighting.

Thus, the image of the weak-willed and submissive killing machine is taken to extremes, and a generally pessimistic and hopeless point of view adopted. This not only feels absurd and unlikely—it also does not reflect the reality of the war. A scene like the one shown in the film did not occur on the Western Front. Not only that, but when the German Naval Command attempted to sabotage the peace negotiations with a final offensive shortly before the armistice, the sailors mutinied, triggering the November Revolution, in the course of which workers’ and soldiers’ councils were formed throughout the country, driving out the Kaiser and ending the war.

The novel also only hints at the revolution, suggesting this possibility through the fraternisation of the German troops with the “enemy” and the soldiers’ ability to resist. Remarque shows the fundamentally hostile attitude towards the war among the ordinary soldiers. They feel out of place, reject militarism and its representatives, such as the hated instructor Himmelstoss and the patriotic academics like Kantorek who conquer the world at the regulars’ table in the pub. The soldiers despise the “field gendarme” and the “commissary policeman” who supervise the soldiers, and bitterly comment: “The factory owners in Germany have become rich people—our guts are being destroyed by dysentery.”

Berger has almost entirely erased the insurrectionary developments on all sides of the front. He shifts the central portion of the film to the month when soldiers were deserting, refusing orders and the generals were increasingly losing control, but leaves all that untreated, except for one passing comment. Instead, he shows in detail the peace negotiations under the centrist politician Matthias Erzberger (Daniel Brühl), who is portrayed quite pointedly as a bagman of the general staff, but who contributes little to the understanding of the war and its end.

Berger justifies the introduction of this plot element by explaining that he wanted to throw a “spotlight on the future,” in which the militarists, making use of Erzberger’s signing of the armistice, spread the stab-in-the-back legend and thus ideologically paved the way for the Second World War.

But this development was by no means straightforward. The First World War led not only to the far-right *Freikorps*, out of which many of Hitler’s forces were recruited, and to reaction, but also to revolution and a deep anti-militarist conviction in the working class. The appearance of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, in fact, fuelled this attitude through its unsparing documenting of the ravages of war.

The new film also manages to make the horrors of war tangible. It sticks in the viewer’s bones for weeks afterwards, and the question hammers inside one’s head as to how such a catastrophe can be prevented in the face of renewed warmongering today. This is precisely why the film’s bleak outlook and its eradication of real social contradictions are so regrettable.

Nevertheless, this *All Quiet on the Western Front* will help inspire a new generation to look at the reasons for imperialist slaughter and incite opposition to the forces who threaten the world with a Third World War. It will encourage them to reject today’s Himmelstösses and Kantoreks in media offices and at university lecterns and to join an international movement against war.

Today too the only way to prevent a new outbreak of barbarism is through the mobilisation of the international working class. “War will be stopped not by appeals and protests directed to the ruling class and its governments, but through the political mobilization of the international working class,” reads the IYSSE’s statement calling for the international online meeting against the Ukrainian war.



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