

Nazi Propaganda and the 1930 Berlin Film Premiere of “All Quiet on the Western Front”

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Abstract—Historical narration is an act that necessarily develops and deforms history. This “translation” is examined within the historical and political context of the 1930 Berlin film premiere of “All Quiet on the Western Front,” a film based on Erich Maria Remarque’s 1928 best-selling novel. Both the film and the novel appeared during an era in which life was conceived of as innately artistic. The emergence of this “aestheticization” of memory and history enabled conservative propaganda of the period to denounce all art that did not adhere conceptually to its political tenets, with “All Quiet” becoming yet another of its “victims.”

Keywords—Propaganda, Film, International Literature, Popular Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE unprecedented magnitude of death and destruction of the First World War forever altered how Europeans perceived their world and how they represented those perceptions. Modris Ekstein in “The Rites of Spring” describes the seismic change in human consciousness brought about by this cataclysm as “a psychological turning point” in which “the urge to create and the urge to destroy had changed places” [1].

While most Germans could see no practical alternative to the acceptance of defeat, they “were inclined to sympathize with the radical elements that at least had the courage vigorously and publicly to deny that the war effort had been in vain” [2]. This tendency toward fiction allowed Germans to confront their suffering, doubt and self-pity; as the German nationalist author Ernst Jünger stated in 1921, before long the war had the character of the “crucifixion paintings of the old masters” [3]. The belief that Germany had not lost on the battlefield but had been undermined by the political left was part of this same narcissistic complex, a narcissism that rejected reality and sought to reshape the world as a more perfect one. This psychological and deeply conservative shift rejected any conventional humanistic concepts in order to promulgate a fantastic concept of existence that was essentially hollow, for it was affirmation without criticism, struggle without insight. Indeed, fascism and the forces on the right allied with it were an incarnation of ritualistic theatre on a grand and ultimately deadly scale. Unlike the common conception of the Nazi era, that is, as a reactionary and monolithic order that saw the past as a model to be emulated, Nazism was a radical and unstable movement that used the

past to affirm subjective experience, a movement whose tenets had been forged by a war in which defeat was impossible to accept. In this process, history, as an objectively conceived enterprise of shared knowledge, had no integrity of its own – it was a tool to be exploited. And although Nazi propaganda attacked, ridiculed and despised anything that it perceived as undermining its faith in an awakened Germany, the morality of violence that it promulgated was informed essentially by tattered ideas and jargon inherited from earlier decades; notably, as Ekstein points out, from the “paranoid Austro-German border politics of the pre-1914 era, which saw ‘Germanness’ threatened with inundation by ‘subject nationalities’” [4].

In 1928, the vitality and staying power of the Nazi movement was not a given. In May of that year, parliamentary elections were held in which the Socialist Democrats and Communists gained ground and in which conservative parties such as the *Deutschnationale* [German Nationals] and the *Deutsche Volkspartei* [German People’s Party] lost votes, with the *Nationalsozialisten* [National Socialists] relegated to a meaningless 12 seats (compared to the Social Democrats 153). Despite this climate of political polarization, there was hope that Weimar Germany’s international isolation would end and that it would continue on the path of relative stability: in 1925 Chancellor Stresemann improved relations with the western powers by signing the Locarno Agreement; in 1926 Germany was admitted into the League of Nations with a permanent seat on the Council; in 1928 Germany signed the Briand-Kellogg Pact by which the world’s major nations renounced war as an instrument of national policy; and in 1930 Allied troops withdrew from the Rhineland.

Yet many Germans were not satisfied with these diplomatic gains. The right-wing nationalists above all could not forget that the Treaty of Versailles had deprived Germany of many territories, that more than 3 million Germans still lived in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria, and that Austria was still forbidden to unite with Germany. The government formed in June 1928 after the national elections was that of a coalition of relatively moderate parties. But by 1930 it had fallen, victim of the economic problems of 1928-29, and within Germany there was a revived nationalist sentiment that went hand in hand with social disillusionment.

II. THE REMARQUE DEBATE

This was the context in which Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front” appeared. When the *Vossische Zeitung*, owned by the Ullstein Company, published Remarque’s novel in serial form from November 10 to

December 9, 1928, it garnered more popular acclaim than any war or anti-war novel during the rise of such literature since 1927. And when released in book form by Ullstein at the end of January 1929, and supported by a vast advertising campaign, it became the first international bestseller, a world success like few others in literary history, selling 200,000 copies in five weeks and reaching 900,000 by the end of 1929 [5]. Part of the novel's unprecedented resonance lay in its *experiential* portrayal of the human cost of war from the soldier's point of view. While Remarque presented his work as an objective depiction of war, its implicit critique of technological dehumanization and the pathos of patriotism gave it the allure of an anti-war novel, one appearing at an historical moment in which European society was still trying to make sense of the experiences of WWI. The fact that Remarque did not take an overt political position, however, forced feuding parties to defend their own positions for or against his book.

This "Remarque Debate" relied for its arguments on the novel's perceived fidelity or infidelity to the truth. The German playwright Carl Zuckmayer's early review reveals his own political leanings by such statements as: "It is the first war novel that tells the truth." [6]. Indeed, the "truth" depicted in "All Quiet" is the central focus of this debate. On the right, as organized opposition to the novel developed, criticism did not focus on its literary merit but on its perceived falsity, on its skewed portrait of the cowardly German soldier, and on its ignorance of the beauty of sacrifice and the nobility of collective purpose.

Six months after the novel's publication, on July 3, 1929, Universal Pictures Corporation bought the rights to the novel. Over the course of the following months the German press carefully followed the film's production. Much of this focus was on Carl Laemmle, the German-born president and founder of Universal, who was of Jewish descent and accused of being anti-German. In April 1930 the film premiered in Los Angeles to rave reviews and eventually won the Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Direction for that year. Germany was the second largest European market for American films in 1930, and Universal was anxious to make the film acceptable there. Laemmle knew what the conservative press thought of him, however: the Nazi party paper *Völkischer Beobachter*, for example, in its edition of September 10, 1929, cursed him as a "Jewish agitator of Germans." He also knew that this might have an impact on the popularity of his film.

The German premiere of "All Quiet on the Western Front" took place in Berlin's Mozart Hall on Nollendorf Platz on December 5, 1930, a day after its screening to a select audience of press and trade officials. The audience came that evening not just to see a movie that had garnered praise in America, as well as in London and in Paris, but also to participate in a major cultural and political event" [7]. On the following night, however, on December 6, Nazi Party members and their sympathizers purchased a block of roughly 300 seats, totaling approximately one-third of those available in the Mozart Hall. Led by the National Socialist *Gauleiter* of Berlin and *Reichstag* representative Josef Goebbels,

disruptions ensued in which the National Socialists and their sympathizers, dressed in civilian clothing, partook in loud interruptions, physical attacks, the throwing of stink bombs and the release of white mice. This provoked a tumult within the theatre, and outside demonstrations and speeches took place over the next several days.

Newspaper articles over that week voiced a spectrum of views for and against the film. Conservative newspapers throughout Germany criticized the film for its perceived defamation of Germany honor and many spoke of the American origin of the film, complaining of its directors inability to understand the German experience. Those that praised the film spoke of its technical brilliance, its fine dialogue and the visual and acoustic embodiment of events; the newspaper *Berliner Morgenpost* of December 6 noted its realism and congratulated its director Lewis Milestone, explicitly stating that "alle anti-deutsche Propaganda den Herstellern ferngeblieben ist" [the producers avoid all anti-German propaganda]; and the communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* on December 7 considered it in overwhelmingly positive terms, and made a point of condemning "die blöde Hetze der Nazis" [the stupid agitation of the Nazis]. This article also spoke of how "Berufsmäßige Lärmhändler und politische Abenteurer" [professional noisemakers and political adventurers] were misusing the film against their political enemies, and it blamed not only the Nazis but also the government's reaction, with its "Schlappheit" [cowardness], "Nachgiebigkeit" [indulgence] and its "Bedenklichkeit" [apprehension].

The national elections of September 14, 1930 had resulted in an immense political shift wherein the Nazis went from 2.6% of the vote in the previous election of May 1928, to a remarkable 18.3%, just behind the Social Democrats' 24.5%. This had devastating consequences for the Weimar Republic since there was no longer a majority of moderate party representation. It also encouraged the Nazis to increase their use of violence and terror tactics. With new electoral respectability, and looking for a cause, Goebbels found it in the release of "All Quiet on the Western Front."

With the turmoil surrounding the film's German release, on December 10 the Berlin police prohibited all open-air demonstrations, and on December 11 the Berlin *Filmoberprüfstelle* [Film Censorship Office] banned the film completely, noting its "ungehemmte pazifistische Tendenz" [unrestrained pacifist tendency] and its damage to "das deutsche Ansehen" [German prestige] [8]. Although the report emphasized that the ban was not instituted under the pressure of the street, Goebbels managed to convince the public that the National Socialists had won a victory against the government, a film victory of the first order.

It was not the conservative reaction to the film but rather the bad publicity surrounding the film's banning that did more than anything to undermine the government. This was not only in Germany, where the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts*, on December 12, spoke of a victory of terror, but also in other countries; the *New York Times*, for example, carried the unfolding story on its front page from Wednesday,

December 10, through Saturday, December 13. On the latter day, it stated “Dr. Goebbels was jubilant over his victory” and quoted Heinrich Mann’s assertion of a “shameful capitulation by the highest German officials before a horde of half-grown brats.” And Goebbels own use of dramatic injunctions can be found throughout his diary entries. On December 6 he wrote: “Deutsche Frontsoldaten gegen perverse Juden” [German front soldiers against perverse Jews]; on December 8, in connection with confrontations with the police, he noted: “Das war eine Nervenprobe. Aber wir haben sie bestanden” [It was a test of nerves. But we passed it]; and on December 9 he wrote: “Kampf um Berlin. Frontkämpfer heraus! Heute Massenprotest. Die gestrige Kundgebung muß verdoppelt und verdreifacht werden” [Struggle for Berlin. Front fighters out! Tomorrow mass protests. Yesterday’s demonstration must be doubled]. Goebbel’s goes on to refer to the film’s banning as a triumph, and he states that “Die Republik tobt vor Wut über unseren Filmsieg. Wir sind in den Augen der Öffentlichkeit die starken Männer.” [9] The Republic is raging with anger because of our film victory. We are the strong men in the eyes of the public]. This so-called “film victory” was also supported indirectly by parts of the government itself: The *Reichswehrministerium* [Ministry of the Armed Services] argued that the film damaged Germany’s reputation and the *Reichsministerium des Innern* [Ministry of the Interior] flatly stated that it was not worthy of Germans to watch its defeat, especially when it was filmed “durch eine ausländische Herstellungsfirma” [by a foreign production company] [10].

Throughout this debate, Laemmle and Milestone’s careful attempts to depict Remarque’s characters as universal were ignored. And it should be noted that although the film was banned inside Germany, the German language version played to full houses just over the border, with special trains and buses transporting audiences to theaters in Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. In September 1931 the film was also allowed to be shown after editing and political maneuvering by Universal Studios, and it was shown then without incident.

But the political damage had been done – the film’s symbolic value had been exploited to its full extent, and the government’s reputation had been decidedly compromised, leading to cabinet crises that lasted for months.

Conservative commentators rarely spoke of the artistic merits of the film and considered it exclusively in political terms. The day after the ban, on December 12, the Nazi Party newspaper “*Der Angriff*” published an article entitled “In die Knie gezwungen” [forced to their knees]. In it, Goebbels recited the same conservative arguments, seeing in the film a “Verhöhnung deutscher Ehre und deutscher Tradition” [deriding of German honor and German tradition]. And his Nazi ideology is reflected by his emphasis on militaristic rhetorical locutions: He speaks of bringing protesters to the “front” against the film and insists that: “Die Straße mußte mobilisiert werden” [the street must be mobilized]. Citing “internationaler Marxismus” [international Marxism] and “die jüdische Presse” [the Jewish press] he concludes that these provocative entities can only be beaten “wenn man mit der Faust auf den Tisch schlägt” [if one bangs the table with one’s

fist]. In all of this, action is the key concept, action undertaken at a moment invested with drama: “Für eine revolutionäre Bewegung kommt es nicht darauf an, das Richtige zu tun, sondern es auch im *richtigen Augenblick* zu tun” [for a revolutionary movement it is not only important to do the right thing but also to do it at the *right moment*].

In the so-called Remarque Debate, one can see that the Nazis were not only a party but also a *movement*, one that acted tactically to exploit the turbulent dislocations of the time – economic, historical, and social. In this war of rhetoric, he who owns the past owns the future: the enemies of World War I are figuratively overrun by the radicalized army of protest, buoyed by nationalist jargon and appeals to the amorphous construct of a German honor that might still be saved.

In the national elections of July 1932, the Nazis garnered 37.4 percent of the vote, becoming the largest party in the Reichstag, and six months later Hitler was appointed chancellor. Shortly thereafter, the film “All Quiet on the Western Front” was banned and Remarque’s book publicly burned on May 10, 1933.

III. CONCLUSION

It was those days of early December 1930 that announced the beginning of the end of Weimar Germany. The theatricality of those days went hand in hand with a monumental egocentrism, “a realm of illusion which invented the outside world in its own image. If the tendency of modernism, from its roots in romanticism, was to objectify the subjective, to translate into symbol subjective experience, Nazism took this tendency and turned it into a general philosophy of life and society” [11]. This development of subjective aestheticism to egocentric nationalism was a “transference of one’s own illusions of self to the nation” [12]. But in that development, an audience was needed to support the illusion of intrinsic meaning.

Writing in 1958, Remarque recalled that several weeks before the film opened Joseph Goebbels, then the Nazi Party leader in Berlin, promised him protection from the Party if he would state that the film had been sold to Universal and its Jewish president, Laemmle, without Remarque’s approval. Goebbels wanted to use this point as anti-Semitic propaganda and to assert that the rights had been stolen “für ihre ‘kosmopolitisch-pazifistischen’ Ziele” [for cosmopolitan and pacifist goals]. Remarque refused the offer, and at the premiere Goebbels gave a “giftige Rede” [poisonous speech] [13]. Remarque himself watched this massive demonstration on Nollendorf Platz and noted that no one among the demonstrators was older than 20 and not one of them could have been in the war. Moreover, no one knew that that most of them would be dead before they reached thirty. As he points out, “Die Schwierigkeit mit dem Krieg ist, dass die Leute, die ihn wollen, nicht erwarten, in ihm zu sterben” [the difficulty with war is that those who want it, do not expect to die in it]. As Remarque also notes, the impersonal character of conflict was greatly increased through the use of technology in the First World War, and this was even more the case in the one

that followed it: “Der Krieg der Soldaten ist vorbei: der totale Krieg richtet sich gegen jedermann. Der Krieg des Heldentums ist vorbei: man kann sich verstecken, aber nicht selbst verteidigen” [the soldier’s war is over: total war is directed at everyone. The war of the soldier is over: total war is against everyone. The hero’s war is over: one can hide, but not defend oneself] [14].

This process reflects the emergence, in the first half of the 20th-century, of a modern consciousness of confused self-pity, one in which memory and history, as Modris Ekstein argues, “surrendered much of its former authority to fiction” [15]. This aestheticization of existence lies at the basis of German politics of the period – in the narcissistic complex of fascism and its emphasis on the hero, and existence becomes “a matter of turning life into a *thing* of beauty, not of right, or of good, but of beauty.” Two later German films by Leni Riefensthal evoke this general tendency, 1934’s “The Triumph of the Will” and her 1936 documentary of the Berlin Olympics, for both are notable examples of the attempt to lie beautifully to the German nation and to the world.

Looking back on his reaction when he saw the film “All Quiet on the Western Front” in 1930, Remarque claimed to have mixed feelings. He admired the technical aspects of the battle scenes, “aber die Darsteller schienen mir Fremde zu sein, die ich nicht mit den Personen in meiner Erinnerung identifizieren konnte. Sie waren anders; sie hatten andere Gesichter, und sie verhielten sich anders” [yet the actors appeared to me as strangers that I could not identify with the people in my memory. They were different; they had different faces, and they behaved differently]. From a later 1958 perspective, however, the opposite was true – through a strange alchemy, the power of the film and its characters had melded with his book, and his memory of real events often came after the image that had formed from his book and the film based on it. As he states, “Das Auge ist ein starker Verführer” [the eye is a strong seducer], and he laments the shortcomings of memory, for it “vergißt” [forgets] and “verändert” [changes] and “verfälscht” [falsifies] in order to survive [16].

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