The Reception of

All Quiet on the Western Front

Mark Ward

It is commonplace, when considering literature relating to World War I, to say that the conflict had been so devastating for what became known as the lost generation that effectively a decade had to elapse before the war could be confronted in literary form. The years 1927 through 1929 saw the publication not only of Erich Maria Remarque’s Im Westen nichts Neues (1929; All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929) but also of Arnold Zweig’s Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa (1927; The Case of Sergeant Grischa, 1927), Ludwig Renn’s Krieg (1928; War, 1929), and Ernst Glaeser’s Jahrgang 1902 (1928; Class of 1902, 1929), and subsequent years saw many more treatments, from a variety of perspectives, of the momentous events of 1914-18. Of all these treatments, however, it was, and is, Remarque’s novel that has had the most enduring impact, not only within a German or European context but also around the world. It rapidly became a best seller, with 1.2 million copies selling in the first year after it was published, and it has subsequently been translated into approximately fifty languages. The reasons for its success, however, were at the time, and remain, a topic of debate and contest, although the circumstances surrounding the novel’s publication do provide some insight into its initial impact.

All Quiet on the Western Front was written in late 1927 and submitted to the prestigious S. Fischer Press. To this day, it is not clear why the imprint turned it down, but the novel eventually did appear on January 29, 1929, with the Ullstein Propyläen Press, thanks to the efforts of Fritz Roß, the son-in-law of Hans Ullstein. But there appear to have been doubts about whether the book would sell. The contract that Ullstein issued to Remarque guaranteed one thousand marks per month over a two-year period but also included a clause stating that Remarque would have to partially repay any deficit. That said, the
Ullstein Press took great pains to try to ensure the success of the work. In 1928 the work appeared in serialized form in the Vossische Zeitung newspaper, which sold out during the weeks in which the serialization appeared—from November 10 to December 9—something that was unprecedented. The Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel (Stock Market Journal for the German Book Trade) of June 10, 1930, recorded that the newspaper “had taken the risk of publishing such a realistic war novel in its entertainment section with some hesitation because everybody had in their minds that phrase that had been heard a thousand times: ‘We do not want to hear anything more about the war’” (54). The substantial advertising campaign that preceded the publication in novel form included, among other things, posters on advertising pillars that changed weekly:

Week 1: It’s coming.
Week 2: The great war novel.
Week 3: All Quiet on the Western Front.
Week 4: By Erich Maria Remarque.

After its publication, the daily sales on occasion reached fifteen thousand copies, and the Ullstein Press, having run out of paper and cloth, began employing up to seven printing works and binderies.

The book was also promoted through the distribution of leaflets containing commentary by a broad range of readers including the parliamentary president, famous writers, politicians, readers of the Vossische Zeitung, press reviews, and ordinary women readers. Common to these various voices is the shattering effect that the novel had on them; a feeling that it was true to the experience of those who fought in the Great War; a recognition of the warning it sounded; and an appreciation for the novel’s first-person narration, which tells the story clearly and simply and without any attempt to propagandize. There are also frequent comments to the effect that the novel is a fitting monument to the soldiers.
The dramatist Carl Zuckmayer, who had served as an officer in the war, observed, “It will be the same for hundreds of thousands who took part in the war as for me: that they rediscover a part of their own life history in this book”; the novelist Stefan Zweig, who had adopted a pacifist stance toward the war, recorded:

In order to know what the last generation suffered in the war, every German should read this book that is unprecedentedly true and mercilessly disturbing. It overpowers without being partial, it distresses without exaggerating. Perfect work of art and incontrovertible truth at the same time.

It was the ordinary women readers who stressed the status of the book as a warning. Thus Else von Holten wrote: “This plea for peace should lie in thousands of copies on the Christmas table. The girls of today are the mothers of tomorrow.” And taking up the same motif of the Christmas table, Paula Weiß, a teacher from Berlin, wrote:

May this in book form fall into thousands and thousands upon thousands of hands. Mothers should read it and place it on the Christmas table for their growing sons. Those who work with their brains or with their hands, teachers and educators, doctors and priests, women in nursing and charitable organisations, they should all have knowledge of this work.

Among the politicians whose words are recorded are those of the president of the German Parliament, Paul Löbe:

Remarque has set up a memorial to the field-grey mass of millions of unknowns, that will be as enduring as ever a monument would be. This book is great by virtue of its simplicity and stirring by virtue of its truthfulness.

The former state president Hermann Hummel said simply: “I am convinced that a huge number of people, those who took part in the war of all countries, will feel their soul deeply affected by this book.”
Judging by these remarks, it would seem that the novel and its writer articulated the feelings and experiences of a generation. The frontline soldier who fought and died for reasons and causes he could not comprehend is embodied in the central figure of Paul Bäumer. But such a view is very partial and, indeed, misleading. At the time of its publication and subsequently, *All Quiet on the Western Front* has proved to be a text with an almost unparalleled power to polarize its readers. Criticism, sometimes scandalous and personal, of both man and work has rained down from both the left and the right wings of the political spectrum.

What has often been seen as a strength of the text—namely, its refusal to adopt a political position on the rights, wrongs, and causes of the war, concentrating instead on the simple human experience—was castigated by the Left. While acknowledging the power of Remarque’s text, the left wing missed in it any analysis or presentation of the causes of the war, which, for them, were intimately connected with the structure of capitalist and bourgeois society. The silence of the text on these matters constituted for them the novel’s failure as well as its guilt. Indeed, the critic Helfland uses a word as strong as “lie” in discussing the novel. Remarque’s unwillingness to use the text as a means of provoking protest and resistance, he writes, is “the toxin of passive obedience” (qtd. in Rüter 158).

On the other hand, the Right saw Remarque as trying to elevate the perspective of a private individual into an all-embracing vision of the war that was inconsistent with their understanding of it. Additionally, the Right identified a pacifist dimension in the text that again was inconsistent with their understanding and that was seen as dangerous because of the seeming objectivity of the narrative. In the words of one such critic, “For me the book is not a memorial, rather a desecration of a corpse” (Pflug qtd. in Rüter 160).

In the immediate period after the novel’s publication, a number of lengthier anti-Remarque writings were published. Of these the most interesting is the satire by Mynona (“Anonym” spelled backward), the
pseudonym used by philosopher and minor expressionist and Dadaist poet Salomo Friedländer. The work is titled *Hat Erich Maria Remarque wirklich gelebt?* (Did Erich Maria Remarque Really Live?) and, in the course of some 250 pages, Friedländer undertakes a scurrilous personal assault on Remarque’s character, trawling in detail over his early writings. At the same time Friedländer attacks *All Quiet on the Western Front* for its prevarication and, hence, its capacity to provoke violently conflicting reactions. This attack met with a riposte from Kurt Tucholsky, who saw himself as a liberal democrat and a pacifist and who wrote, among other things, social criticism and satire. The riposte, titled “Hat Mynona wirklich gelebt?” (Did Mynona Really Live?), was published originally under one of Tucholsky’s pseudonyms, Ignaz Wrobel, in the journal *Die Weltbühne* (The World Stage), of which he was coeditor, on December 31, 1929. After a brief satirical introduction, in which Tucholsky has Mynona claiming to have sabotaged Remarque, Tucholsky turns his attention briefly to *All Quiet on the Western Front* before attacking the way in which Mynona had himself attacked Remarque. He judges that Remarque’s novel is “not a great work of art, but a good book” and continues, “Through the unspeakable stupidity of those in right-wing circles, the book has acquired an aura of pacifism; this tendency was in all probability not intended by Remarque” (283). Tucholsky raises, but does not develop, issues of stylistic quality.

Peter Kropp, in a pamphlet titled *Endlich Klarheit über Remarque und sein Buch “Im Westen nichts Neues”* (Finally Clarity About Remarque and His Book *All Quiet on the Western Front*), adopts a strategy similar to Mynona’s in attacking Remarque’s character. Arguing that Remarque did not live through many of the episodes he depicted in the novel, Kropp rejects the assertion that the power of the book lies in its transcription of Rémarque’s personal experience. Instead, he ascribes the novel’s success to Rémarque’s publisher: “It appears to me that the secret power of the book lies in the skilful advertising of a capitalist publisher and in the common dirty jokes” (8). He goes on to la-
ment the absence of heroism from the novel: “Can one write a war book without praising that life-giving high element that we simply call heroism?” Fearful of the book’s influence, he issues the cry: “Get this book out of schools. Onwards to the struggle so that a spiritual decline does not follow on the economic decline” (15).

Of other contemporary responses, a few more should be mentioned. In 1929, Wilhelm Müller-Scheld published the booklet “Im Westen nichts Neues” eine Täuschung (All Quiet on the Western Front—A Deception). Among other things, Müller-Scheld finds that the soldiers of Remarque’s novel lack any sign of pride or confidence; however, his main concern is that the novel lacks focus, which he attributes to the prominence of Paul Bäumer and the dominance of his limited perspective. Also, in 1929, Dr. Gottfried Nickl’s “Im Westen nichts Neues” und sein wahrer Sinn. Betrachtung über den Pazifismus und Antwort auf Remarque (“All Quiet on the Western Front” and Its True Meaning: A Consideration of Pacifism and a Reply to Remarque) appeared. Since this work was distributed through the National Socialist Party network, it achieved very substantial dissemination. The front cover reads:

The monument of shame that was erected in the book All Quiet on the Western Front for our heroes of the World War has now been toppled. Everyone must be aware of these revelations about Remarque and his war novel. The scales will then fall from the eyes of everybody who has been blinded and led astray by Remarque.

The political dimension of Nickl’s writing emerges clearly from statements; for instance, pacifism, he writes, “is the same false doctrine in the area of ethics as is Marxism in social matters” (12). He also emphasizes the fact that the novel was published by a press owned by the Jewish Ullstein, and, like Kropp, he fears that the novel may have a negative impact on German youth:
Instead of the heroic spirit that allowed our incomparable army to triumph in the field for four and a half years against half the world, the pernicious ideology which speaks out from Remarque’s book will raise and lead German youth land will result in a future Germany lying on the ground, impotent and quiescent. (36)

E. Erbelding, with his Im Westen doch Neues (1930; Something New on the Western Front), penned more than four hundred pages of an attack on Remarque targeting what he sees as his pacifist stance, and, in the manner of others writing from a right-wing perspective, praising the German troops and their heroism, which he believed Remarque had denigrated. Franz Arthur Klietmann’s Im Westen wohl was Neues (1931; Probably Something New on the Western Front) has at the top of its title page the words “Contra Remarque,” and, by way of a preface to 174 pages of vitriol, Klietmann writes: “This book is an accusation against a degenerate who is trying to besmirch the German heroic spirit, because his emaciated bone marrow and his wilfully nerve-wracked body, destroyed by his own hand, could not grasp what the great struggle did for the German soldier at the front.” Klietmann then proceeds to take scenes from All Quiet on the Western Front and rework them in a different light in order to criticize the novel’s central character and present him as unrepresentative. Remarkably, Klietmann’s hero does not die at the end but becomes a Bolshevik.

One other ordinary voice is also worth noting here. In a review of Thomas Levenson’s 2003 book Einstein in Berlin, Freeman J. Dyson, having read of the Nazi activities at the time of the Berlin showing of the film of All Quiet on the Western Front, concludes on a personal note:

One of my relatives, who is now 94 years old, has lived in Germany all her life. Many years ago I gave her Remarque’s book to read and she found it very moving. “This book is wonderful,” she said. “Why didn’t they let us read it when it was published? That was before the Hitler time, but we were
told it was disgusting and shameful, and that respectable people should not read it.” So the respectable Germans of her generation, even those who were not Nazis, did not read Remarque. I had always wondered why, and now I know. (812)

A number of common features emerge from these contemporary receptions of Remarque’s text, one of which is the frequent use of forms of parody and, indeed, quotation. Using the pen name Emil Marius Requark, Max Joseph Wolff published *Vor Troja nichts Neues* (1930; *All Quiet on the Trojan Front*), an attack on Remarque that, yet again, questions what are seen as the pacifist dimensions of the novel. Remarque’s work also picks up on another charge repeatedly leveled against Remarque, namely, that he wrote *All Quiet on the Western Front* in order to make money. Remarque certainly profited from this novel, but, as critics have repeatedly observed, he continued to lead a modest lifestyle in the years immediately after its publication and certainly did not flaunt his wealth, although he was famously given a six-cylinder Lancia Cabriolet of which he was very fond. Carl Otto’s *Im Osten nichts Neues* (1929; *All Quiet on the Eastern Front*) is a straight imitation of Remarque’s novel and aims to simply point out that experiences elsewhere were just as horrific as those depicted by Remarque. In 1930, Evadne Price published (as Helen Zenna Smith) *Not So Quiet . . . : Stepdaughters of War*, a novel that offers a female perspective on the war.

One final factor that led to the very diverse but nevertheless huge reception accorded to Remarque’s text was the release by Universal Pictures Corporation on April 29, 1930, of Lewis Milestone’s famous film adaptation. George Abbott and Maxwell Anderson wrote the screenplay. The review by Mordaunt Hall that appeared in the *New York Times* the following day has only one negative observation, namely: “Some of the scenes are not a little too long and a few members of the cast are not Teutonic in appearance.” Otherwise, the review has only praise for the film’s fidelity to Remarque’s text, for its “harrowing and
"pulsating" realism, and for its powerful portrayal of disillusionment. The film premiered in Berlin on December 4, 1930, amid demonstrations orchestrated by the National Socialist Party against its alleged anti-German sentiment. An open letter to Remarque from Curt Emmrich in the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung on December 10, 1930, drew attention to the fact that there were two versions of the film in circulation, one for the German cinema and one for other countries. The latter, Emmrich claims, contains scenes that put down both the German people and the German army. Given, he argues, that Remarque has arrogated to himself the position of speaker for a generation, he asks Remarque to dissociate himself from this version. But this and other controversies surrounding the film were ultimately of little consequence since Joseph Goebbels succeeded in getting the film banned, and by 1933, under the new National Socialist regime, the book was banned as well and subsequently fell victim to the wave of book burning.

One episode in the 1940s demonstrates just how tenacious was the influence of Remarque’s novel. In 1943 Remarque’s younger sister, Elfriede, had been denounced in Dresden for publicly asserting that Hitler would lose the war. At her trial the Nazi judge, Dr. Roland Freisler, sentenced her to death by the guillotine and is alleged to have said that this was because the Nazis had been unable to capture her brother.

Popular interest in All Quiet on the Western Front then follows a curious path. Following the end of World War II there was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a relatively mild flurry of interest as a later generation struggled to come to terms with the events of 1939-45. However, any direct literary influence on this generation is harder to discern. Alfred Andersch’s novel Winterspelt, published in 1974 (English translation, 1978) and dealing with the Ardenne offensive of 1944, is clearly indebted to Remarque. Director Douglas Sirk’s 1958 film A Time to Love and a Time to Die is based on Remarque’s novel Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben (1954; A Time to Love and a Time to Die, 1954); it deals with
events of World War II but is indebted to *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

A further visual realization was the 1979 television movie of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, directed by Delbert Mann. It is generally felt that, though good (it won a Golden Globe and an Emmy Award), this adaptation does not have the raw power of Milestone’s version. John Pym’s May 1980 review in *Monthly Film Bulletin* is something less than flattering: “Made as a theatrical feature but shown on American TV (at the behest of Remarque’s widow Paulette Goddard), in three one-hour slots, this ploddingly expensive film is as redundant a remake as one could conceive.”

Having failed to find a suitable location in either Britain (the Ministry of Defense refused cooperation) or West Germany (war damage and reconstruction simply meant an absence of locations), the film’s producer turned to the town of Most in what was then Czechoslovakia. Alan Road, writing in the *Observer Magazine* on November 11, 1979, finishes his article by anticipating the kind of comparison between the substance and circumstances surrounding the publication of the novel in 1929 and the issues of the later twentieth century:

When Milestone’s “All Quiet on the Western Front” was first released there were violent demonstrations outside cinemas by members of the nascent Nazi Party. Even while the new film was being made, descendants of those Nazis were demonstrating against the persecution of suspected war criminals in West Germany. Perhaps it is time for another warning against the dangers of rampant nationalism.

Perhaps more remarkable was the premiere on April 2, 2003, in Osnabrück of the opera of the novel with music by Nancy van de Vate. In 1988, the ninetieth anniversary of Remarque’s birth, the Remarque Society in Osnabrück announced the “Remarque Year 88.” Among the events taking place that year were exhibitions, film showings, and an academic conference, all of which achieved significant in-
ternational representation. The year’s academic purpose was to consider the totality of Remarque’s oeuvre, and the year saw the publication of a two-volume bibliography that collected together copious material relating to Remarque’s literary works and their filmic realizations. However, *All Quiet on the Western Front* dominated the press coverage of the event—Remarque’s second novel was, and remains, the central point of orientation for readers and scholars. Indeed, the view of Remarque as a one-book author remains very tenacious. Little known and not widely read is the sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Der Weg zurück* (1931; *The Road Back*, 1931).

*The Road Back* deals with the fate of those who survived the war and their experiences as they attempt to reintegrate into German society. The majority of the characters find reintegration not just difficult but impossible. In the turbulent world of postwar Germany, what was heralded as the comradeship of the trenches becomes a much more questionable entity, not least of all in the new, militarized youth (a clear reference to the Nazi Party and an anticipation of the future conflict).

Still, it was not until the 1980s that a real revival of interest in *All Quiet on the Western Front* began. An advertisement for an edition of the novel in the newspaper *Die Zeit* on April 12, 1984, comments:

> The book experienced a renaissance after the Second World War that is being repeated nowadays under the increasing threat of war. For the horrors of the 1st. World War are the horrors of all wars even if the possibilities of destruction have become more radical in the meantime.

On March 22, 2003, Ulrich Baron published an article in the newspaper *Die Welt* titled “Birth of the Generation Gulf War.” The article, alluding to September 11, 2001, focuses on how the experiences of new European generations who have never known war differ from those generations in Iraq for whom war is a reality. Baron draws attention in particular to the notion of the “lost generation”: “Far more telling than
the rather underplayed pacifist tendency of his book, is the invocation of a lost generation.”

Peter von Becker starts his article in the Tagesspiegel of August 6, 2006, with this simple observation: “It was a book of the century and novel of the hour. It is exactly the same now.” Ranging widely over historical and more contemporary conflicts, Becker considers various modes of representing war, including film and the television coverage of the Balkan conflict, Israel and Lebanon, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War. He observes in the modern media reports and records a kind of impersonality and the absence of the perspective of the common soldier. While the effects of war, particularly on civilians are vividly portrayed, these remain what he calls “pictures from the outside.” For him, “The complex system and the barbarically brutal effect of modern war can scarcely be depicted with more insight, scarcely more appeal to the sensual imagination, than in Remarque’s novel.”

The year 2009, the eightieth anniversary of the publication of All Quiet on the Western Front, witnessed a further flowering of interest in Remarque’s text. However, few new insights or connections emerged in the many newspaper and magazine articles devoted to discussion of the novel. Rather, media coverage tended to rehearse and repeat the kind of connections made from the 1980s onward between the experience of World War I and the many other conflicts, of greater or smaller proportion, that are still a reality in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.

Much of the academic engagement with Remarque has been colored by his success, at the time of publication and subsequently, with All Quiet on the Western Front. There is a kind of sometimes suppressed, sometimes explicit, premise that a best seller such as All Quiet on the Western Front is somehow inferior to and different from other works of literature. Equally, Remarque’s general lifestyle and career—his love of fast cars; his relationships with Marlene Dietrich and, subsequently, Paulette Goddard; his fondness for alcohol; his involvement with Hollywood; and his early career as a journalist and advertising copy-
writer—all give rise to a degree of suspicion toward his status as an author.

One of the earliest scholarly engagements with *All Quiet on the Western Front* is to be found in J. Knight Bostock’s *Some Well-Known German War-Novels, 1914-1930*, which was published in 1931. Bostock engages with the phenomenal success of the novel:

There is no doubt that Remarque’s methods and personal character, as revealed by Mynona’s muck-rake, are dubious; nevertheless we cannot in consequence dismiss *Im Westen nichts Neues* as sheer humbug. We have to explain both the phenomenal success of the book and the extraordinary controversy that it aroused. . . . If *Im Westen nichts Neues* is humbug, it is clearly humbug of no ordinary kind. (7)

Bostock identifies “the black depression which dominates the book to an extent previously unheard of in literature” (8) and attributes this tone precisely to the novel’s failure to mediate a particular political or social position and to the limited perspective of Remarque’s narrator, who has no understanding of the origins and causes of the horror in which he is caught up: “No one has any genuine idealism, or knows what he is fighting and suffering for. They do their duty as soldiers should, but purely by instinct. It is pessimism unrelieved, complete and universal intellectual bankruptcy” (8). Stylistically, Bostock also discerns a kind of negativity in Remarque’s short, disjointed sentences and his appeals to his reader’s imagination with skillfully chosen words and hints. Bostock’s conclusion is fairly stark: “It is clever journalism, but it is not great literature, and if the book is re-read deliberately after the first flush of excitement has passed, it appears to be very dull” (9).

A further example of the British reception comes from Herbert Read in his brief essay “The Failure of War Books,” written around the time of the end of World War II. Read observes that young writers returning from the trenches wanted not only to describe the horrors of war but also to warn future generations; while war novels may appeal to the
imagination with their vivid descriptions, they do not communicate an underlying reality:

But war acquires its reality from psychological and economic forces, and it is useless to protest against war unless at the same time there is some understanding of the workings of these primary forces and some attempt to control them. But there was no such understanding. (73)

Hence, for Read, it is then relevant to make the simple point that, ten years after the publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the world was once against at war. He also mentions a recurrent issue in criticism of the novel, the charge of sentimentality: “To some extent the criticism is true, but sentimentality was not, for effectiveness a fault” (74). He points to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a more sentimental text, yet notes that that novel played a pivotal role in the abolition of slavery.

An overview of the scholarly secondary literature reveals a pattern that is strikingly similar to the novel’s more popular reception. The volume of criticism shows that scholarly interest in Remarque generally and in *All Quiet on the Western Front* particularly has grown exponentially since the late 1970s. Nevertheless, the two early pieces cited make interesting points. Bostock’s judgment of the text as “dull” has been countered by the reading public’s continuing interest in the book and is now being overturned by the weight of academic engagement with the text. On the other hand, Read’s title, “The Failure of War Books,” has sadly proven to be only too prophetic.

**Works Cited**


Klietmann, Franz Arthur. *Im Westen wohl was Neues*. Berlin: Nonnemann, 1931.
Otto, Carl. *Im Osten nichts Neues*. Zirndorf: Sanitas-Verlagshaus, 1929.