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War, Memory, and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*

MODRIS EKSTEINS

> . . . memory is a flower which only opens fully in the kingdom of Heaven, where the eye is eternally innocent.[1]

WITHIN months of its publication in January 1929 Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*) was the world's best-selling book. It provoked a feverish controversy between those who claimed that it was an accurate representation of the war experience of 1914–18, portraying the utter futility of war, and those who denounced it as propaganda and an irreverent commercial exploitation of the Great War. Ironically, despite the intended focus of this heated debate, both the novel and the response which it elicited were more an emotional expression of postwar disillusionment and distress than a contribution to the understanding of the actual war experience.[2]

The American film of the same title, when it appeared in May 1930, evoked an even stormier response and revealed, even more clearly than the novel, how the past could be turned into a chattel of the present. The book brought controversy, the film brought political crisis. In December 1930 it was proscribed in Germany, the country in which Remarque's success originated and in which his book sold well over a million copies within a year. The "film war," as the Nazis described the affair surrounding the picture, constitutes an interesting but hitherto neglected episode in the history of film, in the cultural reverberations of the First World War, and in the demise of the Weimar Republic.

The debate over the book was at its height when Carl Laemmle, the

I thank the Canada Council for the financial support which made possible the research for this article.

1. Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience* (London, 1963), p. 55.

2. I have tried to show this in my discussion of the novel, "*All Quiet on the Western Front* and the Fate of a War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (April 1980): 345–66.

German-American founder and president of Universal Pictures Corporation, announced, in August 1929, that he was planning a film version. A few days later he was in Berlin with his twenty-one-year-old son, Carl, Jr., whom he had just appointed general manager of production at Universal, seeking the cooperation of Remarque as script writer or actor. Initially, it appears, the younger Laemmle, who was actually in charge of the production, wanted Remarque to play the role of Paul Bäumer, the central character. Remarque, however, was not interested in either proposition. Shortly thereafter, Lewis Milestone was chosen, over Herbert Brenon, who was involved in the filming of Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*, to direct the film.[3] Milestone had been born in Odessa in 1895, had studied briefly at Ghent in Belgium, and had emigrated to the United States in 1913. He had spent three years in the American army before beginning his career in films in 1919. *All Quiet* was to be his second sound film and was, by its success, to mark him for the rest of his career as a "war director." Sergei Eisenstein was to say, apparently, that Milestone's *All Quiet* was a good "doctoral thesis."[4]

The screenplay was written by the team of Dell Andrews, George Abbott, and Maxwell Anderson. Anderson had been coauthor with Laurence Stallings of the play *What Price Glory?* which Raoul Walsh had directed as a film in 1926. The leading players were Lew Ayres (Paul Bäumer), Louis Wolheim (Katczinsky), George "Slim" Summerville (Tjaden), John Wray (Himmelstoss), and Raymond Griffith (the Frenchman). Work began at Universal City in November and continued through the winter.

On May 17, 1930, the film was released. It had cost close to two million dollars. It turned out to be a very faithful rendering of the novel but a distinctive film in its own right. It, like the novel, told the story of a platoon of schoolmates who, one by one, are destroyed at the front. However, rather than using a flashback technique, as the novel did on occasion, the film developed the story in chronological order, beginning with the schoolbenches and ending with the death, by a sniper's bullet, of the central figure, Paul Bäumer, as he reaches from the trench to touch a butterfly. This last scene was to be a brilliant and evocative interpretation of Remarque's less specific conclusion. The success of

3. See the *New York Times*, Aug. 6 and 11 and Oct. 13, 1929.

4. *Der Tagesspiegel* (Berlin), Sept. 29, 1965; and Robert Parrish, *Growing Up in Hollywood* (London, 1976), p. 93.

Remarque's novel stemmed largely from its emotional intensity, its passion; the film version managed effectively to sustain, at times even, as in the last scene, to enhance this emotional energy.

In the technical development of motion pictures the film was an important transitional work. Sound films were a recent innovation, and in many of the early ventures sound overwhelmed the images. In *All Quiet* sound remained subordinate but its potential was exploited well, intensifying the significance of the images. The staccato editing rhythm was also very striking. It was inspired in part by silent films and in part by the novel itself, which had been written in the form of a series of sequences. It is indeed possible that the structure of Remarque's novel was influenced by silent film. At any rate, Milestone's film gave the "talkie" a new pictorial flexibility at a moment when sound films were little more than photographed plays. The extraordinary battle scenes in the middle of the film are still breathtaking as action sequences and as cinematography, and have even been worked into documentaries about the First World War.

In New York, London, and Paris the film received great attention. In London's West End *All Quiet* played simultaneously at two first-run cinemas, the first time any picture had been accorded such prominence. In Paris the film was given the honor of inaugurating a newly built cinema, L'Ermitage, on the Champs Elysées, on November 21, 1930. Although a number of reviewers felt that the picture did not manage to recapture the intensity, the "brooding horror," of the book, and that the characters by comparison tended to be lifeless, generally the film received enthusiastic plaudits from the critics.[5] Sydney W. Carroll of London's *Sunday Times* expressed majority sentiment when he called *All Quiet* "the greatest of all war films" (June 22).

> Realism reaches its zenith in this picture. I hate it. It made me shudder with horror. It brought the war back to me as nothing has ever done before since 1918. . . . No detail of horror has been spared to us. The dangers, the savageries, the madness of war, and the appalling waste and destruction of youth, the shattering of hopes, illusions, beliefs, the futility of patriotism and nationalism—all these are depicted with relentless veracity, unshrinking crudity, and on a scale as colossal as the world-war itself.

By all accounts, British and French audiences were gripped by the film. School classes in England were taken to see it. At one London performance in the late summer of 1930, when the news was shown after the

5. See the discussion of the American reviews in *Literary Digest* 105 (May 15, 1930): 19–20; also, A. Arnoux's critical review in *Nouvelles Littéraires*, Dec. 6, 1930.

film, the items on Germany—dealing with the constitutional celebrations and the visit to the liberated Rhineland by the Reich president and war hero Hindenburg—were clapped spontaneously by the audience. In Paris there were shouts of "À bas la guerre!" and men were seen at the end to have tears in their eyes.[6] The film, probably even more than the book, brought home to audiences the similarity of the war experience in all armies. The film's program in a Brussels cinema remarked that the uniforms in the film could easily have been changed without loss of effect. In America the suggestion came up that Laemmle, Sr., Remarque, and Milestone should receive the Nobel Peace Prize.[7]

By late November a dubbed version was ready for release in Germany. On November 21 the Berlin censorship board viewed the film. At this meeting, a representative of the defense ministry, invited to give expert opinion, called for rejection of the film on grounds that it was damaging to Germany's image and cast aspersions on the German army. The delegate of the foreign office, however, urged its release, and, apparently mainly on the basis of this opinion, the board approved the film for showing. It was, nevertheless, to be restricted to adults, and to try and appease the military authorities the censors cut a few sections from the American version. The deletions included: the scene where the recruits in training dive into the mud a second time; that part of the conversation on the causes of war where the Kaiser is blamed; the end of Bäumer's speech to the school class; a number of scenes where the recruits eat ravenously; a scene where Himmelstoss does not join in attack but remains behind whimpering, and a scene where he receives a thrashing (the latter two scenes have now also been cut from most currently available editions); and considerable sections of the scene concerning the boots of the dying Kemmerich.[8]

The picture was to have its première in Berlin in the Mozartsaal of the Theater am Nollendorfplatz on December 4. But there were indications that a storm of protest would erupt. The nationalist right had begun its campaign against the film from the first news of its preparation, and as

6. See reports in *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 582, Dec. 10, 1930, and *Berliner Morgenpost*, Dec. 16, 1930.

7. See the account in the curious sycophantic biography by the poet John Drinkwater, *The Life and Adventures of Carl Laemmle* (New York, 1931), pp. 276–77.

8. See the memorandum of Dec. 9, 1930, in the Reichskanzlei files, R43I/folder 2500, pp. 126–27, Bundesarchiv Koblenz.

the date for the opening drew near, many general political frustrations in the country began to converge and focus on the film.

When the Laemmle team was in Berlin in early August 1929 they contacted UFA, the largest film producer and cinema owner in Germany, to seek cooperation in the making and distribution of *All Quiet*. However, on August 8 the directors of the company agreed emphatically "that UFA will place neither studios nor theaters, neither domestic nor foreign distribution facilities at the disposal of this film," and informed the Laemmles to this effect.[9] A year later, on June 17, 1930, after the film had opened in London, the board of directors received a report on the picture from the UFA representative in London. The latter described *All Quiet* as "thoroughly hostile" toward Germany, and as a result the directors decided that, apart from refusing its theaters to the film, "an appropriate stand would be taken against the showing of the film in Germany."[10] What the exact nature of that stand would be appears not to have been discussed officially at that meeting, but shortly thereafter Scherl newspapers, particularly the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* and the *Nachtausgabe*, which along with UFA were part of Hugenberg's right-wing media empire, began to mount an attack on the film. Other conservative organs soon joined in the denunciations.[11]

When the privately owned Theater am Nollendorfplatz booked *All Quiet* for public showing, UFA's hostility toward the film was intensified, for, ironically, the Mozartsaal in that theater complex had been rented by UFA as a cinema between 1920 and 1923 and again between 1925 and 1928. UFA had moved out in 1928 because of the losses which its films had continually suffered there. The cinema had a seating capacity of 935.[12] In December 1930, Hugenberg would send a telegram to President Hindenburg urging him to use his influence to suppress the film.[13]

The gist of the nationalist vehemence was that *All Quiet* was part of the ongoing war against Germany by her enemies, a war being conducted most subtly and viciously on the propaganda front. The subject of propaganda, and particularly of the role of film in propaganda, was a

9. Minutes of the Vorstand meeting, in the UFA files, R109I/1027b, n.p., Bundesarchiv Koblenz; see also the minutes for the meeting of July 12, 1929.

10. Minutes of the Vorstand meeting, June 17, 1930, ibid.

11. *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, no. 559, Nov. 30, 1930; *Deutsche Zeitung*, no. 158, July 9, 1930; *Der Jungdeutsche*, no. 262, Nov. 8, 1930.

12. UFA files, R109I/586.

13. *Vorwärts* cited the contents in no. 577, Dec. 9, 1930.

sensitive one among the political right. It was felt that Germany had failed completely to exploit properly the power of the media since the war. The western allies had proved to be far superior in this area. Northcliffe, for example, was both a hated and a venerated name in Germany in the 1920s. America's development of her film industry was similarly admired and resented because of the policy of cultural imperialism which the United States could pursue through this medium. Part of that policy, it was said, was the continual production of inflammatory war films which propagated international hatred and, most important, the war-guilt lie. Hugenberg's methodical construction of a communications empire was symptomatic of the nationalist right's preoccupation with propaganda.

German conservatives and, of course, right-wing radicals were upset not only by *Hetzfilme*, a genre the Americans were thought to be especially adept at making; they were generally upset by the American influence which was said to be making irresponsible apolitical *Tango-jünglinge* and *Jazzbandhörer* of German youth. American governments supported this cultural expansionism, claimed the nationalists, for exported American films were given a tax cut. German governments, on the other hand, were failing in their duty to support the native film industry, since German films for export were subjected to a turnover tax. In short, American culture was penetrating Germany through the film, undermining indigenous cultural standards and values, and killing the German film industry. By the late twenties the sense of crisis in this industry was acute. There were frequent references to the *Todesstunde* of German film. German talent was being lured away to Hollywood, American capital was eating away at the native industry at an alarming rate, and American money was even buying up cinemas in Germany.[14]

Throughout the decade German governments were well aware both of the difficulties facing the national film industry and of the frequently unfavorable treatment Germany received in foreign films. Certain measures were taken in both areas. In 1920 a film act was passed which amended the constitutional provision against censorship by creating a centralized film censorship system. Before release all films had to be

14. See the material in the Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2497–2500; especially folder 2499, pp. 196–214, which contains the pamphlet by Schwarz, president of the Deutschen Kunst-Vereinigung, "Denkschrift über die wahre Situation in der 'deutschen' Filmindustrie und über Forderungen zur Hilfe und Rettung" (1929). See also Paul Monaco, *Cinema and Society: France and Germany during the Twenties* (New York, 1976).

examined by one of two boards sitting in Berlin and Munich. A supreme censorship board in Berlin would consider appeals. The new law permitted a film, or parts thereof, to be banned if the film or certain sections were judged "to endanger public order or security, injure religious sentiments, encourage brutality or immorality, harm the German image or Germany's relations with foreign states." "Permission may not be denied," the act stated, however, "on political, social, religious, ethical, or ideological grounds."[15] As can be seen, ambiguity was inherent in the act, and to conservative and nationalist minds the act was inadequate. Strict censorship was applied, the critics said, only to native and not to foreign films. The act had to be tightened. The criticism of the right was, however, exaggerated. Foreign films in Germany were in fact subjected to close scrutiny, and many were cut or banned. Nevertheless, it is true that the German censors were on the whole quite tolerant. Many films, notably Soviet products such as *Battleship Potemkin*, which were not permitted in England, France, or America, were released, despite cuts, in Germany. Of course, the release of these films fed the nationalist fire but, on the other hand, it brought considerable admiration for the German system from liberals abroad.[16] Nonetheless, from 1922 on, various governments debated possibilities for altering the censorship law. Concrete steps in this direction were, however, not taken until 1930.

On another level change was instituted earlier. In 1925 a quota system was introduced for foreign films. Previously, a certain amount of footage had been allowed into the country yearly,[17] but now, for every foreign film released in Germany, a German film had to be produced. The aim of this measure was, of course, to support native film production, but, ironically, the reverse was achieved. American infiltration was not stopped, only encouraged. Americans began to buy up or finance German film companies in order to produce their own quota films in Germany—many of which were never released because of their perfunctory nature—and thus to acquire the necessary "quota certificates" for American films.[18] As a result, the system was dropped in 1928 for

15. Lichtspielgesetz, no. 7525, *Reichsgesetzblatt*, May 15, 1920, pp. 953–58.

16. See the debates on *Potemkin* in Reichskanzlei file R43I/2500; and the comments of the *Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 11, 1930.

17. In 1921 180,000 meters (c. 90 films of average length); 1922–23, 250,000 m. (c. 125 films); 1924, 260,000 m. (c. 130 films). See the circular letter of the minister of the interior to other cabinet members, May 30, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2500, pp. 67–72.

18. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, 1947), p. 133.

feature films, though retained for shorts, and the government returned to the policy of permitting a certain number of foreign films into the country every year—170 for 1928, 210 for 1929. But by 1930 even the government recognized that this system was unsatisfactory. "The distress of German film makers is such," wrote Josef Wirth, the minister of the interior, in May 1930, "that it is a social obligation of the state to guarantee their continued existence by securing further work possibilities."[19] On July 15 a skeleton law was instituted which gave the government the right to exercise the necessary control over the import and censorship of foreign films.[20] The law was certainly not a clear or positive initiative, but more or less simply a statement of principle: that foreign imports had to be strictly controlled.

Naturally, the film industries in all European countries encountered similar problems. Viewed in an international context, the German industry managed to retain considerable independence from Hollywood and thus was greatly envied elsewhere.[21] Yet, precisely because Germany's film production was as extensive as that of the rest of Europe combined—in 1927 Germany produced 241 feature films, France 74, and Britain 44[22]—and because the German achievement in this area was internationally recognized, the American advance was regarded by Germans with mounting alarm and anger. America, in 1927, produced 743 feature films.

Within the various German governments since the war differences of opinion had often arisen on how to deal with the situation. The foreign and economic ministries, while sympathetic to the problems of the film industry, nevertheless tended to view these problems in the wider context of trade and international relations. A severe protectionist policy toward German film could have negative repercussions on German exports in other areas of the economy.[23] Also, while careful scrutiny of foreign films was naturally supported, nonetheless an ultranationalistic

19. In his circular letter of May 30, R43I/2500, p. 71.

20. *Reichsgesetzblatt* (1930), 1: 215. The law was promulgated on the basis of Article 48. In June 1933 the Nazis would extend the law for three years; *Reichsgesetzblatt* (1933), 1: 393.

21. See Michael Sadleir, "The Cinema in Germany," *The New Statesman*, Aug. 9, 1930, p. 568; and Louis Chéronnet, "Le cinéma allemand," *Le Crapouillet*, Nov. 1932, pp. 51–54.

22. H. H. Wollenberg, *Fifty Years of German Film* (London, 1948), p. 16.

23. See, for example, the minutes of the discussions in the economics ministry, Jan. 19 and 23, 1920, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2497, pp. 241–43.

policy of film censorship could harm Germany's image abroad, and hence impede efforts at achieving revision of the Versailles Treaty. These concerns and reservations were still present at the end of the decade. However, more protectionist tendencies were making headway.

A more or less middle position was held by the ministry of the interior, while at the opposite pole stood the defense ministry. Both were primarily concerned about the state of domestic affairs. As we have seen, the ministry of the interior was prepared by 1930 to take steps to protect the German film, but rash measures were certainly to be avoided. While preparing the legislation promulgated in July 1930, Wirth met with representatives of both the German and American film and electrical industries to try and reach some effective agreement on reducing the difficulties confronting German film. Wirth still wished to negotiate a solution. He was, for example, averse to implementing any stricter regulations unilaterally by means of Article 48, the emergency clause of the constitution.[24] But he was under growing pressure to take action.

The defense ministry was one of the bodies urging decisive and dramatic action by 1930. Throughout the Weimar Republic the army leadership was preoccupied with the numerical weakness and the general image of the German military. The Phoebus scandal in 1927 had revealed that this important film company, which had gone bankrupt, had received secret *Reichswehr* funds to promote the image of the army. Otto Gessler, the defense minister and member of the Democratic Party, had been forced to resign his cabinet post as a result of the revelations and had been replaced in 1928 by the professional soldier General Groener. The latter exercised caution initially, but by 1930 he was becoming very irritated by what he saw as the foreign office's inefficacy in protecting Germany's interests in film matters. In July 1930 dissension surfaced between these ministries when the foreign ministry protested against official support for the making of a film by a German company on the battle of Skagerrak. Groener vented his anger. "It would be an incomprehensible retreat," he wrote scathingly to the foreign office,

> in the face of foreign countries which have constantly and repeatedly produced war films which undermine the spirit and will of military defense and make the German soldier contemptible—something that the foreign office has hitherto not been able

24. Wirth to Chancellor Brüning, Aug. 3, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2500, pp. 87–88.

either to prevent or limit—if I refrained from giving a certain amount of support to the production of German war films of an irreproachable character.[25]

A few days later, in a letter to the chancellor, Brüning, Groener expressed his outrage that the government was not taking sufficient steps against the flood of anti-German films. The hope that the production of such films would cease with time was unfounded, he said, and, to prove his point, he cited a remark by a representative of the foreign ministry to the Reichstag educational committee in March of that year: "The tendency to make the German contemptible and laughable in films is growing internationally." Appended to his letter was a list of thirty-seven foreign films released since 1925 which, he claimed, portrayed Germans in an objectionable manner. The list ranged from items like *The Big Parade* (1925) and *What Price Glory?* (1926) to the rerelease in 1927 of Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms*. Groener argued that the only answer to the hostile films was to ban them. But not only that: one should ban all other products of the guilty foreign film makers. In other words, a form of boycott was necessary. The law recently drawn up by the ministry of the interior and promulgated on July 15 was, Groener insisted, totally inadequate because of its looseness, as was the existing film law of 1920. He suggested that his proposals either be implemented as a supplement to Wirth's law of July 15 or be legislated separately by means of emergency decree.[26]

All Quiet was, of course, included in Groener's list of unacceptable films. His ministry was already trying to have the film denied release in Germany, but in November, to his chagrin, it would succeed only in having certain sections deleted. In another letter to the chancellor in August he insisted that it was "high time to defend Germany's national honor energetically."[27] By the time *All Quiet* was released in Germany Groener was in a fighting mood. The "national wave" was obviously mounting in the country, and he sensed that unless he acted decisively the political crisis might destroy the army. In the elections in September, which further aggravated the political deadlock and the sense of crisis, the National Socialists registered their landslide gains, increasing their representation in the Reichstag from 12 to 107 seats. In early October the nation's attention was centered on the army when the High Court

25. Letter of July 19, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2500, p. 79. See also his letter to the Reich Chancellery, July 24, 1930, ibid., p. 78.

26. Letter of July 25, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2500, pp. 80–86.

27. Letter of Aug. 21, 1930, ibid., pp. 101–2.

at Leipzig convicted two lieutenants for conspiring to commit high treason by recruiting for the Nazi party and by setting up Nazi cells in the army. The two officers levelled the charge of insufficient patriotism against their superiors.[28] The army leadership was convinced by December that such charges had to be countered by resolute action.

In December, many of the frustrations and fears, and much hatred and resentment, prevalent in various sectors of German politics and the economy, would converge dramatically on *All Quiet*. The fate of the film in Germany would illustrate eloquently the acuteness of the crisis that country was facing and would suggest the direction the government would follow in the next years.

On December 3 Mary Wigman, the dancer who wanted to liberate dance from, as she put it, the "dictatorship of music," ended her triumphant stay in Berlin on the stage of the Theater am Nollendorfplatz, and during the next day preparations were made for that evening's première showing of *All Quiet* in Germany. Remarque had apparently seen the film several weeks earlier and was reported to be completely satisfied with it.[29] That same day, December 4, a Thursday, the outspoken radical artist, George Grosz, was acquitted in his trial on the charge of slandering the Christian church. The right was incensed. "The Prussia of corruption, dishonor, and sacrilege, in which a slanderer of religion like Grosz is acquitted; the Prussia of pacifism we want to eliminate, and in its place put a Prussia of order, patriotism, and honor," a Nationalist (DNVP) deputy declaimed in the Landtag a few days later.[30] Mary Wigman's dancing, Grosz's activities, and the showing of *All Quiet* were regarded as related aspects of the ongoing nihilistic "bolshevist" attack of the left on Germany's honor, tradition, and self-respect.

The première performance of *All Quiet* nevertheless passed uneventfully before what was, by most accounts, an impressed invited audience which, at the conclusion of the film, sat silently and reverently for several minutes.[31] However, the film critic of the *Deutsche Allgemeine*

28. See the documents printed in Otto Ernst Schüddekopf, *Das Heer und die Republik: Quellen zur Politik der Reichswehrführung 1918–1933* (Hanover and Frankfurt a.M., 1955), pp. 290–92.

29. *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1930.

30. *Verhandlungen des Preussischen Landtags*, session of Dec. 16, 1930, vol. 739, col. 16308.

31. See the reports in *Berliner Morgenpost*, no. 290, Dec. 5; *Vorwärts*, no. 570, Dec. 5; and the London *Times*, Dec. 6, 1930. The conservative *Neue Preussische Kreuz-Zeitung*, no. 342, Dec. 6, 1930, claimed, on the other hand, that the film was received totally negatively by the audience, without, however, in any way substantiating the assertion.

Zeitung, an organ of right-wing financial and industrial interests, commenting the following day on the French version of *All Quiet*, which he had seen in Paris two days earlier, ended his article on a particularly malevolent note. That performance in Paris, he said, had not been disturbed. The obvious implication of this totally unwarranted remark was that the Berlin performances should be.[32]

The eruption came at the 7 P.M. showing that Friday evening, at the first performance open to the general public. The National Socialists had purchased a large block of tickets, about three hundred according to one estimate—in other words, about one-third of the seats; and several Nazi Reichstag deputies, including Joseph Goebbels, were in attendance. Shortly after the start of the film, during the scene where the students are persuaded by their teacher to join up, catcalls and shouting began. However, quiet did return. The real tumult began after the scenes of fighting where the German troops retreat, exhausted, after their temporary advance, and during the scene where the decimated group of soldiers receives an extra portion of food. Cries were heard: "German soldiers had courage. It's a disgrace that such an insulting film was made in America!" And: "Down with the hunger government which permits such a film!" Because of the ruckus, the film was stopped. Non-Nazis in the audience began whistling. The house lights went on. Goebbels, who, of course, had never been in the war, stood up in the front row of the balcony where the Nazis were congregated and began delivering a speech claiming that the film was an attempt to destroy Germany's image. Suddenly stink bombs and sneeze powder were thrown from the balcony and white mice were noticed scurrying about. Fights broke out, and people fled for the exits, accompanied by Nazi cries of "Jewish audience!" The cinema had anticipated possible trouble and some police were present, but apparently not enough, and so an emergency force was summoned. Despite the intervention of the police, the stench was such that the performance could not be continued, and the theater was vacated. As they were leaving, the Nazi troublemakers added insult to injury by demanding refunds. Outside, the demonstration continued, reinforced by waiting Nazis. Inside, conversations took place between the director of the theater, a police major, and the film councillor in the Prussian ministry of the interior, who happened to be in attendance, and the decision was made to cancel the 9 P.M. showing as well. The demon-

32. Dr. Curt Emmrich, *DAZ*, no. 567, Dec. 5, 1930.

strators were gradually dispersed, and that night the theater was placed under heavy guard.[33]

The events made front-page headlines in newspapers throughout the country the following day. The divisions in the press over the film were similar to those over the book. The socialist and liberal left poured invective on the nationalist right for attacking "gripping reality," a "grandiose portrait of war," "the truth," "this document of our four-year passion," and for doing more to damage the image of Germany abroad than the film ever could. The right and much of the Catholic Center denounced the film as a scandalous insult, a denial of all the virtues the war had evoked in men, and greeted the demonstration as *ein Erwachen des Deutschtums*. The Nazis predictably called the film a "Jewish obscenity." *Germania*, the main Catholic organ and staunch supporter of Chancellor Brüning, hinted at government opinion and possible action when it stated that the film should not have been allowed in Germany in the first place because it was an insult to two million dead German soldiers. The matter of *All Quiet* was brought up in the Reichstag that day. A DNVP deputy blamed the left and democracy for the violence. The left was attacking the right for being nationally minded, he argued, and was trying to prevent it from expressing its patriotism. At the same time socialists and democrats were promoting the self-abuse and self-denigration of Germany by showing *All Quiet*.[34]

Nevertheless, on the following nights the film was shown again, now, however, under very tight police protection. Yet on the night of December 8, Monday, rioting broke out once more, not in the theater but in Nollendorfplatz and in the general vicinity. The Nazis later explained that there were no demonstrations inside the theater because police and *Reichsbanner* members—the *Reichsbanner* was the paramilitary defense league of the republican parties—outnumbered the genuine audience.[35] The London *Times* correspondent observed in the crowd outside "mostly youths, with a sprinkling of middle-aged men and women, and an occasional dog." The Associated Press statement read: "Boys who were babies in 1914 rioted noisily through the fashionable West End of Berlin

33. The Berlin police had a busy day on December 5. There were, in addition, three separate clashes between Communists and police, and in one incident the police opened fire, wounding a seventeen-year-old apprentice. *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 575, Dec. 6, 1930.

34. *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, Sitzungsberichte*, V. Wahlperiode 1930, 444 (Berlin, 1931): 397–400.

35. *Völkischer Beobachter*, no. 292, Dec. 9, 1930.

tonight in protest against the alleged pacifism of the motion picture 'All Quiet on the Western Front.' "[36] Later in the evening, as the main demonstrations dispersed, shop windows were smashed, passengers on the underground were terrorized, and all told forty-two people were arrested.

The tide of opinion against the film was mounting. On Tuesday, the 9th, the German Federation of Cinema Owners met and adopted a resolution declaring a boycott against films that provoke political disturbances and, furthermore, expressed regret that "Carl Laemmle, a German-American, should have seen fit twelve years after the conclusion of peace to produce a war film which cannot be shown in Berlin in the same version as that exhibited in London and Paris."[37] The executive committee of the main student association of the University of Berlin spoke out against the film, calling for its proscription, because it represented a "mockery of the sense of sacrifice."[38] The leaders of the League of German Officers and of the *Stahlhelm*, the nationalist veterans' organization, appealed to the chancellor to intervene and suppress the film.[39] That night the violence continued, following the pattern of the previous evening. At one point police felt forced to fire warning shots. Again there was widespread vandalism and unsystematic acts of terrorism. The estimates for the size of crowds involved in the demonstrations differed dramatically. The *DAZ* claimed that eighty thousand people were present at the protest on the 9th, about three times as many as on the previous night. The police, in contrast, asserted that in no case were more than six thousand involved at any time.[40]

The next day, Wednesday, the 10th, the Prussian authorities took action. The police president of Berlin, the Social Democrat Grzesinski, pronounced a ban on open-air demonstrations.[41] The Nazis responded predictably. "Grzesinski is protecting the Jewish film of shame!" screamed the *Völkischer Beobachter* (December 12). "Decent Germans are no longer even permitted to protest." In the Reichstag one deputy, Kasche, charged that money was being wasted "to put on police parades for an Ameri-

36. *The Times*, Dec. 9; and *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 1930.

37. Cited in *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 1930.

38. Cited in *DAZ*, no. 576, Dec. 10, 1930.

39. Letters of Dec. 9, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/2500, pp. 128–29, 133.

40. No. 575, Dec. 10, 1930; and then the statement by police president Grzesinski, quoted in the next issue, no. 576, on the same day.

41. For Grzesinski's later, rather hazy and confused, view of the events, see his unpublished "Erinnerungen," Ms., Kl. Erw. 144, pp. 250–52, Bundesarchiv Koblenz.

can film Jew." Another, Stöhr, asserted that the Marxist parties and their press, shocked by their electoral defeat in September, were attempting to provoke the Nazis and were refusing any objective discussions with National Socialism.[42] The Communists joined in the attack. "Kulturfaschismus!" they yelled. They derided the film as the product of bourgeois pacifists who cloud rather than clarify issues and interpreted the ban on demonstrations as a calculated step toward the establishment of a fascist dictatorship.[43] In the Reichstag Walter Ulbricht brought the usual accusation against Grzesinski and the SPD of being "slaves of the fascist government" which, through the ban on demonstrations, intended to suppress "the cry of hunger of the unemployed" so that it would not be heard by "the rich and fat, the hyenas of the stock market and the big industrialists."[44]

By this stage public excitement over the film had reached such a pitch in the country that the Brüning government felt forced to deal directly with the matter. Rumors had circulated for several days that both Curtius, the foreign minister, and Wirth, the minister of the interior, were prepared to adopt a hard line against the film. In a cabinet session on the 9th, during a brief discussion of *All Quiet* and media questions in general, Curtius spoke angrily against the press and radio, and Wirth called for swift passage of a new film law, replacing that of 1920, which would expressly contain a clause forbidding films injurious to Germany's image.[45] On the 10th, members of the cabinet saw *All Quiet* in a private showing at the offices of the film board. "This is probably the first time that a Reich government has officially occupied itself with a film," the *BZ am Mittag* commented (December 10). WTB, the semiofficial news agency, reported that day that the foreign office, which previously had approved release of the film, would, if now consulted, respond differently. Curtius, who hitherto had probably not been directly involved in the question of the film, had, so the news release hinted, finally intervened and forced the foreign office to change its stance. Brüning was careful not to speak out on the matter. His state secretary in the chancellery did, however, comment in his diary on his own impressions of the film which he saw at the cabinet showing:

42. *Sitzungsberichte*, 444: 538.

43. Headline in *Rote Fahne*, no. 288, Dec. 10, 1930; see also the next issue, no. 289, Dec. 11.

44. *Sitzungsberichte*, 444: 538.

45. Minutes of the cabinet session, Dec. 9, 1930, Reichskanzlei files, R43I/1447, p. 295.

Deeply shocking and yet accurate. In the end, nevertheless, I too favor banning the film. For peace and order would be affected by its showing. Moreover, a longer film is said to be running in America, in which apparently parts are anti-German and inflammatory. Certain sections, because of their prominence, tend to standardize and falsify, and thus to create one-sided impressions.[46]

The evident contradiction in this honest comment—of approval and yet disapproval—is very revealing. The film was being rejected not as a statement on the war but as a political irritant.

Now, the film law of 1920 stated that any *Land* could appeal to the supreme censorship board and have it reconsider the ruling on a film by submitting a petition to this effect. By December 9 Saxony, Braunschweig, Thuringia, Württemberg, and Bavaria had submitted such petitions regarding *All Quiet*. At 10 A.M. on December 11 the *Filmoberprüfstelle* met in Berlin for its hearing. Every January a schedule of meetings for the year was planned for this executive board of appeal, and five members from an extensive register of censors—a censor was appointed by the ministry of the interior for a three-year term—were assigned to each meeting. The board for its meeting on the 11th consisted of its usual chairman, a government official, Dr. Ernst Seeger, and also of Otto Schubert, a representative of the film industry, Dr. Paul Baecker, editor of the agrarian nationalist *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, Professor Hinderer, a theologian, and a Miss Reinhardt, a schoolteacher and sister of the late general and former chief of staff Walther Reinhardt. The composition of the board for this meeting made its decision a foregone conclusion. Representatives of the five protesting state governments were also in attendance to present briefs, as were delegates of the defense, foreign, and interior ministries to give "expert opinion." Finally, Universal Pictures was represented by a lawyer, Dr. Frankfurter, as well as a retired major and two directors. The session began with the showing of the film. The briefs followed.

The state governments went first and presented their cases against the film individually. Generally they argued that the film was an obvious threat to public order; that the foreign version must be damaging to Germany's image since a milder version had to be shown in Germany; and that the film would surely encourage negativism and hence political radicalism in young people. In the current spiritual crisis in Germany the film could have only a harmful effect.

46. Entry for Dec. 14, 1930, Hermann Pünder, *Politik in der Reichskanzlei: Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1929–1932* (Stuttgart, 1961), p. 79.

The defense ministry, in the person of naval lieutenant von Baumbach, then reported. The ministry, he said, had followed the fate of the film from the beginning. As early as April 1930 the German consul general in San Francisco had lodged protests with Universal Pictures. When the film reached Germany and was first viewed by officials in an abbreviated English version in the late summer, the ministry had immediately condemned the film. During the past decade relations between states had improved greatly, but one area, that of film, the Locarno spirit had not penetrated. *All Quiet* was merely a refined version of the old propaganda films, in which the German soldier and Germans in general were caricatured, satirized, and disparaged. In these pictures Germans always plunder, rape, and terrorize. They eat and drink like brutes. Their spirits pick up only when they are hunting rats. Albeit more sophisticated in execution, *All Quiet* fitted into this broad pattern, and therefore the ministry was demanding its suppression in Germany on grounds that it damaged Germany's image.

For the foreign office, legation officer Sievers gave a brief statement. Although the ministry had voiced no objections to the film initially, recent reports on the effect of the film abroad, primarily in England and America, had led it to change its position and to conclude that the film was indeed detrimental to Germany. Dr. Frankfurter, the counsel for Universal Pictures, requested an elaboration on this vague pronouncement; he asked for specific reasons and examples, but Sievers declined to answer. When the question was put by Frankfurter whether the change of course stemmed from directives from "leading officials" in the ministry, the chairman, Seeger, forbade the query on grounds that it concerned the internal functioning of the ministry.

The delegate of the interior ministry, Dr. Hoche, described the internal situation in Germany as one of "profound spiritual distress and inner strife" and "destructive and lamentable ideological struggle." Anything serving to augment the difficulties must be avoided, he argued, and the continued showing of *All Quiet* would certainly enflame passions and provoke further disorder.

After a period of deliberation, the board announced its decision, based on the following observations. Characters in the film were meant to be stereotypes: Sergeant Himmelstoss, with his sadistic behavior, was meant to represent German militarism which had supposedly provoked the war; Katczinsky, because of his grotesque appearance, was calculated to be the German barbarian, the Hun, whom the war was meant to de-

stroy; the volunteer who takes the boots of his wounded comrade, the group which devours food and drink like animals, the recruits who howl and crawl about in the face of enemy artillery, these were all meant to represent the German army. In contrast, foreign soldiers in the picture die without a sound, bravely, patriotically. The film therefore slandered Germany; it was a dishonest portrayal, and hence it was understandable that it had been greeted with rage and violence. Furthermore, the film was not about the war but about Germany's defeat, and this defeat was portrayed as an act of providence, as inevitable. The film, then, was malicious in intent, and foreign states would be uncomprehending if it were permitted in Germany.

Having decided that the film should be banned on grounds that it harmed Germany's image, the board stated that discussion of other grounds would be superfluous.[47]

And so *All Quiet* was prohibited from public showing in Germany. The Mozartsaal announced that instead it would play a nature film or something from its repertoire. The picture which had been scheduled next had not yet been approved by the censors; it was called *Der Untergang der Welt* (The Decline of the World).

The nationalist right and the Nazis were, of course, jubilant about their success in "the film war." "Ours the victory!" Goebbels's *Der Angriff* trumpeted on its front page in announcing the interdiction. The *Neue Preussische Kreuz-Zeitung* (December 13) exulted in the "success of the national resistance." Conservative newspapers contended that honor and justice had been achieved.

A few exceptions notwithstanding, as a whole the socialist and liberal left was, of course, outraged. Its press devoted pages to testimonies from veterans that the film was an accurate portrayal of war. The word "capitulation" appeared in virtually every comment by the moderate left on the affair. The government had surrendered to mob pressure, to the irresponsible actions of ignorant hooligans incited by a calculated campaign, and the ban had done incomparably more damage to Germany's image abroad than the film ever could. The SPD organ *Vorwärts* warned (December 12) that the "victory of terror," this victory by the "nationalist street," made it clear that Germany was already engaged in a "final struggle" which would decide the future of the country for years, perhaps decades, to come. "Under the pretext of protecting Ger-

47. The 25-page protocol of the hearing is in Kl. Erw. 457, Bundesarchiv Koblenz.

man honor, film publicity for the spirit of the Locarno treaty and Kellogg pact is being strangled. And with the help of the foreign office no less!" A retired army lieutenant waxed literary in the *Berliner Tageblatt* (December 12): "The appointed guardians of the republic resemble King Lear, who rejects his faithful child and gives his evil daughter his land and fortune. May heaven protect the German republic from the fate of Lear!" Carl von Ossietzky was provoked by "the Remarque incident" to make some incisive observations. The implication of the ban on *All Quiet*, he noted, was that Germans were now forbidden to say that war was evil and that peace was preferable to war. "The republic," he charged, "has given up its own ideology; it has retreated without a struggle. It should have defended this film viciously." And in response to the argument of some of the left that two thousand stupid youths were to blame, Ossietzky asked: "Where was the *Reichsbanner*? Where were the young Socialists? Where were the Communists?" The time had come, he concluded, to respond energetically. If the state would not exert authority, it should tolerate parity. And so, republicans should drive a Hugenberg film out of a cinema. "Fascism is to be beaten only on the street. . . . *A un corsaire—corsaire et demi!*"[48]

Protest meetings, organized mainly by the *Reichsbanner*, actually began the very day of the ban, and continued for weeks. The correspondent of the London *Times* estimated that the numbers present at four *Reichsbanner* rallies on December 15 were far greater than those at the demonstrations against the film. In speeches at these rallies there were frequent suggestions that the *Reichsbanner* should take similar disruptive actions against "hurrah-patriotic" UFA films. And indeed at several performances of the UFA film *The Flute Concert at Sans Souci*, which was one in the series of romantic films about Frederick the Great and which had its première at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo on December 19, there was whistling and shouting and more stink bombs, together with claims that the film was militarist propaganda glorifying war.[49] Police again intervened but in this case, despite headaches occasioned by the hydrogen sulphide, no performance was completely halted. This film in turn was given full police protection, and Ossietzky's hope for parity did not materialize. The right celebrated its triumph in the heady war of stink

48. *Die Weltbühne* 26 (Dec. 16, 1930): 889–91.

49. During a scene where a young officer's wife asserts that Frederick is not a woman hater, someone in the audience shouted: "Oh yeah? He was a homosexual!" *BZ am Mittag*, no. 345, Dec. 20, 1930.

bombs with references to its "true Prussian spirit, the spirit of Frederick the Great."

Foreign comments on the "film war" were, with few exceptions, full of dismay, and most agreed that the interdiction of *All Quiet* represented a revival of promilitary sentiment in Germany. *Le Figaro* hinted (December 13) at collusion between the *Reichswehr* and the Nazis. The Washington correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt* reported the same day that Americans could not understand the ban. Was the government backing the Nazis? Most foreign commentary saw the ban as a surrender to Hitler and as his greatest victory yet. A Labour deputy in England remarked that the German image had not suffered as rude a blow since the Hun-speech of William II in 1898.[50] The *Manchester Guardian* summed up the foreign response (December 12):

> For years the German Republic has led the world as a land of intellectual freedom. This is no longer so.... What has happened now is not merely the suppression of a film..., not merely a militarist victory, but a capitulation before the organized mob, a mob that demonstrated against the world peace as symbolized by this film, a capitulation that is therefore a betrayal of the world's peace.... That there is a revival of German militarist emotion has been clear for some time. That the force opposed to it is so weak is a startling and sinister revelation.

The left-wing German press did not hesitate to cite these critical foreign views at length. The right-wing press, on the other hand, urged its readers simply to ignore these foreign opinions. The foreign press was bound to be hostile since anti-German propaganda was, after all, its business.[51]

The protest against the ban was impressive, but it must be put into a wider context. In Germany it emanated almost exclusively from Berlin, a city which was strongly left-wing in political orientation and was dubbed "red Berlin" by the provinces. In the rest of the country, even though virtually no one had seen the film, opinion on the whole tended to support the government position. That not one or two but five state governments objected to the film suggests this. Moreover, many people felt that if a moderate like Wirth backed the proscription, for whatever reasons, then the film must be sinister. In February 1931, discussions were initiated between the parliamentary delegations of the SPD and of the moderate bourgeois parties about attempting to lift the ban on *All Quiet*, but all the bourgeois parties, without exception, opposed such

50. Cited by *Vorwärts*, no. 583, Dec. 13, 1930.
51. See the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, no. 580, Dec. 12, 1930.

action.[52] The moderate middle-class politicians were fearful not only of the political repercussions, the outbreak of renewed public disorder, not only of losing their own voters; they were basically opposed to the portrait of the war in *All Quiet*.[53]

German middle-class thinking on the war had hovered in a twilight zone between fact and fantasy since November 1918. The German middle classes had been reluctant, even in the brief period of relative prosperity between 1924 and 1928, to accept the reality, the humiliation, of defeat, but they had seen no alternative. And as long as there was a prospect of stability, political and particularly economic, they had not gone out of their way to seek such an alternative. The depression, however, which struck with full force in 1929, tore open the mental floodgates. If the war had, as Remarque and Milestone portrayed it, been in vain, then Germans were confronted with an abyss of further meaningless suffering. Then Germans had to bear stoically further political anarchy and economic horror, for these were now regarded as the obvious outgrowths of the war. But the despair of the depression—with skyrocketing unemployment, wage cuts, bankruptcies—was simply too much to tolerate. "The inner German national consciousness is crying for affirmation," wrote Jakob Kaiser in an organ of the Christian trade-union movement.[54] *All Quiet* offered it only negation.

At the political extremes, both left and right, emphatic explanations for the war were presented. The Communist left depicted the war as the product of the capitalist, industrialist system. That system had to be destroyed and then the causes of war would disappear. Because the war had made many Germans realize the evils of capitalism, the Communists did not regard it as having been futile and meaningless. The war was a chapter in the class struggle. On the right, the political grouping which presented the most consistent and coherent explanation of the war was the NSDAP. The war, the Nazi ideologues asserted, had been a struggle to achieve Germany's rightful eminence in Europe. That struggle had not ended and was being continued by the Nazi party. The NSDAP proclaimed, most virulently and uncompromisingly of all political groups, the *Dolchstoss*, stab-in-the-back, theory, which denied Germany's military defeat and insisted that the efforts of the victorious

52. Reported in the *Kölner Lokal-Anzeiger*, no. 92, Feb. 21, 1931.

53. See, for example, the correspondence on the subject in the Nachlass Kaiser, 220, Bundesarchiv Koblenz.

54. *Zentralblatt*, Jan. 15, 1931; ms. in Nachlass Kaiser, 220.

army had been subverted by traitors and defeatists at home. Moreover, since the war was not really over, the *Dolchstoss* was continuing at the hands of the socialists and liberals who ran the republic. They were the ones who had brought about Germany's humiliation and, of course, it was in their interest to continue that humiliation. The showing of *All Quiet* was part of this nihilistic crusade.

While the Communist interpretation found growing support among the working class, the German middle classes shifted toward the position of the extreme right, not always consciously, not always openly. However, the consequences of saying that the war had been in vain were too terrible, and so sympathies generally shifted to the right. The DNVP and DVP (German People's Party) were not merely currying favor with Hitler or trying to outflank him when, after 1929, they moved distinctly to the right. They were reflecting the public mood. When Ernst Feder, the deputy editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, pointed out (December 12) that the main danger facing Germany was not the NSDAP but "the indolence, the indulgence, and the hesitancy of the so-called 'bourgeoisie,' " he was referring to this faceless but distinct shift. Without bothering to analyze the war experience or the military realities between 1914 and 1918, the German middle classes were now prepared to assert that the war was the main source of their ills.

It should perhaps also be said that there was an element of naïveté in the enthusiastic support of the socialist and liberal left for both the book and film versions of *All Quiet*. Remarque's story was not "the truth about the war." Certainly, the novel and the film were powerful and moving artistic interpretations, but they were no more, no less, than that, and they were interpretations in which memory had become a handmaiden in explaining away a more personal, a more immediate, anxiety.[55] Those who elevated Remarque and the film to the lofty pedestal of "truth" did so because of ideology. Those, in turn, who attacked *All Quiet* were motivated by similar concerns.

For all political groupings, then, and for the general public, the war, by the early thirties, had passed out of the realm of autonomous reality and into the toolshed of politics. The war had become memory; the war had become a fragment of its own reality.

Early in 1931 the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science accorded its awards for best director in 1930 to Lewis Milestone and for best picture to *All Quiet*.

55. See my article cited in n. 2.

During the summer the senior Carl Laemmle informed the German ministry of the interior that Universal Pictures was now willing to show a version even more abbreviated than the German version throughout the world. And in September, this version, shortened from the previous banned version by a few feet—the drill section at the beginning and the second school scene in the middle of the film were edited—was presented again to the Berlin board of censors. National attention and emotions at the time were focused on the rejection by the Allies of Germany's plan for a customs union with Austria and on the flight of the airship *Graf Zeppelin* to and from South America. Consequently, the release of the film by the Berlin board caused little commotion.

Yet, the damage had been done. The "Remarque incident" was to be remembered for the ban in December 1930 and not for the rerelease in September 1931.