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Film and International Politics: The Banning of All Quiet on the Western Front *in Germany and Austria, 1930-1931*

By
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BERLIN, December 5, 1930, 7:05 p.m. The Mozart Hall, an ornate movie palace on Nollendorf Plaza in Berlin's fashionable West End, is entirely sold out. The audience buzzes with anticipation, anxiously awaiting the house lights to dim for the German première of *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a film which has already won critical praise from Los Angeles to Paris and collected a host of prizes including Academy Awards for best direction and best picture. Yet the audience has come to see more than Hollywood's latest extravaganza. This film is supposed to have a special meaning for Germans. Based on the controversial novel of Erich Maria Remarque, it depicts the World War I experience of a group of young German schoolmates as they move from the exhilaration of enlistment through the degradation of training to the blind terror, disillusionment and death of trench warfare on the Western Front. The audience knows this is a uniquely German story, and it has already sparked an extended, bitter debate over the novel's accuracy and the author's patriotism. The leaders of the Reichswehr protested its filming because of the negative portrayal of the army, and Germany's militant Right, especially the National Socialists, recently truimphant in the September elections, predicted dire consequences should the film be shown in the homeland. Thus, the audience came that evening to Mozart Hall not just to see a movie but to participate in a major cultural and political event.

They did not have long to wait. Ten minutes into the performance, a small, dark-haired man arose from his front row

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balcony seat and stalked up the darkened aisle toward the exit. This was the signal for brown-shirted Nazis throughout the hall to begin shouting and chanting "Judenfilm, Judenfilm." Stink bombs rolled down the central aisles, emitting an acrid odor which filled the main floor, and white mice released in the balcony caused pandemonium. The panic was short-lived, however; most of the patrons regained their composure once the management raised the house lights. The auditorium soon cleared without injury to anyone. Joseph Goebbels, whose departure had signaled the disturbance, must have been pleased with the evening's effort.[1]

By itself, such an event would not merit scholarly attention, but over the next four evenings Goebbels orchestrated a succession of boisterous demonstrations aimed at keeping *All Quiet on the Western Front* from the German screen. In each case the Berlin police proved capable of restraining protesters, but Goebbel's actions set in motion a series of events which contributed to a cabinet crisis in Germany and subsequently embroiled the film in both German and Austrian politics for the next six months.

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When Carl Laemmle, president of Universal Studios, traveled to Germany to purchase the screen rights to *All Quiet on the Western Front* in July 1929, he had little reason to anticipate such difficulties. Published in January, the novel had sold over half a million copies in Germany and was beginning to experience even stronger sales abroad. While Laemmle was aware of the vicious criticism directed at the book in the German press, his enthusiasm for the project remained strong. Public controversy often enhances box office appeal, and since most of the criticism was confined to those newspapers and magazines representing the political Right, there seemed little to fear. In July 1929, the Right appeared to be powerless in Germany and certainly unable to threaten the successful exhibition of a film based on *All Quiet.* Hence, Laemmle felt confident enough to offer Remarque £40,000 for the rights to his novel, a figure well beyond that paid for any previous European work. The author himself was less confident. Fearing that Universal might dilute the book's message, Remarque insisted on a unique provision in the contract specifying that the

[1]This account of the public première is drawn from reports in the contemporary press and from an extensive three-volume scrapbook on *All Quiet* in the Lewis Milestone Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills.

film interpret the story without significant alterations or additions.[2]

Laemmle returned to Hollywood in August and turned the new property over to his son, Carl Jr., just placed in charge of production at Universal. The younger Laemmle, known as "Junior" in the industry, had great plans for the novel. He saw it as the perfect vehicle for beginning the transformation of Universal from a minor studio specializing in the production of inoffensive little comedies and low-budget westerns to a major Hollywood institution capable of challenging the likes of MGM, Paramount and Warner Brothers. His determination to switch studio policy toward big-budget features met with resistance among Universal executives, all of whom expressed skepticism over his decision to launch the new program with *All Quiet.* Experience taught them that war pictures were box office poison, and all but the elder Laemmle voted against Junior's first major decision.[3]

The Laemmles sensed that Remarque's novel represented more than a simple war story; it contained unique human elements which would touch a sensitive nerve in audiences throughout the world. They cast aside the objections of their subordinates and hired respected director Lewis Milestone at $5000 per week, thereby setting in motion plans which would result in a motion picture described as "the most powerful indictment of war's stupidity, waste, carnage, agony and confusion yet captured on film."[4] Junior authorized an initial production budget of $891,000, almost four times the cost of a normal Universal film, and included special provisions for the construction of a small German village on the studio back lot, the importation of authentic World War I uniforms and field equipment, and the conversion of the Irvine Ranch, south of Los Angeles, into a muddy, cratered replica of no man's land. The

[2]*New York Times,* 27 April 1930. For a detailed account of the extended literary debate in Germany, see Calvin D. Gruver, "The Public Debate over Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Western Nichts Neues,* 1929-1931," presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, October 1986, or Hubert Rüter, *Erich Maria Remarque, Im Western Nichts Neues: Ein Bestseller der Kriegsliteratur im Kontext* (Munich, 1980).

[3]Axel Madsen, *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography* (New York, 1973), 63.

[4]John Cutts, "All Quiet on the Western Front," *Films and Filming* 9 (April 1963): 58.

lavish budget was meant to insure that Remarque's book would be brought to the screen with complete authenticity and realism.[5]

Given the commitment of resources, it is not surprising that the Laemmles sought to eliminate censorable material from the screenplay before going into production, and they asked for assistance from the Studio Relations Office (SRO) in Hollywood. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), also known as the "Hays Office," had established the SRO in 1926 to act as liaison between the studios and the state and municipal censor boards which had emerged during the preceding decade. Later, after February 1930, the SRO would become the enforcement agency for the MPPDA's notorious production code, but in 1929 it functioned as a studio advisory body. Director Jason Joy and his staff had learned to anticipate the prejudices of the various censor boards in order to provide producers with sound advice about potentially censorable screen material. As a result, studios often submitted troublesome story ideas and scripts to the SRO for an opinion.[6]

At first the Laemmles were concerned about censorship in the U.S.—the novel contained rough language and a number of gruesome battle scenes likely to offend local censors. Due to the contract with Remarque which promised fidelity to the book, they sought Joy's advice. While noting that the book contained censorable material, Joy believed that the work's obvious importance would allow treating its themes with a "boldness and truthfulness which I think you would be unwise to employ in a story of lesser merit." In other words, Joy felt confident that the "censors would not object to a rather literal interpretation of the book." When the script was completed in December, the Laemmles asked for more specific guidance and Joy provided it. He warned that American censors would certainly cut several items of profanity and might also eliminate a crucial scene in which three young German soldiers swim across a canal to spend the night with three French farm girls. Joy also advised that French reaction to the film might be negative because of the portrayal of the girls as well as some dialogue which implied French responsibility for the war. Ironically, he mentioned no scenes which

[5]Production Estimate, 12 December 1929, *All Quiet* Files, Universal Studios Collection, University of Southern California. Universal publicity claimed the film cost nearly $3 million to produce, but the actual outlay was closer to $1.2 million.

[6]On the operation of the SRO, see John Alan Sargent, "Self-Regulation: The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930-1961," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1963), 43-44.

might provoke the Germans. The Laemmles acted on several of Joy's suggestions, such as deleting profanity, and ignored the rest. In January the film went into production.[7]

Up to this point no one at Universal had voiced concerns about potential foreign reaction to the film. This is not surprising since all Hollywood productions targeted the American market first. Yet, *All Quiet* carried a message bound to have enormous impact beyond the domestic market and producers always looked for properties which would do well abroad. With one-third of Hollywood's revenues drawn from foreign rentals, that market constituted a vital concern. Toward the end of February, as the shooting neared completion, the Laemmles began to consider *All Quiet's* foreign potential. While they had little reason to doubt that the film would attract large audiences abroad, they became concerned about the reaction of foreign censors. Acting on Joy's earlier advice, they commissioned Valentine Mandelstamm, former French diplomat and self-professed expert on French tastes, to preview a rough cut of the film. He was appalled. The offensive references to French responsibility for the war, plus the farmhouse scene, might provoke protests and lead to a government ban on the film. He noted that having three French girls give themselves to soldiers of the enemy for bits of food did "not speak highly for French morality," and he found the girls' table manners offensive, ignoring the fact that they were pictured as being near starvation.[8]

The Laemmles chose to ignore Mandelstamm's observations and retained the scene unaltered. By 1930 Remarque's novel had sold over 250,000 copies in France without any protest of its portrayal of French womanhood.[9] They felt less confident, however, about the potential German reaction. The continuing controversy over the novel made the Laemmles nervous after the first of the year. A little controversy often heightens public awareness and interest, but the intensity of the German criticism raised the

[7]Jason Joy to Carl Laemmle Jr., 21 August 1929, and Joy to Jack Gain, 2 January 1930, *All Quiet* File, Production Code Administration [PCA] Collection, Herrick Library. For a scene-by-scene synopsis of the film, see Leonard Leff, *Film Plots: Scene by Scene Narrative Outlines for Feature Film Study,* 2 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1983-1988), 7-12; the script is reprinted in Sam Thomas, ed., *Best American Screenplays* (New York, 1986), 13-72.

[8]Valentine Mandelstamm to C. Laemmle Jr., 31 March 1930, PCA Collection.

[9]Portions of the scene suggesting a sexual interlude were eliminated by state censors in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York, as well as by the British Board of Film Censors. The sequence was run without cuts in France. Elimination Slips, *All Quiet* File, PCA Collection. London *Chronicle,* 8 June 1930.

possibility of censorship, so the Laemmles asked the SRO to find a German official to predict the government's response. Joy arranged for the German consul general in San Francisco, Herr Von Hentig to view some of the early scenes. While pointing out several minor errors in costuming and military procedure, the consul found no reason why *All Quiet* should not be well received in Germany.[10]

In early April, however, the Laemmles grew anxious once again. A worsening unemployment crisis in March precipitated a change in the German Cabinet and the new chancellor, Heinrich Bruening, appeared to be more nationalistic than his predecessor. Just before the Cabinet change, the Reichstag introduced a measure to ban films which presented a negative view of Germany. In support of this bill, the Foreign Office issued a protest against foreign films which defamed the German army, and mentioned the forthcoming Universal Studios picture as a potential violator. Although eventually defeated, consideration of the proposal prompted the Laemmles to hold a special meeting with Joy to discuss the German situation. Late on the afternoon of April 8, Joy and the two Laemmles viewed *All Quiet,* now near its final form. Joy expressed his belief that Germans should find nothing objectionable in the film but the Laemmles remained worried. They prevailed upon him to ask the consul general to fly down once more from San Francisco for an 11:00 P.M. preview. Herr von Hentig consented. This time he voiced his personal distaste for the movie but again assured his hosts that there would be no government ban.[11]

This reassurance, combined with the critical praise that accompanied the film's public release, eliminated further concerns about the German reaction to *All Quiet.* Over the summer, as the picture played to huge audiences in both the U.S. and Britain, Will Hays, president of the MPPDA, succeeded in resolving a series of patent disputes which had plagued the exhibition of American talkies in Germany.[12] As a result the Laemmles decided to have *All Quiet* dubbed by German-speaking actors so

[10]Joy, memorandum, 15 February 1930, PCA Collection.

[11]Joy, memorandum, 8 April 1930, PCA Collection. Von Hentig was obviously saying one thing to Universal and something different to the Foreign Office in Berlin. The Foreign Office statement against *All Quiet* was based on his negative report and he later claimed to have warned Universal against the anti-German tendencies in the film. The motive for his actions may be explained by the fact that he was, at the same time, seeking an appointment to serve as Hollywood's special advisor on German problems. Joy, memorandum, 7 April 1930, PCA Collection.

[12]*New York Times,* 17 & 30 July 1930.

as to avoid the well-known German distaste for films with subtitles. This seemed to prepare the way for a long, uneventful and prosperous run for the movie in Germany. But as an added precaution, they submitted the film to the German Embassy in Washington. The chargé pointed out a negative reference to the Kaiser and several other minor items of dialogue which some German viewers might have found offensive, but otherwise offered no objections. The producers removed the offensive material and submitted the film to the German censor board which, after several additional cuts, approved it without comment.[13]

All Quiet previewed in Berlin before a select audience of press and trade officials on the evening of December 4, 1930. The morning reviews proved disappointing. Whereas American and British critics praised the film, it met with a negative response in most of the German reviews. While the political Left applauded the picture, criticism from the Right was intense and uncompromising. The Nazis called *All Quiet* a "Jewish lie" and a "hate-film slandering the German soldier."[14] Other papers, while less inflammatory, also gave negative reviews. Almost without exception the nationalistic critics ignored the film's cinematic values, focusing instead on *All Quiet's* anti-war theme and its characterization of German soldiers and the German army. In effect they condemned the film for being true to the novel. To them, its portrayal of German soldiers as frightened by their first exposure to gunfire and so disillusioned by the battlefield carnage as to question both their superiors and the ultimate purpose of the war, denigrated the bravery and discipline of German fighting men and undermined the nation's confidence in its armed forces.

In other words, the movie, like the novel, was viewed exclusively in political terms. The Left loved its condemnation of militarism and its anti-war message; the Right saw both as dangerous to the nation's strength. Both sides missed the fact that the Laemmles and director Lewis Milestone carefully sought to portray Remarque's characters as universal figures. They could as easily have been English or French soldiers as German. As one observer noted, the "schoolboys were American, except for their spiked helmets," but the German critics refused to see this universality.[15] Ironically, these same critics also expressed

[13]Ted Herron to Will Hays, 22 November 1930, PCA Collection.

[14]*Der Angriff,* 6 December 1930, 1. For a positive review from a liberal perspective, see *Vossische Zeitung,* 6 December 1930.

[15]Michael T. Isenberg, "An Ambiguous Legacy: A Retrospective on World War I Films, 1930-1938," *Journal of Popular Film* 4 (1975): 110. In the midst of the

outrage that *All Quiet* had been edited for German audiences. While knowing little of the specific cuts made prior to exhibition, they charged that foreigners were viewing scenes even more critical of Germany than those contained in the German version and that the nation's image and honor would suffer as a result. The complaint, echoed again and again by *All Quiet's* detractors, would ultimately serve as primary justification for the government's ban on the film.[16]

The following evening, December 5, *All Quiet* opened for the general public at the Mozart Hall with a Nazi-inspired disruption. Much of the Berlin press condemned the Nazi action, but that hardly deterred Joseph Goebbels. He recognized that *All Quiet* represented an ideal issue, one which could be exploited to stir up the faithful, win new converts to the party and perhaps even embarrass the government of Chancellor Bruening.

From the viewpoint of Goebbels and other Nazi leaders, *All Quiet* arrived in Berlin at an opportune moment. In December 1930 the Nazi hierarchy was still trying to absorb the full implications of the party's dramatic electoral success the preceding September. Almost overnight the National Socialists had moved from political obscurity to the very "anteroom of power." The party's vote had increased from 2.8 percent to 18 percent, and its seats in the Reichstag from 12 to 107, making the Nazis the second largest party in Germany.[17] Such success, however, left party leaders like Goebbels fearful that the faithful would grow complacent and passive. New issues were needed to rekindle commitments and *All Quiet* seemed a perfect vehicle.

But it was not just the party faithful that Goebbels sought to activate with the theater demonstrations. He knew, as did other party leaders, that *All Quiet on the Western Front,* both the novel and now the filmed version, had become a symbol to German nationalists—a symbol of alien, debilitating influences seeking to undermine German resolve at a time when the nation needed to assert itself. While most German nationalists had not come under

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controversy, Carl Laemmle Sr. dispatched a thousand-word cable, to be used as an advertisement in Berlin newspapers, which claimed that *All Quiet* "indicts no nation, no individuals, but it records an international human experience." *Exhibitors Herald-World*, 13 December 1930, 25.

[16]Excerpts from several German reviews are reprinted in the appendix of Rüter, *Erich Maria Remarque*, 227-32. For an excellent discussion of German reaction to the film, see Modris Eksteins, "War, Memory, and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*," *Central European History* 13 (March 1980): 60-82.

[17]Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler* (New York, 1973), 287.

the sway of Adolf Hitler, they did share certain assumptions with the Nazis. They believed that the German military tradition must be respected and the strength of its forces restored. The German army had not been defeated in World War I but instead had been sold out by weak-kneed liberals and socialists. The restrictions then imposed by the Versailles Treaty and especially its unbearable reparations were to blame for Germany's current economic ills, and Germany's traditional enemies used the treaty provisions to keep the nation from assuming its rightful position in European politics. Finally, nationalists felt that the timid policies of the Weimar leaders played into the hands of their enemies. For those committed to such assumptions, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was an anathema. Its criticism of the Reichswehr, and the portrayal of an army demoralized by senseless slaughter in a pointless war represented the worst kind of propaganda. The fact that the novel had been published by a Jewish-owned firm (Ullstein) and had been converted to the screen by an American studio whose president was an ex-German Jew, added a superficial credence to Nazi claims that *All Quiet* originated as part of the larger semitic plot to prostrate the nation.[18]

The opening of *All Quiet* in Berlin afforded Goebbels an opportunity to extend the party's appeal among disaffected nationalists by showing that the Nazis, unlike other parties on the Right, were willing to take to the streets in an effort to stop the insidious influence of alien propaganda. Goebbels ignored the criticism in the press and continued efforts to block the showing of *All Quiet*. On December 8 he announced his intention to speak against the film at a rally to be held outside the theater. That evening mounted police kept the Nazis from interrupting the performance but Goebbels delivered a lengthy diatribe against this "Jewish version of the German soldier's life," and promised that party members would continue their demonstrations until the government withdrew the film. The next night the Berlin police turned out in force. Suspecting Nazi efforts to interrupt the performance from within the theater, they searched all spectators at the entrance for stink bombs and mice and stationed officers throughout the hall. Outside, the police forced the demonstrators to retreat from the theater's vicinity, making them hold the rally in a nearby square. As the crowd grew unruly, the police had

[18]On Goebbel's motives in the *All Quiet* affair, see Helmut Heiber, *Goebbels* (New York, 1972), 80-81. *Der Angriff*, 13 December 1930, noted that Carl Laemmle Sr. was listed in *The International Jew* and suggested that he had changed his name from Baruch to disguise his origins.

difficulty preventing a rush on the theater. The following morning, December 10, the police issued orders banning all further demonstrations in Berlin. This action prevented another evening rally but did not stop two Nazi youths from smuggling garter snakes into the theater and disrupting the performance.[19]

By this point the issue of *All Quiet* had become an embarrassment to the government of Chancellor Bruening. Under normal circumstances the Bruening regime might have been able to ignore the disturbances at the theater. The Nazi demonstrations were essentially a local matter, and while boisterous and unruly, the Berlin police could maintain order and keep the theater open. But circumstances in December 1930 were far from normal. The *All Quiet* demonstrations came at a time when the Cabinet was highly vulnerable. Lacking a stable majority in the Reichstag, Bruening had been forced to implement his policies through emergency decrees. Now those policies were coming under intense criticism from the dramatically enlarged Nazi delegation. And, there was much to criticize. Bruening's austerity program, which never attracted popular support, had failed to stop the deepening economic crisis, and by early December Germany had succumbed to the full brunt of the Great Depression. The Nazi gains in the September elections frightened foreign investors, causing them to recall short-term loans, which only intensified the economic paralysis. Factory and business closings increased and unemployment skyrocketed—all attributed to Chancellor Bruening. In addition, the Nazis and their ultranationalist allies found fault with Bruening's foreign policy, especially his failure to preserve the rights of the German minority in Poland. This combination of issues already had placed Bruening's cabinet on the defensive. The regime hardly needed another volatile issue.

Recognizing the cabinet's vulnerability, Goebbels and his Nazi cohorts pressed the *All Quiet* demonstrations. During the same week that Goebbels launched his street campaigns against *All Quiet*, Bruening attempted to block a series of no confidence resolutions in the Reichstag. The most serious of these aimed at forcing the resignation of two key cabinet officials, Dr. Julius Curtius, the foreign minister, and Dr. Joseph Wirth, the minister of the interior. The uproar over the film exacerbated matters because both officials bore an indirect responsibility for the movie's initial approval by the German censors. The censor board operated under the direction of the Interior Ministry, adding to

[19] *Vorwärts*, 10 & 11 December 1930; *Völkischer Beobachter*, 10 December 1930; *New York Times*, 9, 10 & 11 December 1930; London *Times*, 11 December 1930.

Dr. Wirth's woes, and Curtius attracted criticism because several representatives of the Foreign Office had recommended approval of the film to the censors. As agitation at the theater intensified, National Socialists in the Reichstag drew attention to this superficial responsibility and added it to the list of their failures. Consequently, Bruening and his Cabinet wanted a swift resolution of the *All Quiet* question.[20]

A solution came via a request from five German states for a review of the original censor board's decision of approval. Under German law the federal censor's decisions could be appealed to the Supreme Film Censor Board. Strongly conservative and nationalist, its members represented professional, religious and social welfare organizations. With five of its six members affiliated with rightist parties, there could be little doubt that the board would reverse the censor's decision and ban the film.[21] But to pacify their right-wing critics, Curtius and Wirth decided to go on record against *All Quiet*. On the afternoon of December 10, Wirth arranged for a special screening of the uncut version of *All Quiet* for the entire Cabinet. Afterwards the Interior Ministry issued an official communiqué calling the film "a one-sided presentation of war experiences" which was "bound to have a painful and depressing effect on the nation." The Foreign Office also announced that it had changed its position on the picture and now felt that further showings would damage German prestige abroad.[22]

When the Supreme Film Censorship Board met the following day, little doubt remained about the outcome. After five hours of testimony, virtually all of which condemned the film, the board prohibited future exhibitions of *All Quiet*. In a public statement

[20]On the vulnerability of Bruening's cabinet after the 1930 elections, see Erich Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic,* 2 vols., trans. Harlan P. Hanson and Robert G. L. White (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 2: 278-96. Eyck suggests that President Paul von Hindenburg may have pressured Bruening to ban *All Quiet*, but his speculation rests entirely upon inferences drawn from a conversation between Hindenburg and Prussian premier Otto Braun.

[21]The *Exhibitors Herald-World*, hardly an unbiased observer, claimed in its December 27, 1930 issue that the Supreme Censor Board was composed of the chief censor, the editor of a nationalist daily, "a general's sister, two clergymen and a motion picture operator who had the night before banned *All Quiet*."

[22]*New York Times*, 12 December 1930. Frederic M. Sackett, American Ambassador to Germany, prepared a report on the events surrounding the banning of *All Quiet*. The author's analysis of the Cabinet maneuverings relies on Sackett's report, contemporary press accounts and Ekstein's article "War, Memory and Politics." Sackett to the secretary of state, 17 December 1930, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1931,* 2: 309-14.

following the hearing, Dr. Ernst Seeger, board chairman, denied that they had been influenced by the street demonstrations and justified the ban as necessary to preserve Germany's reputation abroad. The film's portrayal of the army "removed all dignity from the German soldier" and perpetuated negative stereotypes. "Besides," he asked, "why would the German people want to see a film depicting their own defeat?"[23]

Despite Seeger's denial, the Nazis took credit for forcing the board's action. Goebbel's Berlin daily, *Der Angriff,* proclaimed in proud headlines: "Victory is ours! We have forced them to their knee[s]."[24] Not yet under Hitler's sway, much of the nationalist press sought to downplay the Nazi role by attributing the ban to the "justified wrath of an insulted population," but other, more candid observers called the government's action a "capitulation to the Nazi mob" and a "victory of terror."[25] The liberal and socialist press condemned the government's surrender and organized rallies in Berlin to protest the ruling; even the Prussian Diet expressed disapproval. But such gestures counted for little, as Bruening and his Cabinet had opted for pragmatism over principle, and from their perspective the matter was closed.[26]

Like the German Left, American observers in Berlin saw dire consequences in the government's capitulation. Oswald Garrison Villard, then visiting Berlin for *The Nation,* wrote of the growing fear that December 11, 1930 would be seen as "the date of the beginning of the collapse of the German democracy."[27] The American ambassador, Frederic M. Sackett, expressed a similar, though less drastic, fear.

> The supression of the film version of "All Quiet on the Western Front" has undoubtedly assumed great importance. The National-

[23] *Vorwärts,* 12 December 1930; *Völkischer Beobachter,* 13 December 1930; *New York Times,* 12 December 1930; London *Times,* 12 December 1930. Ironically, by the time the chief censor announced the board's decision, *All Quiet* had already been removed from the German screen. Prior to the ruling, the German Exhibitors Association adopted two resolutions, one condemning Laemmle for producing the picture and the second boycotting films which provoke public disturbances. In response, Universal withdrew *All Quiet* from further exhibition. *New York Times,* 10 December 1930. Seeger was still justifying the ban as late as January. See the account of his radio debate with film critic Herbert Ihering in *Vorwärts,* 7 January 1931.

[24] *Der Angriff,* 12 December 1930.

[25] *Vorwärts,* 12 December 1930.

[26] London *Times,* 17 & 19 December 1930; Oswald Garrison Villard, "On the German Front," *The Nation,* 14 January 1931, 37-39.

[27] Villard, "On The German Front," 37.

> Socialist Party has succeeded in giving a blow to the prestige of the Government of the Reich, in that it yielded to Nazi compulsion on a clean-cut political issue.
>
> There is no doubt that this incident has given renewed impetus to the constant and unremitting struggle between the Government and the irreconcilable Opposition, and should the latter eventually succeed in its endeavor to force Dr. Bruening to resign, it may well be found that the present event was a very decided contributive factor in such a result.[28]

As the Nazis celebrated, Universal executives in New York, searching for a means of reversing the ruling, instructed their German agents to review the film to determine whether further cuts might satisfy the censor board. But the effort seemed doomed from the start, as one Embassy official advised them: "The question at issue is not any particular part of *All Quiet* and there is no possibility that any change in the picture would render it acceptable here."[29] The film had become a symbol to the German Right and no effort to make it palatable would alter that fact. At the same time Universal executives sought the assistance of the MPPDA in convincing the State Department to put diplomatic pressure on Germany.

The request put the Hays Office in an awkward position. The foreign office of the MPPDA was expected to use its influence to combat the censorship of American films abroad, but in this instance larger considerations took precedence. For over two years, Hays had been seeking avenues to improve the German climate for American films, and his trip the preceding summer had ended the long-standing German-American dispute over sound patents. Recently the MPPDA had requested State Department assistance in negotiating a revision of Germany's Kontingent regulations, which restricted the number of American films exhibited there.[30] The flareup over *All Quiet* threatened this

[28]Sackett to the Secretary of State, 17 December 1930, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 2: 311.

[29]Unsigned report of a U.S. Embassy official in Berlin, 18 December 1930, PCA Collection. The publicity surrounding the German ban on *All Quiet* promoted the film in the United States. Universal arranged for a new Broadway opening and the movie again played to packed houses. *Exhibitors Herald-World*, 18 December 1930.

[30]Jason Joy, resumé, 20 December 1930, PCA Collection. On the Hays negotiations in Europe, see *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures, 1931* (New York, 1932), 559. On the Kontigent system and other problems facing American film distributors in Germany, see *Film Daily,* 20 October 1930, 10; and Reginald Wright Kauffman, "War in the Film World," *North American Review* 229 (March 1930): 351-56.

strategy. Even worse, the MPPDA's principal representative in Germany predicted that the powerful UFA and Hugenberg interests would exploit the incident, pushing for more stringent barriers to American films.[31] As a result, the Hays Office declined to press Universal's suit with the State Department for fear of stirring up additional trouble, and when the studio's agent in Berlin called on the U.S. Embassy for help, he found the ambassador sympathetic but unwilling to take formal action without explicit instructions from Washington.

Before Universal officials could fully react to the German situation, however, a new crisis emerged in Austria. The trouble there once again involved a series of Nazi-inspired street demonstrations against the opening of *All Quiet* and a political climate which would lead to the film's banning. The conditions which gave rise to this conflict paralleled those in Germany. Like her northern neighbor, Austria also was suffering through the early stages of the Great Depression and the economic crisis intensified political turmoil. As in Germany, political moderates still controlled the central government but assertive, self-confident ultranationalists often attempted to force the moderates from office and crush the Left. The political Right was composed of a small but highly vocal Nazi party and the much more powerful Heimwehr, a paramilitary organization whose leaders shared many of the assumptions and commitments of their Nazi brethren. To complicate matters, entrenched Social Democrats who adamantly opposed concessions to the Right dominated the city government of Vienna, which constituted an independent province of Austria. Both sides viewed the opening of *All Quiet* in Vienna as a test of strength and the result was a violent street confrontation.[32]

[31]See a summary of the *All Quiet* situation in Germany, prepared by Fayette W. Allport, 29 December 1930, PCA Collection. Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the right-wing German Nationalist Peoples party, controlled an extensive network of newspapers, a news agency and most importantly Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft [UFA], the largest German film corporation. The Hays Office had long suspected Hugenberg of using his political influence to exclude foreign competition from the German market, a concern which the *All Quiet* incident reactivated. The Hugenberg press criticized the film and called for censorship. Members of the Peoples party joined the demonstrations and supported measures in the Reichstag against the movie and UFA theaters refused to book *All Quiet*. Hugenberg personally urged German exhibitors to boycott it and sought President von Hindenburg's approval for a ban. *Vorwärts*, the newspaper of the Social Democrats, shared Hays Office suspicions that Hugenberg was masterminding the *All Quiet* protests. See *Vorwärts*, 10 & 12 December 1930.

[32]On the Heimwehr, the Nazis and the Viennese Socialists, see: C. Earl Edmondson, *The Heimwehr and Austrian Politics, 1918-1936* (Athens, Ga., 1978);

The conflict began in mid-December, soon after the German ban on *All Quiet*. During the next week Austrian Nazis, Heimwehr organizations and a number of parliamentary representatives denounced the film and demanded its suppression as a statement of Austro-German solidarity. Under the Austrian constitution, however, censorship remained a provincial matter beyond the authority of the central government. Nevertheless, the government of Otto Ender decided to take up the question, perhaps in the hope of defusing the issue before it grew politically troublesome. On December 18, the cabinet viewed *All Quiet* and, although its members later admitted finding nothing offensive in the film, they decided to ask that all provincial governments prohibit its opening within their respective territories.[33]

The motives for this request were mixed. Little doubt exists that the Austrian ministers wanted to avoid Berlin-style street demonstrations but they also desired to avoid any action which might offend the German government. The German cabinet, acting through Foreign Minister Curtius, had asked Austria to follow Germany's lead in banning *All Quiet*, and at this particular moment such an appeal would have been difficult to ignore. Austria and Germany anticipated the start of a series of delicate negotiations aimed at establishing a customs union. With the Austrian economy rapidly failing, the customs union seemed a vital step toward stabilization. To ignore the request of Curtius, the primary force in the German cabinet for the customs union, could jeopardize a project of great importance to the Austrians. More-over, Karl Ritter, Curtius' special delegate, planned to arrive in Vienna to begin the secret negotiations on January 2, the day before *All Quiet's* première.[34]

The cabinet's action caused Universal to shift its attention from Germany to Austria. The company's general manager in Berlin, Sam Spiegel, proceeded to Vienna to see if he could alter the situation. At the American legation, his first stop, he met with Minister Gilchrist B. Stockton and pleaded for support. Spiegel was less than honest in this initial meeting, conveying the

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Martin Kitchen, *The Coming of Austrian Fascism* (Montreal, 1980); and Anson Rabinbach, *The Crisis of Austrian Socialism: From Red Vienna to Civil War, 1927-1934* (Chicago, 1983).

[33]*New York Times*, 14, 19 & 23 December 1930; London *Times*, 17 December 1930; *Variety*, 24 December 1930.

[34]Stockton, U.S. minister to Austria, to the secretary of state, 13 April 1931, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 1: 868. On the ill-fated Austro German customs union, see Stanley Suval, *The Anschluss Question in the Weimar Era: A Study of Nationalism in Germany and Austria, 1918-1932* (Baltimore, 1974), 146-65.

impression that the U.S. Embassy in Berlin had played an active role in Universal's attempt to rescind the German ban. He implied that the State Department would expect similar efforts in Vienna. Stockton wired Ambassador Sackett in Berlin for confirmation and on learning about Speigel's lies, informed the Universal manager that the legation would take no action without instructions from Washington.[35] Thus rebuffed, Spiegel turned to more drastic measures. He closed the Austrian office of Universal films, dismissed its twenty-five employees and announced that the company would no longer participate in the Austrian market. Spiegel and his associates hoped that the threat to cut off distribution of Universal films would prompt Austrian exhibitors to denounce the cabinet's action and demand that the film be shown. But aside from Vienna, the exhibitors remained silent and, one by one, provincial governors issued orders banning the film.

In Vienna the situation was quite different. The film's Austrian distributor, Kiba (Kinobetriebsanstalt), had close ties with leaders of the city's Social Democratic party and this, combined with the party's deep conviction that the government must never give in to threats from the Right, insured that Vienna's mayor would reject the cabinet's request. Consequently, on January 3, 1931 members of the Viennese press and film trade previewed *All Quiet*, as scheduled, at the Apollo Theater. The Nazis and Heimwehr called for protest meetings throughout the city with marches to converge on the theater at curtain time. On their arrival the demonstrators met a powerful police cordon dispatched by the mayor. Their efforts to break through prompted violence and resulted in thirty arrests, several injuries and minor property damage to surrounding shops and businesses. Several young Nazis broke through police lines and released tear gas bombs in the theater but that only delayed the screening until later in the evening.

In the interim between the special preview and the public première on January 7, the Austrian cabinet received countless requests to ignore the constitution and ban the film outright. Most came from businessmen with establishments located near the theater. The cabinet met in special session on the morning of January 7 to consider these petitions but chose only to issue another plea to Mayor Seitz to cancel the opening. Seitz again ignored the appeal but agreed to transfer the film from the Apollo to the Schweden Theater, situated beyond the city center at the edge of Vienna's large Jewish quarter. This move was prompted

[35]Stockton to the secretary of state, 13 April 1931, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 1: 868.

in part by the desires of the business community but it also reflected the wishes of the Viennese police who preferred the Schweden because demonstrators would be forced to cross one of two bridges to gain access to the theater.

As the opening approached, the area around the Schweden took on the appearance of a military camp. Two thousand police, many mounted on horseback and armed with sabres, blocked the bridges and clogged the street facing the theater. Across the Danube waited several thousand Nazis and Heimwehr activists, many trucked in from the provinces and prepared for the confrontation. The actual conflict, however, proved less violent than expected, and the demonstrators were unable to break through the bridge blockade erected by the police. Although several shots were fired, few injuries occurred and the opening went off as scheduled. A repeat of the scenario followed the next night with an even larger contingent of police and demonstrators, but again the police lines held.

Two days of violence prompted the cabinet to set aside its constitutional scruples. And after another meeting on the morning of January 10, Minister of the Interior Franz Winkler issued an order forbidding all further performances of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Winkler justified the order under a constitutional provision allowing the cabinet to take emergency steps to preserve order. In reality, the government banned *All Quiet* in Austria, like Germany, because the demonstrations had become a political embarrassment to the central government. There was never a question of police ability to restrain the demonstrators or insure the safety of patrons. Politics and diplomatic considerations dictated the movie's fate. The continuing press reports of street violence called attention to the fact that *All Quiet* was being shown in Vienna and this negative publicity threatened to undermine the Austrian efforts to reach an accord with Germany. Faced with that prospect the cabinet apparently felt compelled to end the controversy by banning the film, and once again the Nazis and their allies triumphed.[36]

But the Austrian ban did not end Universal's problems. Over the ensuing three months, Hungary, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia denied exhibition of the film. Yet these difficulties proved inconsequential compared with the loss of the German market. With

[36]The American minister in Vienna provided Washington with a detailed account of the riots and their political consequences. Stockton to the secretary of state, 13 April 1931, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 1: 867-72. For descriptions of the street fighting, see also the *New York Times,* 3-5 & 8-10 January 1931, and London *Times,* 5 & 8-9 January 1931.

more than five thousand theaters, Germany represented the second largest film market in Europe, and the publicity surrounding the censorship of *All Quiet* only served to heighten public interest in the film. By the end of January 1931, theater owners across the German border in Switzerland, France and the Netherlands had discovered this potential and were screening the German-language version of *All Quiet* to packed houses. Rail and bus officials arranged special excursions and altered transportation schedules to accommodate the growing tide.[37]

Envisioning a market worth fighting for, by early February Universal officials began to pursue strategies aimed at lifting the ban on *All Quiet*. Denied the support of the State Department and the Hays Office, Universal representatives moved directly into the German political arena, lobbying public officials and searching for support.[38] Their allies in this effort were those organizations most receptive to *All Quiet's* anti-war message, pacifist groups and most importantly, the German Social Democrats. From the beginning, the Social Democrats had been among the most outspoken critics of the ban. The party's newspaper, *Vorwärts,* condemned the censorship more vigorously than any other Berlin daily, and party strongman Otto Braun denounced the decision.[39] As the largest single party in the Reichstag, the Social Democrats represented a potentially powerful ally in the film war, but since the September elections the new coalition of forces on the Right had muted the party's voice. Forced to sit on the sidelines, occasionally providing the votes necessary to defeat right-wing motions against the Bruening cabinet, party leaders sponsored few initiatives of their own.

In early March the situation changed. As a result of a parliamentary dispute, the Nazis walked out of the Reichstag, weakening the right-wing coalition and leaving the Social Democrats as the dominant force in the Reichstag. The party's first actions included adoption of a series of resolutions relating to *All Quiet* which condemned the original ban, called for a re-examination of the picture by the censor board and authorized

[37]*New York Times,* 20 January, 4 February and 2 April 1931; *Motion Picture Herald,* 31 January 1931; *Film Daily,* 9 March 1931.

[38]The lobbying included an unsuccessful effort to win over the German crown prince whose voice still carried weight among conservatives and nationalists. Shown a newly edited version of *All Quiet* in March, he simply told Universal to take its case to the Nazis. Heiber, *Goebbels,* 81-82.

[39]*New York Times,* 13 December 1930. *Vorwärts* carried the *All Quiet* story on its front page from December 10 through December 13 and included feature pieces on the ban through January 7.

the screening of banned films for private organizations. Universal waxed ecstatic with the result. Its officials in Germany hastened to submit the movie to the censors and, in anticipation of a favorable ruling, began scheduling new release dates.[40] Universal's optimism proved premature.

This time neither the Nazis nor the censors interceded to disrupt Universal's design. Four days after the Reichstag acted, Frederic M. Sackett, American ambassador, wired Secretary of State Stimson to express grave misgivings about Universal's plans. From Sackett's perspective the release of the film at this time "would have seriously unfortunate results. The Nazis and other extremists of the Right would welcome such a chance of rallying their cohorts," and the resulting demonstrations would likely set off a new wave of anti-Americanism in Germany. Sackett urged Stimson to prevail upon the Hays Office to convince Universal to abandon its plans. The Hays Office would surely comply because Sackett was engaged in a negotiation with German officials to remove trade barriers on American films. That matter took precedence, so once again Universal officials were forced to wait.[41]

Ultimately Universal succeeded in its efforts to screen *All Quiet* in Germany. In September 1931 conditions seemed right for a new initiative. The Bruening cabinet felt confident of its position and was less inclined to engage in gestures toward the Right. Also, the publicity surrounding *All Quiet* had faded from public memory. This time Universal instructed its resident officials to approach the Germans with a unique compromise under which the studio agreed not only to cut *All Quiet* to meet the censor board's demands but also promised that all editions of the film shown worldwide would conform exactly to the version approved in Germany.

To have made such a concession in December 1930 would have been foolhardy. Recalling prints scattered throughout the world for editing would have been expensive and difficult; it also would have interrupted exhibition schedules at a time when *All Quiet* was playing in its lucrative first run. In addition, the recall would have come just as Universal was beginning to capitalize on the November Academy Awards. By September 1931, however, the

[40]A. J. Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler* (New York, 1968), 150; Eyck, *History of the Weimar Republic* 2: 297-98. *Film Daily,* 9 March 1931; *New York Times,* 7 March 1931.

[41]Sackett to the secretary of state, 11 March 1931; P. T. Culbertson, memorandum, 17 March 1931, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 2: 314-16. Approval for showing *All Quiet* to private organizations came in June 1931.

film had completed its initial run and the benefits of the Academy Awards were long past. Germany remained the only significant market yet untapped, and it appeared that once Germany rescinded the ban, Austria would follow suit.[42] Hence it made sense to offer whatever concessions were necessary, and neither the Hays Office nor the State Department objected when *All Quiet* was resubmitted to the film censors in Berlin. Surprisingly, the Germans required only a modest number of cuts, and after the board received a personal letter from Laemmle confirming the company's promise to make all prints conform to the version approved by the board, they lifted the ban on *All Quiet*.[43]

All Quiet went into general release the following week without incident. In spite of expressions of outrage in the Nazi press, there were no riots or demonstrations, no stink bombs or white mice. The film had lost its symbolic value. It remained in exhibition throughout the fall and winter, and while its gross revenues failed to live up to 1930 expectations, they still pleased the Laemmles.[44]

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The demise of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Nazism in 1933 seems to invite the suggestion that the uproar over *All Quiet* contributed to that outcome. Clearly, exhibition of *All Quiet* provided new impetus for the militant Right, afforded Goebbels with an issue to activate the faithful and resulted in a Nazi victory. But in spite of the fears expressed by Oswald Garrison Villard and Ambassador Sackett, Bruening survived the uproar over *All Quiet* and continued as chancellor for another seventeen months; the Weimar Republic lasted another seven months

[42]The link between the German and Austrian film bans was made evident in a series of meetings between U.S. Minister Stockton and Austrian Vice Chancellor Johann Schober in April 1931. When Stockton inquired about lifting the ban, Schober informed him that "Austria was following Germany's lead in this matter and would act in concert with Germany." Stockton to the secretary of state, 8 April 1931, *Foreign Relations 1931* 1: 867.

[43]Sackett to the secretary of state, 12 September 1931, *Foreign Relations, 1931* 2: 316. Some confusion about the exact cuts required under this agreement seemed to exist because in December the German Consulate complained to the Hays Office that Universal had failed to remove all of the required scenes from versions of the film then being shown in England and the U.S. The agreement did not affect the film's exhibition in Germany. Joy, memorandum, 28 December 1931, and Gustave A. Struve, German attaché, to J. V. Wilson, Hays Office, 29 December 1931, PCA Collection.

[44]Harold L. Smith to Ted Herron, 5 November 1931, PCA Collection. The material cut to satisfy the German censor reappeared in the 1939 version of *All Quiet*, but by that time the German market excluded most American films.

before the installation of Hitler as chancellor in January 1933. So it is difficult to maintain direct causal connection between the film ban and the collapse of the Republic. Without any doubt, *All Quiet* provided the Nazis with a valuable issue, and their successful exploitation illustrates both the enhanced power of the movement and the weakness of the Weimar government following the September 1930 elections.

At a simpler level, what the story of *All Quiet* in Germany and Austria best illustrates is the growing complexity of the international film market at the beginning of the 1930s, and particularly how politics had begun to shape and confine that market in Central Europe. A matter of great personal importance to Carl Laemmle, he went to extraordinary lengths to insure a good reception for *All Quiet* in his native Germany. All efforts, however, proved in vain. In spite of the film's cinematic excellence, in spite of the Laemmles' attempts to eliminate elements of the story which might be offensive to Germans, *All Quiet* became embroiled in the emerging conflict between Right and Left, a new characteristic of Central European politics.