

How Not to Colonize the Past

Repositioning Edward Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022)

Mark T. Kettler

We begin with a uniform tunic. We see it carried into battle by a Heinrich Gerber, a green conscript in the German Army, immediately killed in action on the western front. His death is insignificant, not even shown on screen. His tunic is important. The camera follows as it is stripped from Gerber's corpse, laundered and mended alongside thousands of identical articles, repackaged, and distributed to a fresh volunteer for the Kaiser's armies, Paul Bäumer. »This belongs to someone«, Paul informs the intake officer, noting Gerber's name still on the tag. »Yes, it was probably too small for the fellow. Happens all the time«, the officer dismisses the question as he rips the nametag from its stitching. Gerber is discarded unceremoniously to the floor.¹ In a few minutes the introduction of Edward Berger's 2022 *All Quiet on the Western Front* conveys the dishonesty of the military bureaucracy. It castigates a war economy which expends herculean effort to preserve and recycle materiel, while callously wasting human lives. It the preludes the central themes of the film; the unworthiness and meanness of military leadership, and the horrifying de-humanization at the center of modern warfare.

Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* opened to widespread fanfare. Described as a »powerful, eloquent, conscientiously impassioned film« it was Germany's official submission for the Academy Awards and considered a serious contender for Best Picture.² It took Best Film and Best Director at the 2023 British Film Academy Awards and Best International Feature Film at the 2023 Academy Awards. It commands an impressive 90% rating from online review aggregator Rottentomatoes. It

1 IM WESTEN NICHTS NEUES (Netflix, 2022).

2 Peter Bradshaw: All Quiet on the Western Front Review: Anti-War Nightmare of Bloodshed and Chaos. In: The Guardian, October 12, 2022, sec. Movies, online at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/oct/12/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-review-anti-war-nightmare-of-bloodshed-and-chaos>.

has captured the commanding heights of public attention.³ Historians and scholars of the First World War have also taken notice.⁴ Most, however, have leveled sharp criticism.

This essay is as much self-reflection as review, asking how I, as an educator in the discipline of history, should engage with this film, and popular historical fiction more broadly. It weighs some of the most salient criticisms of the film. It also weaves in what I consider to be its most substantial narrative and historical shortcomings: Berger's film stages the First World War as an anti-militarist fable. It simultaneously discards the nuance of the 1928 novel and presents a version of the war stripped of political context. In doing so, it crafts mythologized and distorted image of front-line combat and endurance during the First World War. Despite these considerable flaws, Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* has excited renewed public interest in the First World War. The immense popularity of the film presents an opportunity and simultaneously challenges our profession to offer something more than tutting corrective to public audiences. Drolly cataloguing the film's historical inadequacies and inaccuracies risks alienating audiences newly eager to learn about our subject. Capitalizing upon their interest, bringing new publics into historically literate conversations about the First World War, will require didactic strategies beyond criticism; perhaps even generosity.

Critics have rightly excoriated the film's disloyalty to the source text. Apart from the names of the main characters, the film bears little resemblance to the book. It drastically alters the plot, undermining or even subverting the central themes of Remarque's 1928 novel. Key scenes from the book are excised. In Remarque's novel, Paul returns home on furlough, an experienced veteran after long service at the front. He despises the pompous nationalism and naïveté of authority figures he encounters, men he had so respected before the war. He returns to the front disenchanted. This is the moral pivot of the novel. But it's gone in the film. Historian Jonathan Boff has noted that a central theme of Remarque's novel is chronicling the horrifying and grinding loss of life that occurred almost entirely on days which military leaders considered insignificant. The film, however, turns on the very final days of the war,

3 Critical acclaim has not been unanimous. Some have described the film as »stripped to the bone – morally, spiritually, dramatically«, »competent« but not excellent. Owen Gleiberman: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Review: A World War I Drama That's Dutifully Competent and Dull. In: *Variety*, November 5, 2022, online at <https://variety.com/2022/film/reviews/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-review-1235424169>.

4 The University of Warwick recently hosted a conference on the new film. I look forward to the scholarship it produces. Ervin Malakaj and Molly Harrabin, eds. (*Watching War: A Symposium on Edward Berger's »All Quiet on the Western Front.«* Coventry: University of Warwick, 2023), online at <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/intranet/postgraduate/mhsymposium/>.

which were anything but irrelevant. In focusing on the spectacle and cruelty of combat, it misses the tragic psychological damage suffered by the novel's characters, the way the war kills their spirits even before it kills their bodies.⁵ These are compelling criticisms. Berger's film was hardly an adaptation. One critic quipped that it was a »rendering«, cooking down all of the story's muscle in the fires of battle. A more cynical mind might think it an entirely new story capitalizing on the prestige of Remarque's novel.⁶

The novel opens not with a tunic, but with Paul's company reveling in an unexpected windfall of rations. They feast. They banter. They *rejoice*, taking near double their allotment of food and tobacco. Half of 2nd Company has been obliterated by British artillery and the survivors inherit their rations.⁷ A barrage of moral ambiguity follows. Paul and his closest mates visit the wounded Kemmerich in hospital. Kemmerich withers from infection following a leg amputation. The orderly must be bribed to administer scarce morphine. The men of 2nd Company comfort Kemmerich, but their attention soon turns to the fate of his prize aviator's boots. Kropp asks to take them now, for safekeeping – Kemmerich's watch has already disappeared. When Kemmerich refuses, Kropp begins to quietly estimate his time of death, calculating the right moment to clip the boots while his friend's corpse is still warm. At first glance, Kemmerich looks like he will recover from his wounds. But he is rotting from the inside, and this rot is apparent to all who know the signs.⁸

Remarque published *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1928. It directly challenged the mythology of the *Frontgemeinschaft*, the fabled community of the trenches exalted as manifesting a more authentic brotherhood of noble self-sacrifice; the promise of what the nation might be. Already articulated during the war, this idea of a *Frontgemeinschaft* became totemic after 1918, both an object of worship and a model of utopian community increasingly central to the fascist and radical politics of interwar Germany.⁹ Remarque's novel profaned this myth, a riposte to the stoic portrait

5 Jonathan Boff: Not All Quiet on the Western Front. In: University of Birmingham: News, March 9, 2023, online at <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/not-all-quiet-on-the-western-front>.

6 Hubert Wetzel: Schlamschlacht: »Im Westen nichts Neues« bei Netflix. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, October 29, 2022, sec. *Kultur*.

7 Erich Maria Remarque: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), pp. 5–10.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

9 Thomas Kühne: *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017), pp. 45–69; Jeffrey Verhey: *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), pp. 5–10, 116–132 and 210–219; Eric Weitz: *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 338.

of soldiers in Ernst Jünger's earlier *Storm of Steel*. Remarque's 2nd Company is not ennobled but barbarized by war. They gorge themselves on the rations of their fallen comrades. They circle as their friend dies in the hospital, ready to pick the savory bits from his corpse. They don't find meaning in battle. They find solace on the commode, avoiding duty and gazing at clouds. They forge community around the degradations of the imperious Sergeant Himmelstöß. They don't passively follow orders. They delight in brutally assaulting the martinet for all his indignities.¹⁰ Remarque's novel unflinchingly repudiated the notion of a noble masculine community of the trenches, a martial brotherhood which would redeem the nation once reclaimed. War didn't bring out the best in men. Those who survived were spiritually dead or morally stained. »The war has ruined us for everything«, Paul's friend Albert says in moment of quiet.¹¹ Remarque's novel provoked outrage from the Weimar Republic's nationalist right. The Nazi Party organized demonstrations and incited riots against the first cinematic adaptation of the novel in 1930. The *Reichswehr*, Foreign Office, and other conservative quarters of government pressed to ban the film. Censors agreed.¹² But Berger strips Remarque's characters of their moral ambiguity. In its place he offers viewers a portrait of 2nd Company as plucky underdogs, rough but lovable, fighting against the odds, but never each other.

Ironically, others have accused Berger's film of mistaking carnage for realism. It »aims to pummel you with ceaseless brutality,« critic Ben Kenigsberg writes.¹³ Waves of human mass crash back and forth over no-man's land. The French counterattack at minute 76 evokes the infernal horror of industrial war. Flamethrowers consume German conscripts as they beg for mercy. Primitive tanks crush men like primordial steel leviathans.

High intensity combat makes for good entertainment. But much of the killing on the Western Front was impersonal, remote. Artillery fire inflicted a staggering 70% of battlefield deaths in the First World War.¹⁴ The kinds of massed infantry attacks across no-man's land depicted in the film were comparatively rare precisely because they were so costly, typically launched as part of larger planned offensives or counterattacks.¹⁵ They were interspersed with long periods of relative quiet, marked by harassing fire, low intensity trench-raiding, and informal ceasefires. These, and the

¹⁰ Remarque: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 45.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 78.

¹² Peter Jelavich: *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Radio, Film, and the Death of Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2009), pp. 156–158 and 160–170.

¹³ Ben Kenigsberger: *The Spectacle of War and Its Relentless Brutality*. In: *The New York Times*, October 27, 2022, sec. C.

¹⁴ Jörn Leonhard: *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich: Beck 2014), p. 152.

¹⁵ Dennis Showalter: »It All Goes Wrong!« German, French, and British Approaches to Mastering the Western Front. In: *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First*

frequent rotation of units out of the frontline trenches into the comparative safety of reinforcement and reserve positions, were essential to sustaining morale on the Western Front.¹⁶ The combatants on the Western Front also quickly learned to appreciate the terrifying effectiveness of entrenched infantry supported by machine guns and artillery. By the final years of the war, they had adopted new equipment, tactics, and operational concepts to evade the devastating losses of human wave attacks. Germany increasingly leaned on elastic defenses and shock infantry tactics. The Spring Offensives were spear-headed by »hurricane« barrages and small flexible units of fast-moving *Stoßtruppen*. The French and British armies employed innovations in artillery, infantry firepower, and rudimentary tanks and bombers.¹⁷ Objections like this may seem fussy. But these inaccuracies render a distorted picture of combat on the Western Front defined by the endless repetition of uncreative and obviously futile massed infantry attacks.

The film culminates with the callous General Friedrichs ordering a suicidal charge to retake a French position just minutes before the scheduled armistice. The honor of the German Army will be satisfied in blood. Friedrichs is a caricature. As with all caricatures, his outlines are recognizable. Isolated in a chateau, the General gorges on roast fowl while his men starve in the trenches. Enlisted men complained sharply about the Officers' privileges, their higher pay, their careless handling of provisions, and until the practice ended in 1916, their unequal rations.¹⁸ General officers enjoyed comparatively greater luxury. But General Friedrichs's obsession with rescuing the army's honor reflects the constructed memory of the First World War far better than the final days of the war itself. Fighting on the Western Front continued up until the eleventh hour of the eleventh day. But in the last weeks of the war German units routinely surrendered. Commanding officers were often complicit. German officers were more likely to preside over the surrender of their men, sometimes at considerable personal risk, than to lead them in a vainglorious charge.¹⁹ Absent from Remarque's novel, the Friedrichs side-plot sacrifices accuracy and complexity at the altar of a clean narrative with a simple anti-militarist aesthetic.

Indeed, critics have raised more fundamental objections to the muddled politics of Berger's film. Reviewers have accused the film of casting a sympathetic light

World War Studies, ed. Purseigle, Pierre, vol. 30, History of Warfare (Leiden: Brill 2005), p. 39.

16 Benjamin Ziemann: War Experiences in Rural Germany: 1914–1923, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Berg 2011), pp. 42 and 55.

17 Showalter: »It All Goes Wrong!« pp. 39, 39–42, 45–49, 56–57 and 62–64.

18 Ziemann: War Experiences in Rural Germany: 1914–1923, pp. 74–79.

19 Alexander Watson: Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), pp. 224 and 230–131.

on German ›invaders‹ even as Russian forces brutally occupy large tracts of Eastern and Southern Ukraine.²⁰ The implication is that the film's mealy-mouthed ›war-is-hell‹ message risks moral equivocation as precisely the moment when Europe needs moral clarity. I'm less sympathetic to this line of criticism. Any balanced assessment of Berger's work should acknowledge that films take a long time to make. His adaptation was not filmed in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and should not be evaluated as if it did. Moreover, this line of criticism is itself rooted in a creative re-imagination of the First World War as a morally unambiguous conflict between ›good‹ defenders and ›evil‹ invaders, largely to serve our own political preferences. It presumes that the German Empire initiated an unprovoked war of conquest in 1914, similar in intent to Russia's ongoing campaign in Ukraine. Without wading into a historiographical debate which has lasted more than a century, the evidence does not sustain this interpretation. I understand why some critics object to the optics, but I chafe at this comparison.

Others have objected that Berger's film accidentally reproduces a version of the *Dolchstoßlegende*.²¹ The pernicious ›stab-in-the-back‹ myth held that Germany's armies had not been defeated in the field, but rather betrayed by self-serving conspirators on the home-front. It was a flexible narrative. The supposed traitors could include socialists, trade-unionists, war-profiteers, and for a growing segment on the nationalist right, Jews. It permeated German political culture of the interwar period. Film Critics' objections are not unfounded. Audiences watch a plucky band of fighters endure, suffer, and fight bravely for two and a half hours only for civilians to end the war. Paul is literally *stabbed in the back* at the end of Berger's film.

But I think this objection is overblown. Berger may well have intended to riff on the *Dolchstoßlegende*, Paul betrayed not by civilians but by the conceit of a pouting General Friedrichs who valued vanity over human life. Berger's depiction of Matthias Erzberger, The German Empire's plenipotentiary at Compiègne, is sympathetic; his portrait of Friedrichs, diabolical. The film takes pain to show the army's presence at armistice negotiations, and its reluctant assent to terms. The central battle sequence of the film shows a German Army undersupplied and overmatched. Paul and his comrades might fight bravely, even adeptly, but they are literally crushed under the weight of allied war industry.

20 Glenn Kenny: Review: All Quiet on the Western Front. In: Rogerebert.Com, October 28, 2022, online at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-movie-review-2022>; Nicholas Barber: Germans Are Right to Be Incensed by All Quiet on the Western Front: It Paints Them as the Good Guys. In: The Guardian, February 27, 2023, sec. Opinion, online at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/27/germans-all-quiet-on-the-western-front-novel-film>.

21 Barber: Germans Are Right to Be Incensed.

Indeed, a central problem of the film is its tendency to reproduce tired clichés of frontline soldiers as automata. The film strips the First World War of politics, extracting frontline experience from the wider meaning of the conflict. *Why* Paul and his comrades continue to fight is never explored. Germany's war aims are never discussed, nor are the potential consequences of losing the war. Berger's film glosses over any larger discussion of the nature of the war, preferring to take it as axiomatic that the conflict was waged for the hypocritical and corrupt motives of the elite. Obedient men charge back and forth over no-man's land, fighting with tenacity and barbarity because that is what soldiers do. Audiences watch men die meaningless deaths for a meaningless cause. We reflexively feel outrage at the senselessness of it all.

But this papers over the profound entanglement of politics, legitimacy, and morale within the German Army. A variety of material and structural conditions influenced morale and unit cohesion in the German Army. But both the perceived legitimacy of the war effort and the prospect of victory played critical roles in the sustaining morale of the army as a whole. German soldiers didn't just blithely accept war. They fought for reasons. From 1914, conscripts largely embraced the empire's official interpretation of the conflict as a defensive war foisted upon Germany. Soldiers longed peace, especially as the war dragged into its final years. But not without qualification. They mocked the haughty annexationism of the Fatherland Party and the bombastic »Patriotic Instruction« of the late war.²² But the desire to preserve Germany from the terrors of industrial warfare often steeled their resolve.²³ Russia's collapse and withdrawal from the war revived hopes for victory in 1918, promising a successful conclusion to the war and with it, the fortification of German security on the continent. Accordingly, frontline troops often vocally criticized the wave of industrial strikes which swept through Germany in January 1918, which they saw as prolonging the war and undermining prospects for imminent victory.²⁴ Both the perceived legitimacy of the war effort and the possibility of victory substantially reinforced German morale in the First World War.

Conversely, the morale and cohesion of the German army evaporated when frontline troops ceased to believe in the realistic prospect of victory. As the Spring Offensives lost momentum and the army shifted first to the defensive, and then to retreat, troops widely lost hope in the prospect of victory, an end to the war which would be meaningfully better than defeat. With defeat seemingly inevitable, morale

²² Ziemann: War Experiences in Rural Germany, p. 60 and 139.

²³ Ibid., p. 86 and 120; Watson: Enduring the Great War 2, p. 232.

²⁴ Benjamin Ziemann: Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving, trans. Andrew Evans (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2017), pp. 124–125.

plummeted as soldiers turned to self-preservation.²⁵ Desertion rates skyrocketed. Groups of men marched aimlessly behind the front, avoiding combat while pretending to search for their parent units. Entire units surrendered or melted away.²⁶ By November 1918, the German Army was in a state of advanced decay, sapped by desertions and pummeled by the relentless allied campaign. In some regiments, only a few hundred men remained of a nominal strength of 3,000.²⁷ After 8 November, when much of the film takes place, the German revolution spread like wildfire, Soldiers'- and Workers'- Councils mushrooming across Germany and occupied territory. German frontline commanders acknowledged that their men were no longer willing to fight.²⁸ Abject collapse threatened.

Rather than grapple with this reality, Berger seems determined to depict heroic young men betrayed by spineless military leaders. His soldiers are stoic and noble, but also tragically obedient, largely unthinking servants of corruption and caprice, betrayed by vainglorious and hypocritical warlords. Soldiers, in Berger's film fight with grim determination, because to resist the infernal Moloch of war is pointless. Stripped of its complexity, the men stripped of their agency, the war becomes a morality play for a juvenile pacifism. Rather than prompting audiences to interrogate why soldiers continued to fight under conditions of brutal violence and desperate privation or, just as importantly, why they stopped, the film settles for the faux-profoundity of ›war is bad‹.

Historians have a complex relationship with historical fiction. Historians carefully analyze and synthesize evidence to construct narratives that can answer historical questions. When done well, it is often grinding work involving months of archival research. Historical fiction, on the other hand, claims the past as a setting to lend an air of truth to a fabricated narrative. Unencumbered by the shackles of accuracy and unmoored from evidentiary standards, it is free to exploit the past as a backdrop for its story, glamor for its artifice. Historical settings signal to audiences

25 Debate continues as to whether this process was driven more by active resistance on the part of soldiers, or apathy born of physical exhaustion and despair. Watson: *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918*, pp. 181–232 and 235; Ziemann: *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, p. 129.

26 Ziemann: *War Experiences in Rural Germany: 1914–1923*, pp. 98–100; Ziemann: *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, pp. 121, 130, 135–37 and 141–46.

27 Ziemann: *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, p. 137; Showalter: »It All Goes Wrong!«, p. 51.

28 Jonathan Boff: *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 3.

that, though this story is fiction, it could have happened. It might have ... Usually, it didn't.

Historians chafe at this colonization of the past. We know that historical fiction often supplants pedagogical role of our discipline. For most viewers, the three hours spent watching Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* will be their most sustained engagement with the First World War. Historians dedicate their lives to painstakingly analyzing the past and then educating students and publics. We naturally get incensed when popular fiction propounds shaky historical interpretations to an audience far larger than we could hope to reach.

So how might historians and educators approach Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* productively? With a charitable disposition, I think. We should resist the urge to deride the film. Perhaps this sounds somewhat rich at this point in the essay. Bear with me. Historical fiction and popular culture play an indispensable role in bringing students and curious minds to the discipline of history. It can be a gateway. If we are honest with ourselves, many of us were first drawn to history through historical fiction. For all the problems we might have with the film, its success in sparking interest in the First World War is undeniable. If our first response to students excited about the First World War is to mock the film, we risk closing this gate. Mocking the film may give us a fleeting sense of superiority. But we are either preaching to the converted or driving away potential neophytes.

Instead we should approach Berger's film as a starting point for a larger conversation. Our role is to encourage curiosity. When students mention the film, we might ask what they found interesting in the work. We might ask where else they have encountered depictions of the First World War, and if those portraits resembled or differed from Berger's film. We should ask what aspects of the First World War draw their attention, what they're interested in learning more about. Rather than catalogue problems in the film, we should reframe issues as historiographical questions. When students express astonishment at the hellish conditions of the Western Front, we should prod, asking why soldiers might have endured this. We should be prepared to suggest articles or monographs to speak to their interests.

Berger's film may also serve as a primary source for examining memory of the First World War in contemporary Germany. Rather than approaching Berger's film as a more-or-less accurate depiction of the past, a classroom exercise might ask students to scrutinize and analyze the film as a reflection of the culture which generated it. Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* tells us very little about the German Army in 1918. But like all films, it is historically situated. It can reveal quite a bit about Germany in 2022. Its cookie-cutter moralism both reflects and reinforces a particular brand of reflexive anti-militarism which has come to define contemporary German political culture.

The historical distortions of Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* accumulate towards a single artistic end. Its depiction of stale human wave tactics, its stoic but

pliable soldiers, its diabolical officers, and its stripping of political context from the war together amount to a portrayal of the First World War as a meaningless vanity project. In this respect, Berger's film places itself in a long tradition of using the First World War as a blank screen onto which one can project phantasmagorical images. This usually makes for dull historical fiction and always produces bad history. As historians, it is incumbent on us to intervene in public historical discourses. But we must be strategic. We cannot dig-in to a static position, uncompromisingly cataloguing and deriding the film's errors to all who will listen (very few). We will lose this war of attrition. Approaching popular historical fiction requires more flexible tactics.