

SCREENING HISTORY

Not So Quiet on the Western Front: German Reactions to Netflix's 2022 Remake

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In October 2022, Netflix's remake of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*) opened to great acclaim in the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, receiving rave reviews from critics and movie-goers alike, eventually winning seven BAFTAs and four Oscars, the most awards ever for a German-language production. In Germany, however, reactions could not have been more different. The film was roundly panned by historians as “flawed, cliché-laden, and unauthentic [all translations from German by Michael Geheran],” and derided by critics as Oscar bait, an anti-American trope often used to disparage a cultural production.¹ In what has now become something of a punchline, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quipped that “No book is so good you can't make a bad film out of it,” while the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* charged that the producers were “horny for an Oscar,” having removed “the inner plot, the brains of the story” and “replaced them with a Hollywood program.”² How to make sense of such dramatically different reactions to the same film? Germans' responses cannot simply be explained by the historical liberties taken by the director, Edward Berger, or disappointment with the plot differences between the movie and Erich Maria Remarque's novel, but arguably reveal deeper anxieties as the long shadow of Germany's past continues to weigh heavily on German minds. Does the film pander to popular images about war in a way that has different meaning in Germany than, say, in the US or the UK, with their different memory cultures? How much is German dislike of the film shaped by the legacy of the Second World War and not just the First? With these questions in mind, this essay will consider German reactions to the 2022 film and what they say about Germany's memory culture, paying close attention to the film's language, connotations, and imagery that may be particularly meaningful to German audiences. To be sure, film reviews are not the most reliable source for getting at popular attitudes and mentalities, but the stark divergence of opinion about Netflix's *All Quiet* say something important about how and whether memories of militarism and the Holocaust continue to shape how Germans think about war.

Unlike in the United States, where *All Quiet* was released on Netflix's streaming platform in October 2022, the film opened in German movie theaters in September and was

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¹ Cezary Bazydło, “Vier Oscars, aber wenig authentisch. ‘Im Westen nichts Neues,’” *MDR*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/weitere-epochen/erster-weltkrieg/deutscher-film-im-westen-nichts-neues-vier-oscars-100.html>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

² Hubert Wetzels, “Schlamm Schlacht. Im Westen Nichts Neues bei Netflix,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230312042424/https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/im-westen-nichts-neues-netflix-roman-1.5683370>, accessed on July 1, 2023; Andreas Kilb, “Ein Krieg aus dem Katalog,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kino/im-westen-nichts-neues-kinofilm-will-geschichte-ohne-helden-sein-18346648.html>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

subsequently reviewed by newspapers and major media outlets, such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Bild*, and others. Not surprisingly, a good deal of negative critique was leveled at the disparities between the movie and Remarque's classic novel, with reviewers expressing disappointment at missing central characters (notably the infamous Corporal Himmelstoß), added backstories, and a new ending that appears to contradict the very meaning of the film's title. While in the 2022 production, Paul Bäumer (played by Felix Kammerer) dies in a climactic, suicidal charge literally moments before the armistice goes into effect, the novel ends with a laconic epilogue noting Bäumer's death: "He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence: all quiet on the western front."³ The film apparently had so little in common with Remarque's work that the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* questioned whether Edward Berger had even bothered to read the novel at all. "Had the characters not borne the same names as those in the book, it would be difficult to find noteworthy parallels between the two works."⁴ German moviegoers, writing on the German review aggregator site *Filmstarts.de*, voiced similar objections, complaining that Berger's film was unfaithful to the source material, with several reviewers calling it an "insult to the novel."⁵

The film's departure from the novel did not appear to dampen the enthusiasm for *All Quiet* in the United States, however, where it has earned a 90% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, with many reviewers lauding its special effects and supposedly realistic depiction of the First World War battlefield.⁶ Yet it is precisely this – the prolonged, action-filled combat scenes – that left many Germans uncomfortable.⁷ *All Quiet* opens with a harrowing battle sequence that depicts the kind of futile, industrial slaughter commonly associated with trench warfare and the horrors of the First World War. The camera follows Heinrich (Jakob Schmidt), an ordinary German soldier, via a tracking shot as he advances towards the French lines, seeing most of his comrades killed along the way. After the bloodletting, in which soldiers are cut down by bullets and eviscerated by artillery fire, the scene shifts to an overhead view of a pile of corpses, including the dead body of Heinrich, whose remains are attended to by a detail of German soldiers who strip the uniforms from the corpses for re-issue. In scenes eerily reminiscent of the Final Solution, the soldiers meticulously create a pile of boots and coats for reuse and place the deceased into an open pit of coffins covered with lime, as the bloodied bundles of clothing are loaded onto train carriages. The attention to detail the film spends on the actions of stacking dead soldiers as well as collecting and sorting their personal effects was intentional: Berger has stated that the acclaimed 2015 Holocaust film directed by László Nemes, *Son of Saul*, that follows a day in the life of member of the Jewish Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, served as an inspiration for his adaptation of *All Quiet*.⁸ Later in the film, the protagonist Paul Bäumer and his comrades are met with an apparent gas attack as they arrive at the front. After Paul is late in donning his gas mask, he is punished by having to wear his mask the entire day as a mark of shame. Paul goes on to discover a company of German soldiers in a warehouse dead from the effects of poisonous gas. These not-so-subtle undercurrents suggest a direct link, a kind of *Sonderweg*, from the trenches of the First World War to the systematic mass killing of the Second. Such parallels are drawn by evocative imagery of gas, mass graves, summary executions, piles of victims' clothing, and burning human flesh, images with unmistakable references to the Third Reich that particularly resonate with German audiences.

³ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Random House, 2013), 215.

⁴ Wetzel, "Schlammschlacht."

⁵ <https://www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/182953/userkritiken/>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

⁶ <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-2022>, accessed on June 22, 2023.

⁷ Kilb, "Ein Krieg aus dem Katalog."

⁸ Interview with Edward Berger, *Deep Dive Genre – A German Films Podcast*, November 7, 2022, https://www.german-films.de/fileadmin/mediapool/IMAGES/Podcast_Deep_Dive/SOUNDFILES/01-Edward_Berger_Deep_Dive_Genre.mp3, accessed on July 1, 2023.

The major point of contention among critics, however, is that while *All Quiet* purports to be an antiwar film, in reality Netflix has turned Remarque's masterpiece, "one of the most important books ever written in the German language," into "war porn."⁹ With scenes of attacking tanks, flamethrowers, and bodies being ripped apart by bullets, artillery fire, or spades, German media outlets lambasted Berger for producing "148 minutes of blockbuster-compatible war kitsch [*Kriegskitsch*]" designed to guarantee high ratings and "maybe even an Oscar."¹⁰ Even the tabloid *Bild*, hardly known for its highbrow reviews of art and cultural products, called Berger's version "trash," proclaiming that "if the first film adaptation of Remarque's book from 1930, as well as the 1979 remake, shocked through their portrayal of the monstrous banality of killing, in the Netflix production all that is left is banality."¹¹ Remarque's novel, after all, was a story about the "tragedy" of a German generation, who came of age at a time when young men were expected to fulfill ideals that were inseparable from those of the soldier. In the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II, military service was the most visible expression of male status and one's willingness to self-sacrifice for the nation. The language of heroism in early twentieth-century German society was later co-opted and radicalized by the Nazis and became the underpinnings of Hitler's *Volksgemeinschaft*. Unlike British or American audiences, who could watch *Saving Private Ryan*, *Dunkirk*, or *1917* and point to wartime sacrifice as redemptive and having borne positive results for the postwar world, most Germans see nothing redeeming about war. As the film's director himself notes of Germany's relationship to war and the military: "In our national psyche, there is nothing but guilt, horror, terror and destruction."¹²

In Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, German militarism is personified in the character of General Friedrichs (Devid Striesow), who functions as a composite of the Prussian officer caste. Unlike Remarque's novel, which casts light on the militaristic attitudes that permeated both German society and institutions, Berger's film places the blame for the First World War on the figure of General Friedrichs. Juxtaposed with the ordinary conscripts, the real victims in the film, and the historical figure of the German politician Matthias Erzberger (Daniel Brühl) in the film, who does everything possible to bring the fighting to an end, the fictional Friedrichs sends his soldiers to capture a meaningless enemy trench minutes before the armistice in order to preserve the army's "honor." Sporting a stereotypical Prussian mustache with bald head, dueling scar on his cheek, and a massive hunting dog at his side, the character of General Friedrichs is typical of his caste and profession, remaining indifferent to the suffering of his soldiers and rationalizing the senseless slaughter by declaring that a soldier without a war is nothing. By compartmentalizing German militarism in the figure of General Friedrichs, the filmmakers help the audience avoid the more difficult and troubling questions about collective responsibility and the pervasiveness of militarism.

Building on the legacy of earlier German war films, the 2022 adaptation of *All Quiet* grapples with the themes of militarism, the futility of war, and the disillusionment experienced by idealistic young men. However, deeper questions about responsibility remain largely unexamined. Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*, 1959) became the most acclaimed, as well as popular, war film in the new Federal Republic. Based on the novel of the same title by Gregor Dorfmeister (writing as Manfred Gregor), the movie tells the story of seven schoolboys drafted shortly before the end of the Second World War and assigned to defend a militarily worthless bridge from the Americans. Similarly to *All Quiet*, the

⁹ Wetzell, "Schlammschlacht."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Max Boeddeker, "Im Westen nur Müll! Eine ganz persönliche Abrechnung," *Bild*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.bild.de/unterhaltung/kino/leute/netflix-verstuemmelt-buch-klassiker-im-westen-nur-muell--81842954.bild.html>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

¹² Scott Roxborough, "Edward Berger on Why It Was Important to Make a German-Language Version of 'All Quiet on the Western Front'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 10, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/tiff-2022-edward-berger-interview-all-quiet-on-the-western-front-1235213231/>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

protagonists in *Die Brücke* enthusiastically look forward to defending their fatherland, yet their commitment to fighting cannot be traced to any adult characters in the film and seems to arise solely from indoctrination in the form of propagandistic slogans and hollow speeches. Praised for its realistic depiction of combat, the film earned wide acclaim for its antiwar message, as all but one of the German youths die horrific deaths in the final days of the Second World War. Like *Die Brücke*, *Das Boot* (*The Boat*, 1981) directed by Wolfgang Petersen, also condemns the futility of war in its final sequence, in which the heroic leader of a German submarine in the Second World War and his crew are killed by Allied planes while docked in apparent safety, after having survived countless harrowing ordeals on the ocean. In *Das Boot*, German militarism is personified in the character of the first watch officer, a committed Nazi and the only crew member who shaves and maintains a proper uniform. Eventually, this character becomes disillusioned with the war effort, stops wearing his uniform, and grows a beard like the other characters. Like most German films in the immediate postwar era, *Das Boot* reinforces 1950s memory politics by emphasizing German victimhood and misguided individuals performing heroically, while avoiding a closer examination of broader, collective responsibility.

Germans' lack of enthusiasm for the 2022 *All Quiet* can be understood as a reflection of what political scientist Herfried Münkler calls Germany's "post-heroic" society, which is no longer willing to blindly march off to war and sacrifice itself on the altar of the fatherland, but views patriotic values, the military, and the use of force with skepticism.¹³ Militarism was more or less dead following Germany's total devastation in 1945. Pacifist attitudes, exemplified by the slogan "Nie wieder Krieg" (Never Again War) were prevalent throughout the 1950s and 1960s. And while both Germanies rearmed in 1955–1956, the West German Bundeswehr was founded on the principle of *Staatsbürger in Uniform* (Citizens in Uniform), which guarantees soldiers the same rights as all other citizens while serving in the armed forces, thereby ensuring the military's link to the state and civilian society. Since the 1970s, public schools in West Germany have placed considerable emphasis on Holocaust education and instilling a sense of moral responsibility for past crimes committed in Germany's name, a development that generated public interest about the Holocaust and was accompanied by a wave of memorial-building, museums, and exhibitions dedicated to the victims of the Third Reich.¹⁴ In 1995, thanks in part to the so-called *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht Exhibition) organized by the Institute for Social Research in Hamburg, the general public also learned that the German military had not fought a "clean" war between 1939 and 1945, as many former officers (and the Bundeswehr itself) had claimed, but had enthusiastically greeted the Nazis' rise to power and played a substantial role in Hitler's genocidal war. Education about German suffering in the Second World War, a change in public conversation, and the lack of institutional reinforcement meant that a German society dominated by militarism had been rapidly transformed.

Germany announced the end of conscription in 2011. Yet by that time, the draft had become something of a farce anyway, with the majority of draftees choosing civilian service (*Zivildienst*) over serving in the Bundeswehr.¹⁵ Still, conscription ensured that wider society remained somewhat connected to the armed forces, as most Germans had at least a family member, friend, or colleague serving in the military. Since then, fewer and fewer young Germans engage with the military. Military service carries less pride in today's Germany compared to the United States, with some members of the armed forces, especially those living in Berlin and other big cities, reporting not wearing their uniforms when commuting

¹³ On the concept of post-heroic societies, see Herfried Münkler, *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2015).

¹⁴ Andrew I. Port, *Never Again: Germans and Genocide after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2023), 56–57.

¹⁵ Matthias Strohn, "Commentary #4 – A Typhoon in a Teacup... Or Has Germany Woken Up?", *CHACR*, https://issuu.com/chacr_camberley/docs/germany_a_new_era, accessed on June 7, 2023.

to and from work in order to avoid unfriendly stares and rude comments. The Bundeswehr, for its part, despite financial incentives and new marketing campaigns designed to appeal to millennials, struggles to meet its annual recruiting goals.¹⁶

The pronounced aversion to militarism and highly ambivalent feelings about the use of force, Herfried Münkler argues, is regarded as a societal achievement in today's Germany, a country that enthusiastically threw itself into two world wars and committed genocide before becoming one of the world's most successful democracies.¹⁷ But whereas other liberal democracies do not see a source of conflict in delegating national defense to professional "heroic communities" like the army or NATO, Germans' collective memory of their country's past crimes make their relationship with the military particularly complicated. Ulrike Franke, a frequent commentator on defense and security issues, explains how Germans, especially millennials, who are now moving into positions of influence, grew up in a world that felt safe and shielded from external threats and believing that military force is not just immoral and unnecessary but also ineffective. It had caused the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century and wreaked more destruction and instability in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and now Ukraine. "Germans view themselves as enlightened, having moved beyond power politics, the national interest and militarism," Franke writes.¹⁸ This historical sense of responsibility to prevent war leaves little room for Germans to applaud sensationalizing treatment of military violence, which is largely incompatible with Germans' sense of self.

Given the grief, pain, and trauma caused and experienced by Germans during the Second World War, such attitudes are hardly surprising. These pacifist attitudes have contributed to dissonance between the military and its civilian leadership, which is further reflected by the problematic tenure of recent German defense ministers, each of whom has openly expressed frustration of the Bundeswehr and the military leadership. Christine Lambrecht, who was defense minister from December 2021 till January 2023, angered senior military leaders by supposedly ignoring them, while her predecessor, Ursula von der Leyen (2013–2019), is best remembered for her efforts to root out alleged extremism in the German military and accusing the Bundeswehr, as a whole, of having an "attitude problem," creating a rift between the military and its civilian leadership.¹⁹ Tensions have also arisen on a local level, such as in Potsdam, where elected officials debated whether it was appropriate for city buses and trams to carry recruitment ads for the German military,²⁰ or in Berlin, where in 2020 a city district turned down the offer of support from the Bundeswehr in the fight against COVID-19 because political leaders felt uneasy about the sight of soldiers in their neighborhood.²¹ Most recently, many Germans voiced their displeasure about the Bundeswehr holding a tattoo (*Zapfenstreich*) in front of the Reichstag to mark the end of the Afghanistan deployment, because the torches, uniforms, and military music reminded people of the Third Reich.²² Addressing these criticisms, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in many ways exemplified these attitudes in a speech given on November 14,

¹⁶ Matthew Karnitschnig, "Germany's Soldiers of Misfortune," *Politico*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-biggest-enemy-threadbare-army-bundeswehr/>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

¹⁷ Münkler, *Kriegssplitter*, 169–187.

¹⁸ Ulrike Franke, "Germany isn't turning its back on NATO. It only looks that way," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/31/germany-ukraine-weapons-nato-russia/>, accessed on June 22, 2023. See also Ulrike Franke, "A Millennial Considers the New German Problem after 30 Years of Peace," *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/a-millennial-considers-the-new-german-problem-after-30-years-of-peace/>, accessed on July 5, 2023.

¹⁹ Sönke Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger. Vom Kaiserreich zur Berliner Republik – eine Militärgeschichte* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2000), 569–579.

²⁰ Karnitschnig, "Germany's Soldiers of Misfortune."

²¹ Strohn, "Commentary #4 – A Typhoon in a Teacup."

²² "Verteidigungsministerium enttäuscht über Zapfenstreich-Kritik," *Der Spiegel*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/zapfenstreich-fuer-afghanistan-veteranen-verteidigungsministerium-enttaeuscht-ueber-kritik-a-71583203-915a-4d11-97a9-9e2da50112f8>, accessed on July 1, 2023.

2021, Germany's Memorial Day (*Volkstrauertag*), when he declared: "Many Germans feel uneasy about military rituals. They do not want to be reminded of what having an army, including the Bundeswehr, means. Death and trauma, German soldiers in armed missions, in foreign countries – these are things we prefer to repress. We talk about these things far too seldom and only reluctantly."²³

Eight months before *All Quiet* opened in German cinemas, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. In response to Vladimir Putin's aggression, Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende*, a historic turning point, in which Germany would invest massively into its armed forces, making it the biggest spender on defense in Europe and the third largest worldwide. The daily deluge of grisly images from Ukraine that have dominated the headlines since February 2022 forced Germans to confront the possibility of military confrontation. Memories of the Second World War prompted by graphic images from regions that had previously suffered under German occupation inspired empathy, indignation, and even calls from ordinary Germans for increased military aid.²⁴ While Putin's invasion of Ukraine brought about a major shift in government policy, was Scholz's declaration of a *Zeitenwende* accompanied by a similar change in German attitudes? If we believe Thomas Bagger, a foreign policy advisor to the German president, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 had already shaken "Germany's dominant worldview to its foundation."²⁵ But there is little evidence to support this claim or to suggest that the current war in Ukraine has changed popular attitudes in Germany in any tangible way. A 2022 poll, for example, found that only 37 percent of Germans said they considered that under some circumstances war could be necessary to preserve the international order, while more than 32 percent said military force is never necessary (29 percent of respondents were unsure).²⁶

Would Germans' reactions to the 2022 *All Quiet on the Western Front* have been different if there had been no intensive reckoning with the past? Perhaps this is why German reactions to the Edward Berger film have been so critical: like *Die Brücke* and *Das Boot*, *All Quiet* reinforces 1950s memory politics by emphasizing German victimhood, while neglecting questions of guilt or responsibility. If there is one thing that German reactions to the Netflix film suggest, it is that the challenge of navigating this difficult legacy is ongoing, and is why this history continues to shape public conversations and how Germans think about the military's place in German society. This critical, collective self-examination, which is lacking in *All Quiet*, is undoubtedly a consequence of the intense public and scholarly engagement with German militarism and the Holocaust over the last eight decades, and a sense of responsibility toward that history that Germans of all political persuasions continue to take seriously.

²³ www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2021/11/211114-Gedenkrede-Volkstrauertag.html, accessed on July 1, 2023.

²⁴ Port, *Never Again*, 315–318.

²⁵ Thomas Bagger, "The World According to Germany: Reassessing 1989," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2018): 57–58.

²⁶ Timo Graf, et al., "Zeitenwende im sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitischen Meinungsbild. Ergebnisse der ZMSBw-Bevölkerungsbefragung 2022," <https://zms.bundeswehr.de/de/zmsbw-forschung-oeffentliche-meinung-im-vereinten-deutschland-5335184>, accessed on July 6, 2023.