

All Quiet on the Western Front—Once Not So Quiet

By Victor Grossman

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On December 5, one or two hundred people left a movie theatre in Berlin, mostly silent and deeply moved, though the film they had seen was first released in 1930. This American-made epic had lost none of its intensely emotional appeal. It was *All Quiet on the Western Front*, based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque, and the date of its showing here was no accident.

Exactly eighty years earlier, to the day, Joseph Goebbels, later to become Hitler's notorious propaganda minister, had led 200 Nazis in violently preventing the showing of this same film. At the shout of Goebbels, who was in the balcony, the Nazis—storm troopers without their brown uniforms and some of the many newly-elected deputies to the Reichstag—blew whistles, attacked the rest of the audience, and then let hundreds of white mice out of cardboard boxes to scurry through the rows. The police tried to restore order (or at least some did), but this proved impossible, and the showing was stopped. Then five to ten thousand Nazis waiting outside joined Goebbels in a march and rally in the downtown area. The tumult continued for a week, after which the Censorship Office, made up of Nazi sympathizers or men fearing growing Nazi pressure, bowed to the demands of several pro-Nazi states to have the film banned altogether in Germany. This was a first major success of the Nazis, and was accompanied by an obscene barrage of propaganda against this “defamation of our boys in uniform” by the “Jews in Hollywood” and in Berlin’s “elite” West Side.

Half a year later, after protests by prominent writers, artists and anti-Nazi political figures, permission was reluctantly granted to show the film to small private audiences, but only in such a radically cut version that much of the political punch was gone. This strange edict, a compromise applying to a single film, was soon canceled, but the result of this attempted concession to the important German market for American films was

that only cut film versions were distributed to all other countries as well. The film was totally forbidden in many countries, including France, Austria and Australia, and was eviscerated even in the U.S., despite its two Oscars for best film and, for Lewis Milestone, best director. A final wish of Milestone was to have the film restored to its original length, conveying its full, original message. It took two decades after his death in 1980 before this was finally achieved.



The film shown last Friday was the original, uncut version with German subtitles. Before it started, two historians described what had happened in 1930, which was a major step in the Nazi takeover of German culture and, two years later, of the whole country,

resulting in the destruction of both. One historian told the tragic story of Hanns Brodnitz, the manager of the Mozart-Saal, which he had turned into a leading art film center, highlighting such film greats as the young Rene Clair (*Under the Roofs of Paris*) and Charlie Chaplin's masterpieces. But after the Nazi attacks on his theatre and the exploding level of anti-Semitism in Germany, he lost his job and, before long, all jobs. His attempts to escape to the U.S. were in vain, and in 1938 he went into hiding. Only after five years, when he dared to leave his last hiding-place, was he caught and sent to Auschwitz, where he was murdered in a gas chamber a few days later. His autobiographical book on film culture during Germany's Weimar Period was not released in 1933 because of the Nazi takeover, and was soon destroyed, but the surprising discovery of the galley proofs a few years ago made a new edition possible.

Two thoughts certainly went through the minds of many audience members last Friday. One was a swift understanding of why not only Nazis, and not only German super-patriots, hated the film and its terrifying portrayal of the horrors of war, with occasional questioning by the soldiers as to why and to whose benefit they are suffering, shooting and dying. One scene in which the hero, played by Lew Ayres, bitterly regrets

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killing a French soldier lying next to him, is unforgettable. The way in which the glories of “fighting and dying for one’s country” were so mercilessly satirized and exposed by the film, went against all efforts by nearly every government in those years to honour the dead in such a way that the next generation would dutifully follow in their fatal footsteps.

The other thought surely going through the heads of so many in the audience was not unrelated: They are at it again! Not only the heavy-booted pro-Nazi groups marching through one city after another in Germany, for they are still a small minority and face unrelenting resistance by anti-fascists. But even more menacingly, troops are again being sent to fight in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and when the metal coffins are



Lew Ayres in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

flown home they are met with rites and speeches hardly differing from those in the years before and between the two world wars, and attacked in the film. This month Germany’s Minister of Defense, while ending the draft, is creating a tough professional army with the latest murderous equipment, ready to defend “Germany’s trade routes and access to needed raw materials” anywhere in the world.

Words like Iran, Palestine, Yemen and Korea inevitably crossed people’s minds. Eighty years had passed, and what terrible years some of them were, yet so many have learned, or changed, so little. Aside from the greatness of the film, it was thoughts like these which made this event so meaningful, and so disturbing. ♦

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including Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords—the debate has shifted oddly. Supporters of the American right have accused liberals and progressives of “irresponsible hate-mongering” (Margaret Wentz, *Globe*, Jan. 11) for suggesting that violent rhetoric and imagery might have contributed to an atmosphere which encouraged the shooting. Wentz wrote that “blaming the Tea Party for the killing spree is about as useful as blaming the Beatles for the Manson Family’s murder of Sharon Tate” (an allusion to the Beatles song *Helter Skelter* which some say influenced Charles Manson). This was similar to Sarah Palin’s defensive statement that “acts of monstrous criminality ... begin and end with the criminals who commit them” (in the same address in which she outrageously accused the mass media of “blood libel”).

What I find perverse about American political culture in recent years is not simply angry, virulent, even demonizing, rhetoric. What is really creepy is the mixing of politics and guns: the Palin campaign’s notorious

map showing crosshairs over Democratic congressional districts, and Palin’s slogan, “Don’t retreat, reload!” Palin is far from the only one: Republican Senate candidate Sharron Angle, on a conservative talk show, speculated that it might be necessary to have a “Second Amendment solution” to a Congress she disapproved of, and spoke of the need to “take out [Democratic Senator] Harry Reid.” Republican Congressional candidate Jesse Kelly, hoping to defeat Giffords, issued an invitation to supporters to attend a fundraising event and then join him on the rifle range: “Get on target for victory in November—help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office—shoot a fully automatic M-16 with Jesse Kelly.” He and his supporters might as well have been directly shooting at targets of Giffords. Kelley, a U.S. Marine and veteran of the Iraq invasion, proudly displays publicity photos of himself holding an assault rifle, alongside the words, “Send a Warrior to Congress.” And all this in addition to the earlier grotesque spectacle of Tea Party supporters openly carrying guns outside town hall meetings.

Much of the recent discussion turns on whether there was

any direct, demonstrable cause-and-effect link between all this gun fetishism, and the actual attempt on Giffords’ life. Suppose there was none, and that her would-be assassin had no sympathy with the Tea Party, Palin, Kelley, or Angle (although in fact there is evidence that Jared Loughner was strongly influenced by far-right politics). In that case, it all seems rather normal to commentators like Margaret Wentz and other apologists for the right in the U.S. and Canada.

It’s fascinating to speculate on the outcome if these political permutations were reversed. Supposing *Democratic* candidates and politicians under Bush had spoken of the need for “Second Amendment solutions,” had issued maps showing electoral districts covered with crosshairs, etc., and that all this bloodthirsty posturing had been followed by an attempt on the life of a *Republican* member of Congress. My guess is that all the Democrats involved would have been arrested by Homeland Security. As it is, America’s latter-day *freikorps* are somehow able to portray themselves as misunderstood victims, and put their liberal opponents on the defensive. ♦