

# All Quiet on the Western Front

by  
Erich Maria Remarque



**E**rich Maria Remarque, the son of a bookbinder, was born in Germany in 1898. A bright and perceptive student with strong interests in music, art, and literature, Remarque decided to pursue a teaching career. But in 1916, before he could complete his training, Remarque was drafted into the German army along with other fellow students. He served in a sapper unit, which was responsible for fortifying positions behind the front, until he was wounded by an artillery attack in July 1917. His experiences at the front and the antiwar sentiment that they produced in him form the central core of his most famous novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

## Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

**The outbreak of war.** In reaction to Austria's harsh attempts to control Serbian commerce, on June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo. As the Austrian government plotted a suitable retribution against the Serbs, the effect on Russia was taken into consideration. Because Russia was closely allied with Serbia, Austrian officials worried that the slightest aggression against the Serbs would result in Russian involvement. As a precaution, Austria sought support from Germany, its most powerful ally. Kaiser Wilhelm II immediately vouched for Germany's assistance, telling the Austrian powers that his nation would support whatever action the Austrian government might take.

## THE LITERARY WORK

A novel set during World War I on Germany's western front; published in 1929.

## SYNOPSIS

A young infantry soldier describes the horrible realities of World War I's trench warfare and the drastic consequences of the war upon his generation.

On July 23, 1914, the Austrian empire presented an ultimatum to the Serbs, demanding that they suppress Serbian nationalist activity by punishing activists, prosecuting terrorists, squashing anti-Austrian propaganda, and even allowing Austrian officials to intrude into Serbian military affairs. Two hours before the expiration of the forty-eight-hour deadline on the ultimatum, Serbia responded. Its response fell short of complete acceptance of the terms and so was rejected by the Austrian authorities. As war between Austria and Serbia loomed on the horizon, both sides experienced a massive groundswell of optimism and patriotism regarding the impending conflict.

Austria declared war on Serbia and immediately began shelling Serbian defenses. As these aggressions began, the Russian army started mobilizing to aid the Serbs, and it was soon clear that Russia was going to become thoroughly involved in the war. Two days later the German



army began to mobilize and entered the war to support Austria. Germany was jubilant about the prospect of war and believed that its entrance into the conflict was perfectly justified. On August 1, 1914, Germany's Kaiser spoke to a crowd of thousands, telling them, "A fateful hour has fallen upon Germany. Envious people on all sides are compelling us to resort to a just defense . . . war will demand enormous sacrifices in blood and treasure but we shall show our foes what it means to provoke Germany" (Kaiser Wilhelm II in Moyer, p. 72).

Germany's strategy for the war began with a heavy assault on France, which was an ally of the Russians. To facilitate this assault, the German troops marched through Belgium. Great Britain, Belgium's ally, immediately sent an ultimatum to the German army to withdraw from Belgian soil. When the ultimatum went unanswered, Britain declared war on Germany. During one week of political and military machinations, Germany found itself facing Russian, French, and British enemies who outnumbered their own army 10 million to 6 million.

**War in the trenches.** As Germany engaged the French and British armies in the West, it became clear that a decisive victory was not an immediate possibility. Both sides in the conflict settled themselves into trenches and dugouts in preparation for a war of attrition. New weapons such as the machine gun and more efficient artillery made the trenches a necessity. Soldiers on open ground would be decimated by the newfangled instruments of death. Opposing trenches were typically several hundred yards apart. The middle ground, which was laced with barbed wire, soon became known as "no man's land." Constant firefights and artillery barrages removed all foliage from this area and made it nearly impossible to cross.

Daring raids across this deadly no man's land became one of the chief pursuits of infantrymen in the trenches. During these raids, supported by fire from their own side, soldiers would cross the treacherous ground and penetrate enemy barbed wire with the help of either well-placed artillery attacks or special rifle attachments that gathered several strands of wire together and then fired a bullet, severing them. Upon reaching the enemy lines, soldiers would first throw a volley of hand grenades into the trenches and then attack the surprised defenders with bayonets. While these raids did not typically result in major casualties to defenders, they devastated enemy morale and bolstered the confidence of the attackers. In *All*

*Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Baumer participates in such a raid. Caught in no-man's land by shellfire, Baumer takes shelter in a shallow hole. When a French soldier also seeks shelter there, Baumer stabs him and feels tormented by guilt as he watches the young man die. This scene illustrates the traumatic nature of the raids.

**A soldier's life in the trenches.** The round of duty along the western front differed little for soldiers on either side of the conflict. Most of the night would be spent at hard labor, repairing the trench walls, laying barbed wire, and packing sandbags. After the dawn stand-to, when every man would line up on the firing step against the possibility of a morning attack, the rest of the day would generally be spent in sleep or idleness, occasionally interrupted by sentry duty or another stand-to when enemy activity was suspected. Despite the sometimes lengthy periods of calm along the front, life in the trenches was filled

## THE WESTERN FRONT

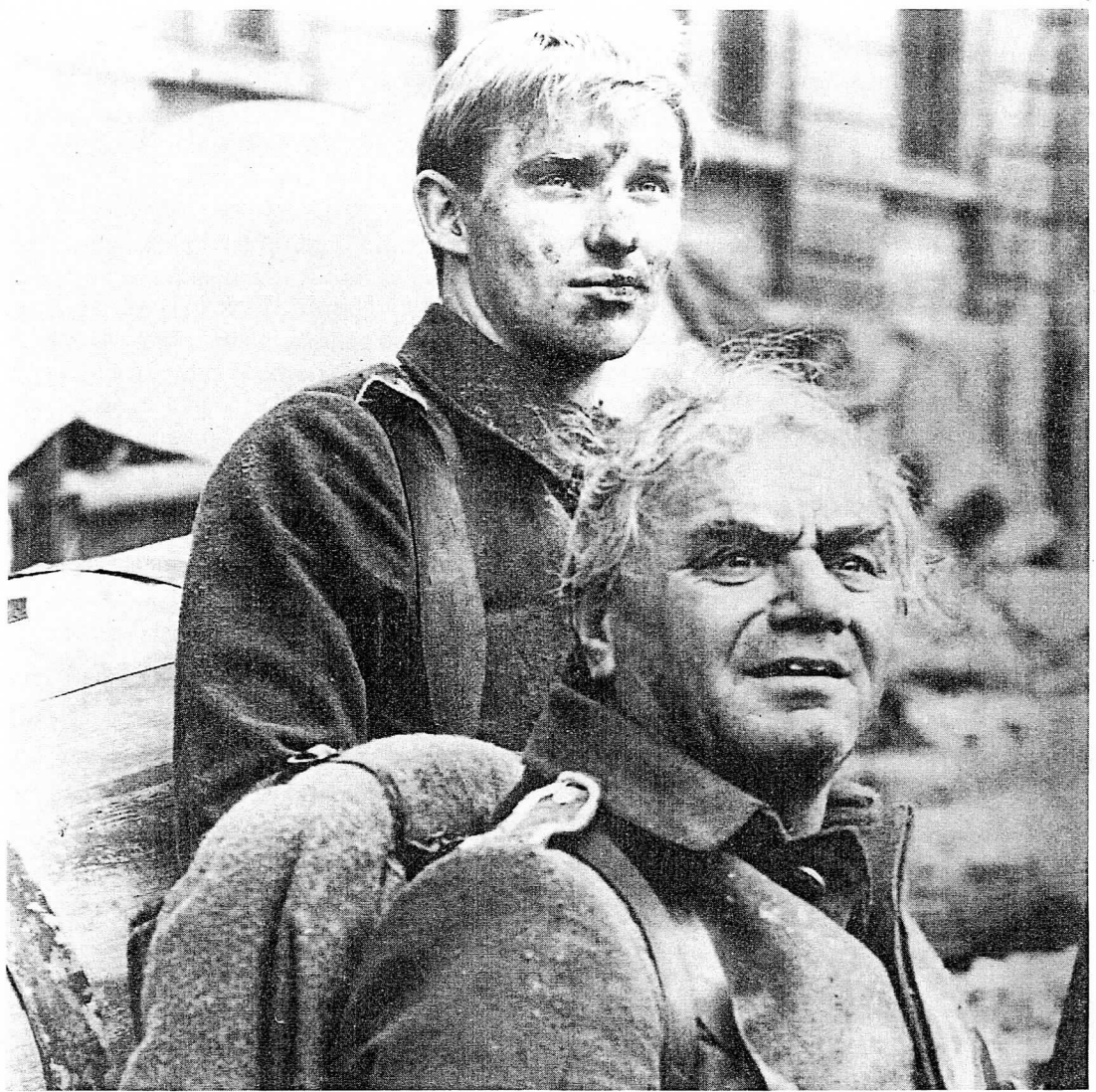


The western front was a 475-mile-long battle-line between the Germans and the Allied forces. Along this line of fighting were 900,000 German troops and 1.2 million Allied soldiers, or roughly 1,900 and 2,500 men per mile of front. Overall, the western front was not a continuous trench, but rather a string of unconnected trenches and fortifications.

with constant dangers. In addition to artillery attacks and surprise raids, soldiers suffered afflictions brought on by a daily existence in wet and unsanitary conditions. The lack of fresh foods and the soggy environment in the trenches resulted in "trench foot," an affliction that turned the feet green, swollen, and painful. Another ailment suffered by soldiers in the trenches was the debilitating, though not fatal, trench fever, transmitted by the lice that infested everyone after a day or two in the line. Typically the first stop after being granted a relief or a leave from duty was the delousing station, and then the baths. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Baumer and his comrades take several trips to the delousing stations during their service on the front.

**The influence of the older generation.** Central to *All Quiet on the Western Front* is the attack on members of Germany's older generation for imposing their false ideals of war on their children.





Richard Thomas and Ernest Borgnine in a 1979 television adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

The older generation's notions of patriotism and their assumptions that war was indeed a valorous pursuit played a crucial role in the conflict. The chief sources of this pro-war ideology were the older men of the nation: professors, publicists, politicians, and even pastors. As the war began, these figures intensified the rhetoric, providing all the right reasons why killing the young men of France and Britain was a worthy and noble endeavor. One Protestant clergyman spoke of the war as "the magnificent preserver and rejuvenator" (Moyer, p. 9). He went on to say that the war would bring an "end to deceit, hypocrisy, self-aggrandizement, and immorality" and would bring about "a revival of trust, honesty, decency, and obedience" (Moyer, p. 9). Government authorities in Germany did everything in their

power to encourage young men to enlist, even granting students special dispensation to complete final examinations early so as to be able to join up sooner. As the war broke out, more than a million young men volunteered for service.

In the novel, Remarque uses the character of the schoolteacher Kantorek to develop the novel's attack against the older generation. Kantorek's constant encouraging of the young men to enlist—"Won't you join up, Comrades?" he urges (Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 11)—prompts Baumer's entire class to volunteer for service. As the plot unfolds, with each successive death of Baumer's classmates, the novel further condemns the attitudes and influences of the older generation. In the novel, Baumer himself denounces the pressure they ex-

THE HUMAN COST OF THE WAR

Country	Killed or Died	Wounded & Missing	Prisoners	Total Casualties
Russia	1,700,000	4,950,000	2,500,000	9,150,000
British Empire	908,371	2,090,212	191,652	3,190,235
France	1,357,800	4,266,000	537,000	6,160,000
Italy	650,000	947,000	600,000	2,197,000
United States	116,516	204,002	4,500	323,018
Serbia	45,000	133,148	152,958	331,106
Germany	1,773,700	4,216,058	1,152,800	7,142,558
Austria-Hungary	1,200,000	3,620,000	2,200,000	7,020,000

erted. "For us lads of eighteen," he observes, "they ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress—to the future" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 12). Baumer continues, "The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 12). In a final condemnation of this older generation, Baumer says, "While they continued to write and talk, we saw the wounded and dying. While they taught that duty to one's country is the greatest thing, we already knew that death-throes are stronger" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 13). Though Remarque, who was drafted into military service, had not been inspired to enlist by the urgings of Germany's middle-aged middle class, he still resented their false influence and betrayal of the young men in his generation.

**On the home front.** While their young men suffered on the western front, German civilians at home made their own sacrifices. As the war continued, a failure in the potato harvest in December of 1916 forecasted additional sacrifices on the horizon. In place of their usual seven-pound-per-week ration of potatoes for each person, German citizens would now receive five pounds of potatoes and two pounds of turnips, a food previously used only as animal fodder. To make matters worse, the list of rationed foods continued to grow. Diminishing grain supplies led to a severe cutback in the bread production. The ration for butter and other fat foods dropped to

two ounces per person per week. Milk was also scarce, and fruits and vegetables disappeared from the German diet completely. With the poorer diet came new health problems—stomach, skin, and digestive disorders became common. These difficult conditions are illustrated in *All Quiet on the Western Front* when Baumer returns home on leave. During the stay, Baumer uses his soldier's ration card to provide nourishing food for his family members, who have been completely deprived because of the increasing shortages.

*The Novel in Focus*

**The plot.** Influenced by their patriotic teacher, Kantorek, Paul Baumer and his German classmates have volunteered for military service on the western front. Their first disillusionment occurs during boot camp, where the vicious drill-sergeant Himmelstoss subjects them to seemingly endless torment and harassment.

At the front, they experience firsthand the gruesome realities of the war; in one of the early chapters they visit Kemmerich, one of their classmates whose leg has been amputated after suffering a wound in battle. As Kemmerich lies dying, another of Baumer's comrades, Müller, asks if he can have Kemmerich's boots, a request that illustrates the cold practicality of warfare. Before Kemmerich dies, he tells Baumer to give the boots to Müller.

Between battles, Baumer and his friends smoke cigarettes, relax, and forage for food in the surrounding countryside. The group forms a

close bond of friendship despite the grueling conditions in the trenches.

As the number of casualties grows, Baumer's company is reduced from 150 men to 80, and younger men are brought to the front. With the new men comes Himmelstoss, the despised boot camp sergeant. Himmelstoss continues his abusive behavior toward Baumer and his comrades, and the men plot revenge. Disguised in hoods, they find Himmelstoss away from the camp, pounce on him, and beat him.

After being granted a leave, Baumer returns home to visit his mother, who is sick with cancer. His stay proves less than pleasant. Unable to adjust even temporarily to a tranquil life back home, Baumer becomes anxious to rejoin his comrades. He readily returns to the trenches after a tearful parting with his mother.

In the trenches, the men cope with the discomforts of rats, lice, and deprivation. During a patrol into no man's land, Baumer takes cover in a shallow hole. When a French soldier also dives into the hole for cover, Baumer reflexively stabs him. Unable to make himself finish the Frenchman off, Baumer is tormented by guilt as he watches the young soldier die and realizes the senselessness of the war.

During an attack Baumer is wounded by a shell and is taken to convalesce in a military hospital. The horrible wounds and deaths of many of the soldiers around him again reinforce his realization of the horrible human cost of the war.

When Baumer is released from the hospital, he returns again to the front. In his absence casualties have continued to mount. He is the only survivor among the students from Kantorek's class. The final chapter of the novel reports that Paul Baumer fell to his death on a day in which the army record consisted of a simple statement: all quiet on the western front.

**Remarque's antiwar sentiment.** The novel's most potent and recurring focal point is of a sense of disillusionment with the institution of war. As Baumer spends a greater stretch of time at the front, he realizes with increasing clarity the hypocrisy of this war and the horrible realities of combat that the war propaganda of the older generation failed to mention. Listening to the conversations of his comrades, Baumer senses their disillusionment with the war and their feelings of betrayal by the older generation. In one conversation between the men, the soldier Albert asks his friends, "But what I would like to know, is whether there would not



Erich Maria Remarque

have been a war if the Kaiser had said no?" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 203). The soldiers have realized by this point that the petty politics of Europe's leaders have resulted in their personal involvement in the war. As the conversation continues, the soldier Kropp poses a basic question: "It's queer, when one thinks about it, we are here to protect our fatherland. And the French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now who's in the right?" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 203). When Kropp states that war is caused by one side offending the other, the soldier Tjaden replies, "Then haven't any business here at all, I don't feel myself offended" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 204). Their conversation underscores the pointlessness of the conflict and the thousands of lives needlessly ended in its battles.

An even more poignant attack against war appears when Baumer stabs the French soldier in no man's land. Baumer regrets the stabbing and tries to talk to the man as he lies dying. "Comrade," Baumer says, "I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do . . . But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called for its appropriate response" (*All Quiet on the W*

ern Front, p. 223). Baumer continues talking to the man:

For the first time I see that you are a man like me . . . now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. . . . Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death. . . ?

(*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 223)

This scene more than any other condemns the war and its useless pitting of innocent against innocent.

It was the powerful effectiveness of scenes such as these that made Nazi leaders of the 1930s condemn Remarque's novel, and their disapproval would eventually lead to the revocation of his German citizenship during the Third Reich's reign.

**Sources.** Many elements of *All Quiet on the Western Front* come directly from Remarque's own experiences on the front. Remarque, like the novel's narrator, Baumer, was a student when the war broke out. Remarque was drafted, and his duties in the sapper unit to which he was assigned included fortifying positions behind the front by laying barbed wire and building gun emplacements, bunkers, and dugouts, all within range of enemy gunfire. There are several episodes in the novel in which Baumer and his comrades are sent with shovels to repair damaged fortifications. These scenes, no doubt, are modeled after Remarque's own experiences in a sapper unit. Also based on Remarque's real-life experience is Baumer's wound and convalescence in a military hospital in Duisburg. After recovering, Remarque was sent back into service, but unlike Baumer, he did not return to the front or die in action. Peace was declared just before Remarque returned to the conflict.

Many aspects of Baumer's personal life are also based on Remarque—for example, Remarque's mother, like his character's, was dying from cancer during his service at the front. However, the reason why each was granted a leave differs—whereas Baumer returns home to visit his sick mother, Remarque went back home to attend his mother's funeral.

### *Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written*

**Germany's lost generation.** Remarque was one among the many younger Germans who felt that their lives had been permanently damaged by the

war. In 1928, while writing *All Quiet on the Western Front*, he had been working a series of odd jobs that brought a meager income and little satisfaction. Like others, he blamed his inability to find a fulfilling career or sustained happiness on the war and the crucial coming-of-age period that it had stolen from him. Numerous passages in the novel highlight these feelings and comment on the development of the "lost generation," a term also applied to the post-World War I generation of Allied lands. This group of youths felt robbed of time and hope by the war. During one conversation between the soldiers, Albert complains about the future awaiting him after the war, "That's just it. Kat and Detering and Haie can go back to their jobs because they had them already. Himmelstoss too. But we never had any. How will we ever get used to one after this, here?" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 86). As the conversation ends, Baumer continues in this vein in his narration: "We agree that it's the same for everyone; not only for us here, but everywhere, for everyone who is of our age; for some more, and to others less. It is the common fate of our generation" (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 87). Perhaps the most powerful statement about the fate of this lost generation is found in Remarque's preface to the novel, in which he writes:

This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.

(Remarque, preface)

**Reception of the novel and the rise of the Nazis.** After its publication in its original German in 1929, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was interpreted worldwide as a manifesto for pacifism and antimilitarism. An American film version of the novel, released in 1930, reinforced this concept. The book, the film, and the author himself all became the subject of heated political debate in Germany at a time when Hitler's Nazi party was rising to power. In response to the novel, the Nazi party unleashed propaganda in an attempt to defame Remarque by claiming that he was a French Jew, and that his real name was Kramer. More serious than simple defamations was the Nazis' attempt to imprison Remarque when they came to full power in 1933. Fortunately, Remarque had just left for Switzerland to begin a new book.

Remarque's works were among those publicly burned in Berlin in front of the Opera House on

May 11, 1933. Both students and Nazi speakers denounced the authors whose writings they burned. As flames consumed Remarque's works, a speaker shouted to the crowd, "Against literary betrayal of the soldiers of the World War, for the education of the nation in the spirit of truthfulness. I consign to the flames the works of Erich Maria Remarque" (Wagener, p. 6).

In the opinion of numerous scholars, Remarque might have avoided the public burnings of his books and subsequent exile had he submitted to a specific request of the Nazis. Joseph Goebbels, Germany's propaganda minister during the Third Reich, offered to leave him and his works unmolested if he would simply attribute all responsibility for the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* to his Jewish publisher. Remarque refused.

Though Remarque was safely out of Germany, the Nazis were still able to exact revenge on the famous writer. On December 16, 1943, Remarque's sister Elfriede was accused of making defeatist remarks and beheaded with an axe. Roland Freisler, the judge of the People's Court that presided over her trial, told her that "be-

cause her brother was beyond the control of the court she would have to atone for his actions" (Wagener, p. 7).

Though it cost him his German citizenship and the life of his sister, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was Remarque's greatest literary achievement. To this day, the poignant depiction of a young man, Paul Bäumer, who lives and dies in the trenches of World War I, remains one of the most powerful testaments against war.

### *For More Information*

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