The Films to End All Wars: The Great War in the Post-War Imagination

Graduate Winner of the Joseph Mullin Prize in History

Mike Castellanos

Over a decade after the end of the Great War a profusion of books and films attempted to relate the story of the war—some of which were autobiographical, some fictional, and sometimes an intriguing blend of the two. Much of the work was anti-war to some degree, whether explicitly or implicitly, and was born of a reflective moment in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Three films especially exemplified this: *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), a film from the United States based on the German novel, *Westfront: 1918* (1930) from Germany, and the *The Grand Illusion* (1937) from France. These three films, made over a decade after the Armistice, have come to represent the Great War perhaps more than contemporary historical sources. In examining the films and their reception a change can be traced that mirrors the historical moment of their making and screening. *Westfront: 1918* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* were mired in the post-war disillusionment of the late 1920s to early 1930s and the severe worldwide economic depression with all the helplessness it engendered. Pacifism had become dangerously intertwined with passivity. Seven years later, with Jean Renoir's *The Grand Illusion*, this latent passivity faced a bellicose German state. As such, Renoir's film called on his audience to act in the context of a looming war. Where the first two films showed the viewers the common humanity which the war sought to destroy, the last film implored the viewers to dissolve their false boundaries before they sank into war anew.

*Mise en scène:*

Officially, the Great War ended with the Armistice on November 11, 1918. However, the peace that followed was tenuous at best. Many historians argue that it was in fact a momentary truce in a modern Thirty Years’ War.¹ According to that argument, the roots of the next war lay in the Treaty of

Versailles. Its harsh penalties for Germany created an insufferable condition which caused a backlash, culminating in the rise of the Nazi Party. This is an argument born of historical hindsight, for those living through the 1930s war was not seen as inevitable. As this paper will demonstrate, there were multiple responses to the memory of the Great War. These ranged from pacifist efforts to prevent any future war to the belligerence of fascism—while the most common was to simply get by and hope another war would not happen or would at least happen elsewhere. All the while political polarization continued, only to be exacerbated by the dramatic economic plight of a world plunging further into a depression.

What became known as the Great Depression began with the shock of the stock market crash in October of 1929 and soon rippled throughout all aspects of the economy and the globe. The world had known depressions and economic slumps as part of the business cycle; however the depths and length of this depression were to award it the same dubious appellation of the war preceding it. The bottom was not to be reached until 1932 in Germany with over 30% of workers unemployed and 1933 for the United States with 25% unemployed and Britain at over 20%. France managed to do relatively well, partly through heavy state involvement, until 1936 saw the nation leave the gold standard and join the world of fiat currency. One of the only countries with a growing economy in the early 1930s was the Soviet Union. Though this was for a variety of reasons, not least of which was an authoritarianism not fully known to the West, it gave Communism a huge boost in appeal as an example of a way out of the storm. The deep sense of unease pervading the time was a backdrop to all events of the period, whether personal, political, or cultural.

With the disastrous economic times came increasing political unrest. People were dislocated and searching for solutions—as well as a place to lay blame. In Germany the political battles took place around elections but also increasingly became literal battles in the streets. The Weimar Republic was a weak state in which parliamentary elections were called often: from 1920 to 1930 five elections were held, growing to an additional four by 1933. Aside from all the bread and butter issues of the day, each with a political party to match, the legacy of the Great War remained an undercurrent. This legacy was twofold: first, the memory of the war in the minds and bodies of those who fought in the trenches and those who suffered deprivations at home, and second, the bitter peace agreement that followed with its demands for reparations, hobbling of the military and territorial changes. The question of Germany's place in the world was of concern both domestically and abroad. An international debate had been playing out since the Armistice on whether to punish or support Germany. With the French government taking a stronger line on disarmament and reparations payments and those of the United States and Britain generally more lenient, the people of Germany were caught in the middle and beginning to

---

3 Ibid., 90.

EX POST FACTO
act on their own. The sharpest reaction against the international community came from the growing National Socialist Party, or Nazis. In 1930 they saw a gain of nearly one hundred seats in the Reichstag and by the next elections in 1932 they became the largest single party. By January of 1933 their leader, Adolf Hitler, was chosen to be the Chancellor of Germany. This rising power, measured in elections as well as their ability to drive the debates of the day, was an additional shadow affecting the three films of this paper.

There were many forms of response to this growth of Nazis and Fascism with the strongest coming from the Left. It was partly in regards to fears of leftist parties and agitation that the reactionary Nazis and Fascists gained ground throughout Europe. Coming in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the aborted German Revolution at the end of the war there were many who saw a real possibility of another Communist uprising as was attempted in Germany in 1923. With the Nazis in power in 1933 and Benito Mussolini’s Fascists ruling in Italy since 1922 the French reactionaries saw their moment in 1934 to bring down the leftist coalition then in power. Their march on Paris became a riot, known as the Stavisky riots after a scandal associated with the government. This was seen by many contemporaries as part of the rising Fascist tide encompassing most of Europe. In 1936, in an effort to form a global response to Fascism the Communist leadership in Moscow, through the Communist International (Comintern), called for the formation of Popular Front governments. These would be governing coalitions working to stop Fascist and militarist regimes rather than simply push the causes of the Left. France, Spain, and China all formed Popular Front governments in 1936. In the same year Germany reoccupied the Rhineland, forbidden by the Versailles Treaty, and the Spanish Civil War began—eventually bringing in Germany and Italy in support of Francisco Franco, and the Soviet Union for the Republican forces, with the United States, Britain, and France remaining officially neutral. Even at the time this conflict was seen as the potential beginning of a new world war.

These political and economic changes deeply affected the cultural production of the era. After the Armistice there was a period of forgetting and moving on from the war experience. This was felt in the film industry as much as anywhere else, according to Michael Eisenberg, “The immediate postwar climate continued to treat the war film as a pariah. Very few pictures with a world war background were made between 1919 and 1925. Almost all sank at the box office.” In the United States this trend was broken by The Big Parade in 1925. It did well with critics and at the box office chiefly due to its perceived realism. The director, King Vidor, intended it to have an antiwar message;

---

6 Michael T. Eisenberg, “The Great War View From the 1920s” in *Why We Fought: America’s Wars in Film and History*, ed. Peter C. Rollins et al. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 140.
however this was subsumed in the love story and bravado of the main character. Another early treatment of the war was the 1919 French film, J'Accuse, which also enjoyed great success internationally. Despite these outliers, cinema's strong statements on the war were to wait until the late 1920s and early 1930s.

It was through the publishing of memoirs, poetry, and novels that the Great War was finally revisited in the minds of participants and the reading public. The feminist literary critic, Elaine Showalter, argues that “there were very few men's war memoirs or novels published during the 1920s; they did not begin to appear in substantial numbers until the 1930s, after the Depression had 'closed the gap between civilian and ex-soldier' by making all abject and powerless.” In accord with this idea the public was receptive to the story of the war, even hungering to know more, thus the focus on praising films for their “realism” and telling “the truth.” The stories that ensued were often bitter and gave a picture of disillusionment, with the most famous being All Quiet on the Western Front. Andrew Kelly, focused on the cultural drivers behind the “myth of disillusionment.” He found “it was the force of literature in the late 1920s that propelled cinema into action.” Thus, the cultural outpouring of the late 1920s set the stage for the films to come.

*Westfront 1918 (1930)*

Though later surpassed by the success of All Quiet on the Western Front, the German film, Westfront 1918, is today considered by many critics to be the more powerful picture of trench warfare in all its horror. The film was the product of a conflicted director working in a tumultuous time. Georg Wilhelm Pabst was born in Bohemia in 1885, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and moved to Vienna and later Zurich to study and work as an actor. He served during the Great War, but was captured and thus spent much of it in a prisoner of war camp. After the war, he started working as a director, on the other side of the camera, and by the 1920s was becoming a prominent director in Germany. He eventually made thirty three films—with the Weimar films considered his best work. In the mid-1930s, he went to Hollywood, but after returning to visit Austria in 1939, he ended up staying, and spent the war years making films under the Nazi regime. His postwar work and reputation never recovered from this, and although he directed into the 1960s, his films were widely panned by critics. As one biographer noted, “he received his faith and strength from current trends, being too susceptible and too irresolute to find them in himself.”

---

7 Ibid., 147-150.
12 Ibid., 1.

EX POST FACTO
Pabst saw his work during the Weimar period as part of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement which attempted to subvert the dominant historiography of the recent past, particularly, the war, by shocking the audience with a “documentary realism.” With the Right in Germany telling a reactionary story about war—the ideas of the “stab-in-the-back” and an undefeated army—the proponents of Neue Sachlichkeit offered a counter-story, an early version of history from below. For Pabst, one of the hallmarks of this approach was the use of editing to make rapid cuts that created an unsettling effect. Additionally, with *Westfront 1918* he had a high standard for authenticity in the appearance of the trenches and the battles surrounding them. This was matched in by the use of sound, just coming into being in the film industry, and a first for him. Here he meticulously spliced the explosion sounds between dialogues to produce a nearly constant barrage during battles. This was to set the example followed by most war films, in which explosions and gunfire are used to shock the viewer into the feeling of a “real” battle.

The screenplay for *Westfront 1918* was based on a semi-autobiographical novel by Ernst Johannsen, *Vier von der Infanterie* (usually translated as *Four Infantrymen*) from 1929, the same year Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* was published. Johannsen's book was soon overshadowed by Remarque's more popular novel and the respective film versions followed the same fate. The novel was part of the late 1920s wave of German antiwar novels and can also be seen as attached to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement. A *New York Times* reviewer of the book found it to be a new strain of “Pacifism of a tough and hairy sort, far removed from the wishy-washy sentimentality of parlors, public banquets and political discussion clubs.” Pabst intended the film to retain the same gritty “realistic” portrayal of the war. What is unclear is whether this was meant to be a conscious stand against war or merely a strike against those on the Right who were trying to use the cleansed noble idea of war for their own purposes. In his study of the film, “The Battleground of Modernity: *Westfront 1918* (1930),” the historian Michael Geisler wrote: “the war provided a convincing metaphor for widespread economic anxieties, feelings of undeserved victimization, and general fears that the fabric of society was coming apart at the seams.” This was perfectly in line with Neue Sachlichkeit criticism and Pabst's vision for the film.

In scenes that are at times only loosely related, the film follows the story of four German infantrymen in 1918 at end of war. The lack of a strong narrative structure was intended as part of the disconcerting element. From the beginning scene establishing the camaraderie between the soldiers we come to know them only as the Student, the Bavarian, the Lieutenant, and Karl, the only
named character. The action then moves to a bunker under fire from their own guns as they attempt to hold up the collapsing structure. After their rescue and a transition, the Student runs into Karl and in a memorable scene they sit on the edge of a shell-hole and talk about love. Later, Karl goes home on leave to see his mother and wife, however his mother cannot immediately leave her place in line at the butcher's to see her son. She had been there for hours and she fears meat may not be seen again for days or weeks. Upon entering his home, Karl finds his wife in bed with the butcher's son and Karl goes for his gun. However, he becomes resigned, and seeing a draft notice for the butcher's son Karl says, "You too?" as he walks out. His wife says she was hungry and claims: "It isn't my fault." He leaves, having earlier said: "What's the use of leave when everyone at home is starving?" In home there is no solace. Meanwhile, in cut-away scenes at the front, the Student is killed by Senegalese troops. Karl then volunteers for a mission at the front before an imminent French attack and is joined by the Bavarian and Lieutenant. The final attack scene is the most dramatic of the film, making full use of sound with the continuous visual and audio explosions accompanied by the staccato fire of machine guns and the whine of incoming shells. After the bombardment there is a wave of tanks and the trenches are overwhelmed. The iconic moment of the film has the Lieutenant standing in a pile of corpses, having clearly gone mad. The final scene is in a hospital in all the post-battle agony of death and dismemberment. Karl is dying and sees his wife repeating: "It isn't my fault" to which he replies: "We are all guilty." A French soldier in the next bed takes his hand, not realizing he is already dead, and says: "My comrade, not enemy, not enemy."

The film premiered in May of 1930 in Berlin and was widely distributed in France, with a smaller distribution in Britain. The film was not available in the United States until after the publication of All Quiet on the Western Front. The greatest critical praise was for its perceived realism, and the general public was reportedly shocked at the battle scenes and depictions of trench life. One critic wrote: "in the fight against war, this film is...worth more than thousands of books, pamphlets, and articles." Another critic writing in a similar vein said: "Already a generation has reached the age of maturity which does not know those years from personal experience. They have to see, and see time and again, what they have not seen for themselves. It is unlikely that the things they see will work as a deterrent, but they must at least know about them." However, the same critic wrote 16 years later, after the Second World War, that it amounted to a "noncommittal survey of war horrors. Their exhibition is a favorite weapon of the many pacifists who indulge in the belief that the mere sight of such horrors suffices to deter people from war. Thus the message was strong, but what was the message?

The ambivalence of the film in making a clear statement was born out by the responses to it. It was alternately used by pacifists as a critical strike against war and by the Nazis as visceral evidence of the drama and power of

---

19 Ibid., 95.

EX POST FACTO
war. Initially the Nazis tried to disrupt the Berlin premiere but were shouted down by veterans in the audience. The Nazis then made a change and supported it, in contrast to the threat they saw in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In “Culture Wars and the Local Screen: The Reception of *Westfront 1918* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* in One German City” David Imhoof focused on the release of the two films in Göttingen, a university town in central Germany from 1930 to 1931. He found that *Westfront 1918* was well-received as a realistic portrayal of the war while *All Quiet on the Western Front* was condemned. Much of this dynamic was due to a “German” versus “American” dichotomy rather than on the merits of the story and visuals of the films. However, in 1933 these finer points of distinction were rendered moot. Within three months of their coming to power, the film was finally banned by the Nazis—the ambivalence had ended.20

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930)

The 1930 film version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* was conceived under the guidance of Carl Laemmle, one of the great impresarios of early Hollywood. Born in Germany, he came to the United States and eventually invested in movie theaters and film distribution. He moved to Los Angeles in the early days of Hollywood and founded Universal Studios in 1912 along with three other producers.21 As the war began in Europe he advocated for peace and supported efforts toward that end. However, once the United States joined the war, he then lent his support and made pro-war films, the most infamous of which was the rabidly anti-German film *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* in 1918. By 1930, in the wake of the war, he had returned to a pacifist ideology. He saw his film version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* as being his crucial anti-war statement saying: “if there was anything in my life I am proud of, it is this picture. It is, to my mind, a picture that will live forever.” It was his belief that the film would lead to a Nobel Peace Prize, or at least a nomination. Despite the best efforts of a publicist writing his biography, there was no forthcoming nomination.22

Laemmle’s film was directly based on the work of Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1971), the novelist who had risen to worldwide fame with the publishing of his novel, *Im westen nichts Neues* (In the West, nothing new), in January of 1929 in Germany and translated into English as *All Quiet on the Western Front* in June of that same year in the United States.23 Deeply impressed by the novel, in August Laemmle met with Remarque in Germany to

---

20 David Imhoof, “Culture Wars and the Local Screen: The Reception of *Westfront 1918* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* in One German City,” in *Why We Fought*: *America’s Wars in Film and History*, ed. by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2008), 180-186.


22 Kelly, *All Quiet: Film*, 60.

23 Born Erich Paul Remark he changed his name after publishing an unsuccessful novel in 1921.; Murdoch, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 359-361.
make his bid for a film. Laemmle offered Remarque $25,000 for the rights but as the success of the novel became clear he tried to back out and was purportedly offered an additional $25,000. According to the New York Times, after Laemmle met with Remarque there was an understanding that the film would be made as close as possible to the novel as it "had the virtues of human appeal and truth, and that, therefore, it was a subject that needed no conventional romance or screen embellishments." The Universal board was initially against making the film due to troubled finances and concern that it would be a flop due to the lack of romance and the focus on a former enemy, but Laemmle and his son Carl Laemmle, Jr. persisted and were ideologically committed to making the film. Laemmle, Jr. was then chosen by his father to produce the film as his inaugural project. He was only twenty-one at the time but had all the ambition of his successful father (who had a propensity for nepotism). Remarque claimed that he was asked to write the script but was advised against it by his agent in order to write his next book, The Road Back. Instead, a series of writers worked on the screenplay at different stages—one of whom was a pacifist who wrote the popular anti-war play What Price Glory? This was then reworked by the director of the film, Lewis Milestone, who brought it closer to the form of the original novel.

Lewis Milestone was born Lev Milstein in 1895 in Odessa, and after spending time in Germany he left for the United States in 1913 to work in theater, fortuitously leaving Germany the year before the war began. He enlisted in the army after the United States entered the war and gained experience in film by working on training films alongside future famed directors. He drew upon this experience when working on All Quiet on the Western Front, as he said in a 1969 interview: "having examined thousands of feet of actual war footage while stationed at the Washington, D.C, War College during the war, I knew what precisely what it was supposed to look like." In his essay on the film John Whiteclay Chambers II emphasized that Milestone was thus reinterpreting the war as viewed by photographers who were themselves showing what the war was "supposed" to look like. After the war Milestone moved to Hollywood to further his career and found early directing success with a World War I comedy, Two Arabian Knights, for which he garnered an Academy Award. Laemmle, Jr. chose him to direct All Quiet on the Western Front and filming began in the fall of 1929. He was known for his editing expertise, stemming from his wartime experience, and made the most of it in the memorable and intense battle.

---

25 Kelly, All Quiet: the Story of a Film, 67.
27 Kelly, All Quiet: Film, 62.
28 Ibid., 69.
29 Chambers, "All Quiet: Antiwar Film," 314.
30 Ibid., 309-310; Kelly, All Quiet: Film, 63.
31 Milestone went on to direct dozens of films into the 1960s, including: Ocean's 11, Have Gun Will Travel (TV), Mutiny on the Bounty, and the Korean War film, Pork Chop Hill.

EX POST FACTO
scenes. Here he described the impression he wished to convey with the first large battle of the film, a French attack on the German trenches:

You know how [in] trench warfare, they used to send over wave after wave in the attack—came five o'clock in the morning, over the top, first wave then the second wave and third and so on.... I discovered the central idea for this...should be that when a machine gun shoots the man ought to drop with the same rapidity as the bullets leave the machine. And I thought if I keep that up, as wave after wave comes over, you have six, seven frames of the machine gun shooting and then immediately show the guys dropping, and they drop with the same impersonal, unemotional thing as the machine gun spitting bullets.... That became the central idea, and the rest is history.32

While the general public was impressed by the overall feeling of battle, film critics praised the precise editing and thoughtful construction demonstrated by this quote. The key piece, however, is his critical linking of men and machines in this newly impersonal warfare. The production was to be a lavish affair, a hallmark of Laemmle, Jr., eventually costing $1.5 million—a huge sum for the time, which appalled the Universal board.33 According to a pre-release article in the New York Times, thousands of soldiers were portrayed by actual veterans, including 2,000 American Legionnaires as well as foreign veterans (in actuality only 150 were used), and authentic military equipment was brought in from Germany and France, including cannons.34 The film was heavily publicized as the novel gained popularity, with the New York Times informing their readers that there was to be no "softening of the message which is embodied in this war experience, which was just as typical of the soldier in every country engaged in this conflict as it was typical of the German soldier. Remarque graphically described three things—the war itself, the fate of an entire generation, and true comradeship. These were the same in all countries."35 Indeed, these themes were heavily retained in the film version despite the continuing trepidation of some of Universal's executives, with even Laemmle worrying that the resulting message was too bleak to do well at the box office.36

With the exception of a few scenes, the film version of All Quiet on the Western Front did remain faithful to the novel and followed the tale of the young soldier, Paul Bäumer. The film begins in the classroom with their teacher

32 Kelly, All Quiet: Film, 94-95.
33 Chambers, "All Quiet: Antiwar Film," 316.
34 Ibid., 313; and Paul Gulick, "All Quiet' As A Screen Drama," New York Times, March 2, 1930.
35 Gulick, "Screen Drama."
36 Kelly, All Quiet: Film, 94; Kelly relates a story that Laemmle asked Milestone to change the ending, an effort which stopped when Milestone responded that he could have the Germans win the war.

VOLUME XXI · 2012
exhorting them to join the army as a class. In a divergence from the novel the teacher recites the Latin phrase “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” (How sweet and proper it is to die for your country) as an inspiration. This is a clear nod to Wilfred Owen whose poem, with its heavy antiwar irony, would have been well known at the time and immediately recalled by this scene. After the boys of the class join they fall in with a few older soldiers, with Kat chief among them, quickly learning the lessons of survival. In the first of the surprisingly realistic battle scenes we see the machine gun firing and bodies falling with the effect that Milestone intended. As in *Westfront: 1918* the use of sound is striking and disconcerting. Milestone had a similar intention as Pabst, and for audiences becoming used to semi-realistic sound in cinema it would have come across with strong effect. Indeed, the battle scenes continue to hold up even today.

The post-battle hospital visit to their schoolmate Kemmerich is retained in the film with a focus on his well-made boots. After Kemmerich's death there is a montage of men happily wearing the boots, until in turn each fall dead in battle as the boots continue their march with new feet. As in the novel, many of the antiwar messages often come clumsily spoon-fed, such as: “I think maybe the Kaiser wanted a war! Every full-grown emperor needs at least one war to make him famous.’ ‘Yeah, generals too! They need war.’ ‘And manufacturers too, they get rich!’” However, for its time, uttering these lines on the screen rather than in private grumbling would have come across as shocking rather than trite. Following a battle Paul is caught in a shell-hole and the memorable scene transpires where he bayonets a French soldier diving into the same hole. He sits in the hole all night as the Frenchman's rasping breath slowly gives way to death. In one of the strongest antiwar scenes Paul has his famous monologue with the man he killed: “Why did they do this to us? We only wanted to live—you and I—why should they send us out to fight each other? If we threw away these rifles and these uniforms you could be my brother...” By the end all his classmates and comrades have been killed, with the indomitable Kat going last. The final scene adds a touch not found in the novel: Paul Bäumer is despondently crouched in a trench when he sees a butterfly, as he reaches out smiling we see a sniper preparing his shot, Paul's hand jerks back and curls into death.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* was a critical and box office success with Lewis Milestone receiving the 1930 Academy Award for Best Director and the film itself taking the first Oscar awarded for the new category of Best Picture, as well as being nominated for cinematography and writing. After the Los Angeles premiere in April of 1930 it went on to general release in the summer in the United States and Britain, with French and German dubbed versions in December. By 1931 it was being shown in theaters across the globe, from Japan to Brazil. The film was immediately popular and more than regained the financial outlay of its expensive production and continued to be re-released internationally into the 1960s. Remarque himself was reportedly moved when given a private screening in Germany by Universal, saying, with tears in

---

37 Murdoch, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 360; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 298.

EX POST FACTO
his eyes: "It is beautiful indeed. I can say no more." In a review of the London premiere from *The Times* one critic wrote that the scenes in the trenches were "meant to strip war of its last rag of romance and they spare us nothing." The critic was taken with the depiction of an assault: "with the earth bursting about us and the air thick with flying fragments of steel, smoke, and noise, we experience, as if for the first time, the authentic terrors of bombardment." This was to be the film's lasting impact: the realistic impression of being in battle. In our contemporary world of special effects and seven decades of films in the wake of *All Quiet on the Western Front* it is easy to forget the shock of seeing, and *hearing*, modern warfare. A reviewer wrote of the realism as seeming "as though they had really been photographed during the war." Newspapers reported "an audience stunned with the terrific power of stark, awful drama" and being "silenced by its realistic scenes."

In a piece before the film's release a *New York Times* reporter wrote about veterans' reactions to the novel: "Many have written that scenes described by Remarque must have taken place opposite their own trenches, although in the book there is no mention of the American troops in the war." American soldiers needed to identify with the scenes portrayed on the screen, and despite the German uniforms, veterans understood a common experience. In the same *New York Times* article a German grocer living in the United States proudly claimed that the character of the drill sergeant was based on him as he believed Remarque was one of his recruits—though he denied being as cruel as Himmelstoss. This need to relate personal experiences was the chief feature of the phenomenon surrounding the reflective moment which saw the publishing of memoirs and subsequent films over a decade after the Armistice.

In addition to finding a receptive audience in the general public the film was quickly taken up by pacifists as a strong antiwar statement and became a centerpiece of peace campaigns throughout the 1930s and even into the Cold War era. One pacifist organized a "Peace Films Caravan" which featured a silent version shown on a portable screen in parks and campuses around the country into the mid-1930s. The film was also shown at meetings in churches and schools by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. They saw the film as a boon to the movement, and they lobbied Hollywood to make more along the same lines. The degree to which the public agreed with their perception can be gleaned from the ending line of the previously quoted *Times* review from London. He saw it as "the supreme merit of the film that it contrives to suggest in its final scenes the soldiers' lack of enthusiasm, their

---

38 Chambers, "All Quiet: Antiwar Film," 316.
39 The Times, "All Quiet on the Western Front: Film Version of the Novel," June 6, 1930.
41 Chambers, "All Quiet: Antiwar Film," 315-316.
42 Gulick, "Screen Drama."
43 Chambers, "All Quiet: Antiwar Film," 317.
recognition of defeat, and their willingness to go on fighting to the last.”45 This last point is crucial, for if the message received was one of resilience in the face of combat then the film failed as an antiwar statement. If audiences beyond the London critic were struck not by the futility of the Great War, and war in general, but rather by the portrayal of soldiers willing “to go on fighting,” then either the message was lost, or it was not as imbedded as many projected it to be.

All Quiet on the Western Front was deeply contentious as a novel and this extended into its life as a film. It was one of the most famously banned films of all time, becoming a rallying cry not only for antiwar groups but also their reactionary opposite, the Fascists. David Imhoof wrote of the film's reception in Germany and the agitation provoked by the Nazis. The film premiered in Berlin on December 4, 1930, over half a year after the United States debut and two years after the novel was published in serial form. Thus, many Germans knew what to expect, and condemned it even before it was screened. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda chief and head of the party in Berlin, along with other party members, stopped the showing the second night in Berlin by “shouting 'Jewish film,' tossing stink bombs, and releasing mice in the aisles”46 (Milestone was Jewish). The chaos they created there, and at other showings across the country put pressure on the government to ban the film, which was already censored before its release. They succeeded in securing a ban by December 10, achieving all this while as a minority party in the Reichstag.47 The ban was lifted for a heavily censored version which was then used for many of the global releases. The Nazis finally banned the film in Germany once they achieved national power.48 This dramatic episode illustrated the power and impact of the film: regardless of its disputed “truth” or strength as an antiwar film, the perception of its power provoked a heavy response.

The Grand Illusion (1937)

Unlike the previous two films The Grand Illusion was developed as a film from the beginning by its director, Jean Renoir. Renoir was born into fame due to the legacy of his father, the famous Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir. When he was nearly twenty the Germans invaded France and he was drawn into the Great War. He initially served in a cavalry unit but then became a pilot flying reconnaissance missions, work that was quite dangerous. Though he had nurtured a love for the cinema, it was not until the mid-1920s that he began making his own films, and by the mid-1930s he remained in the early stage of his career.49 At this point that he began working on The Grand Illusion. The idea for the film occurred to Renoir while filming near an airfield, and he was bothered by the effect of the noise. He went to meet with the commander of the

45 The Times. “All Quiet on the Western Front: Film Version.”
46 Imhoof, Culture Wars,” 188.
47 Ibid., 186-191.
48 Chambers, “All Quiet: Antiwar Film,” 318-319.

EX POST FACTO
base and found it was an old friend who he flew with during the war, Pinsard. "I was eternally grateful to him," said Renoir in an interview, "because I was in aviation, I took photographs—which meant that I was in a plane that was neither very fast nor well defended—and very often I was attacked by the Germans. The reason I wasn't shot down is that a fighter plane from the adjoining formation always came over and shot down the German, and most of the time it was Pinsard!" Upon hearing his tales of multiple escapes from prisoner of war camps he put them down for a future story, saying: "[they] have nothing in common with the film, but they were a necessary starting point."\(^{50}\) From there he worked with the Belgian screenwriter Charles Spaak on a script, their second screenplay together. They collected stories to work from, but Renoir claimed it was not self-referential, as he was never captured during the war. He said: "I shot this film according to other people's stories, Pinsard's stories, and the stories of many other prisoners whom I interviewed."\(^{51}\) He did certainly employ his wartime experience in some of the details of the main character, who happened to be a reconnaissance pilot like Renoir.

After writing the early script he then enlisted the actor Jean Gabin, who was a friend and had also worked with Spaak, to help him find a producer. In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* he said that no one was interested at that time, "They all refused, they all said, 'Oh, a war story, what a joke, and so on.' And then, we were raising many delicate questions, and that's just not done." After three years of searching, they found someone who wanted to invest but had not previously worked with cinema, which is the reason Renoir believes they were financed.\(^{52}\) Aside from his jocular and self-deprecating tone, he made a striking statement regarding the "delicate questions" and how this was "just not done." The film consciously questioned the major assumptions of its time: the rigidity of the class structure, the stereotypes of Jews, and most notably, the permanence of national differences.

The film was made during the winter of 1936 amidst the tumult and passion of the Popular Front era in France, a time in which Renoir said "the French really believed that they could love one another. One felt oneself borne on a wave of warm-heartedness."\(^{53}\) By the mid-1930s in the wake of the Stavisky riots, and the call for a Popular Front against Fascism, Renoir was a committed leftist. He even made a pilgrimage to Moscow at this time (before making *The Grand Illusion*). The film he made just before *The Grand Illusion* was financed by the French Communist Party expressly for the election campaign of 1936. His next film after *The Grand Illusion* was made for the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT, the massive Leftist trade union). Additionally, he was associated with a studio, Ciné-liberté, which promoted films with revolutionary themes, as well as writing articles on behalf of the


\(^{51}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{52}\) Renoir, *Renoir on Renoir*, 91-92.


*VOLUME XXI · 2012*
party. In short, he was socially and politically aware and this consciousness was reflected in his films during this period. Yet one of Renoir's many biographers, Alexander Sesonke, wrote that while recognizing the politicized nature of this period in his life, "Renoir's deep attachments have always been to people rather than to ideologies." To further drive the anti-Nazi agenda he added the Jewish character of Rosenthal to counter stereotypes prevalent in France as much as in Germany. As Renoir said himself, The Grand Illusion was "a documentary on the condition of society at a given moment." On the surface it was a simple and dramatic escape film which even manages to include a love story; yet it is a war story without battle. The clear subtext is a humanizing tale: one which dissolves barriers of nationality, class, and race. In Renoir's words: "My chief aim was the one I have been pursuing ever since I started to make films—to express the common humanity of men."

The film opens with a French pilot, Maréchal, meeting an officer, Bœldieu, planning their reconnaissance flight. Next we meet a German pilot, Rauffenstein, who has just shot them down and cordially asks them join in a bowl of punch with the other German officers. A soldier soon comes to whisk them away to their prisoner of war camp. Note that there is no depiction of fighting, not so much as a gunshot is heard from their seclusion at the airfield. At the prison camp they encounter another protagonist, Rosenthal, who is sharing out the gifts of food he receives regularly from home. Here they join in with their cellmates (though it is really a room rather than a cell) in digging a secret tunnel in order to make their escape. Their other diversion is preparing for a pageant with the other prisoners. Their characters come into greater detail with each representing a broader segment of society: Maréchal as the working man who is uncomfortable with finery (preferring a bistro to the Parisian restaurant Maxim's), Bœldieu as the aristocrat whose place in the world was outmoded, and Rosenthal who comes from a wealthy Jewish banking family and is always generous despite the jibes from others registering their surprise that he isn't stingy or their claims that he isn't truly French.

This early part of the film culminates with Maréchal interrupting the pageant with the news that the French took back the fortress of Douamont during the long battle of Verdun. One of the English prisoners then leads "The Marseillaise" while Maréchal is locked up for his impertinence. After days or weeks, it is unclear, he is released just as the hole is finished and they set to make their escape that evening. However, they are told that in the afternoon they will assemble to change camps and thus their efforts were in vain. Maréchal's attempt to tell the incoming English prisoners about the tunnel is equally futile as they don't speak French. After a montage of camps and rail journeys Maréchal and Bœldieu arrive at a castle—a special prison for those who have too many escape attempts. To their surprise Rosenthal is also there and the

---

54 Faulkner, Social Cinema, 58-84.
56 Faulkner, Social Cinema, 84.
57 Renoir, My Life, 148.

**EX POST FACTO**
commandant is none other than the pilot who shot them down at the beginning, Rauffenstein. He develops a friendship with Bœldieu based on their aristocracy, having him join for a drink in his room and talking of horses, women, and places they have in common. Notably, they have much of this conversation in English, which they perhaps feel more comfortable with as a common language of the educated class. During the talk Rauffenstein says: “I do not know who is going to win this war, but I know one thing: the end of it, whatever it may be, will be the end of the Rauffensteins and the Bœldieus.” to which Bœldieu responds: “But perhaps there is no more need for us.” By this point in the film Bœldieu has gained respect, born of close quarters, for his fellow officers, Maréchal and Rosenthal, irrespective of his class instincts. However, Rauffenstein disdainfully calls them “The charming legacy of the French Revolution.” This turn in Bœldieu allows him to see the common humanity between all of them, his fellow prisoners and his jailor.

Bœldieu comes upon a plan for escape and proposes to provide the distraction, thus sacrificing himself so that Maréchal and Rosenthal might go free. This is perhaps the last act of the French Revolution as previously alluded to, though in this case the nobility is a willing sacrifice. As Maréchal and Rosenthal successfully escape Bœldieu is reluctantly shot by Rauffenstein. Significantly, this is only one of the two gunshots in the entire film. Thus, it is a war story in which there is no fighting. We then follow Maréchal and Rosenthal on their long march to the Swiss border. They come upon a house and the farming woman, Elsa, is friendly to them. In one of the clearest antiewar statements of the film she shows them a family photograph and describes them, saying: “My husband, killed at Verdun. My brothers, killed at Liege, Charleroi and Tannenberg. Our greatest victories! Now the table is too large...” They continue to stay with her and her daughter as they tend their wounds and rest for perhaps weeks or months while helping on the farm and as a romance develops between Maréchal and Elsa. At last, they know they must leave, and Maréchal tells Elsa he will return after the war. The film closes with Maréchal and Rosenthal trudging through the snow into Switzerland and a German soldier on a patrol shooting once (the second shot of the film) and then stopped by another soldier saying “It's too late, they're across.”

The Grand Illusion premiered in Paris in June of 1937 and throughout Europe in the fall, then finally coming to the United States in September of 1938. It was awarded the Academy Award for Best Picture (the first for a foreign film). With the notable exception of Germany and Japan, where it was not shown until the late 1940s, the film received wide commercial success and continues to be shown.58 Renoir wrote that it was “warmly received by the trade and the public, who thought of it simply as an escape film. Later the real theme, which was that of human relations, was understood and accepted; but the way for this had been paved by its success, when the unorthodoxy with which I had filled it was applauded by even the most thick-headed spectators.”59

---

58 Sesonke, Jean Renoir, 322.
59 Renoir, My Life, 82.
famous biography of Renoir, the film critic André Bazin attributed the success of *The Grand Illusion* to its realism. Languages were spoken appropriately by each character rather than the common device of everyone speaking in the language of the film's origin. This realism extended to the characters types, even though they were representative it was not heavy-handed and came across as authentic.

Beyond the critics and the mass audience the film also struck a chord in the politically charged times. In the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt promoted the film, saying: “All the democracies of the world must see this film.”60 On the other side, the Nazis, well into power now in Germany, banned the film without any need for the theatrics of protest demonstrated in the December 1930 episode with *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Goebbels went so far as to call it “cinematographic enemy number one.” Additionally, Belgium banned the film when Charles Spaak's brother, the country's foreign minister, denounced it.61 These bans represented the success of the film: for if fascists did not condemn Renoir's film then his comment on the historical moment would have failed. Despite the general reception of the film Renoir found that he ultimately did not achieve his larger goal. In a 1960s interview he said: “people were nice enough to think that *Grand Illusion* had a great influence and told me so. I answered, 'It's not true. *Grand Illusion* had no influence, because the film is against war, and the war broke out right afterward!’”62 To single-handedly alter the march to war and change history is indeed much to ask; if not held to that high standard, then his film was an undoubted success with an impact felt to this day.

A Generation Reflects

The late 1920s and into the early 1930s was a period of reflection when portrayals of the Great War, on screen and in print, flooded the social landscape. This mass popularity was in part tied to the need for participants, in this case the millions of veterans around the world, to attach their experience to something larger. Recall the German grocer and his claim to be represented, even if it was in the unsavory personage of Himmelstoss. In a reflexive essay relating his own war experience Samuel Hynes stated two principle reasons that non-literary veterans write memoirs: “for most men who fight, war is their one contact with the world of great doings” and “war is a powerful transforming force in the lives of men who fight.... Change—inner change—is the other motive for war stories: what happened to me.”63 With this identification came a subtle reworking of, or coming to terms with, the war experience. In *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* Samuel Hynes elucidated the concept of the “Myth of the War” stemming from 1926 to 1933 when the wave of memoirs and novels

---

60 Faulkner, *Social Cinema*, 86.
61 Ibid., 86.
were published. As Hynes saw it, this myth was "not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true." Within this "myth" the soldiers' experience formed the key component:

The elements of that story are everywhere in the war narratives published in the myth-making years. We know them all by now: the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped.

Here are all the critical elements of Westfront: 1918 and All Quiet on the Western Front which came to form the cultural outpouring of disillusionment in literature, art, and film. This became the unified "reality" and is still with us as the dominant perception of the war. The myth became History.

What began with poetry and then memoirs and novels saw its apex in the cinema: the reworking of memories that came from wrestling with the past from a place of reflection. These three films and their respective filmmakers were re-fighting the war as it should have been, as they wished it to be. In this version they would not be carried away by hyper-nationalism, there would be no demonizing of the enemy, and they would all be comrades looking out for each other. This was a chance to speak the truths that were left unsaid, and perhaps unthought of, at the time. Each filmmaker responded equally to the past, both historically and personally, as well as their contemporary world. Laemmle, Milestone, and Pabst came to terms with their European past, and wartime propaganda films, and Renoir with his war service. Each of them reshaped their collective past to speak to the present. It was a dark present with a worldwide depression and lingering doubts about the resolution of the not-too-distant war. The Pabst and Milestone films from 1930 reflected this, and Renoir's film of 1937 added the element of an impending new war and the Nazi menace.

Because The Grand Illusion was not concerned with a brutally realistic portrayal of trench warfare it was free to focus on the shared humanity of all those forced together by the war. In the prison camps they were absolved of the need for fighting and there lay the genius of the film: in removing the combat

---

65 Ibid., 439.
Renoir displaced the easier dichotomies of war versus peace and created an antiwar film that was all the stronger for its subtlety. The graphic and raw emotional power of Westfront: 1918 and All Quiet on the Western Front served to bring the horrors of war to light, or reignite its memories for those who experienced it, and thus create the basis for antiwar sentiment. In order to be against war, it must first be stripped of its glory and attraction born of ignorance. With this foundation in place The Grand Illusion could then call upon its viewers to reaffirm their common humanity and repel war altogether.

Mike Castellanos is completing an MA in World History after teaching high school history for six years (world and US). He graduated from UCSC in 1998 with a BA in European History. His interests have ranged from globalization and social justice to pirates.