

# Literature (Germany)

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## Summary

World War I literature is a reflection of a collective crisis of confidence and trust in modern civilization, issues that are inextricably linked to the question of meaning. Depending on philosophical and political positions, the attempts to answer this question varied, and they changed over time until the 1930s. During the first months, World War I still inspired notions of heroism and enthusiasm. Soon, however, disillusionment became the prevalent feelings, which led to a debate on the authenticity of war literature. One literary response was the creation of the “New Man,” a literary prototype with no emotions, no nerves and a body of steel. The opposite approach insisted on a moral perspective and empathy. The war also initiated literary experimentation that refuted the quest for meaning altogether. In Germany, finally, nationalism and authoritarian rule came to dominate literature and cultural discourse.

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## Introduction: End and Beginning

The First World War is an epic event in history that marks a deep rift in time. It divides the

before and after, the end of an old and the emergence of a new epoch. [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#) called the pre-war world the “world of yesterday.”<sup>1</sup> His title *Die Welt von Gestern*, captures ambivalence, simultaneously negative and positive in terms of both subjective emotions and the history of European societies. From the point of view of progress, it was interpreted as a gain. The “world of yesterday” [*gestern*] was not up-to-date and required some radical change for it to be in accord with a technologically advanced society. From another point of view, however, the war and its effects were regarded as a loss. It meant the end of a time of confidence, a period that had been associated with sentiments connected to the home and childhood. This schism is reflected in European literature and is particularly present in the literature of the vanquished nations.

In both interpretations, the war is perceived in terms of emotions, positive or negative, that were linked to generations to a certain degree. In August 1914, [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) remarked that “the lamps are going out all over Europe,” signalling the abrupt end of a period of light.<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast to Grey’s view are reports (and [photographs](#)) from [Germany](#), [Austria](#) and [France](#) that capture an atmosphere characterized by enthusiasm, the “*August-Begeisterung*” [“August enthusiasm”]. Among other concepts, vitalism, uprising [*Aufbruch*], action, community [*Gemeinschaft*] and the celebration of life have been used to characterize the basic emotions underpinning the First World War. Even the young Austrian sceptic [Robert Musil \(1880-1942\)](#) could not contain his enthusiasm about the newly achieved unity, and after the end of the war, he wrote a few essays on the collective sentiments and expectations of unity and community.

The central term in the history of emotions was confidence. Certainly, the origin of confidence as a concept dates back further than the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it was during these years that confidence emerged as a key problem in the collective mentality. Traditionally, confidence presupposed the ability and readiness to look into the future without fear; an acknowledgement of vulnerability without jeopardizing a basic feeling of trust, despite the fact that the future could not be known.

The decades prior to 1914 had been experienced as a period of security, based on a shared feeling of confidence in civilization and progress, and common trusting in a world of reason which was on its way to becoming a good society. But the belle époque was undermined by a feeling of disbelief and a sense of the simultaneous disintegration of this world of confidence. The loss of this confidence was not entirely unexpected. Zweig’s work, similar to that of other authors such as [Arthur Schnitzler \(1862-1931\)](#), Robert Musil, [Georg Trakl \(1887-1914\)](#), [Carl Sternheim \(1878-1942\)](#) and many others was symptomatic of a strong undercurrent of collective *angst*, which created the ambivalence characteristic of bourgeois mentality and

literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1916, [Georg Lukacs \(1885-1971\)](#) described this shattered confidence in bourgeois society as a “metaphysical homelessness.”<sup>3</sup>

After a period of gradual disintegration of collective confidence, World War I eclipsed such lines of thought, coinciding with, and at the same time darkening, the image of present and future. Highly technological, the war seemed out of control. Battles characterized by systemic cruelty and with an unbelievably high blood toll, as well as the chaotic events of 1918-19 resulted in a fragmentation of the basic feeling of being-in-the-world. The war was experienced as a crisis of civilization and progress, and the space in which they were meant to manifest, namely the nation.

From Romanticism to [Joseph Roth's \(1894-1939\)](#) war novels, the implication of fragmented confidence was embodied by literature that indulged in a fantasy world, leading to social pathology and denial of the reality of the present, subjecting it to the wishful imagination. Joseph Roth's novels focus on capturing the atmosphere of a demise of confidence during the war. His longing for the lost “world of yesterday” was different from the fantasies of a past that could be found in militaristic literature of the Weimar Republic and its followers, the novels of [Freikorps](#) activists. They, too, can be characterized by an absence of a basic notion of trust in present and future, and an inability to face reality thus retreating into a dream world. Their response to the loss of confidence was a militant view of the world in which they anticipated a period of struggle, and prepared for it through constant demonstrations of strength and power.

A key literary example that addressed the unique combination of confidence and fear was [Ernst Jünger's \(1895-1998\)](#) early prose. It saluted the end of the period of confidence, while abstaining from moral judgment. He attacked the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the epoch of the self-confident bourgeois with an “insurance mentality”- an attitude to life that was deadly, bred boredom and created a world of book-keepers. Life, he argued, was only worth living when it included risk. It needs adventure and real danger, including that of losing one's life, he argued. According to Jünger, war offered exposure to such dangers, and fundamental challenge. From his autobiographical novel *Storm of Steel* [*In Stahlgewittern*, 1920] onwards, the author's early work focused on the war experience as an adventure in terms of the anthropologic condition of man.

## Imagined War

In literature, war is a construct of the mind. It should not be understood as an attempt to explain war. Understanding war through literature produces no applicable knowledge and includes levels of warfare that cannot be made transparent, remaining opaque by definition.

War literature does not necessarily follow the logic and causality of events as reconstructed through history and, in contrast to military history, creates its own logic. It acknowledges no difference between experienced, remembered or anticipated [warfare](#), between the [imagined war](#) before 1914 and the remembered war after 1918. It consists of images and fantasies that might include imagined fights and battlefields, begin years prior to the commencement of hostilities, and does not necessarily come to an end in accordance with actual armistice or peace treaties. German war literature is significant for the remarkable discontinuities in the country's intellectual and emotional history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Categorizing war literature in three phases is artificial and runs the risk of undermining the concept of the unity of discourse. In this essay, I use three phases for heuristic purposes.

## Before the War

Prior to 1914, an impending war was a topic that resided in the imagination.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, knowledge of [modern warfare](#) was non-existent in Europe. The French [poilu](#) (a charming term for "the hairy one," meaning infantrymen from the country who had a moustache) went to the battlefield with red trousers, while the German *Landser* (a word reminiscent of the *Landsknecht* or mercenary, and Condottieri) was proud of his *Helm mit Spitze* (colloquially referred to as *Pickelhaube*, a spiked leather helmet). The medieval word *Haube* instead of *Helm* ["helmet"] was significant as it connected the helmet and its wearer with a military tradition dating back to the Middle Ages and, in conjunction with the spiked helmet, to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such romanticized notions of warfare were typical of the poetry and prose written about the war in the decades pre-dating August 1914, and lasted until the end of that year. A close look at these writings exposes the naïve attitude that was still commonly held towards war throughout the summer of 1914. [Detlev von Liliencron's \(1844-1909\)](#) poetry, and in particular his *Die Musik kommt* from 1883, is among the best known examples.<sup>5</sup> His verses lent expression to the majority's idea of warfare, and vocalized the widespread expectation that the war would be over by Christmas. By 1915, this perception of the battle had become obsolete, never to return. When militarist and nationalist discourse began dominating war literature post-World War I, it tended to idealize the industrialized, often called "rough war" [*"der raue Krieg"*] fought by soldiers in grey uniforms with [flame throwers](#) and [machine guns](#) – not a topic that necessarily invited emotional identification.

There were voices more responsive to the cultural and social realities, and the sense of collapsing confidence. [Georg Heym's \(1887-1912\)](#) diary is symptomatic of such notions. In it, he writes about boredom and a foul peace, and indulges in fantasies of brutal violence and

torture. His entry from July 1910 reads: *“Dieser Friede ist so faul ölig und schmierig wie eine Leimpolitur auf alten Möbeln...”* [“This peace is as rotten, oily and grimy as sticky polish on old furniture...”] In hindsight, his poem *“Der Krieg”* [“The War”] has often been interpreted as an apocalyptic vision of the imminent war. It might also be understood as an imagination of the welcome end of a period of boredom, coupled with the opportunity to experience adventure. Thus in a way an apocalypse was possibly longed for.

Georg Heym, *“Der Krieg”* (1911)

Aufgestanden ist er, welcher lange schlief,...  
Auf den Bergen hebt er schon zu tanzen an  
Und er schreit: Ihr Krieger alle, auf und an.  
Und es schallet, wenn das schwarze Haupt er schwenkt,  
Drum von tausend Schädeln laute Kette hängt.  
...  
In die Nacht er jagt das Feuer querfeldein  
Einen roten Hund mit wilder Mäuler Schrein.<sup>6</sup>

There was another, but significantly less common alternative envisioning the war, namely it being a catastrophe. A school teacher from Hamburg, [Wilhelm Lamszus \(1881-1965\)](#), published a short novel entitled *“Das Menschenschlachthaus”* [“The Human Slaughter House”] two years before the outbreak of the war. He approached modern technology from the point of view of a humanist who had empathy for those suffering from industrialized warfare.<sup>7</sup> Voices as bleak as Lamszus’ were exceptions.

## During the War

Passions like hatred are customarily associated with war. In relation to World War I this view regarding a close relationship of war and passions needs qualification. Its support by literature is dubious. There is no doubt that feelings of hatred can be observed on both sides of the front. The following lines, written by the German poet [Ernst Lissauer \(1882-1937\)](#) in *“Hassgesang gegen England”* [“Hymn of Hatred against England”] make such sentiments unequivocally clear: *“Wir haben nur einen einzigen Hass, wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, wir haben nur einen einzigen Feind...”*<sup>8</sup> Investigating the passion of these verses, it would be too simple to attribute them to the hurt feelings of the rejected volunteer Lissauer. It needs to be considered to what degree these lines are a repetition of the rhetoric symptomatic of the time and place they were written in. Its reception makes it clear that this poem gave words to the shallow public rhetoric of hatred at the outbreak of the war. Significantly, the poem was quickly adopted by the government’s [propaganda](#) machine and

widely disseminated in the war of words. While the language of hatred cannot be reduced to individual psychology, it is not a poetic expression of common and lasting feelings either. Feelings of hatred were no driving force in the representation of this war in literature, and expressions of hatred are all but absent from soldiers' letters and other documents of the war experience and memories of the front.

Rather than hatred, love for the fatherland was a driving force. In his autobiography, [Ernst Toller \(1893-1939\)](#) recalls feeling intoxicated with nationalist emotions. He writes: "*Wir leben in einem Rausch des Gefühls*" ["We live in an ecstasy of emotions"]. [Walter Flex's \(1887-1917\)](#) short novel *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten* ["The Wanderer Between Two Worlds"] from 1916 combines an erotic relationship to the nation, homoerotic lyrical passages and romantic devotion with exposure to nature. The book has slipped into obscurity now, but in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Flex was one of the most famous authors of German literature. Unlimited love for the nation and the hero sacrificing his young life for his country made *Der Wanderer* a cult book among German youths with nationalist identification. The literature of the "*Wandervogel*" youth movement was an extension of this attitude towards war in general, as well the German nation and its war in particular. Its impact faded with the more militant and aggressive forms of [nationalism](#) in the early 1930s that must not be projected back in the time of the war.

In contrast to the celebration of an idealized nation by the emotional youths, the nationalist cause was supported by a crude discourse of the superiority of German culture. In September 1914, a manifesto initiated by [Ludwig Fulda \(1862-1939\)](#)<sup>9</sup> entitled "*Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*" ["Appeal to the World of Culture"] and signed by ninety-three established contemporary writers and artists appeared. It rejected accusations made by the Entente (following the destruction of the library of Louvain) and called for solidarity with a Germany which was fighting, so it was argued, in defence of the highest values of humanity ["*der höchste Besitz der Menschheit.*"] In October, a similar manifesto was published with the signatures of more than 3,000 German scientists and professors. Both appeals left no doubt about their belief in the superiority of German literature and sciences. Furthermore, [Rudolf Eucken \(1846-1926\)](#), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1908, published his view of the war as a source of moral vitalization ["*Quelle sittlicher Stärkung*"].

## Censorship

There were few [conscientious objectors](#) on both sides of the front. In [Germany](#), most people were motivated by Christian belief, in particular Adventists (Quakers, the only world-wide institution with a pacifist attitude, were not represented in Germany). Along with certain writers and artists, they were prepared to go to prison. They left behind very few literary

traces. Publication of [Erich Mühsam's \(1878-1934\)](#) anarchist journal *Kain* was interrupted from 1914 to 1918. [Joachim Ringelnatz \(1883-1934\)](#), who had served as an officer in the navy, wrote war novellas that were not printed until 1919 despite their generally affirmative attitude. [Fritz von Unruh \(1885-1970\)](#) served as a high ranking officer and was commissioned to write reports for the [Supreme Command](#) (OHL). They turned out to be too realistic and did not make it past the censor. Von Unruh's novel *Opfergang* [*Pasage of Sacrifice*] was written in 1916 and a heavily edited version was published after the end of the war (1919).

Only a small number of independent publications managed to escape [censorship](#). *Der Sturm*, edited by [Herwarth Walden \(1878-1941\)](#), was the most important periodical for the advancement of [Expressionism](#), [Dada](#) and Futurism. With the outbreak of the war, its connections to the Paris literary scene were severed abruptly, yet the weekly journal appeared throughout the war. Similarly, the *Journal for a Free Politics and Literature*, *Die Aktion*, edited by [Franz Pfemfert \(1879-1954\)](#), succeeded in publishing avant-garde texts, some with an open anti-war attitude, throughout the entire war period. Its selection reflected a broad literary and political spectrum and included works by communist [Oskar Kanehl \(1888-1929\)](#), and expressionist [Wilhelm Klemm \(1881-1968\)](#): "*Die Nacht arbeitet ununterbrochen. Schüsse jagen / Vorüber. Klatschen ein, oder seufzen davon, / Poltern fern wie Steingeröll. Vergähren. Ein Geschütz brüllt auf...*"<sup>10</sup> These journals were exceptions. *Die Weissen Blätter*, a highly acclaimed periodical that published Expressionist authors, avoided censorship by moving to [Switzerland](#) in 1915 and returned after the end of the war.

Since 1915, a number of writers and philosophers, among them [Iwan Goll \(1891-1950\)](#), [Ernst Bloch \(1885-1977\)](#), [Leonhard Frank \(1882-1961\)](#) and [Ferdinand Hardekopf \(1876-1954\)](#), migrated to Zurich and continued writing literature. After the war, Zurich Dada turned into a literary movement that had a strong presence in Berlin, and even a brief episode in New York, as well as connections to Paris and French Surrealist contemporaries.

## The "Great War" in Poetry and the Arts

From August 1914, newspapers were flooded with thousands of poems that lacked aesthetic quality, but were written with a belief in the expressive power of rhyme, meter and rhythm, characterized by unrestrained patriotism and nationalist language. [Julius Bab \(1880-1955\)](#)

later estimated that approximately 1.5 million poems were sent to newspapers that month.<sup>11</sup> Though much smaller in terms of numbers, a wave of pseudo-philosophical pamphlets with essays, sermons and lectures that justified the war and, in particular, philosophized on *Krieg und Kultur* [*War and Culture*] washed over the public audience making the term *The Great War* popular. The flood receded with the continuation of battles into winter and spring of the next year, accompanied by actual news from the front in news papers and their extra issues.

As a consequence of the common disillusionment, the poetry of 1914 was soon forgotten and the designation as *The Great War* withered away. Rather, it was an artist like [Max Beckmann \(1884-1950\)](#) who managed to capture the *Zeitgeist*, calling the war a “*nationales Unglück*” [“national disaster”] and at the same time a “*großartige Katastrophe*” [“grandiose catastrophe”]. [Otto Dix \(1891-1969\)](#), arguably the most innovative German artists of the time, shared this ambivalent attitude towards the war that, after an initial phase of enthusiasm, in the arts became the time of organized killing and destruction.

## Supported Literature

Literature that propagated the fighting spirit was supported by the authorities. Authors who were known to have a nationalist identification were invited to visit the [Western front](#) and chauffeured around. They published travelogues in the tradition of European travel writing and so created a particular genre, the “*Reisebericht von der Front*” [“Travel Account from the Front”], which combined documentary and fiction, essay, journalism and tourist narrative. Some of them dappled in humour, but at all times they remained seriously concerned with praising the great effort for a justified cause. [Sven Hedin \(1865-1952\)](#), for example, was at several occasions invited by the OHL (Supreme Command). At a special reception in 1915, [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) honoured Hedin, who had taken sides. His praise for the German war effort had been published to the satisfaction of army generals, the German emperor and the Berlin political establishment: “*Ein Volk in Waffen. Den deutschen Soldaten gewidmet.*” [“A People in Arms. Dedicated to the German Soldiers.”].<sup>12</sup> In generalizing terms, he described the war as the struggle of the German race against its adversaries, in particular the Russian menace. This travelogue was among a number of publications that created a literary framework and set the tone for a tradition that was carried over into the Weimar Republic, often associated with an appeal to [Social Darwinism](#).

## Writers of the Western Front

There were writers who continued their work during the war, some even in the trenches. [Gustav Sack \(1885-1916\)](#), Ernst Toller, [Alfred Lichtenstein \(1889-1914\)](#), [Walter Hasenclever \(1890-1940\)](#) and several others were heavily influenced by their war experience. “*Meine Kunst kriegt hier zu fressen*” [“My art gets feed here”], was Max Beckmann’s drastic statement about the impact which the horrors of trench fighting had on his artistic imagination. [August Stramm \(1874-1915\)](#) exclaiming the three words “*Grausig! Gewaltig! Groß!*” [“Horrid! Gigantic! Great!”] is indicative of a common feeling towards the war, and his poems are inbetween subjective war experience and linguistic experimentation. His poem “*Patrouille*” reads: “*Die Steine feinden/ Fenster grinst Verrat/ Äste würgen/ Berge Sträucher blättern raschlig/ gellen/Tod.*”<sup>13</sup> The post-war experimental literary scene was in some ways a

continuation of such literature from the trenches.

Switzerland and in particular Zurich was an ideal place for critical literati who wanted to take issue with the war but without battling against German censorship. [Hugo Ball \(1886-1927\)](#) and [Emmy Hennings \(1885-1948\)](#) founded the nightclub *Cabaret Voltaire* in February 1916, soon to be joined by the Romanian poet [Tristan Tzara \(1896-1963\)](#), and later [Hans Arp \(1886-1966\)](#), [Richard Huelsenbeck \(1892-1974\)](#) and others. They performed on stage and experimented with an anti-art program. Text recitals were interrupted by cries, whispers and sounds emitted from empty boxes serving as drums and from other instruments. At random paper and wooden objects appeared on stage and disappeared. The name "Dada," in its surreal meaninglessness was symptomatic. Tzara edited the periodical *Dada* and called for a distinction between Italian Futurism, which had a program, and Dada, which followed a program of "having no program."

### Ober Ost and Brussels

Writer [Arnold Zweig \(1887-1968\)](#) was serving as a "Schipper" ["sapper"] at the Western front, a time he later described in *Erziehung vor Verdun* ["Education before Verdun"] (1935) and other novels. In 1917, he was transferred to the [Ober Ost](#) news department in Kovno, where he met the artist [Hermann Struck \(1876-1944\)](#).<sup>14</sup> Together, they produced an illustrated book that might be seen as representative of discovering Eastern European Jewry as a direct result of the war,<sup>15</sup> and the closer connections between the German-Austrian and Eastern Jewry that emerged.<sup>16</sup> The Jewish renaissance of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by such exchanges with the hitherto unknown Eastern Jews. In his diary, [Franz Kafka \(1883-1924\)](#) refers to a theatre company that had moved to Prague and he had been in touch with. It had a deep and lasting effect on his thinking and writing. [Martin Buber's \(1878-1965\)](#) translations and editions of Hassidic texts also had considerable impact. More often than not, however, the war led to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about Eastern Europe as an underdeveloped region in need of modernization.

A small colony of writers, including Carl Sternheim, [Gottfried Benn \(1886-1956\)](#) and [Carl Einstein \(1885-1940\)](#)<sup>17</sup> emerged in Belgium. Gottfried Benn wrote the *Rönne* novellas in [Brussels](#) and remarked:

*In Krieg und Frieden, in der Front und in der Etappe, als Offizier wie als Arzt...im Triumph und im Verfall verließ mich die Trance nie, dass es diese Wirklichkeit nicht gäbe...und eine Urschicht stieg herauf, berauscht, an Bildern reich und panisch.* <sup>18</sup>

In stark contrast to the program of avant-garde art that these writers were invested in, [Rudolf-Alexander Schröder \(1878-1962\)](#), [Wilhelm Hausenstein \(1882-1957\)](#) and others placed their emphasis on the German literary tradition and became engaged in the cultural politics in [occupied Belgium](#). With support from Berlin, [Anton Kippenberg \(1874-1950\)](#) even brought out a *Flemish Series* with his Insel Verlag.

Blurring the lines between experience and imagination was not merely Benn's idiosyncratic form of writing, but marked the beginning of a literary movement characterized by the experimentation with language and reality that would soon transcend all categories of experience available thus far. In 1917, [Alfred Döblin \(1878-1957\)](#) began writing his novel *Wallenstein* (1920) in Alsace, with battles taking place all around him. His descriptions of warfare skilfully explore his term *Tatsachenphantasie* ["Fact-fantasy"] by merging two wars, memories of the Thirty-Years-War and his own war experiences. Such a fusion is indicative of the image of World War I as created by creative literary minds. It constructs war as destructive, chaotic and out of control, producing war profiteers, millions of victims and cruelties beyond anyone's imagination, modelled on the war that had devastated central Europe 300 years earlier. Twenty years later, [Bertolt Brecht \(1898-1956\)](#) continued this line of thought from the First to the Second World War in his play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* ["Mother Courage and Her Children"] (1938/39).

## After the War

### Authenticity and the Crisis of Representation

The war triggered a crisis of [memory](#) and representation. As a result of the combination of military technology and the new mass media, traditional ways of approaching war in terms of psychological and strategic causality had lost its compelling force. The chaos of the battlefield and subjective experiences of war destabilized any authority that literature used to have. After 1919, the issue of what constituted the "true war image" led to heated debates. There was uncertainty as to who was entitled to speak for the war generation, and what the appropriate means of representing the war's inclemency and roughness would be. Authenticity had been an issue in cultural discourse from the turn of the century. The war intensified the conflict between an essentialist definition of authenticity, versus an understanding of authenticity as a cultural construct dependent on time and perspective. Authors as different as Benn, Döblin, [Hermann Broch \(1886-1951\)](#), Musil or the early Brecht were deeply concerned about a loss of authenticity. They considered authenticity to be in crisis, since literature was no longer capable of mediating reality. The established psychological categories of narration ceased to be effective in expressing the traumatic experiences of the new technologically advanced modern warfare and its cruelty. Authors

engaged in a search for reality, as much as the appropriate means to make it present in literature. Calls for radical change in the scope of creative expression did not always coincide with political positions. Yet, there was an affinity of political conservatism and nationalism with conventional forms of narrative and, on the other hand, artistic experimentation and fragmentation of language and form with anti-war attitudes. Among the notable exceptions were Gottfried Benn's revolution of the poetic language with no objection to war and violence, and the pacifist Arnold Zweig's conservative narrative.

One strong current of the opposition was realism as propagated by a traditionalist aesthetics with little to no sense of the complexity of the modern world. A number of books of amateur [photography](#) were published, all of which claimed to present a realist view of the war. However, the images that they presented differed so greatly that it was unlikely they all presented an authentic image of the same war, just that there were no criteria that would have made it possible to distinguish between true and false. The obvious problem with visual representation repeated itself with war novels. Is description or dissolution of linguistic structures the appropriate means of representing the trauma of the war? While the majority of readers regarded shocking images of inhumane conditions as evidence of authenticity, others considered it literature's job to provide the means for identification and a re-enactment of the trench warfare by taking the reader along for a nightmarish but entertaining ride.

Was the dehumanized world that Georg Zweig's character, the sapper Bertin, inhabited a more authentic representation of the war than Ernst Jünger's storm trooper lieutenant's inner experiences? It was the difference in expectations that amplified the tensions around more or less authentic ways of (self-) expression.

[Edlef Köppen's \(1893-1939\)](#) underrated novel *Heeresbericht* [Army Report] (1930) is an example of montage. In it, he combines original documents such as newspaper clippings, quotes from public speeches by the Kaiser and high officers, advertisements, diary entries, and letters with the fictional biography of a volunteer called Reisiger. [Karl Kraus's \(1874-1936\)](#) epic text *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* [The Last Days of Mankind] from 1922 should also be mentioned in this context; in these satirical sketches, often described by Kraus as a "tragedy," God makes the following absurd statement about the war: "*Ich habe es nicht gewollt.*" ["I did not want for this to happen."]

Jünger's *Arbeiter* is exemplary of a militant modernism that is not concerned with realism, but with the transformation of the human body in a construction of flesh and steel, visualized in the soldier's head that fuses the human skull and the steel helmet into an inseparable unit. This "New Man" is portrayed in a topography of steel and concrete, closely meshed [barbed wire](#) fence (*Drahtverhau*) and public spaces of imagined battle. Images of corpses rotting in

barbed wire or gas masks hiding the human face ascribe a certain authenticity to such images of modern warfare (Otto Dix). In post-war art, this “New Man” was also ironized. In a Dresden street, an installation reconstructed a *Drahtverhau* with the effigy of a dead soldier (1928); the *Drahtverhau* had become a metaphor for the militant anti-war activists’ and artists’ image of this war.<sup>19</sup>

## War Novels after 1927

Ten years after the end of the war, a number of novels written by former combatants appeared, among them Arnold Zweig’s *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa* (1927); Ernst Glaeser’s (1902-1963) *Jahrgang 1902* (1928); [Ludwig Renn’s \(1889-1979\) \*Krieg\*](#) (1928), [Theodor Plievier’s \(1892-1955\) \*Der Kaiser ging, die Generäle blieben\*](#) (1932), and the most successful one by far, [Erich Maria Remarque’s \(1898-1970\), \*Im Westen nichts Neues\*](#) (1928/29). The novels claimed that they gave an authentic account of the front. The problem of authenticity becomes complicated, however, when we consider for example Ludwig Renn, the author of *Krieg*.<sup>20</sup> Born Arnold Friedrich Vieth von Golßenau, he was a high ranking officer with connections to the court of Saxony and had friends in high places on the battlefield, too. In the novel, he adopts the perspective of a private and narrates the story of a simple front soldier. He invented the perspective of a know-nothing soldier in order to produce an authentic image that seemed plausible only through the distance of a perspective from below. Strategic ignorance was supposed to create an unsoldierly view of the the war “as it really was,” told from the point of view of a private that was faked.

Biographical realism was the credo of affirmative novels. Examples were [Franz Schauwecker’s \(1890-1964\) \*Aufbruch der Nation\*](#) (1930), [Hans Zöberlein’s \(1895-1964\) \*Der Glaube an Deutschland. Ein Kriegserleben von Verdun bis zum Umsturz\*](#) (1931), [Edwin Erich Dwinger’s \(1898-1981\) \*Die Armee hinter Stacheldraht. Das Sibirische Tagebuch\*](#). (1929), [Werner Beumelburg’s \(1899-1963\) \*Sperrfeuer um Deutschland\*](#) (1929), and [Thor Goote’s \(1899-1940\) \*Wir fahren den Tod\*](#) (1930). A violent campaign against Erich Maria Remarque’s and [Lewis Milestone’s \(1895-1980\) film \*Im Westen nichts Neues\*](#) was driven by this anti-intellectual aesthetic and political position. [Josef Magnus Wehner \(1891-1973\)](#) made clear that his novel *Sieben vor Verdun* (1930) was conceived as an anti-Remarquean literary affront.

## Experiment, Dada

The flipside of the negativity inspired by the loss of authenticity and confidence was the excitement and adventure of a cultural discourse of experimentation. Experimental literature fought against an aestheticization of the war, and a determination of the mind through

psychological structures. Such artificial constructions of “authenticity” resulted in noticeable distance of subjects and war that was no longer *theirs*. The end of experience and meaning experienced as stable and consistent identity led to the beginnings of montage. Surrealism and Dada created their own language and genuine forms of writing about the war. They rejected any involvement in or (indirect) responsibility for the war. By destroying grammar and semantic and patterns of narration, they denied language its function as the most basic means for submission, for which it had so openly been (mis-)used in preparing men for the carnage of the long years of war.

[Johannes R. Becher's \(1891-1958\)](#) experimental novel *Levisite* was an exception in terms of genre, as the novel was usually considered the literary form of realist representation. His work, however, was closer to [Louis-Ferdinand Céline's \(1894-1961\)](#) war prose or Apollinaire's *Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes* (1917) as well as his poems and short prose. [Kurt Schwitters \(1887-1948\)](#) created *Lautgedichte* [“Sound Poems”]. His famous “Ursonate” (written in 1923, recorded in 1932) and imitations of the roaring sounds of a machine gun were attempts to create a world of words and sounds as anti-representation that would be a linguistic remedy against warmongering.<sup>21</sup> A generation later, Ernst Jandel wrote a poem without vowels, “*Schtzngrmm schtzgrmm*” (1957) which avoids the word “*Schützengraben*” [“Trench”] but combines the hard consonants of the word in all possible combinations of onomatopoesis.

## Conclusion: The End of War Literature

For those who believed in the idea of the nation, war was the ultimate apotheosis. The publication of [Thomas Mann's \(1875-1955\)](#) *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918) was a major event in national discourse. This extensive essay reflected the spirit of the immediate pre-war years, as much as that of the war itself. It contrasted culture and civilization, the political, in particular representational democracy, and a specifically German conception of freedom, die *deutsche Freiheit* [“German Liberty”] were juxtaposed to the ideas of the French Revolution of 1789 (Plenge, Kjellén and others). From this perspective, Germany had not only the right but the obligation to fight a war for the maintenance of European diversity. Ten years later, Mann admitted his mistake of having sympathized with a misguided notion of nationalism. The error was aggravated when his ideas were high-jacked by supporters of right wing nationalism and National Socialism.

War gained significant importance as a major aspect of the absurd misrepresentation of [Charles Darwin \(1809-1882\)](#) through [Social Darwinism](#) as the survival-of-the-fittest pseudo-theory. National Socialism combined an over-simplifying interpretation of evolution with a nationalist view of World War I under the general slogan “*Im Felde unbesiegt*” [“Undefeated in battle”]. With unhindered National-Socialist power over the public discourse after 1933,

German war literature was appropriated and soon disconnected from European discourse. War literature was a prime target in the Nazis' "*Wider den undeutschen Geist*"-actions ["Against the non-German spirit"] that culminated in the book burning on 10 May 1933. Burned books included works about the war by Erich Maria Remarque, Ernst Glaeser, [Adrienne Thomas \(1897-1980\)](#), [Kurt Tucholsky \(1890-1935\)](#), [Rudolf Frank \(1886-1979\)](#), Ludwig Renn and [Henri Barbusse \(1873-1935\)](#). The Nazis' rallying cry was "*Gegen literarischen Verrat am Soldaten des Weltkriegs, für Erziehung des Volkes im Geist der Wehrhaftigkeit!*" ["Against the literary betrayal of the soldiers of World War I, for the people's education in the spirit of military service"]. Militant pro-war education was supported by aggressive war literature. A new edition of Zöberlein's *Der Glaube an Deutschland* [*Faith in Germany*] was now published with a foreword by [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#). The vocabulary of confidence was now usurped by Nazi war literature. The union of war literature and contemporary politics spelt the end of the genre. War literature had no comeback after 1945 either.

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## Notes

1. Zweig, Stefan: *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*, Stockholm 1944. ↑
2. Edward Grey about the events of 3 August 1914: "A friend came to see me...It was getting dusk, and the lamps were being lit in the space below on which we were looking. My friend recalls that I remarked on this with the words, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our life-time.'" – Grey, Edward: *Twenty-Five Years 1892-1916*, volume 2, New York 1925, p. 20. ↑
3. Lukacs, Georg: *Die Theorie des Romans*, Munich 2009. ↑
4. Falk, Walter: *Der kollektive Traum vom Krieg. Epochale Strukturen in der deutschen Literatur zwischen Naturalismus und Expressionismus*, Heidelberg 1977. ↑
5. "Klingkling, bumbum und tschingdada, zieht im Triumph der Perserschah? ...Der Hauptmann naht mit stolzem Sinn, die Schuppenketten unterm Kinn, die Schärpe schnürt den schlanken Leib, beim Zeus! das ist kein Zeitvertreib, und dann die Herren Leutnants. Zwei Leutnants, rosenrot und braun, die Fahne schützen sie als Zaun,..." ["Klingkling, bumbum and tschingdada, Does the Persian Shah advance triumphantly? ...The General approaches proudly, Brass scales under his chin, The sash lace sin the slim body, By Zeus! This is no pastime, And then the Mister Lieutenants. Two lieutenants, rose-red and brown, Protecting the banner as a fence,..."] ↑
6. "He is risen up who was so long asleep...Now upon the mountains he begins to dance and his cry sounds: On them, warriors! Advance! And the chain that swings around him

as he rolls his black head roars and rattles with its thousand skulls. In the night he hunts the fire, the red hound, in the howl of savage mouths across the land." From Heym, Georg / Hasler, Antony (trans.): Poems, London 2004, p. 143. ↑

7. Lamszus, Wilhelm: Das Menschenschlachthaus – Bilder vom kommenden Krieg, Hamburg 1912, p. 19. ↑
8. "We have only one hate, we love as one, we hate as one, we all have only one enemy..." From: Murdoch, Brian: Fighting Songs and Warring Words. Popular Lyrics of Two World Wars, London 1990, p. 34. ↑
9. Ludwig Fulda later published nationalist pamphlets and Deutsche Kultur und Ausländerei. Zwischen Krieg und Frieden, volume 31, Leipzig 1916, pp. 1-32; Kellermann, Hermann: Der Krieg der Geister, Berlin 1915. ↑
10. The night is working, incessantly. Shots zoom/Past. Penetrate or sigh away,/Rumble far away like rock rubble. Fermenting. A cannon screams..." from Klemm, Wilhelm: "Stellung", in: Die Aktion , 27 February 1915, pp. 109; Klemm, Wilhelm: Gloria! Kriegsgedichte aus dem Feld, Munich 1915, p. 53. ↑
11. Bab, Julius: Die deutsche Kriegsliteratur, 1914-1918: eine kritische Bibliographie, Stettin 1920, p. 55. ↑
12. Hedin's reputation as a scientist was irreparably damaged among the nations of the Entente and he lost his numerous memberships in learned societies and geographical associations as well as any support for his future expeditions. ↑
13. Reconnaissance Patrol  
 "The stones inimic  
 Window grins betray  
 Branches choking  
 Screening bushes leafing rustly  
 Yelling  
 Death."  
 From: Grimm, Reinhold / Hunt, Irmgard (eds.): German 20th Century Poetry, New York 2001, p. 19, poem translated by Reinhold Grimm. ↑
14. Ober Ost was short for "Oberbefehlshaber der gesamten Deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten" ["Supreme Commander of All German Forces in the East"]. Ober Ost, created in 1914, was the term for the high command of the occupied territories east of the German border. At times it controlled around 109,000 square kilometers and was a huge military organization with Paul von Hindenburg as its first commander. ↑
15. Zweig, Arnold/Struck, Hermann: Das ostjüdische Antlitz, 1923; Gronemann, Sammy: Hawdloh und Zapfenstreich. Erinnerungen an die ostjüdische Etappe 1916-1918. 1924. ↑
16. Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten: Kriegsbriege gefallener deutscher Juden, Berlin

1935. ↑

17. Roland, Hubert: Die deutsche literarische Kriegskolonie in Belgien 1914-1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Literaturbeziehungen 1900-1920, Bern 1999. ↑
18. "In war and peace, as well as behind the front lines, as officer and as doctor... triumphant as well as in decay, the trance that this reality might not actually exist never left me...and primordial notions welled up in me, inebriated, rich in images and in panic." From Benn, Gottfried: "Lebensweg eines Intellektualisten," in: Hillebrand, Bruno: Gottfried Benn. Gesammelte Werke, Frankfurt 1998, p. 314. ↑
19. Der Drahtverhau was one of the few examples of Trench Newspapers which was published regularly until the end of the war. See Schubert, Dietrich: Künstler im Trommelfeuer des Krieges 1914-18, Heidelberg 2013, pp. 105 and 517; Lipp, Anne: Meinungslenkung im Krieg. Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918, Göttingen 2003, pp. 35-38. ↑
20. Renn, Ludwig: Krieg, Frankfurt 1928. ↑
21. Rr rr rr rr rr rrumm!!!!!!!!!!!!  
Rrumpff tillff toooo? Ziiuu ennze ziiuu nnzkrrmüü  
ziiuu ennze ziiuu rinnzkrrmüüüü!  
Rakete bee bee ↑
22. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the editorial office. ↑

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