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All Quiet on the Western Front (novel)

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The anti-war novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) by Erich Maria Remarque (first published in 1928) and the movie directed by Lewis Milestone (USA 1930) are internationally acclaimed representations of World War I's Western Front. Both novel and film greatly influenced the way that World War I has been commemorated internationally.

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1. The novel Im Westen nichts Neues

1.1. Content

The novel by [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898–1970\)](#) describes the fate, experiences, and suffering of a group of young students who volunteered for the war; it traces these soldiers' experiences on the [Western Front](#), in the hospital, and on the home front. Through the first-person narration by Paul

Bäumer, World War I is depicted as an industrialized war replete with senseless fighting and killing; the individual soldier is disillusioned and only interested in survival. When Bäumer, the last surviving member of the group, is killed in October 1918 the High Command report only states: “All quiet on the western front”. Although the novel is a description of life in the trenches, the book focuses on the post-war situation by reporting about a “generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war”.^[1] *Im Westen nichts Neues* poses the timeless question about the consequences of war for the participating soldiers and for the society to which they return.

1.2. Publication and reception in Germany

As early as 1917 Erich Maria Remarque began to write a novel about the war, relying on his six-week front experience at the [Somme](#) and in Flanders. He finished the novel in 1927 and in the summer of 1928 the democratic Ullstein Verlag (Ullstein Publishing House) accepted it for publication. The serialization in the Berlin *Vossische Zeitung* started in November 1928, and the book version was published in January 1929. Accompanied by a modern marketing campaign, by publishing *Im Westen nichts Neues* Ullstein aimed to establish an anti-war image of disillusionment about the First World War. The publishing house hoped to regain control over the interpretation of the war from the nationalist and National-Socialists, whose pro-war and revanchist image of the war prevailed at the time. Furthermore, Ullstein attempted to install *Im Westen nichts Neues* as the virtual German “Monument of the Unknown Soldier,” as indicated on the book’s cover: “Remarque’s book is the memorial of our unknown soldier. Written by all the dead.” The serialization quickly became an enormous success, and the book edition sold 1 million copies within a year. In an attempt to disavow the book’s and the author’s reputation, both the political right and the political left began a public discussion about the book and questioned the authenticity of Remarque’s report. This discussion developed into one of the main controversies in the Weimar Republic about the representation and interpretation of World War I. The nationalists and National Socialists successfully published a huge number of front reports that contradicted Remarque’s disillusioned descriptions and thus regained control over the contents of the discussion.

1.3. International reception

Im Westen nichts Neues was also an international success. In 1929 more than thirty translations into all major languages were published, and in the U.S. alone the text was serialized in more than eighty newspapers. Due to its purported anti-war stance, *Im Westen nichts Neues* provoked controversial debates about the interpretation of the First World War and about war in general everywhere it was published. Nevertheless, today some critics doubt the anti-war statement of the text by regarding *Im Westen nichts Neues* as a neutral description of the First World War, leaving its interpretation to the reader. But with 30–40 million copies sold world-wide in more than fifty languages, *Im Westen nichts Neues* stands today as a symbol of the anti-war movement and remains a blueprint for representing modern war in [literature](#).

2. The Movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*

2.1. Production

Due to the enormous international success of the novel, Universal Pictures began to produce the film *of All Quiet on the Western Front* as early as fall 1929. Based on the screenplay by [Maxwell Anderson \(1888–1959\)](#), [George Abbott \(1887–1995\)](#) and [Del Andrews \(1894–1942\)](#)- born Udell Endrows,- director [Lewis Milestone \(1895–1980\)](#) shot the movie at Universal Studios, in Los Angeles and on Irvine Ranch in Southern California. Several technical innovations, such as a camera crane and battle sounds, made the movie the most realistic representation of trench warfare seen on screen to date. The movie premiered on 23 April 1930 and won the 1930 Academy Award for best movie and best direction.

2.2. Reception in Germany

Subsequent to the controversial discussion of the novel *Im Westen nichts Neues*, German nationalists and National Socialists protested the movie before the German premiere in December 1930. The National Socialists organized violent protests against the movie in front of the premiere theater in Berlin. Although it had passed German [censorship](#) in early December 1930 after cuts were made, the movie was banned on 11 December 1930 by the official censorship institution “*Filmoberprüfstelle*”, because it was said to “affect the reputation of the German soldier.”^[2] The National Socialists hailed this ban as their first victory over the democratic institutions of Weimar Germany and as the first step toward gaining power. Democratic and pacifist parties of Weimar Germany who had protested the ban and the fascist protests viewed the ban as the first loss of Weimar democratic principles.

2.3. International reception

Everywhere that the movie *All Quiet on the Western Front* was screened it became subject to cuts and bans and sparked controversies about the interpretation of war and the military system. Director Lewis Milestone’s original version of 155 minutes was cut shorter and shorter to versions of eighty minutes. These cuts tried to reduce the [pacifist](#) statement of the movie, the harsh realism of the battle sequences, and the discussions between the soldiers about the participating in the war. Today, Milestone’s original version is lost because of the continuous censorship and cuts. Attempts to restore the movie have provided only 128 minutes of the original version. Despite this continuous history of censorship and bans, *All Quiet on the Western Front* had an enormous influence on the visual representation of the First World War in particular and the image of modern [warfare](#) in general. Milestone’s battle sequences served as blueprints for realistic representation of fighting in the trenches and were sometimes included in documentaries as authentic World War I footage. Moreover, the movie shaped the representation of [modern war](#) on the screen. For many directors of subsequent war movies, including [Stanley Kubrick \(1928-1999\)](#), Steven Spielberg, Peter Weir and Terrence Malick, the striking contrast between military training and fighting on the frontlines, the

moving, disillusioning fate of a group of young soldiers as the main plot, and the structure of the battlefield served as guidelines for their own movies.

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Notes

1. ↑ Remarque, Erich Maria: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Translated from the German by A.W.Wheen. Boston, 1929, p. 3.
2. ↑ Filmoberprüfstelle Berlin, Urteil Nr. 1254, 11 December 1930, in: Erich Maria Remarque Jahrbuch/Yearbook 10 (2000), p. 110.

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