

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ERICH MARIA REMARQUE (1898-1970)

On May 10, 1933, Berlin students ritually burned the books of 160 authors whose works were unacceptable to the Nazis. Foremost among them was *All Quiet on the Western Front* (AQWF), although its author was neither Jew nor communist. The film AQWF was based on Remarque's novel and is essentially an account of the author's wartime experiences.

Erich Paul Remark (later Erich Maria Remarque – a publisher's return to his family's French origins) was born in Osnabrueck in Lower Saxony on June 22, 1898 to a staunchly Catholic family of modest means. He later became a humanist in philosophy after his experiences in World War I. Financial problems led to a series of local moves in Remark's youth and likely contributed to the sense of rootlessness found in his later life and novels. As a youth he liked to read, gave piano lessons, collected butterflies, aquarium fish, and stamps and developed an interest in painting. Unlike the hero of his novel, Remark did not enlist in 1914. He was drafted into the German Army at 18 in November 1916. The unwilling draftees of these years went to the front without illusions for they had some knowledge of the horrors that awaited them there. By June 1917 he was in France in time for the Third Ypres battle (Passchendaele) in the Houthulst Forest area in July (a mile down the line from Adolf Hitler!). Wounded by artillery shrapnel, he was evacuated to Germany to a hospital for fifteen months and, like many of his contemporaries during the latter years of the war, tried to remain in hospital as long as possible. Reassigned to a unit on October 31, 1918, he was spared further combat before the Armistice ended the fighting on November 11.

A number of characters and events in the novel/film are based on Remark's adolescent and wartime experiences. For example:

- - His closest school friend Kristen Kranzbuehler appears as Kemmerich in *AQWF*. Others included friend Theo Troske (Kat in *AQWF*) who was killed as depicted in the film. Recall that the German Army (like the British) was territorially based to encourage term spirit and committed loyalty among troops from a shared locality.
- - He reincarnated a sadistic French teacher as the sanctimonious schoolmaster Kantorek.
- - His trench maintenance/barbed wire duties are shown in the film.
- - The tremendous Allied artillery barrage on the Ypres salient is depicted in the scene of German troops in the underground bunker.
- - The encounter with the French women is depicted during a lull in the action.

After the war, Remark was a sports writer, race car driver and teacher among other occupations. By the time he wrote *AQWF*, over 200 war related titles with respectable sales had already appeared in Germany and the literary market seemed satiated. Read by an editor at the Ullstein publishing firm almost by accident, the novel was serialized in Vossische Zeitung in Berlin before publication on January 31, 1929. The first print run sold out the first day and, by the end of 1929, nearly 1,000,000 copies had been sold in Germany alone, with an additional 300,000 each in Britain and France and 125,00 in the U.S. It was translated into 28 languages. Although condemned by the Nazis for its anti-war overtones, the novel was less about the war than on the problems of a generation unable to integrate into

post-war society. Its message is one of shattered illusions. Remark developed this theme more fully in *The Road Back*, his sequel to *AQWF*, published in 1930.

Remark bought a house in Switzerland with the profits and lived there off and on for the rest of his life. He spent a good deal of time in the U.S. after the late 1930s in New York and Hollywood ,where he was linked to a number of famous movie stars, including Greta Garbo, Maureen O’Sullivan, Delores del Rio, Marlene Dietrich and Luise Rainer before marrying Paulette Goddard and retiring to Switzerland.

His younger sister Elfriede was executed by the Nazis in 1943 for “defeatist” sympathies and Remark himself was stripped of German citizenship in 1938. He became an American citizen in 1947. Remark died in Switzerland on September 25, 1970.