

Looking Back at the Lost Generation: Representing Veterans of the First World War in German Literature and Culture during the Weimar Republic & Now

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Inspired by my seminar on the “Literature and Culture of the Great War and the Weimar Republic” (GER 3390) with Professor Jill Smith, I aimed to investigate how men of the “lost generation,” those who fought in and survived the First World War, are depicted in the literature and visual works (film, graphic fiction, television) of two separate time periods: the period between the First World War and the takeover of the National Socialist or Nazi regime (1918-1933) and the present day (2008-present). In regard to the first period, which is usually known as the Weimar Republic, I investigated two key questions: First, what sorts of physical and psychological wounds did the veterans of WWI have, and which of these were seen as new? For instance, how did what came to be known as “shell shock” manifest itself physically and mentally in veterans? Second, how were literature and art used as a way to process the trauma of war? What works were produced by veterans, and how do those differ from works written *about* them by someone who did not experience the war firsthand? While a significant body of scholarship on this topic during the Weimar era does exist and was an essential part of my project, little to no scholarly attention has yet been given to the present moment. As the centenary of the First World War approached, I argue, writers, artists, directors, and producers displayed renewed interest in the war and its effects on those who fought in it. This led on the one hand to visual adaptations of Weimar-era classics, such as Peter Eickmeyer and Gaby von Borstel’s 2014 graphic novel rendition of Eric Maria Remarque’s internationally bestselling novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929) and on the other hand to new, large-scale productions like the 16-episode television drama *Babylon Berlin*, written and directed by three of Germany’s most prominent filmmakers, Achim von Börries, Henk Handloegten, and Tom Tykwer, and released on Netflix in 2018. *Babylon Berlin* is of particular interest to me because its protagonist, the police detective Gereon Rath, is a WWI veteran who suffers from shell shock.

My own project on representations of WWI veterans fit well with a book-length project on Weimar Berlin in contemporary culture currently being developed and written by Professor Smith. I therefore spent a large part of my summer research aiding her in two key areas of her own research: 1) a comprehensive review of how the culture of Weimar Berlin has been written about in 5 of the highest-circulation newspapers and magazines in Germany (*Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *der Tagesspiegel*, and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*) between 2007 and today; and 2) the reading and cultural diagramming of 5 separate crime novels by Volker Kutscher. Kutscher’s crime novels served as the literary inspiration for the TV series *Babylon Berlin* and contain rich cultural and historical references to the Weimar period. In fact, they are set in Berlin between the years 1929 and 1936, and they feature the protagonist Gereon Rath. Unlike in the television series, however, the Commisar Rath of Kutscher’s novels is not a veteran of the First World War. However, veterans figure prominently in some of the later novels such as in *Märzgefallene*, in which veterans are shown either struggling with homelessness or befriending members of the Nazi party, such as Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, for their own benefit.

This summer I experienced firsthand the amount of effort required to conduct research, but also the possibilities that it entails. With the help of research librarian Barbara Levergood, for example, I learned how to manage journal databases, allowing me to more easily find articles that were useful for Professor Smith and for myself. With the help of Professor Fernando Nascimento from the program in Digital and Computational Studies, I found, reviewed, and sorted nearly 1,000 articles for Professor Smith. I am thankful for having had the opportunity to conduct this research.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Jill Smith

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