

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

Jairo Izaguirre, Class of 2022

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

Faculty Mentor: Professor Jill Smith

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References:

Babylon Berlin: Seasons 1 & 2