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# SCHRIFTEN DES ZUM SCHEITERN VERURTEILT: FIRST WORLD WAR GERMAN POETRY

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In end-July 2014, international communities all around the world commemorated the passage of a century from the declaration of the First World War/ Great War (1914-18), which, in its duration of four years, three months, and a week, led to the annihilation of 10.7 million military personnel of both the Triple Entente/Allied countries (principally the British Empire, Russia, France, U.S.A., and Italy among others) and Triple Alliance/Central Powers (the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria), and of 2.4 million civilians, while approximately 23.6 million warriors were wounded in action[1]. In course of such commemorations, the war-litterateurs have also been fondly remembered for their truthful depiction of the realties of belligerence. However, most of the memorisings and commemorative-writings and publications have acquired so much of anti-German character that Simon Jenkins of the London-based *The Guardian* has been forced to 'apologise' to Germany 'for this sickening avalanche of First World War worship'[2]. Taking in view of this 'sickening' and 'prejudiced' phenomenon, the present author proposes to use this platform of the *H.E.R.S.*-organised *International Conference* on *Fourth World Literature and Culture* to recall the writings and patriotism of the German soldiers who produced

[1] "First World War Casualties". *Wikipedia*. 12 July 2014. Accessed on 29 July 2014 <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties*>. Web.

[2] Jenkins, Simon. "Germany, I apologise for this sickening avalanche of First World War worship". *The Guardian* 30 January 2014. Accessed on 30 July 2014. <*http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/first-world-war-worship-sickening-avalanche*>. Web.

quality literature during the atrocious days of the Great War but who have been marginalised symbolically to the *fourth-world writers*' status.

While rereading German writings of the First World War, one must remember that for the average 21st-century-A.D.-readers, the term 'war-writings' has come to usually indicate 'writings of the First World War' written in English by solider-poets fighting for the *Triple Entente* nations against the *Central Powers*. In his *German First World War Writing*, Nicholas Marsh has tried to show how the victorious Allies have, over the years, gradually tried to culturally banish pro-Great War German publications. In fact, impressions created from writings by such Great War-English litterateurs as Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), or, later, the German writer Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) would suggest that soldiers – mostly of the Allied countries – experienced indescribable hardships in the Great War fronts and trenches throughout the entire period of belligerence, and constantly encountered life-threatening circumstances, which nevertheless, did not lessen their patriotic fervour, while the German soldiers were forced into war against the British or French soldiers.

In contrast, the real socio-literary situations were vastly different. As Robin Higham writes in his 'Introduction' to *Researching the First World War*, a significant number of Euro-American accounts of the first global confrontation are "misleading in that they give the impression [...] that the memoirist, the participants, the heroes, spent all their time in the front lines in dreadful conditions, a myth perpetuated by the illustrations chosen or mislabelled", whereas in reality combatants would have to spend an average of ninety days on the frontline (xiii). Second, as both Baird (1-3) and Shirer (792) write, the ordinary Germans as wilfully and joyously participated in the Great War as did the English and the French soldiers. An early photograph from the time of the initial Great War-mobilisations preserved in the *Imperial War Museum* displays jubilant Germans heading towards the front by train whose compartments have been marked with optimistic messages about winning the confrontation quickly (Sherry 193). And, finally, Germany produced as many quality war-poets as did England and France. In their literary excellence, efficiencies of depictions, and loyalties, German combatant-litterateurs like Adolf Petrenz (1873-1915), August Stramm (1874-1915), Albert Michel (1877-1915), Wilhelm Klemm (1881-1968), Ernst Stadler (1883-1914), Gottfried Benn (1886-1956), Friedrich Wolf (1888-1953), Alfred Lichtenstein (1889-1914), Gerrit Engleke (1890-1918), Kurd Adler (1892-1916), Anton Schnack (1892-1973), Franz Janowitz (1892-1917), Ernst Toller (1893-1939), and Wilhelm Runge (1894-1918), could easily match – or even out-qualify the British, French, or American soldier-poets of the First World War.

The present paper proposes to offer a very brief overview of poetry written by the German soldiers during the First World War – a genre which can be truly identified as a collection of 'Schriften des zum Scheitern verurteilt' – though Ann Linder finds a commonness in both the English and German war publications in their poignant portrayal of perforated battlescapes (351). Hamburger has refused to give importance to the limited number of German poems available in English translation because, as he writes, 'censorship and repression had permitted no honest *war poetry* to be published on the German side' throughout the World Wars (154). This contradicts Trudi Tate's claim that by reading the British writings of the First World War, readers could *actually* learn something about "what was really happening" (McLoughlin 160). Such writings were *actually* bent on giving the 'fourth-world-writings'-status to the German poems, other than vilifying the enemy-writers as 'naturally and instinctively evil', 'greedy', and 'demonic'.

Nevertheless, as the First World War was declared, the first German writing to have gained international attention was "Haßgesang gegen England" (in English: 'Hate-song against England'), written by Ernst Lissauer (1882-1937) (who also coined the popular war-time phrase 'Gott strafe England'): 'Was schiert uns Russe und Franzos'? / Schuß wider Schuß und Stoß um Stoß! / Wir lieben sie nicht, / Wir hassen sie nicht, / Wir schützen Weichsel und Wasgaupass, – / Wir haben nur einen einzigen Haß, / Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, / Wir haben nur einen einzigen Feind: / Denn ihr alle wißt, denn ihr alle wißt, / Er sitzt geduckt hinter der grauen Flut, / Voll Neid, voll Wut, voll Schläue, voll List, / Durch Wasser getrennt, die sind dicker als Blut. / Wir wollen treten in ein Gericht, / Einen Schwur zu schwören, Gesicht in Gesicht, / Einen Schwur von Erz, den verbläst kein Wind, / Einen Schwur für / Kind und für Kindeskind, / Vernehmt das Wort, sagt nach das Wort, / Es wälzt sich durch ganz Deutschland fort: / Wir wollen nicht lassen von unserem Haß, / Wir haben alle nur einen Haß, / Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, / Wir alle haben nur einen Feind: 'England'!'

Lissauer's writing was followed by several others by such authors as Carl Herman Busse (1872-1918) (published *German War-song*, 1915), Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), who had already released *Beautiful Wide World* in 1913, Hanns Heinz Ewers (1871-1943), Walter Flex (1887-1917) – the composer of "Wild Geese Noise through the Night" – and Walter Hasenclever (1890-1940), publisher of *Towns, Nights, and People* (1910), all of whom had volunteered for *Deutsch Militärdienst* during the Great War. However, 'German war-poetry' as a genre took a considerable amount of years to mature.

However, it requires mention that as soon as the war assumed global status, a number of German writers had begun to register their nationalistic fervour and support for the 'fatherland': 'das Vaterland'. The proletarian poet, Heinrich Lersch (1889-1936), whose war-time oeuvre would later include *Reflection of Life* (1914), *Brothers* (1915), *Poems in War* (1916), *War Songs* (1917), *Germany!: Songs of People and Fatherland* (1918), and *Shoulder to Shoulder: Poems of War and Labour* (1918), wrote in his (undated) "Poems of the Battle-period": 'Let me go, Mother, let me go!/ It is no use crying anymore, / Because we are leaving to protect the Fatherland!/ Let me go, Mother, let me go, / I want to take your last goodbye with a kiss. / Germany must live, even if we must die!' It would be erroneous to presume that the horrendous experiences of the Kaiser's combatants on battlefield, and circumstances leading to the death of approximately 2 million soldiers, had filled in writers with disillusionment. The last poem by Guido von Gillhaussen (1870-1918) yet reveals a steadfast allegiance: 'I know why I am suffering, / And have shed my blood, / I fought in the German Army/ For German sacredness, / As a shield-bearer for German honour/ For the glory of the German future'. For Walter Flex (1887-1917), the writer of *The Wanderer between Two Worlds* (1918), a chance "to serve the Fatherland [during the Great War] presented the young soldier with the rare opportunity to receive the elements in a feast of national communion" (Baird 13), and even after burying his friend, Ernst Wursche – killed in action in France in May 1917 – he could write: 'The sword, so often gazed at with joy/ Glows silently in its own brightness. / It covers the breast of the sun youth…/ The golden lance of flowers'. Mark Ferro has opined that England clashed with Germany in 1914 predominantly because the former country's nationalistic, imperialistic, and technological prides were challenged by the latter, a comparatively new nation (22). Courageous and patriotic writers like von Gillhaussen and Flex were not ready to take the English dismissive attitude and insolence lying down.

Though, after the Second World War, history has been rewritten by the Allies, with several facts distorted and several Germans siding with the Anglo-American forces for their own convenience, Strachan writes how the beginning of the 1914-18 engagement was viewed as a 'new departure' for Germany, and how intellectuals like Johann Plenge (1874-1963) and Thomas Mann (1875-1955) celebrated the mobilisations (153). Otto Wiegmann, in his (translated) poem "An die deutsche Jugend" ('The German Youth'), published in *Kosliner Zeitung* of 5 August 1914, wrote, 'Then let the holy war begin/ The united Germany will win/ Because all, all are holding together, / City dweller and farmer, the young and the old'. Jeffrey Verhey, while condemning the enthusiasm of the Germans regarding the onset of war as a 'hubris' (119), nevertheless terms this spirit as the

'pleasure of witnessing history' (120). It is probably because of this inclination for witnessing history as well as demonstrating their love for 'der Vaterland' that German military-volunteers and conscripts began to write mellifluously about the potencies of the war. As Bridgwater estimates, in the initial days of the Great War, approximately fifty thousand war-poems were being written in Germany daily (vii).

It is important that proper attention be paid to German Great War poems for understanding the socio-cultural situations of the 1914-18 years because as Lyon writes, war poetry 'is one of the most popular contemporary poetic genres' (3). In addition, Stallworthy gives particular importance to the poems composed by soldiers because '[t]he poems of these young men move […] [readers], as human documents, more than many better poems. They illustrate the hypnotic power of a long cultural tradition; the tragic outcome of educating a generation to face not the future but the past' (xxvii-viii). However, postmodern approaches to German war-poetry suffer from a serious and severe defect and prejudice. As Dagmar Barnouw correctly points out, any pro-war German writing is immediately silenced by the Allied-nations-dominated world with accusations of Holocaust (MacKay 100). Importantly, if the Germans perpetrated the Holocaust, the English and French colonisers indulged in unbelievable cruelties and annihilations in the early-20th-century in the conquered colonies in Asia and Africa. Moreover, Grayling, in his *Among the Dead Cities*, accuses the Anglo-American forces of committing war and 'moral crimes' because of their Second World War-time firebombing of the German cities (2-3).

It is true that the German war-poetry-scene has also had been dominated by writers against warring and militarism. Though the word 'krieg' has traditionally been attached to words like 'patriotismus', 'tapferkeit', 'mannlichkeit', 'abenteuer' and 'ritterlichkeit', it is also associated with terms like 'tod', 'blut', 'verstümmelung' and 'folter'. During the First World War, Gerhard Hauptmann (1862-1946) and the soldier-poet Emil Erich Kästner (1899-1974) were two prominent pacifists. Several communist poets have been consistently vociferous against Germany's war efforts. They were generally not soldier-poets, albeit some of them were drafted, but they had apocalyptic visions regarding a total war – 'totaler krieg'. Johannes Robert Beecher (1891-1958), who published his warning verses in *Die Aktion*, *Verfall und Triumph*, and *Die neue Kunst*, was a consistent objector, like his comrade Heinrich Blücher (1899-1970). As Arend recalls, the two poetry-collections of Walter Bauer (1904-1976) were later banned by the Nazis for their innate anti-war massages. They were relegated to the status of the 'fourth-world-writers' at that time, as is presently the 'situation' for the German writers of the first global belligerence.

It is a fact incontrovertible that war-poetry is best written by soldiers having direct experiences of belligerence. However, to cite an example from war-novels, the postmodern readers have traditionally preferred Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) to *The Storm of Steel* (1920) by Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) as the 'most exhaustive and realistic account of the German attitude towards the Great War'. Interestingly, while Remarque saw active duty on the Western Front only for two months – June and July 1917 – Jünger served in the *Imperial German Army* throughout the First World War, earning *Iron Cross First Class* (January 1917) and the *Pour le Mérite* (September 1918). Even during the Second World War, he served as a German army-captain. Jünger's experience of the war is therefore more authentic than Remarque's, but he appears nonchalant as against Remarque's sentiments. Lengel naturally comments, "It would be unfair, however, to dismiss Jünger's writings as so much nationalist propaganda. Jünger was unafraid to admit that there were times when German soldiers committed apparent atrocities. [...] Jünger experienced a full four years of fighting but most British and German soldiers spent much less time at the front. Remarque only spent a total of two months in or near the line. [...] *All Quiet on the Western Front* is also a political book and is not necessarily more 'realistic' than *The Storm of Steel*. Many scholars reject Jünger out of hand and accept Remarque's interpretation of the war as 'realistic'. This is largely because a pessimistic view of the war is currently fashionable. I would argue, however, that Remarque's book is not only fictional but an unqualified romance; Jünger's book at least has the advantage of being ostensibly non-fictional"[3].

It is precisely the reason why literary world is so readily acquainted with the names of Sassoon, Owen, Seeger, and Apollinaire, but not with those of Petrenz, Stramm, Klemm, Stadler, or Benn. Several other German soldier-poets were there too, but their writings unfortunately could not rise to critical acclaim, and they include Hermann Löns (1866-1914): the 'poet of the heath', the expressionist Alfred Lichtenstein (1889-1914), who composed such memorable poems as "The Athlete", "Smoke on the Field", "Dreaming", and "The Sad Man", before being killed at the Somme,

[3] Lengel, Edward G. "German and British Memoirs of the First World War". *First World War.com*. 22 August 2009. Accessed on 30 July 2014. <*http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/ww1lit.htm*> Web.

the nihilist Hans Leybold (1892-1914), who committed suicide on 8 September 1914, the night he was expected to rejoin his regiment at Namur, Belgium, after convalescence, and the expressionist poet Reinhard Sorge (1892-1916), also killed at the Somme. Other than those mentioned above, some non-combatant and non-German writers (writing in German) contributed to the genre of 'German First World War poetry', and they include Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), who wrote Great War-time poems from Switzerland, Rainier Maria Rilke (1875-1926), Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980), Georg Trakl (1887-1914), and Franz Werfel (1890-1945). Rilke's *Fourth Duino Elegy* (1915) and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* ('Sonnets to Orpheus') (1923), the diverse and pessimistic poems collected in Werfel's *Der Gerichttag* ('The Day of Judgement') (1919), and Zweig's "Jeremiah" (1917) are critically acclaimed for their steadfast critiquing of soldiering and imperialism.

Christine Froula has prioritised the First World War poems for their contribution to literary modernism (Das 210-26). In fact, 'Literary expressionism' and the German-language journals, *Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion* and *Simplicissimus*, have become intimately associated with the First World War-time German combat verses, which together contributed to modernism – and even postmodernism – in literature. 'Expressionism' is understood to have matured in Berlin, and was contributed to by a number of the later-days' German and Austrian soldier-poets including Trakl, Stadler, Benn, and Stramm. *Der Sturm* ('The Storm'), an expressionist magazine founded in Berlin in 1910 by Walden, helped several German and Austrian solider-poets to achieve recognition through contributions during the first decade of its publication. *Die Aktion* ('The Action') was an influential Berlin-based politico-literary weekly magazine, edited by Franz Pfemfert, published between 1911 and 1932. Like its older counterpart, the magazine also became a platform for literary expressionism and un-dogmatic left-wing policies. It was in this magazine where Klemm and Oskar Kanehl published their trench poems. Other contributors to this leftist magazine included Benn, Georg Heym, Lichtenstein, Stadler and Toller. Some of the later soldier-poets also published their writings in *Simplicissimus*, a Munich-based satirical German weekly started by Albert Langen in April 1896 and published until 1967. The magazine took its name from the protagonist of Grimmelshausen's novel, *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668). The contents were politically daring and written in a modern graphic style. Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria Rilke were often published in it. *Simplicissimus* generally targeted the Prussian military figures and rigid German social and class distinctions. During the 1914-18 war, however, it began to support the war-efforts, and its editor, Ludwig Thoma, himself joined the Prussian forces in 1917.

Many of the German poems published through the First World War, like their British and American counterparts, reflect the horrors of the event and question its glory. Among the writers of this 'grim' school of poetry are Stramm, Michel, Stadler, Benn, Schnack, Toller and Runge. On the other hand, the sonnets and lyrics written by Klemm, Lichtenstein, Engleke, Adler and Janowitz fondly remember and celebrate the courage and comradeship demonstrated by the imperial forces at the fields of, for example, the Somme and Ypres.

One of the major German soldier-poets, August Stramm, was awarded the *Iron Cross* twice for his courageousness and agility at Vosges, Alsace, and Somme, and was killed at Rokitno, Poland. He was a visionary who foresaw a terrible and mangled end for Deutschland and published several Futurist war poems warning of such a fate in *Der Sturm*. His collected poems, fittingly entitled *Tropfblut* ('Rogue's Blood'), were published from Berlin in 1919. Michel, who hailed from Munich, published the despairing "Nachtstruck" ('Struck in Night') in *Die Aktion* before being killed on the Western Front in June 1915. The Oxonian Stadler printed his collection of expressionist anti-war poems, *Der Aufbruch* ('The Departure') in 1914: the year he joined the *Imperial German Army* as an artillery-lieutenant only to be killed in action at Ypres in October. Benn was a military physician who served in occupied Brussels and published his collection of expressionist poems, titled *Fleisch* ('Flesh'), in 1917. His anti-militaristic verses, banned later by the Nazis, focus primarily on the degeneracy and medical aspects of decay. Anton Schnack, who has often had been compared with Wilfred Owen (Bridgwater 97), recollected his war-experiences in his *Strophen der Gier* ('Stanzas of Greed') (1919) and *Tier rang gewaltig mit Tier* ('Animal Wrestled Powerfully with Animal') (1920). Wilhelm Runge, a poet of the *Sturm*-circle, was killed in action at Arras in March 1918, but not before he had finalised the publication of his *Das denken traumt* ('The Thoughtful Daydreams') from Berlin, which forced even the more patriotic and war-loving Germans to reconsider the necessity and results of militarism. Critics, however, generally tend to overlook the other features of these war-verses – such as their aesthetic and stylistic features, unlike, for example, what Bridgwater does for Klemm's "At the Front" (88), and this is approved of by Krimmer in her *The Representation of War in German Literature* because they can, as she develops, undermine a text's martial stance and its pacifist agenda.

Though a committed soldier and later a leftist writer, Ernst Toller, the German equivalent of Sassoon in common pacifist stance, initially and voluntarily enlisted as an artillery observer in the *First Bavarian Foot Artillery Regiment*, serving at Bois-le-Petre and Verdun, where he was shell shocked in May 1916. In 1918, he co-organised a munitions workers' strike in Munich and was involved in anti-war efforts until being imprisoned briefly for treason. Throughout his life, he

continued to publish a number of anti-war poems and plays, including the early *Masses Man* (1921) and *The Machine Wreckers* (1922), and enjoyed prominence until 1933 when his works were banned. In 1938, as a migrant to the U.S.A., Toller began to lobby for pro-Republican intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), later inexplicably committing suicide on 29 May 1939.

Stanley Corngold quotes Robert Musil's comment in the 1914-essay "Europaertum, Krieg, Deutschtum" (in English: 'Europeanism, War, and Germanism') that any 'sensitive' German in early-1914 could not but feel compelled to show 'loyalty, courage, subordination and performance of duty' to the contemporary government (Sherry 192). Many of the German soldier-poets reposed faith in the belief that their fatherland was a *Machtstaat* ('National Power') and it was its 'duty' to 'preserve' the European cultures. To them, the war was an affair of honour and 'historical responsibility'. Most of Wilhelm Klemm's poems collected in *Gloria: Kriegsgedichte aus dem Feld* ('Glory: War Poems from the Field') (1915) and *Aufforderung: Gesammelte Verse* ('Request: Accumulated Verses') (1917) reflect this conviction. A surgeon with General von Hausen's *Third Army* in Flanders, Klemm was frankly critical of anyone who tried to shun the 'duty of protecting Deutschland'. Gerrit Engleke, who earned an *Iron Cross* in 1916 for swimming across the flooded Yser and served in the frontlines at Langemarck, Somme, Champagne, Dunaberg and Verdun, wrote pro-war verses, and registered visions of the creation of a new Europe through initial military activities – collectively published in 1960 as *Rhythumus des neuen Europa: Das Gesamtwerk* ('Rhythms of New Europe: The Whole Work'). Adler, much like the English Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918), was a trench-poet, some of whose poems were included in Erwin Piscator's anthology *1914-1916* and some, like "Das Geschutz" ('The Geschutz') and "Ruhe an der Front" ('Rest in the Front'), in *Die Aktion*. His collected poems were published as *Wiederkehr: Gedichte* ('Return: Poems') in the series *Der rote Hahn* ('The Red Cock'), published in 1918. Lieutenant Franz Janowitz, wounded fatally by machinegun fire near Monte Rombon on 24 October 1917 only to die ten days later, had his pro-bellicose verses published as *Auf Der Erde: Gedichte* ('On that Earth: Poems') posthumously in 1919.

In conclusion, it may be said that the German poems of the First World War are 'refreshingly' but 'poignantly' different from those written by the English, American, and French soldier-litterateurs. In his 'Introduction' to *The Faber Book of War Poetry*, Kenneth Baker values such Great War-poems for lending 'considerable strength to the pacifist movement of the 1920s and 1930s', and thus differentiates between the two groups of combat poems: 'The poetry of the Second World War is different against from that of the First, because the nature and scale of the war was different too. The 1939-45 conflict was fought, not on any single front, but in a wide variety of

theatres – Europe, North Africa, Burma, and the Pacific, among others – and sea and air battles were as significant as those on land. The geographical spread and fluidity of the various campaigns did not bring about the intensity of experience felt by those soldiers who had been confined to the mud of Flanders. Nor did Second World War poets turn against their generals […] [as their First World War counterparts] had done' (xxiii-xxiv). There is, however, a feature common to the German war poems of both the First and Second World Wars: they have always been relegated to the status of the 'writings of the doomed', which has been suggested in the title of this paper. The German poems, however, retain immense scopes for researching, and would reveal, in the process, as numerous traces of patriotism and bravery as do the English, French, and American poems of the Great War.

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