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From Abstraction to Documentary: Ernst Toller's Plays as War Dramas

Abstract

This article considers what the plays of Ernst Toller add to our conception of German literature about World War I. It interrogates the relevant themes that emerge in his plays: how the body at war is memorialized; the class divide as an instrument of militarism; and the responsibility to bear both sensory and documentary witness to war events. Though they are more frequently ascribed to *Nachkriegsdrama* or *Heimkehrerdrama*, Toller's plays from 1919-1930 illustrate a broader development in *Kriegsliteratur* from Expressionist abstraction to a more realistic treatment of historical particulars. Tracing this gradual development helps to further dispel the myth that the war experience was an unwelcome subject for German writers until the explosion onto the scene of Erich Maria Remarque and others and counters our previous overreliance on novels in studies of German war literature. It adds complexity and diversity to our understanding of German war literature, not only chronologically and in terms of genre, but thematically and stylistically as well.

Keywords

Ernst Toller, war drama, WWI literature, World War I literature

From Abstraction to Documentary: Ernst Toller's Plays as War Dramas

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Recent studies of German literature about World War I have begun dismantling a long-established fallacy: that in the late 1920s, the sudden commercial success of anti-war novels—most famously Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) published in 1929—brought the war experience back to public consciousness after it had been an underrepresented if not taboo literary subject (Golbach 360, Müller 2). Working against this misconception in an extensive 2008 bibliography, Thomas F. Schneider pointed out that most studies of German war literature had confined themselves to the same twenty to thirty primarily anti-war texts and had thus failed to accurately define the corpus they purported to investigate—which would have to include plays, poems, and all kinds of prose texts, many of them published during and soon after the war, and many decidedly not anti-war (Schneider 7-14). Such lesser-known texts are being taken up now, particularly in publications marking the war's centenary.

Ernst Toller (1893-1939) volunteered enthusiastically in 1914 and saw action at the Western Front before returning home a convert to pacifism. He wrote poems processing his war experience (Neis 68-69; Blecken 89-93; Jordan), but is familiar today primarily for his dramas. Perhaps the most celebrated and controversial playwright of the Weimar era, his plays were staged all over Germany and routinely set off political protests that garnered intense media attention. They were translated into more than twenty languages during his lifetime and performed all over the world. The most popular sold upwards of 25,000 copies (Spalek 29-30, 44). So why is Toller not better represented in studies of literature about the war?

One factor is the burning and banning of his work in 1933, an event from which his reputation and name recognition were slow to recover (Kane 185). Another is a persistent genre imbalance in the scholarship, with German prose texts about the war still receiving more attention than poetry and writing for the stage.¹ But as Schneider's bibliography attests, German writers did come to terms with the war in numerous poems and dramas—even if these did not sell as well as fiction, non-fiction, and semi-fiction by Remarque, Ludwig Renn, Manfred von Richthofen (the "Red Baron"), Walter Flex, Ernst Jünger, Werner Beumelburg, Erich Ludendorff, and others.

A final factor has to do with what we define as war literature. Toller did not write war dramas in the strictest sense. His plays are worlds away from Paul Joseph Cremers's *Die Marneschlacht* ('The Battle of the Marne'), Friedrich Bethge's *Reims*, or Sigmund Graff's *Die endlose Straße* (*The Endless Road*), all of which

take place on the frontlines (Ritchie 84-85). More traditionally classified as postwar or “returnee” dramas, Toller’s plays take up the war as one theme among many. But it is this theme that shaped most if not all of the other prominent ones, both historically and on the stage: the November Revolution; the short-lived soviet government in Bavaria (in which Toller himself held office); the societal, economic, and legal injustices of the new republic; and broader philosophical questions surrounding pacifism, socialism, and political activity in the twentieth century.

Ironically, Toller himself may have contributed to misguided notions of what “counts” as war literature and when it emerged. He was among those who hailed *Im Westen nichts Neues* as a turning point: finally someone had broken through the wall of forgetting to speak truthfully for the generation that had been in the trenches (Toller 4: 603). In a review considering Remarque’s novel alongside others by Renn, Arnold Zweig, and Ernst Gläser, Toller identified 1928 as the year war literature had reached its “giltige Gestalt” ‘valid form’ (4: 601).² With the distance of a decade, a new blend of vision and reality seemed to be emerging. While Toller welcomed it, he also defended earlier Expressionist attempts to find such a form—which would have to include his own. Surely, he wrote, they had had no choice but to deal in abstractions at a time when all of the concrete details were still so overpowering (see also 4: 158).

This is precisely what Toller’s writing about the war illustrates: the development from Expressionist abstraction to a more realistic, even documentary, treatment of historical particulars. Tracing this development, more gradual than sudden, helps to further dispel the myth that the war experience was an unwelcome subject for German writers until the explosion onto the scene of Remarque and others and counters our previous overreliance on novels in studies of German war literature.

Memorializing the body at war: *Die Wandlung* (1919)

Toller began writing his first play, *Die Wandlung* (*Transformation*), in 1917, the year he returned from the war; he completed it the following year while in military prison on account of his pacifist activism.³ In keeping with the abstraction Toller would later equate with Expressionism, the play unfolds around a war which is not identical to World War I: it is identified only as a colonial war against “the savages.” The protagonist, a would-be sculptor named Friedrich, enlists in order to prove his belonging to the fatherland. The script makes clear, without ever using the word, that his Jewishness has made him a pariah. His experience thus parallels that of Toller and other German Jews who hoped to gain acceptance by fighting against a different Other (1: 321).

Home from the war, Friedrich begins to sculpt a monument, a larger than life-sized statue of a naked, muscular warrior, his fist brutally raised. He wants it to be a reminder of the duty to defend the fatherland against the enemy; yet he wrestles with the nature of enmity and armed conflict: “Wer bestimmt, dass ein anderer Feind sei? . . . Ist da eine geistige Kraft, die zum Kampf zwingt? . . . Oder bestimmt Willkür den Feind?” (1: 22; ellipses in original) ‘Who determines that another is the enemy? . . . Is there a spiritual power that compels us to fight? . . . Or is the enemy arbitrary?’ These doubts are soon intensified by an encounter with a beggar, who turns out to be a veteran of Friedrich’s own company, and his wife, a victim of war rape. Hearing her message that he and his comrades fought only for the benefit of a very few rich people, Friedrich wonders: “Ward der Staat Zuhälter und das Vaterland eine getretene Hure, die jeder brutalen Lust sich verkauft? Ausgestattet mit dem Segen der Kupplerin Kirche?” (1: 25) ‘Did the state become pimp and the fatherland a trodden whore, selling itself to every brutal appetite? With the blessing of the church as procuress?’ Registering the desecrations these institutions have caused, Friedrich attacks his statue with a hammer: “*Ich zertrümmere dich, Sieg des Vaterlands*” (1: 25) ‘*I smash you to pieces, victory of the fatherland.*’

Not only is this scene pivotal in Friedrich’s transformation, it also highlights two interrelated features of Toller’s first attempt to process the war for the stage: its focus on the body and its critique of memorialization. The dialogue foregrounds the physical as the woman compares the oppressed—both the colonized and the soldiers who opposed them—to caged slaughter cattle, and as Friedrich’s epiphany adopts prostitution as its metaphor. The stage directions are precise about the sores on the bodies of the syphilitic couple, as well as the physicality of the statue and its destruction. In smashing it, Friedrich seeks to destroy art that memorializes strength, brutality, and force.

Die Wandlung memorializes the body at war quite differently: the primitive statue of the powerful, aggressive warrior gives way to the staging of a vast military hospital where a grotesque technology reigns. In a kind of death dance, seven veterans are marched across the stage. Their nakedness is all they share with the warrior statue. They walk like wound-up machines, their arms and legs replaced by swinging prostheses, with typically Expressionist stage lighting and acoustics contributing to the gruesome effect (1: 317). As these reanimated hunks of flesh disappear from the stage, other wounded soldiers cry out from their beds, some of them with afflictions that tie this abstract war to the technologies of the world war: one is suffering the effects of poison gas; another relives the horrors of trench warfare.

A decade later Paul Bäumer, the narrator of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, will proclaim at the bedside of his injured comrade: “Man sollte die ganze Welt an diesem Bette vorbeiführen und sagen: Das ist Franz Kemmerich, neunzehneinhalb

Jahre alt, er will nicht sterben” (Remarque 27) ‘One should lead the whole world past this bed and say: This is Franz Kemmerich, nineteen-and-a-half years old, he doesn’t want to die.’ This is what Remarque’s realistic novel will aspire to do: arouse empathy by transporting its reader into the military hospital. Toller’s Expressionist play, on the other hand, has no need of the subjunctive mood: it brings the injured, disfigured veterans directly to its audience, compelling them to witness the war’s effects on the soldier’s body.⁴ In further contrast to Remarque, Toller does not name these soldiers who stand in for countless others; all have been de-individualized by modern warfare. And they do not share Kemmerich’s desire to live: one of them even wishes for the death that would be preferable to his spinal cord injury.

Die Wandlung continues to tie the commemoration of war to nationalism, patriotism, and nostalgia: at a public meeting late in the play, Friedrich hears an old man proclaim the heroism of the nation’s soldiers; a clergyman defends the war with the reminder that even the church endorsed its weapons, including poison gas, submarines, and forced starvation. Friedrich continues to free himself from this militarist commemoration. His final speech applies his previous critique of institutions to the level of the human, evoking once again the uses and perversions of the body: “Eure Hände bauen Mauern um euch auf, und ihr sagt, jenseits wären die Wilden. . . . Ihr Frauen, die ihr Kinder gebärt und sie gleichgültig oder aus falschem Stolz und eitlen Lügen Scheingebilden opfert—ihr seid nicht mehr Mütter” (1: 42-43) ‘Your hands build walls around you and you say, on the other side are the savages. . . . You women who bear children and sacrifice them to illusory things, indifferently or out of false pride and vain lies—you are no longer mothers.’

A decade after *Die Wandlung*’s sensational premiere, it would become customary to talk about works of war literature as monuments, with Remarque’s “deutsche[s] Denkmal des unbekanntes Soldaten” (Hermann 6) ‘German memorial to the unknown soldier’ leading the way.⁵ Toller’s review would take a different approach, praising the severity of *Im Westen nichts Neues* toward those who caused and prosecuted the war and then built monuments to themselves atop millions of corpses. Toller recognized the book’s strengths and shortcomings in relation to his own: Remarque was a masterful narrator of gas attacks, hand-to-hand combat, and deaths on the battlefield; if his novel was missing anything it was background, reflection on the causes and contexts of the war (4: 603-04)—all the things that Toller prioritizes, as we shall see.

Almost another decade later Toller, now in exile, further lamented the way the war had been memorialized, precisely because Weimar artists, among others, failed to do the very thing Friedrich had done: “Überall in Schulen, in Büchern, in Filmen, in den Reden der republikanischen Staatsmänner wurden den falschen Helden Denkmale gesetzt Das einzige Verdienst dieser Helden war ein mehr

oder minder heroischer Tod. . . . Die falschen Heroen hätten gestürzt und in ihrer Nichtigkeit angeprangert werden . . . müssen” (4: 340) ‘Everywhere in schools, books, films, and the speeches of republican statesmen, monuments to false heroes were erected The only merit of these heroes was a more or less heroic death. . . . The false heroes should have been toppled, their vanity denounced. . . .’

Militarism and the class divide: *Masse Mensch* (1921), *Die Maschinenstürmer* (1922)

An additional reflection on memorials, from a speech Toller gave in 1925, drew attention to the ruling class that builds them in the first place. Here Toller said that memorials—like certain colors, songs, and flags—are loaded with the “Traditionen, Gefühle und Wünsche der herrschenden Klasse, sie sind magische, gewaltige Kräfte, die das Alte beschwören . . .” (4: 135) ‘traditions, feelings and desires of the ruling class; they are powerful magic forces that conjure up the old . . .’ Toller’s emphasis at this moment on the conservatism of memorials and the class relations they uphold is reflective of the ideas he had been pursuing in his plays from the early 1920s. Like *Die Wandlung* they deal with war primarily as an abstraction. But their sustained examination of militarism employed across the class divide clearly stems from Toller’s experience in the revolution that brought about the end of World War I.⁶

Dedicated to the proletariat, *Masse Mensch* (*Man and the Masses*) consists of seven scenes. One of them, a typically Expressionist dream scene, is devoted to the economic rationale for the perpetuation of war. Bankers on the exchange floor react to news of troops retreating after a failed offensive: “So ist der Krieg / Als unser Instrument, / Das mächtige gewaltge Instrument, / Das Könige und Staaten, / Minister, Parlamente, / Presse, Kirchen / Tanzen läßt, . . . Verloren?” (1: 75) ‘So the war / Our instrument, / The mighty powerful instrument / That makes kings and states, / Ministers, parliaments, / Press, churches / Dance . . . Is lost?’ But immediately a new source of profits and dividends is devised: a state-run brothel under the altruistic guise of a convalescent home for veterans. Meanwhile the workers are incensed to see the ruling class build palaces while soldiers rot in the trenches and farmers are forced off the land into armaments factories. They plan an armaments strike: “Wer weiter Rüstungswerkstatt speist, / . . . tötet eignen Bruder. / Und Frauen ihr! / Kennt ihr Legende jener Weiber, / Die ewig fruchtlos, / Weil sie Waffen mitgeschmiedet?” (1: 82) ‘He who further feeds the armaments factory / . . . kills his own brother. / And you women! / Do you know the legend of those women / Forever barren / Because they helped forge weapons?’

These lines—fraught with Expressionism’s tortured syntax and telegram style—are delivered by the protagonist. She is based on Sarah Sonja Lerch, whom Toller met during the strike movement of 1918. In the play she too becomes an

abstraction, called simply “the Woman.” Her call for a strike threatens the ambitions of her husband, a civil servant. He warns that she is committing treason; she counters that the state betrays its people by waging war. He responds with the highly militarist argument that war gives the state life in the first place by securing it against both external and internal enemies—that peace is only a phantom.

The Woman’s primary antagonist is the Nameless One (*der Namenlose*), a representative of the masses and proponent of violent revolution. He argues that while a strike may bring about a temporary peace, a permanent end to war requires a different struggle: “Bedenken Sie: ein einzger blutiger Kampf / Und ewig Frieden. / Kein Maskentand, wie früher Frieden, / Wo unter Hülle Krieg, / Krieg der Starken gegen Schwache, / Krieg der Ausbeutung, Krieg der Gier” (1: 84-85) ‘Think of it: a single bloody fight / And eternal peace. / No frippery like peace before, / War beneath the mask, / War of strong against weak, / War of exploitation, war of greed.’ Violence must be met with violence, he says, since people have never been taught anything else.

Violence becomes a kind of common denominator for the Woman, as well, when the people’s revolution turns bloody: “Schrie ich nicht gestern gegen Krieg?? / Und heute . . . laß ichs zu, / Daß Brüder in den Tod geworfen? . . . In . . . beiden Kriegen . . . Menschen . . .” (1: 91; all but 2nd ellipses in original) ‘Did I not scream yesterday against war?? / And today . . . I permit / That brothers are thrown into death? . . . In . . . both wars . . . humans . . .’ Language fails her as she equates the victims of the revolution with the victims of war. In the final scene she realizes that the Nameless One is himself the bastard child of war, no better or worse than generals who commit murder on behalf of the state. The violent mass he represents is as yet unable to choose the peaceful path she envisions, because it has been successfully indoctrinated with the militarism of the ruling class.

Die Maschinenstürmer (The Machine Wreckers) is similarly ambivalent about the proletariat’s approach to revolution; again desperate workers betray their own cause in succumbing to brutality. But the play is unambivalent about the effects of war on the proletariat. Set in England around 1815, it reminds its audience of World War I only obliquely: we hear of mass starvation and a lack of basic commodities in the wake of a war. Drawing on historical sources, Toller has Lord Byron tell the House of Lords, in a prologue, that the Luddites have resorted to violent revolt as a kind of learned behavior: “Wer aber lehrte sie ein solches Tun? . . . Die Politik der ‘großen Männer’! / Die Politik der Räuberkriege! / Die Politik der großen Helden, / Von denen Ihre Bücher zeugen. . . .” (1: 133) ‘Who taught them to act this way? . . . The politics of ‘great men’! / The politics of predatory war! / The politics of the great heroes / To whom your books bear witness. . . .’ Byron reminds his peers that they have gained at least as much by militarizing England’s workers as they now stand to lose: “Es ist der Pöbel, der den Schiffen und Armeen Soldaten stellt, / Es ist der starke Arm, der Sie instand setzt, / Einer

Welt von Feinden Trotz zu bieten – / Und der auch Ihnen trotzen wird, / Wenn Sie ihn in den Sackweg der Verzweiflung peitschen!” (1: 134) ‘It is the rabble who provide soldiers for ships and armies, / It is the strong arm that enables you / To defy a world of enemies – / And that will defy you as well / If you whip them into the dead end of despair!’

The play’s protagonist, Jimmy Cobbett, takes just that step—in fact Toller’s stage directions suggest that he and Lord Byron be played by the same actor. Cobbett prompts the laborers to action with the message that they have been sent to war because of the profit motives of England’s lords. He claims that capitalists have turned the earth into a battlefield and heroized oppression of the so-called enemy. His philosophy is countered by a militarism based in social Darwinism, as the exploitative factory owner Ure explains that life itself consists in the struggle between weak and strong, that culture develops according to the brutal laws of nature. These nineteenth-century Englishmen speak for the Germans who were struggling to shape postwar society according to the best interests of their respective social classes.⁷

Toller’s plays became a part of that struggle, as *Masse Mensch* made him internationally famous. The police limited the audience for its 1920 premiere to a closed group of union members, because a nationalist organization had already demanded the play be banned. Only in September 1921 could it premiere for public audiences, to thunderous applause and excellent reviews (1: 368-70). *Die Maschinenstürmer* was also a commercial success. Five thousand people attended its premiere at Max Reinhardt’s Berlin theater. It was eventually translated into fifteen languages and performed all over the world (1: 474-76).

Bearing sensory witness: *Hinkemann* (1923), *Hoppla, wir leben!* (1927)

Hinkemann marks a turning point: written in 1921 and 1922, it takes place at that time in a small German city. While previous plays referred indirectly to World War I, this is the first one in which Toller speaks about it explicitly. As before, his focus is not on frontline events. When the protagonist, Eugen Hinkemann, thinks back on his time in the infantry, he does not recall detailed battle scenes or the camaraderie in his unit. The play is concerned instead with the characters’ struggle to process what they have witnessed. Toller directs his criticism and even mockery at contemporary discourse about the war, with emphasis on heroism, religious justification of the war, and the question of war guilt.

In its treatment of heroism, *Hinkemann* is a grotesque intensification of *Die Wandlung*. Whereas Friedrich shatters the monument to the virile war hero and, symbolically, the patriotic memorialization of war, Hinkemann’s own body has been shattered in a way that undermines the cultural ideal of soldierly heroism: a gunshot wound has physically castrated him. The destruction is no longer symbolic

but embodied. With irony Hinkemann says that it was the “Heldenschuß einer verfluchten Kreatur” (1: 194) ‘hero’s shot of an accursed creature’ that emasculated him. Heroism is stripped not only from the enemy shooter, but from Hinkemann as well. A physically imposing man, he is repeatedly called the typical German hero. But each time, the audience is reminded that this hero has become a eunuch.

Also critiqued is the mobilization of religion to support the war. Hinkemann’s rival, Paul Grosshahn, turns the battle cry “Mit Gott für König und Vaterland” (‘With God for King and Fatherland’), which was used by Wilhelm II and by the Bavarian army in which Toller served, into the more honest “mit Gott für Menschenmord, mit Gott für Obergott Mammon” (1: 196) ‘with God for murder, with God for the higher god Mammon.’ The name of God has been invoked to rally the people behind the horrendous ambitions of the powerful.⁸ Hinkemann seems to agree with Grosshahn that belief in God is no longer possible after the war; he calls the Jewish, pagan, Christian, French, and German gods battlefield commanders who got tangled up in the barbed wire.

The play removes the question of war guilt, which fueled much discussion at the time about the Treaty of Versailles, from the political plane. Hinkemann’s wife Grete says that she herself is guilty for allowing her husband to go to war. Rather than blaming any nation, she condemns the age that allows such brutality and the individuals who do not demand otherwise. Hinkemann comes to count himself among such individuals, a virtual accomplice to the crimes of statesmen and generals because he went to war instead of resisting.

For all the insights these characters articulate about the war, they also struggle to talk about it; at times language becomes incapable of representing the experience. Unable to express her feelings about her emasculated husband, Grete wishes for God to take away language altogether and paraphrases John’s gospel: “Das Wort ward die Hölle!” (1: 202) ‘The word became hell!’ Hinkemann too struggles with an inability to cognize and communicate:

Ja, seit meiner Verwundung im Kriege meine ich selbst, ich bin ein bißchen verworren im Denken . . . Jeden Tag, wenn ich morgens aufstehe, kostet es mich ungeheure Anstrengung, um in all das, was in mir ist . . . durch ein paar Worte, ein paar Gedanken Ordnung hineinzubringen. . . . Morgens, wenn man aufsteht, ist Chaos in einem da und wenn man sich abends zu Bett legt, ist wieder Chaos da. . . . ich will versuchen mich deutlicher zu erklären . . . Also, wir haben doch soviel Krüppel seit dem Krieg. Was wird mit denen? (1: 210-11; 1st and final ellipses in original)

Since my war injury I find I’m a little confused in my thinking . . . Every day when I wake up it costs a tremendous effort to bring order to everything that’s inside me . . . with a few words, a few thoughts. . . . When you get up

in the morning there's chaos inside and when you lay down in bed at night the chaos is there again. . . . I'll try to explain myself more clearly . . . We have so many cripples since the war. What will happen to them?'

This question that Hinkemann eventually articulates is in some ways the central one of the play. He hears only facile answers: artificial limbs, care in a sanitarium, unspecified social support, a more peaceful society to come. But platitudes cannot satisfy him given what he has witnessed. In two important speeches framing the final act, witness by sight becomes an extended metaphor. The first speech finds Hinkemann in the ecstasy of many an Expressionist visionary: "Mir haben sie den Star gestochen. Ich bin sehend geworden! . . . Die Menschen sehe ich! Die Zeit sehe ich! . . . der Krieg ist wieder da!" (1: 218) 'The scales fell from my eyes. I could see! . . . I see the people! I see the times! . . . the war is back!' The second finds him far more resigned, for the people he has seen are no longer human: "Ich bin durch die Straßen gegangen, ich sah keine Menschen. . . . ich sah Fratzen . . . und Not . . . sinnlose, unendliche Not der blinden Kreatur. . . . Der Schuß, der war wie eine Frucht vom Baume der Erkenntnis . . . Alles Sehen wird mir Wissen, alles Wissen Leid. *Ich will nicht mehr*" (1: 231; 2nd, 3rd, and 5th ellipses in original) 'I walked the streets, I didn't see humans. . . . I saw grimaces . . . and misery . . . senseless, unending misery of blind creatures. . . . The gunshot was like fruit from the Tree of Knowledge . . . All seeing becomes knowing, all knowing suffering. *I don't want to go on.*' Because these "creatures" do not see what he does, because they are blind to suffering and hatred and murder, the war is not actually over: the cycle is bound to repeat.⁹

The societal blindness that drives Hinkemann to desperation is paralleled in *Hoppla, wir leben!* (*Hoppla, We're Alive!*), where it becomes a deafness. Like *Hinkemann* this play takes place "in the present day." This means that four more years have passed and Toller is even more concerned that the war is being forgotten. He sounds the alarm in a scene that processes what was clearly a powerful experience at the front: he would later relay the same event in much the same way in his autobiography (3: 149). Here it is put into the mouth of the protagonist Karl Thomas, who asks two teenagers, almost a decade after the war, what they have learned about it. They complain about having to memorize the names and dates of major battles; they know that a nearby factory produces poison gas to be used in future conflicts. Horrified by their lack of real knowledge he responds:

Während des Krieges lag ich irgendwo in Frankreich im Schützengraben. Plötzlich, nachts, hörten wir Schreie. . . . Die ganze Nacht schrie ein Mensch. Den ganzen Tag schrie ein Mensch. . . . Als es dunkel wurde, stiegen zwei Soldaten aus dem Graben und wollten den Menschen, der verwundet zwischen den Gräben lag, hereinholen. Kugeln knallten und

beide Soldaten wurden erschossen. . . . Da kam der Befehl, es dürfe keiner mehr aus dem Graben. Wir mußten gehorchen. Aber der Mensch schrie weiter. Wir wußten nicht, war er Franzose, war er Deutscher, war er Engländer. Er schrie wie ein Säugling schreit, nackt, ohne Worte. Vier Tage und vier Nächte schrie er. Für uns waren es vier Jahre. . . . Ach, Kinder, vermöchte ich Phantasie in euer Herz zu pflanzen wie Korn in durchpflügte Erde. Könnt ihr euch vorstellen, was da geschah? . . . Nicht: der Feind. Der Mensch. Der Mensch schrie. In Frankreich und in Deutschland und in Russland und in Amerika und in England. In solchen Stunden . . . fragt man sich: Warum das alles? Wofür das alles? Würdet ihr auch so fragen? (2: 43-44)

During the war I was lying in a trench somewhere in France. Suddenly one night we heard screams. . . . The whole night this person screamed. The whole day this person screamed. . . . When it got dark two soldiers climbed out of the trench to fetch him, lying wounded between the trenches. There was the cracking of bullets and both soldiers were killed. . . . Then came the order, no one else leaves the trench. We had to obey. But this person continued to scream. We didn't know if he was French, German, English. He screamed like an infant screams, naked, wordless. For four days and four nights he screamed. For us it was four years. . . . Children, if I could plant imagination in your hearts like grain in well-plowed earth. Can you imagine what happened there? . . . Not the enemy. A human being. The human being screamed. In France and in Germany and in Russia and in America and in England. In such hours . . . one asks: Why all this? For what? Would you ask as well?

Hinkemann has seen too much suffering; Karl Thomas has heard it. His speech has neither the ecstasy nor the abstraction of the Expressionism that Toller has by now largely left behind. Still these four days and nights of one human screaming stand in for the experience of humanity in the four years of the war. The wordless screams, the sound of exploding bullets, even the word used for the obedience of the soldiers (*gehörchen*) all focus the attention on auditory input. But already the generation to whom Karl Thomas speaks is deaf to the echoes, lacking the empathy and imagination to perceive what happened on the battlefields. If *Die Wandlung* thematizes how war is remembered, these two later plays are concerned with how the world war, specifically, was forgotten. Their historical specificity compels the seeing and hearing that Toller finds necessary a decade after the armistice.

Documentary witness: *Feuer aus den Kesseln* (1930)

While *Hinkemann* and *Hoppla, wir leben!* speak directly to the effects of World War I, they still do not take wartime events as their primary subject. This Toller did for the first time in *Feuer aus den Kesseln* (*Draw the Fires*). In both the revised stage version and the book edition of this “historical play,” Toller notes in a foreword that he has drawn on actual people, settings, and events, taking liberties with them but not thereby compromising the work’s artistic truth (2: 266, 317). Also included in the book edition (the basis for my analysis here) is an extensive appendix of materials Toller consulted, including a 1928 Reichstag report on “Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918” (2: 371) ‘The Causes of the German Collapse in 1918,’ which he often quotes verbatim. This makes *Feuer aus den Kesseln* one of the first examples of documentary drama (Dove 172; Reimers 248).

This is also the first time that Toller sets dramatic action on the battlefield (*Die Wandlung*’s Friedrich is seen heading into battle and later in a military hospital but not in between; Hinkemann and Karl Thomas engage in after-the-fact reflections). But he continues to avoid the representation of trench warfare, focusing instead on the sailors and stokers whose insurrection eventually led to the outbreak of the Revolution and the end of hostilities. The only actual fighting Toller stages—the second scene presents the Battle of Jutland from the perspective of a single stokehold—is a secondary structuring device rather than the play’s climax or culmination, as it was in Reinhard Goering’s *Seeschlacht* (*Naval Encounter*), for example. Toller’s primary concern in selecting and presenting historical events, and the documents that substantiate them, is to demonstrate that the root problems behind this and other wars—problems that continue to plague the so-called republic—are economic inequality and social injustice. In this case he shows how they resulted, in 1917, in a politically motivated trial and the judicial murder of two men fighting for the German navy.

The play’s central marker of injustice is the unequal living conditions among the naval officers and the crew. These are the complaints the sailor Reichpietsch and the stoker Sachse take to members of the Reichstag. They begin with Philipp Scheidemann of the Social Democrats, telling him also that losses sustained by the German navy are being concealed from the public. They tell Wilhelm Dittmann, one of the founders of the breakaway Independent Social Democrats (USPD), that crew members are forbidden to read socialist publications.

Back on board, a lieutenant tells the hungry crew to stop asking for more food, and that if they starve they will be buried with military honors; meanwhile the officers enjoy multi-course meals with wine and schnapps. As the stoker Köbis puts it: “In der Offiziersmesse hört die Vaterlandsliebe beim Magen auf” (2: 334) ‘In the officers’ mess, love of fatherland ends with the stomach.’ He refers to the

same rhyme that shows up in numerous documents of the war: “Gleiche Löhnung, gleiches Essen, wär der Krieg schon längst vergessen” (2: 334) ‘With equal pay and equal food, the war’d be long forgotten.’

In the context of the crew’s complaints, the documentary materials that Toller builds into the action of the play become a source of irony. On deck, a petty officer reads aloud the articles of war, which include the assurance of officers’ goodwill toward subordinates. The crew is outraged to read a newspaper article by a retired general condemning Scheidemann’s efforts toward a negotiated peace and declaring that Germany’s soldiers and sailors would prefer ten more years of war. They also learn in the newspaper that the Reichstag has dismissed their complaints. Soon they are agitating at a meeting of six hundred angry sailors and stokers. Sachse continues to decry the chasm between them and the officers: “Wenn der Krieg zu Ende ist, werden wir wieder Packer und Metallarbeiter und Eisenbahner und Kutscher sein. Anders wie die Offiziere. Für die ist der Krieg ein Handwerk. . . . Wenn es bei ihnen nur ums Vaterland ginge, müßten sie sich schämen, dicke Gelder einzustecken, sich den Bauch vollzuschlagen” (2: 341) ‘When the war is over we will be packers and metalworkers and railroaders and drivers again. Not the officers. War is their trade. . . . If they really cared about the fatherland they would be ashamed to pocket so much money and stuff their bellies full.’ Reichpietsch encourages the sailors and stokers to join the USPD in advance of the upcoming peace conference in Stockholm.

The following scenes find Sachse, Köbis, Reichpietsch, and others imprisoned and subjected to interrogations, the transcripts of which are falsified. They are charged with high treason, with evidence to the contrary and their defenders’ requests ignored. Prosecuted more for their politics than their actions, they are linked to the “cancer” of socialism and the “treasonous” peace movement (2: 350). Reichpietsch tells the court of his conversion from patriotic volunteer to pacifist. Köbis rebukes the court-martial altogether and the power it represents: “Sie sind der Feind, und nicht der Heizer auf den englischen Schiffen, mit dem ich vor dem Krieg zusammen geschuftet habe, und mit dem ich nach dem Kriege wieder zusammen schufteten werde. . . . Ihr habt kein Recht, für Deutschland zu sprechen. Deutschland—das sind *wir!*” (2: 359) ‘You are the enemy, not the stoker on the English ships who toiled together with me before the war and will again after the war. . . . You have no right to speak for Germany. *We* are Germany!’

In jail awaiting their execution, they recall the *Burgfrieden* ‘party truce’ of August 1914 (it is the first document in Toller’s appendix), in which the emperor claimed he no longer recognized political parties, only Germans (2: 371). Just three years later and with the war ongoing, they have been convicted on the basis of belonging to a socialist party. Sachse’s sentence was reduced to fifteen years; Köbis and Reichpietsch were executed on September 5, 1917. Toller stages the execution only implicitly: the stage is dark and the audience hears drums, marching, and the

order to fire. Immediately thereafter an officer reads aloud a military report that recounts the execution in dry and bureaucratic detail.

The final scene is set up to parallel the second: in early November 1918, the crew of a ship in Kiel is told to prepare for a new battle. An unnamed sailor addresses them: “Die Offiziere sagen: ‘Siegen oder in Ehren untergehen.’ Können wir siegen? . . . das deutsche Heer kann nicht mehr, die U-Boote schaffen es nicht, wir sind am Ende. Für die Ehre unserer Offiziere Zehntausende opfern? . . . Wollt ihr das?” (2: 369; 2nd ellipsis in original) ‘The officers say “Prevail, or perish with honor.” Can we prevail? . . . the German army can’t go on, the U-boats won’t make it, we’re finished. Sacrifice tens of thousands for the honor of our officers? . . . Is that what you want?’ They mutiny instead. Nothing in the dialogue ties their decision to the unjust treatment of Sachse, Köbis, and Reichpietsch a year earlier, but the arc Toller traces from that rebellion to this mutiny to the revolution that will soon break out across Germany is unambiguous.

While Toller’s earlier plays confirm that there had been no lack of engagement with the war on the German stage, it is true that a certain kind of war drama flourished at this moment. Following upon Sergei Eisenstein’s 1926 film *Battleship Potemkin* and the 1928 Reichstag report, *Feuer aus den Kesseln* was one of three documentary plays about the naval revolts to premiere in Berlin in 1930, along with *Des Kaisers Kulis* (*The Kaiser’s Coolies*), based on Theodor Plievier’s 1929 novel, and Friedrich Wolf’s *Matrosen von Cattaro* (*The Sailors of Cattaro*) (see Kiefer). Clearly this was a trend that transcended the stage, with productive cross-fertilization taking place among different media and genres. Like Edlef Köppen’s 1930 novel *Heeresbericht* (*Higher Command*), a masterwork of documentary montage, Toller’s play and appendix are effective in their employment and juxtaposition of historical documents that demonstrate the hypocrisy of military leadership and the effects of censorship and propaganda on a war-weary public.¹⁰

Conclusion

Reading Toller’s plays specifically as documents of the First World War adds complexity and diversity to our understanding of German war literature, not only chronologically and in terms of genre, but thematically and stylistically as well. His recurring themes include propagation of the war by a militarism that served to protect and further class interests, the corruption of institutions that blindly supported this militarism, the devastation of the human body despite attempts at its heroization, and perverse commemorations by a public that all too soon forgot. As important as the presence of these themes is the absence of others so commonly associated with both pro- and anti-war literature, including the heat of combat, the camaraderie among soldiers, and the bravery of their sacrifice. If

these more familiar themes have become stereotypes that unduly restrict our definition of what counts as war literature, then reading Toller is one way to complicate and counteract them.

And if we want our corpus of literature about the war to encompass a greater chronological range, we should be prepared for greater stylistic diversity as well. If some early attempts to process the war experience were, as Toller says, forced into abstractions and off-putting excesses by trauma that was still too fresh, they nevertheless contain the unmistakable seeds of the more realistic, perhaps more relatable war literature to come, even of the documentary that will revolutionize the way artists represent truth.

Notes

1. Perhaps it is not coincidental that one of the earlier exceptions to the widespread misconception about war literature was Ritchie, who pointed out in a 1985 essay about German war dramas that there was no “gap between the end of the war and the appearance of war literature” and that not all of that literature was anti-war (84).
2. All translations are my own.
3. I will not focus in what follows on Toller’s biography, partly because so much scholarship has already done so, particularly with respect to World War I and the Revolution. See for example Dove 19-93 and Anderson.
4. There is a similar scene in the later play *Hinkemann*, in which marching one-armed and one-legged veterans sing soldiers’ songs (1: 205-06). In both plays Toller stages the “mass-scale physical trauma” that had become “an ontological crisis”: by some accounts, “one in every sixteen citizens who might be encountered on a German street in 1919 would be . . . a veteran who had suffered some form of physical injury. . . ” (Elswit 390). But as Sloterdijk observes in his analysis of the Weimar-era “*homo protheticus*,” the most severely injured were later hidden away in institutions (791-94).
5. As Kuxdorf shows, Salomo Friedlaender’s satirical attack on *Im Westen nichts Neues* was marketed precisely as “eine Denkmalsenthüllung” (74) ‘the debunking of a monument’.

6. I mean *militarism* in the sense defined by Ceadel as “the view that war is necessary to human development and therefore a positive good,” that “each state is engaged in a struggle for survival,” and that “there is no prospect of abolishing war even if it were desirable to do so (which it is not)” (4).
7. For Toller's reflections on the commonalities between Luddite England and early Weimar Germany, see 3: 266.
8. See also the folk song “Wir kämpfen nicht fürs Vaterland, / Wir kämpfen nicht für Gott” ‘We fight not for the Fatherland, / we're fighting not for God,’ which is sung in the later play *Feuer aus den Kesseln* (2: 343).
9. This emphasis on seeing and blindness is foreshadowed in the play's first scene, in which Hinkemann's mother-in-law blinds a goldfinch with a knitting needle (1: 193).
10. For Toller's enthusiastic review of Köppen's novel, see 4: 609-10.

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