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Newsreel Images of the Military and War, 1914-1918

Wolfgang Miihl-Benninghaus

The Military before the War

In the nationally oriented culture of the *Kaiserreich*, with its great enthusiasm for all things military, battle, war and heroism, flickering images of torpedo boats at high sea, troops returning from the spring parade or battleship launches were shown with great success on Gennany's first cinema screens.¹ This gave rise to a regular stream of films featuring Wilhelmine forces, initially from Skladanowsky and Messter, and later from other companies. The filming of military set-pieces such as *UBERFALL AUF SCHLOSS BONCOURT*, *THEODOR KORNER*, *DIE SCHLACHT BEI GETTYSBURG* or *LIEB YATERLAND, MAGST RUHIG SEIN*² provided the military with thematic and representational accounts of the many images of military motifs.³

Alongside industry, which used film as a means of advertising its products and even its factories,⁴ the military was one of the first sectors to use film to serve its own purposes, even before the war. As well as having a military value, these films were intended to 'not only cultivate public awareness of the land and sea forces, but also to popularise annament.' Events captured on film served to relive actions in distant garrisons, which members of the military and the public might have heard about but not have been able to participate in.⁵ Footage of military manoeuvres demonstrated how various anns and weaponry could be used to best advantage. With the aid of trick shots, 'living maps' were created to instruct the viewers in tactics, re-living such famous battles as Sedan and Austerlitz.⁶

The films produced by the military pre-1914 can be divided into two broad categories: the training film and the 'popularisation' film. In any case, many training films were also shown to cinema audiences and were employed as a fonn of educational film for the general public.

One of the reasons for the technical advances in cinematography during the war was its application for military purposes. This was particularly true of the serial image cameras (CReihenbildner'), developed by Messter in 1915.⁷ Although this type of military application remained a relatively isolated case and (compared to World War II) few decisive film-technological advances were due to the war, the institution cinema did experience an important increase in status under the influence of the men-and-machine battles in the trenches. The massive mobilisation of the nation's forces gave rise to a process of linking war and ideology which had been unknown until that point. It is in the framework of this 'total mobilisation'S that, from October 1914 onwards, war footage first appeared in Gennany's

cinemas. These films later became divided into the categories of educational, orienting and propaganda films,⁹ although in practice it was not always easy to differentiate between these categories.

The First War Newsreels

The cinematic trade press was extremely reluctant to carry out its first assignment in the service of the war when it came to mobilisation.¹⁰ There was little of that enthusiasm for war one knows about from other sections of the population in the first days of August 1914. Sections of the film industry, though, did succumb to the demand for films which would help transport the audience on a wave of patriotic fervour which struck Germany in August 1914. This is indicated by decisions to remove French and English films from theatre programmes¹¹ and discussions held at the time about the future of German film.¹²

Anticipating a huge public interest in war films, the Berlin-based branch of the American Biograph Company asked the military command's permission on 31 July 1914 to shoot action scenes on the future fronts. In August this request was followed by a series of other applications.¹³ Still in the same month, production companies including Scherl's Eiko managed to negotiate the dispatch of camera operators to the front.¹⁴ Other firms sent their cameramen with the first consignment of troops without going through bureaucratic formalities. All attempts by these operators to join troops at the front line, however, came up against the authority of the General Staff. The fear of espionage and a certain lack of awareness of the civilian population's expectations meant that in the first weeks of the war reporting from the front was limited to military communiqués and press conferences. A mere 15 carefully vetted journalists were given permission to present more extensive press information from the front.¹⁵ This was an initial indication of what was to typify the whole war: the top military command saw the written press as the most important medium for the presentation of war reporting. Partly as a result of discussions raised by cinema reformers concerning the relative merits and demerits of cinema, for much of the military, as well as among broad sections of the public, cinematography was considered a questionable and underdeveloped medium which could serve only as a secondary form of publicity.¹⁶ In September/October 1914 Oskar Messter was selected to serve as advisor to the General Staff on cinema affairs. From this point on, several film firms were given permission to shoot footage at the front. Film companies who had gone to the front at the beginning of the war without official permission were obliged to recall their operators and forbidden to show their films in cinemas.¹⁷ The criteria for licensing war cinematographers were announced on 6 October 1914:

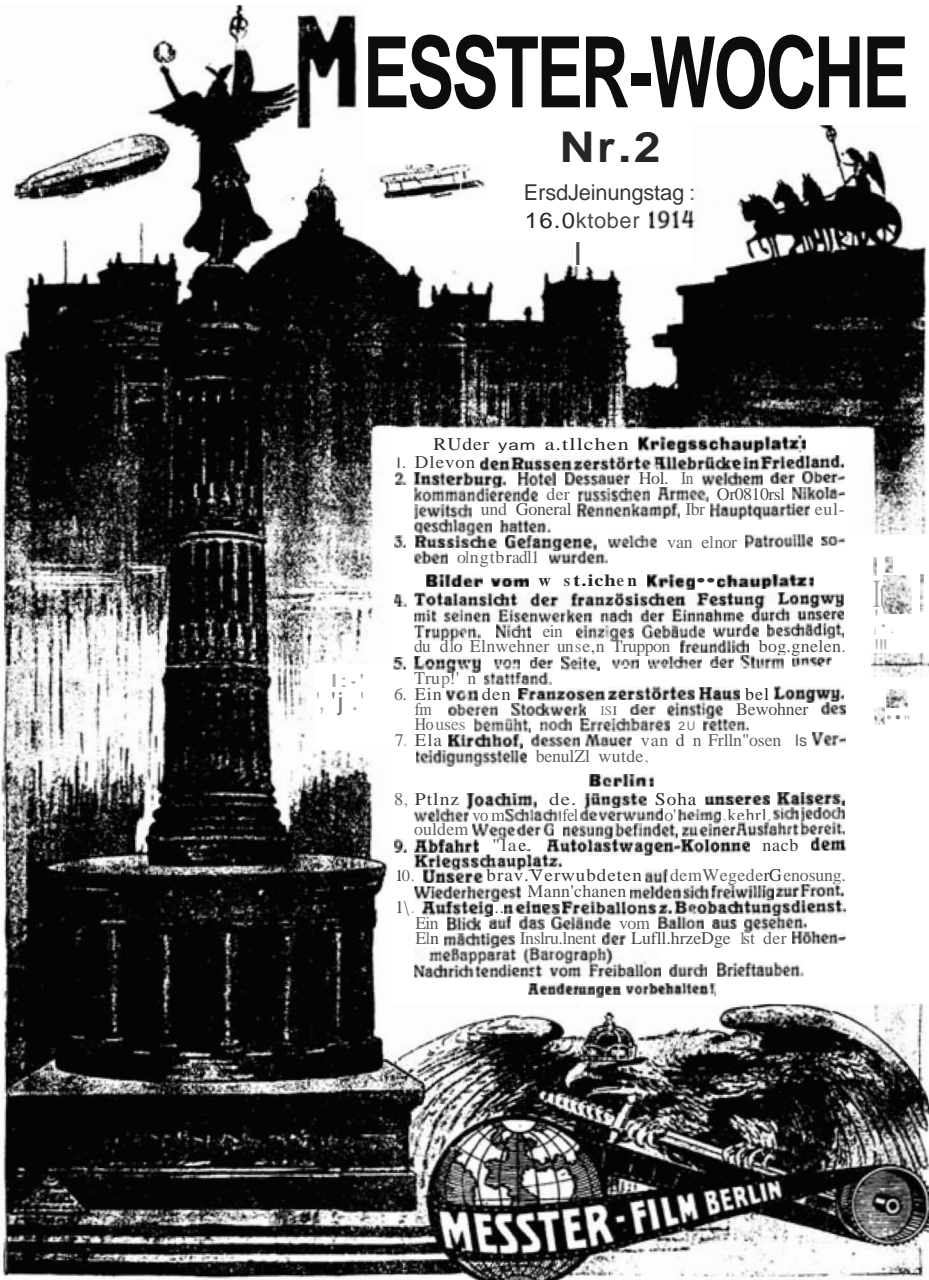
1. The company must be completely German, must be controlled by men of a patriotic, German persuasion, must have sufficient capital and work within the German currency area.
2. The company must use only German recording equipment, German manufacturing apparatus and German film stock, and the entire factory must be company-owned.

3. The company must not only have a reputation for reliability in every respect, but must also be responsible for dispatching representatives to the theatre of war. Photographing in the theatre of war and in territories captured by German troops is subject to the approval of the chief of the general staff of the military in the field. Applications should be addressed to the press department of the military's deputy general staff. The recording of cinematographic material requires a special licence. Photographs and cinematographic footage may only be reproduced, distributed and exhibited with the prior permission of the military censor. The activity of photographers and reporters without a pass from the general staff is strictly prohibited.¹⁸

From the daily press one can gather that among the firms in possession of the necessary papers were Messter-Films, Eiko Films, the Württemberg-based Express-Film, which had already been making 'newsreels' before the war, and the Bavarian company Martin Knopf, Munich.¹⁹ What is certain is that in the first months of the war several newsreels were shown in German cinemas. Most of them offered regular footage from the front, but the Griinspan newsreels specialised in films of the Reich.²⁰ During the entire war period, however, only Eiko and Messter-Film produced newsreels with any regularity. When war broke out, the deputy high command banned a large number of feature films on account of the state of emergency, with the result that cinema suffered from a shortage of feature films. This was accompanied by a decline in cinema audiences. The public that did remain demanded above all images fitting the gravity of the moment. In order to meet this demand, many cinemas supplied films of troop mobilisation which the public responded to with lively interest. These films included shots of great commanders, propaganda cartoons, picture puzzles, portraits of battles, and old, partially re-cut films of military exploits on land and sea, as well as historical footage from conquered overseas territories and patriotic feature films.

The representation of the war in the cinemas was very much in line with general reporting. It was from the newly established war magazines that films took over the depiction of scenes from frontier areas located well away from enemy lines, cities, street signs, mass marches, individual soldiers, and military transport.²¹ The first war edition of *EIKO-WOCHE*, which came out on 11 September 1914, followed the style of general photographic or cinematographic reporting.²² The advertising for it in the trade press contained promises of exclusive footage from the theatre of war. Unfortunately, this footage has been lost, and we can only speculate whether the promised sequences were postponed (since at this point there were still no camera operators at the front) or never shot.

Under pressure from intensified film censorship, the standards set by news reporting before the war had to be relinquished.²³ In the first weeks of the war, the lack of war films made it impossible to supply the press and the cinema with reporting based on actual events. The reaction of producers and theatre-owners to the ban on filming at the front was one of patriotic compliance, mixed with demands to allow the public to participate in the historical course of events in the cinemas.²⁴ In an attempt to cash in on the lack of genuinely



MESSTER-WOCHE

Nr.2

Erstausgabe: 16. Oktober 1914

Rüder vom a. tlichen Kriegsschauplatz:

1. Die von den Russen zerstörte Alleebücke in Friedland.
2. Insterburg. Hotel Dessauer Hof. In welchem der Oberkommandierende der russischen Armee, Oberst Nikolaewitsch und General Rennenkampf, ihr Hauptquartier eulgeschlagen hatten.
3. Russische Gefangene, welche von einer Patrouille soeben eingetradet wurden.

Bilder vom w. st. lichen Kriegsschauplatz:

4. Totalansicht der französischen Festung Longwy mit seinen Eisenwerken nach der Einnahme durch unsere Truppen. Nicht ein einziges Gebäude wurde beschädigt, die Einwohner unserer Truppen freundlich aufgenommen.
5. Longwy von der Seite, von welcher der Sturm unserer Truppen stattfand.
6. Ein von den Franzosen zerstörtes Haus bei Longwy. Im oberen Stockwerk ist der einstige Bewohner des Hauses bemüht, noch Erreichbares zu retten.
7. Ein Kirchof, dessen Mauer von den Feinden als Verteidigungsstelle benutzt wurde.

Berlin:

8. Prinz Joachim, der jüngste Sohn unseres Kaisers, welcher vom Schlachtfeld verwundet heimkehrte, sich jedoch auf dem Wege der Genesung befindet, zu einer Ausfahrt bereit.
9. Abfahrt der Autolastwagen-Kolonnen nach dem Kriegsschauplatz.
10. Unsere brave Verbundeten auf dem Wege der Genesung. Wiederhergestellte Mannschaften melden sich freiwillig zur Front.
11. Aufsteigen eines Freiballons zum Beobachtungsdienst. Ein Blick auf das Gelände vom Ballon aus gesehen. Ein mächtiges Instrument der Luftfahrt ist der Höhenmeßapparat (Barograph). Nachrichtendienst vom Freiballon durch Brieftauben. Änderungen vorbehalten!

Advertisement for MESSTER-WOCHE. no. 2. 16 October 1914

new footage, they passed off historic recordings as new ones, scenes of manoeuvres as war scenes, and footage shot well behind the theatre of war as shots from the front.²⁵ This tendency to create or re-create war films characterised the first weeks of the war and became part of a widespread practice which continued throughout the war.

Fears about espionage led to banning in parts of the country of the first war newsreels, which were censored by the General Staff. In all the cities in which they were shown, the public proved enthusiastic. Against this background, advertising and trailers for the weekly newsreels filled much of the space in the press that had previously been reserved exclusively for feature films. Other advertising techniques, initiated particularly by Messter-Film, presented the imprint of bogus telegrams²⁶ or trailers,²⁷ stressing the particular proximity to the front of the recordings and mentioning the dangers this involved for the cameraman.

The high command's granting of permission for the production of newsreels aroused both economic and other expectations. Newsreels were seen as a link between the real front and the home front that could help those at home to 'create a consoling picture of the courage, joy in victory and the good humour among those who had left for war.'²⁸ The films were also celebrated as a 'great cultural factor,' which could 'act as an absolutely authentic record of inestimable value.'²⁹ On the grounds of this authenticity, the newsreels were seen as 'highly valuable contemporary documents (...) which will retain a sense of the new for many decades to come,' and for this reason there were calls for the creation of an archive to house the material.³⁰ There is little doubt that such statements also helped enhance the social status of the cinema in general. At the same time, these expectations sprang from a basic consensus of opinion among the population that they were being shown authentic documentary material which depicted the war in its entirety until the end of 1914.

Newsreels 1915-1916

Around Christmas 1914 it became clear that the war would not be won quickly. As a result of the blockade and the restrictions it entailed, the mood of the German population underwent a transformation from the enthusiasm of the first months of the war to a more sullen mood of survival. In this new environment the newsreels met their first criticism, directed on the one hand at the censor, who was blamed for the fact that films were 'increasingly losing their appeal.'³¹ Doubts also began to be voiced concerning the worth of the films. Shortly afterwards, the criticism became even more explicit:

None of the current reporting really follows events on the ground. The war newsreels are an indiscriminate hotchpotch of genre shots and episodes which could be shown today just as well as next week, considering how little actual news they contain (...). The public has long since lost interest in this kind of genre film.³²

The trade press, keen to give cinema audiences the most accurate picture possible of events at the front, called for more camera operators to be sent there, supporting their demand with

the argument that propaganda was better in other countries.³¹ The German footage from the front was deemed inadequate: 'what have been offered to the public as war films are in fact not war films at all but only genre shots which could easily have been filmed in Grunewald.'³⁴ Many shots from the front looked pieced-together, haphazard and unconvincing, with little evidence of destroyed buildings or people moving about naturally.³⁵ Other typical scenes featured soldiers clearing up and repairing buildings attacked by the enemy, or the sports and leisure pursuits of the soldier in battle dress. They depicted the war as 'a beautiful nature film featuring military exercises, and devoid of any unpleasantness.'³⁶ The limited freedom of movement enjoyed by the camera operators at the front meant that they were usually unable to come up with more than such 'harmless images.' By March 1915 cinema audiences were beginning to regard the war newsreel as something of an annoying interruption in the evening's programme which had in the meantime returned to entertainment fare.³⁷

While the newspapers were able to report past events as time went on, war footage once banned was not allowed to be shown even at a later date. The vast majority of this footage was in fact destroyed by the censor.³⁸ The rest was put in one of the film archives set up during the war by the General Staff.³⁹ As a result of the censor's decisions, up-to-the-minute material was scattered far and wide, leaving 'not a single hint for the enemy.' Death could only be presented in the form of war graves, and the wounded were shown only with bandages and on the road to recovery. Furthermore, it was forbidden to focus on modern weaponry, such as certain types of ship, heavier artillery, aeroplanes and logistical equipment.⁴⁰ These restrictions combined to prevent the filming and exhibition of genuine battle scenes or other scenes of war that would have been of interest to the public at home.

Under these conditions the authorities claimed, rather disingenuously: 'We do not actually own any war reportage on film.'⁴¹ In many newsreels the deficit had to be compensated for with intertitles. As a result, the war was experienced in the cinema more in the form of a kind of 'film writing' than of 'film showing.' The following example comes from a Messter newsreel:

The title reads: 'A modern battlefield' but all you see is an empty field. The title reads: 'A French pilot tries to destroy German positions with his bombs, etc.' and what you see is a shot of clouds in which, if you squint your eyes, you can just about make out a tiny, moving point in the distance! The title reads: 'A telescope on the dunes' and all you see is a group of officers looking through a pair of binoculars into the distance. (...) 'A soldiers' swimming pool behind the front.' That's what war is.⁴²

By the summer of 1915 small, handy tripods and a range of other equipment had been developed to enable the camera operators to work even when under enemy fire.⁴³ Yet the content of their films did not change. This is indicated in an account from the summer of 1916 of the ironically bemused reactions of soldiers at the front to the war footage: 'The

insincerity of these patchwork war films provokes universal hilarity. The whole place fairly shakes with laughter. What those at home gaze at in wonder is derided mercilessly here.⁴⁴

In the summer of 1916, the only two companies still making newsreels were Eiko and Messter. This development can only partly be explained by the content of the films. We should also take into account the high cost and the enormous effort involved in producing a newsreel. Such efforts were only profitable as long as broad sections of the population went to the cinema chiefly to watch 'the news.' The public's rush to see footage of the war was limited, however, to the first months of the war when everyone was volunteering for service and expectations of a swift end to the war were high. As the euphoria abated, under conditions of entrenched warfare and the blockade, and as the war became less and less a heroic carnival and more part of everyday life, the public's interest in the war newsreel faded. The images they contained no longer corresponded to the public's idea of war formed by the various representations of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71: troops advancing, cavalry attacks, man-to-man combat, colorful uniforms, etc. As early as 1909, General Schlieffen, pointing to the new technology of war, had drawn attention to the fact that in the future wars would be fought on seemingly empty battlefields.⁴⁵ This view was borne out in the pictures of the war in the Balkans, which were shown with little success in German cinemas at the end of 1913 and early 1914. They could offer the audience 'little of interest.'⁴⁶ This development continued in World War I. It offered next to no opportunities for traditional adventure, the soldier's role being largely defined by technology. Trench warfare was unsuitable for filming, and the recordings made by the few camera operators allowed to film on the front line often showed immobile soldiers, shot under poor lighting conditions.

Representations of the Military in the Second Half of the War

With the exception of the then very popular war dramas, during the first half of the war the presence of war in the cinemas was limited almost exclusively to the war newsreel. In addition, only a few films were shown, dealing for example with the rehabilitation of war invalids⁴⁷ or techniques for training war dogs.⁴⁸

After the nomination of Hindenburg as Head of the Supreme Military Command in the summer of 1916, this situation underwent certain profound changes. Many leading personalities of the Reich, including a large number of military men, had by then become convinced that 'film was the best form of propaganda in war time.' It was thought that 'the viewer sees not only with his heart but with his soul and his feelings.'⁴⁹ As a result of this conviction, from the fifth war loan of the summer of 1916 onwards, regular and lavishly produced promotional films were shown alongside the newsreels⁵⁰ to encourage the German people to sign up for the war bonds. That same year the Gennan Naval League began producing films again. It promoted its goals in the cinemas in the second half of the war⁵¹ with the film *STOLZ WEHT DIE FLAGGE SCHWARZ-WEISS-ROT* ('The black-white-and-red Flag flutters with Pride'), and it promoted its social institutions with 'an old people's and

invalids' home.⁵² Deutsche Bioscop showed anti-French and anti-Russian films such as *DIE MAROKKODEUTSCHEN IN DER GEWALT DER FRANZOSEN* and *DER KNUTE ENTFLOHEN*. In Berlin, film producers, with state support, founded the 'Freie Vereinigung zur Förderung des Lichtspielwesens in gemeinnützigem, vaterländischen Sinne' ('The Association for the Promotion of Cinema for the Benefit of the Public and the Fatherland'), which had as its goal improving the procurement of propaganda material for films.⁵³ The Royal Saxony War Ministry, for instance, commissioned Messter to produce footage of troops from Saxony at the front, in order to 'provide those at home with a faithful picture of the life of their loyal sons out there, far away on the scene of bloody conflict.'⁵⁴ In addition, Deulig, founded in 1917, produced a series of partly staged industrial films⁵⁵ such as *AUS DES DEUTSCHEN REICHES WAFFENSCHMIEDE* or *DEUTSCHE SCHUHFABRIKATION IM KRIEGE*, which were intended to demonstrate the productivity of the German war economy. Various films of German cities and countryside by the same firm were also intended to strengthen the spectator's love for his or her homeland.

A key change came following a request from Austria that the Reich provide support for the production of promotional films to be shown primarily in the Balkans. On 8 August 1916, the Military Film and Photography Unit was set up in section IIIB of the General Staff.⁵⁶ A circular issued by the war ministry in August 1916 emphasised that the goal of the new unit was to 'bring to other neutral countries films of much greater potency than those previously made, which would represent the mass effect of our military, economic and industrial achievements.'⁵⁷ A few days later the war ministry wrote to the Imperial Chancellor and the Imperial Ministry of the Interior calling for the production of propaganda films which would bring about 'a boost to the civilians' morale' on a mass scale. During the interval dramatic or comic presentations were to be shown, since the cinema audience could 'not be fed with war footage and industrial films alone.'⁵⁸ Both of these documents indicate a transformation in the perceived value of film among those at top levels of the military command. In connection with the total mobilisation of all forces for the war, film was increasingly regarded as a form of propaganda from a military viewpoint. This was particularly true of non-fiction films about war, industrial plants, banking, the economy and shots of the countryside, which were increasingly produced in the period that followed. But the visible success of this new strategy came up against three main obstacles. The first was connected with the organisational structure of film production and exhibition. Complete responsibility for all issues relating to cinema fell to the deputy military commanders of the army and fortifications.⁵⁹ The lack of a clear command structure and of clearly defined roles within the 24 different army corps as far as cinematic matters were concerned made a nationwide communications policy virtually impossible in the subsequent period. Secondly, all the power of decision-making on essential matters concerning propaganda lay in the hands of the military command - men who had been raised to put the nation and their loyalty to the Kaiser before everything else. As a result their value judgements were oriented more towards the nation-state (a state built on power) than towards a nation of the people.

Both the nation-state and the 'power state' demanded society's deference to all things military. The assertion of power and of power politics was assumed unquestioningly, leaving little room for thinking in terms of the manipulation of melodrama and sentiment.⁶⁰ Thirdly, the cinema, particularly in the provinces, was one of the few forms of public entertainment available during the war. Due largely to the strictly limited range of entertainment on offer, audiences were generally 'more repelled than attracted'⁶¹ by programmes designed as educational propaganda. Under these conditions cinema owners had to reconcile two partly contradictory positions: They had to attract a public seeking diversion and entertainment, while also needing to defer to the cinema reformers – still active in the second half of the war – by demonstrating the indispensability of the cinemas as a place of patriotism and 'attitudes loyal to the fatherland.'⁶²

As a result of the establishment of the Military Photographic and Film Department, members of the imperial army took over the production of special films of the front, a task considered by the supreme command too important to be left to civilians.⁶³ While the newsreels were generally 'recorded a safe distance away from the real war', the official war films produced by the new film department would show real pictures from the front. The first film of this kind was *MACKENSENS SIEGESZUG DURCH DIE DOBRUDSCHA* (1916),⁶⁴ featuring the capture of Romania. It was followed in January 1917 by *BEI UNSEREN HELDEN AN DER SOMME*, which was greatly fêted in the German press, but met with little success in neutral or friendly foreign countries, not least because it was compared unfavourably with the British Somme films.⁶⁵ As part of an intensification of propagandistic activities, 30 January 1917 saw the inauguration of the BuFA (Bild- und Filmamt),⁶⁶ the brainchild of the film section of the foreign office, which produced several official films. Many of the images shown in these official propaganda films were also incorporated into the newsreels. Particularly since towards the end of the war the mood in Germany increasingly degenerated from one of endurance to one of fatalism, the newsreels' lack of footage that could grip the public became a major concern.⁶⁷ The distributors of German newsreels in neutral foreign countries were forever communicating to Germany that the content of the propaganda films was identical to that of the newsreels, with the result that the film theatres in question were 'often empty or could only muster a bored public in their place.'⁶⁸

Besides, all the restrictions placed on the newsreels were also placed on the official films. Despite the change in attitude towards film as a medium compared with that of the pre-war period and the first half of the war, the restrictions on content remained.⁶⁹ As a result of these restrictions on content, the overwhelming majority of the preserved footage gives the impression of a war that had been traditional in nature and which had simply been given an added dimension in the form of new weaponry. None of the suffering, death, dehumanisation, nor the destruction of the countryside, of cities or of industry itself, all of which were part of this war, are to be found in the images of war from 1914-1918 – images which continue to shape our visual memory even today.⁷⁰

There is little evidence in most of the feature films of the period of the kind of

footage seen in *THE BATTLE OF ISONZO*. It came to German cinemas within a week.⁷¹ In terms of actuality, the newsreel of the *LANDING ON THE ISLAND OF OESEL* was also an exception, since this too was shown a mere matter of days after the event. The film, premiered at the end of October 1917, can also be regarded as remarkable by virtue of its content. Whereas war films tended to show only armed forces, this one focused on the interaction between land, air and sea forces in the taking of the island and in doing so highlighted the horrifying dimension of the war. Genuine battle scenes, however, are also missing. The film shows material, heavy guns, horses and soldiers being loaded into huge ships on the quayside at Riga. After shots of the crossing, there follow scenes of the unloading of the motorcycle divisions, the infantry and the horses, at the end of which we are shown Russian prisoners and a captured radio station.

Many of the problems could be traced to the austerity brought on by war, which in any case considerably thwarted the making of films.⁷² But the German film propaganda also faced the problem of the length of newsreels and BuFA productions. Generally, the films were relatively short and could therefore only be used as a filler, the usual practice in Germany's large theatres being to show only two long films. The Austro-Hungarian film market would refuse short films altogether. In Scandinavia only a small number of first-class short films were taken up.⁷³ In Germany official films and newsreels could usually only be shown in small or medium-sized theatres and in cinemas on the front, run by the BuFA. A prerequisite for the marketability of propaganda films was that they formed part of a package which included entertainment films.⁷⁴

In August 1918 there was general agreement among the participants at a conference in the headquarters of the Foreign Office that fundamental changes were required in newsreels.⁷⁵ As in previous years, a few cosmetic alterations were suggested, but the conference failed to agree on fundamental changes to production. The Foreign Office gave its support to a plan that would enable Messter-Film to film also in friendly foreign countries, making newsreels more attractive to foreign audiences. Despite all the shortcomings of Messter newsreels, from this point on, Messter was assured that couriers from the ministry would, if need be, transport his newsreels to these countries.⁷⁶

Immediately after the war, the *Kinematograph* published the following retrospect which might stand as something like an epitaph:

The last year of the war also brought the last war newsreels. Far be it from us to speak ill of the dead, but these war newsreels, which were gradually dying off of their own accord anyway, were not only a burden on the film programme, they were also an annoyance. They were boring and largely undeserving of their title, often being pieced together from old material rather than portraying the war. And what is more, the public was only too aware of it.⁷⁷