



The cameraman is shooting a picture of (left to right): the German-born, American journalist Karl von Wiegand; the British journalist Grace Marguerite, Lady Drummond-Hay; journalist and author Rolf Brandt; and Robert Hartmann, Chief of Fox Movietone News, September 1928. Wikimedia Commons.

Rolf Brandt and a Conservative Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Rolf Brandt (1886–1953) was a German journalist, author, and political commentator. His first work was as a war reporter on the Eastern Front during the opening months of the Great War (World War I). His reports appeared in several important German newspapers (*Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Zeitung*) and were compiled and published in 1915 as *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* (Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports). Brandt's reports were more than just army-approved press releases. He wrote in a way that constructed a bridge between the home front and the front lines. In the process he employed techniques now associated with literary journalism. With a clear point of view, he told his story through a sequence of scenes, instead of a simple historical narrative, and included genuine dialogue and status details. While scholars of German literary journalism point to Egon Erwin Kisch as the originator of German literary journalism, this study suggests Brandt should be considered an early practitioner of literary journalism in the German language. More interestingly, Brandt's particular brand of literary journalism had an unmistakably conservative nationalist perspective, thus suggesting that it is possible to have a conservative form of literary journalism.

Keywords: Rolf Brandt – Germany – Russia — World War I – propaganda – conservative literary journalism

Our small Serbian horses step on the planks of the mighty bridge. The guard gives us back our war reporter credentials, the iron gate opens, and we travel across the summery, calm stream. Through the heavy metal lattice work we see the small Prussian town that will give us quarter. The red brick buildings with their resemblance to the Marienburger style stretch themselves out in the late-summer sun.

In ten minutes, we have traveled over the bridge that has one of the largest spans in Europe; on its top is a powerful wire entanglement that will be reinforced. A flower bed of tall, pointed iron rods which are interconnected in all directions by strong barbed wire: Flower beds that would blossom full of bloody red roses, if the Russians should try to enter here.¹

With those opening lines from his first war report, Rolf Brandt (1886–1953) set the stage for his audience. He was going to take his readers into a different world. The iron gate and bridge separated Brandt's readers from the war, and it was his task to cross that divide by relaying back to the reading public his experiences in this harsh and different world. This world was not just different because of the fighting; it was different because of who they were fighting and how their opponents conducted themselves. His reports were carried in several important German newspapers and were compiled in a small book published in 1915, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* (Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports).² Brandt's reports were more than simple army-approved press releases about German victories. Rather, he constructed a narrative that builds a bridge between the battle front and the home front. If, as David Eason suggests, the New Journalism consciously conceives of reporting "as a linguistic and cultural act" that uses language to mediate understanding of an event for both writer and audience,³ then the writings of German author and journalist Brandt suggest he deserves consideration as an early figure in German literary journalism.

German Literary Journalism, the Public Sphere, and War

Caterina Kostenzer argues that the beginning of the twentieth century was a particularly important time in the history of German literary journalism, because that was when the genre might be considered to have become an independent form of writing.⁴ In her history on the origins of German literary journalism, Kostenzer identifies the travelogue as the precursor to modern literary journalism and points to the early sixteenth century as an important period in the evolution of travelogues. Kostenzer notes that Vespucci's and Columbus's negative depictions of Native American Indians and "barbarians" could be used to justify future rule over the New World and its people.⁵

Kostenzer writes that, since the seventeenth century,

. . .there is a lively exchange between many newspaper writers and travelogue authors, and that they influence each other by telling newspapers about various travelers and their experiences, while in turn serving the newspapers as sources of information. These developments are particularly important because the newspapers—as well as the literature and thus also the travel reports of the time—are put into service of the Enlightenment.⁶

Jürgen Habermas identifies the literary processing of bourgeois travel as an indication of the structural change of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*).⁷ Kostenzer argues that the creation of the public sphere would increase the politicization of travelogues, with the work of Heinrich Heine serving as the pinnacle of the genre. "In his *Reisenbildern* Heine takes a very erratic and associative approach, renouncing a linear narrative style and instead, in a hitherto unusual attention to detail, puts a critical examination of the politics of the past in the foreground."⁸ Heine's method would help set the stage of the "expressionistic travel reports" that emerge in the feuilletons at the end of the nineteenth century that characterizes what Kostenzer identified as a "marked politicization or cosmopolitanization of literature."⁹ The Austrian writer Max Winter was the first German writer to produce an investigative example of social reportage with the publication of *Das schwarze Wienerherz*.¹⁰

Kostenzer argues that theories of *radical constructivism* could be employed to establish literary reportage as something different from both literature and journalism. The crucial point here is the idea that "the reproduction of reality without exception always includes its construction. Thus, the traditional idea that literature can mimic the reality is finally rejected and instead the character of the construction is deliberately emphasized."¹¹ The implications for this position are far reaching. From this perspective absolute objectivity cannot be achieved, and any claim of objectivity means that the writer's words "reflect the reality experiences and beliefs of the largest possible number of readers."¹² Siegfried Kracauer identifies the importance, as well as the limitations, of this approach:

One hundred reports from a factory cannot be added to the reality of the factory, but remain a hundred factory views for all eternity. Reality is a construction. Certainly life has to be observed to begin. By no means, however, is it contained in the more or less accidental observation of the reportage; rather, it lies solely in the mosaic which is formed from the individual observations on the basis of the knowledge of their content. The reporter photographed life; such a mosaic would be his picture.¹³

The mosaic that Kracauer spoke of is what helped give literary journalism a modernist aesthetic. Instead of claiming to write about an objective

reality, writers conveyed the truth of an event through a cultural lens that frames the kinds of choices the author can make. David Eason observes that New Journalism derives its energy from the shifting relationship between the individual and society, where meaning was created in the various subcultures of a fragmented society.¹⁴ The phenomenon known as literary journalism as it continued to emerge in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s was associated with writers on the left, such as Egon Erwin Kisch and John Reed.¹⁵ In the German context, Kisch (1885–1948) is credited with having developed literary reportage and is generally regarded as the most prominent German-language practitioner of literary journalism in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

There are two important points to take away from this introduction to the evolution of the German literary journalism. First is the observation that travelogues could be used for political purposes, notably to justify imperial conquests. On this point, Edward Said's notion of Orientalism is useful to illuminate Brandt's views of Russia. Said identifies three mutually supporting levels of Orientalism, with the first one pertaining to individuals whose academic specialties dealt with the Orient. The second level is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) the 'Occident'."¹⁷ The institutions, corporate or governmental, that claimed the ability or authority to describe, teach, colonize, or rule over the Orient comprise the third form of Orientalism. In short, Orientalism is a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. For some German thinkers, the Orient extended to their eastern border in the form of the Empire of the Slavs. This brand of German Orientalism was an intellectual authority that enabled Germans to pass judgment on Russia.¹⁸

The second takeaway from the introduction is that the method of delivery of literary reportage highlights the power of the genre. Newspapers were founded as a method of relaying information to the public quickly and cheaply. In Germany before the Great War, also known as World War I, most major papers had both morning and evening editions, and that did not include the numerous *Sonderausgaben* (special editions) designed to get information out before competitors. The relaying of information is crucial for an informed public wishing to participate in the public sphere. Here Habermas's definition of the public sphere as a place where private persons' (people not involved with ruling or the state) concerns and interests can challenge public officials is useful.¹⁹ Peter Fritzsche has suggested that the Great War was the event that actually completed the process of German unification.²⁰ One consequence of this unification was a citizenry that was more involved in public affairs, and the war was an important topic of discussion in the public sphere.

The German government could censor sensitive military information, but it could not stop all discussion of the war. Newspapers were the most important source of information for the public regarding the war and could become an important battleground for debate on how to frame the war.

The conditions of war alter the nature of the public sphere and restrict public discourse. As a result, Habermas's understanding of the public sphere as the place where individuals could challenge officials and force them to legitimize their power and policies becomes problematic due to the increase in government authority that usually accompanies armed conflict. Once a state of war was declared in Imperial Germany, in accordance with the *Gesetz über den Belagerungszustand vom 4. Juni 1851* (Law on the State of Siege, June 4, 1851), the government had the right to censor the press in the interest of national security.²¹ The government exercised this right freely, shutting down the *Vorwärts* (the newspaper of the SPD [*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*], the German Social Democratic Party) twice in September 1914. During a war, it might be more useful to think of Oskar Negt's understanding of the public sphere, where "Öffentlichkeit is the creation of a communication and action core in which a consciousness of interest is formed and barriers to the exchange of information and the comparison of experience can be broken."²² While this definition of the public sphere is employed to discuss the literary journalistic efforts of the left (e.g., Kisch and Günter Wallraff), it can also apply to an endeavor with more conservative intentions. Brandt's reporting could break down the barriers that existed between the home front and the front lines in order to maintain support for the troops and, by extension, the war.

The present study argues Brandt's war reportage should be included among the early examples of the literary journalism form in Germany. Brandt's work is absent from discussions about German literary journalism. Neither does his name appear in any of the German or English language literature on the subject. Moreover, the lack of prior work on Brandt requires a different method in assessing whether or not his war writings should be included in discussions of German literary journalism. One approach—which is taken here—is to compare Brandt's techniques with characteristics of literary journalism and with the work of Kisch, a contemporary writer who is included in other studies of the practitioners of literary journalism.

Matthias Harder, placing Kisch's work within the discussion of 1930s reportage, draws on Walter Benjamin's use of the oppositional, that is, contrasting concepts of *erzählen* vs. *informieren* (narrating vs. informing). Benjamin wrote, "The information has its reward at the moment in which it was new. It lives only at this moment, it has to surrender itself to the moment

completely and must clarify itself immediately. The story is different; it does not exhaust itself. It preserves its strength and is still capable of development for a long time."²³

Georg Lukács considered reportage to be an illustrative form of information,²⁴ but in Kisch's work reportage attained a quality that mere information lacked. Harder continued, noting that Kisch's reportage did not simply represent a "hybrid" of its historical-social constellation.²⁵ The special feature of the literary report appeared to be how it dealt with the opposition narrative versus informing. Kisch uses the report as a representation form of the information, in order to get the communicability of various experiences.²⁶

So, while Benjamin may lament that "the art of the narrative is coming to an end,"²⁷ Kisch preserved its inner power by imbuing reportage with literary quality by developing literary reportage. In this way he succeeded in portraying the experiences of everyday life in such a way that they did not remain in a formal plane, but rather brought out their epic quality. Kisch himself was therefore no less than a raging reporter.²⁸

Brandt similarly used his reports to more fully communicate various experiences to his readers. The serial nature of Brandt's reports also made them an ideal platform to practice literary journalism. Wallraff, a later practitioner of the form, talked about the importance of "agitation through facts."²⁹ In an important sense, that is what Brandt was attempting. Drawing from the past to support the present, he was agitating for support in an epic struggle that would shape Germany's future and employing techniques that Tom Wolfe would later identify as crucial to the New Journalism.³⁰ According to Wolfe, the writer needed to tell a story "through a sequence of scenes rather than simple historical narration."³¹ The writer also needed to use genuine dialogue and include status details (i.e., information that indicated the subjects were aware of their place in society). Finally, the author had to have a clear point of view, setting the scene through a particular set of eyes.³² This last characteristic was particularly important for German literary journalism. Beate Josephi and Christine Müller, citing Klaus, maintain that the point of view had to be authentic, which meant lived experience.³³ So in order to write about the war, one needed to have lived through it. This study argues that Brandt's reports met those criteria. Brandt wove together various reports covering a variety of experiences that promoted the virtues of the German army, German culture, and the German monarchy into a vivid picture defending the German cause. In the process, Brandt created a conservative form of literary journalism, meaning that his literary efforts were directed towards supporting what would be considered more conservative political goals.

Brandt wrote in the foreword to his collected reports, "My heart stood

silent at what I saw and I promised myself I would not write if I did not feel it."³⁴ Brandt's emphasis on the authenticity of feeling and fact in his reports made him one of the earliest German practitioners of what came to be called literary journalism, though his politics and perspective may have led to his being overlooked as an early practitioner of the genre. His war reports were a montage of scenes that implicitly juxtaposed Germany and Russia. German soldiers, conduct, and culture were presented as clearly superior to their Russian counterparts. Brandt's closing observations on a series of reports that were grouped together as "Tannenberg" in his compilation illustrate his approach to his task:

[The reader] expects, for instance, a detailed description of the Battle of Tannenberg. That is completely out of the question. A battlefield that spans over eighty kilometers, a battle composed of hundreds of individual battles, skirmishes on the scale of a "previous" battle, can hardly be depicted a year later by correctly bringing together [accounts] from hundreds of individual reports, in such a way that one gets a true picture of the giant battle. Untrue images from the mouth of a fellow fighter hastily thrown together can, of course, be disseminated further. But all my effort and work will be aimed at avoiding the war gossip. One should see in these pages a reflection of . . . how exceedingly wonderfully our German army lives and triumphs. Those who cannot be there should not believe the dust of rumors, but rather that they are seeing from a distance the silent splendor of our eastern army.³⁵

Brandt's request revealed that he was conscious of his audience and he was putting thought into how he presented his material to his readers. In a deft rhetorical move, Brandt asked for the reader's trust while simultaneously framing his reports with a cultural perspective on the war that had political implications. Brandt's accounts are a reminder of Evelyn Copley's observation about First World War narratives and the difficulty of conceiving "an objective world entirely divorced from a socio-historically situated subject."³⁶ Brandt employed language that was intended to move his audience.

Throughout his reports, Brandt constantly compared German and Russian soldiers in a variety of fashions: how they fought, how they handled civilians, how they treated animals, and how they tended their surroundings. Brandt used his platform to create a conservative narrative that extolled the virtues of the German military, government, and culture, and by extension, the war effort.

The Russian Foe

For Brandt, the Russian army was a reflection of Russian culture. In spite of great natural advantages, in terms of both manpower and natural resources, the army was unable to employ these to their benefit due to the

backwardness of Russian culture. This backwardness was clear when observing how the Russian army operated. The (mis)conduct of Russian troops is a recurring theme in Brandt's reports. His report dated September 8, 1914, contrasted the conduct of the two occupying armies, Russian and German. Brandt began the report with the observation that the small city (Rössel) that was currently filled with German soldiers had, as recently as eight days ago, been occupied by Russian soldiers. According to residents, the first visit by the reconnaissance troops had been positive. The Russians paid for part of what they took and did not demand to be quartered by the residents. The second visit was a different story. Within two hours the commander had demanded a 30,000-mark contribution from the residents to the military. A vicar scrambled from door to door of the remaining residents and scraped together the sum demanded, and reported, "the majority gave the last that they had."³⁷ "The Commander raked in the money and gave back a thousand marks, 'because you had taken good care of our wounded'."³⁸ Brandt was certain the Russian government would see little of this contribution.

The viciousness of Russian soldiers towards civilians was a recurring topic in Brandt's reports:

Everywhere one hears stories of innocent civilians shot dead. It raises a chilling hatred that threatens to suffocate. When armies battle armies the horror is great, but the battle of men carries in its grisliness somewhat of a feeling of something larger that makes every little thing silent. The battle against women and old men that the Russian lead gives rise to a hate that only wants to destroy. Vermin must be eradicated. It will happen.³⁹

Brandt's account frames the war as a moral struggle as well as a military conflict.

Brandt took pains to recognize that rumors and exaggerations were a part of war. He therefore related only incidents that he himself had witnessed or came from what he considered to be unimpeachable sources. By making this claim, Brandt reinforced his own legitimacy as a source as well as the credibility of his reports. In one instance a well-known minister verified that the Russians had "stood ten men against a wall and shot them without reason; they had killed nurses in a barbaric manner; they had the ablest and cleverest artisans in the area and shot them in their cellars like a mad dog. They have put civil servants in the field and used them for shooting practice."⁴⁰ In a later report, Brandt related what a retired customs official told him about his wife's murder.⁴¹

For Brandt, the misconduct of Russian troops did not stop at the abuse of civilians. He noted that the Russian cavalry did not treat their horses properly—they simply rode them into the ground. Brandt related an adage,

"The Russians say: First comes the soldier, the horse comes not at all; for us [Germans], the first concern of the soldier is that his horse will be fed."⁴² "The Russians say: 'First comes the soldier, the horse comes not at all'; for us, the first concern of the soldier is that his horse will be fed." Brandt continued, asserting that care of the horses was something unknown to horses ridden by Cossacks. They were treated so poorly that it was impossible for a cavalry that handles horse in such a fashion to achieve military success. Brandt observed that the Russians were apparently complaining about the lack of horses. "Initially, the material was partly good, although the treatment was bad. Now both are evenly inferior: material and treatment."⁴³

The mistreatment of horses was, for Brandt, just one example of what he judged as a common characteristic in the Russian army: a mistreatment or misuse of resources. Brandt could not resist pointing out the shortcomings of Russian actions. Russian tactics always seemed to misfire. For example, the Russian artillery did not get the cover fire during a withdrawal quite right. "The withdrawal cover fire by the artillery does not always seem to be correct, even though the Russians are so adept at the planned withdrawal."⁴⁴ The idea that the Russians had to beat a hasty retreat was also a recurring theme for Brandt. In another report he noted that a finely constructed trench, complete with stuffed hay bags for mattresses, had to be abandoned before anyone could sleep in it.⁴⁵ Brandt was not the only reporter to note Russia's technical mishaps. On August 20, 1914, "the *Berliner Tageblatt* published a report of a Russian pilot who threw bombs from his airplane that did not explode."⁴⁶

The Russians could not seem to take advantage of military opportunities. Brandt observed that a Russian airplane was overhead, above a German battery. The pilot could see clearly that the German battery was under a small cloud, and the Russians had the good fortune to be able to use that as a marker. "But he makes no use of this target marker."⁴⁷ The Russians continued to fire into the woods at the infantry. The commander took this opportunity to relate to Brandt a story of how the Russians had once shot down three of their own planes.⁴⁸ A later report would also note that it was astonishing the Russians did not do a good job of making use of natural markers to help direct military fire. In this particular case, it was a mill that the Germans themselves were using for marking. Brandt could not understand why the Russians did not fire on the mill. Fearing that he had perhaps spoken too soon, he noted, "Now the Russian shrapnel clouds, that for a long time, with almost comical regularity, were landing a few hundred meters behind the mill—always in the same spot where there was a small orchard—appear suddenly in front of the mill."⁴⁹ Fortunately for Brandt, the Russians were not able to take advantage of the adjustment because the German infantry had intervened.

The occasional mocking of the Russians did not diminish the brutality of battle. Brandt noted that the Russian dead lay in heaps on the battle field. One soldier was hit in the skull with shrapnel; his brain was swelling and oozing out, but his hand continued to shake. A German soldier was hit by gun fire and had “his face buried in the earth.”⁵⁰ Brandt came across another scene where two soldiers lay dead; one apparently had been trying to help the other.⁵¹

The German Soldiers

In Brandt’s reports, the depiction of German soldiers in battle demonstrated their superiority. It was after the Battle of Tannenberg that Brandt first met up with the German army. He began his report: “Hohenstein burned; the glowing gables of shattered homes threatened to plunge into the street; in the smoldering rubble lay Russian corpses, charred and still smoldering. . . . There we met up with the Army. It was already moving on. ‘We have certainly attacked the scum here,’ said to me a brave Sergeant, with his thumb pointing to the flaming city.”⁵² Brandt’s visit was met with approval by the officials. “‘It is appropriate that you visit once the *Landwehr*,’ said his Excellency. ‘The people deserve that one speaks of them. Now four days here at the bivouac on alert, from time to time Russian grenades. Damn cold nights. Ah, and Hohenstein . . .’”⁵³ The voice trailing off after mentioning the devastated town reflected both the official’s sadness and signified another hardship the soldiers faced: the destruction of their culture and the deaths of their compatriots. The task facing the *Landwehr* was a literal one. The German Army (*landwehr*) had to defend (*wehren*) their country (*land*).

Brandt fulfilled his duty to speak well of the soldiers. No matter how brutal the fighting was (and it was unimaginably brutal), the German soldiers were never shown in anything but a positive light, and their humanity was always present. More than once Brandt reported on troops singing as they marched in a way that transformed a familiar and sometimes worn-out song. He noted that when the soldiers sang “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,” it became fresh and bright, regaining a lost authenticity as the troops marched into the evening.⁵⁴ The humor of the soldiers was also present. In order to get Russian prisoners to move faster, one soldier advised that they run the way they did the day before (when they were trying to get away). That would be acceptable.

Brandt saw a truck with wounded German soldiers, and he remarked, “They are quiet and seem above all else disgusted that they cannot continue to pound the Russians until the end of the battle.”⁵⁵ The fortitude of the German soldiers was a constant theme in the reports; but this fortitude exacted a price. The war was hard for the soldiers. Brandt observed: “In the faces,

including those of the officers, one saw the hardships. The field beard did not cover all [the] sharp lines around their mouths that were the result of pursing their lips together.”⁵⁶ Even in death, the soldiers maintained their dignity. Brandt encountered a German soldier and his Russian counterpart lying dead in a trench, having killed each other with bayonets. He remarked that the German boy still had his gun held tightly thrusting forward and that his face turned to the side, but it had “a still and peaceful expression.”⁵⁷ The fallen boy’s expression gave Brandt the feeling the soldier knew he was in a victorious battle and that even in death he was still part of the victory.

Brandt’s depictions did not attempt to soften the horrors of war. In fact, he often went into great detail about the conditions of war (the noise, smoke, and confusion) and the grotesque impact of modern technology on the human body. What distinguishes Brandt’s accounts was that he did not see the suffering and sacrifice of the soldiers as pointless. Brandt’s soldiers were fighting to defend their fatherland from the Russian peril and did so willingly. His eyewitness account poses an interesting challenge to scholars of the Great War. It is tempting to side with Erich Maria Remarque’s view of war as expressed in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but Brandt’s account suggests that Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*⁵⁸ was more representative than generally acknowledged. One has to wonder if time has had an impact on post-war memoirs. What in hindsight is judged as a waste does not necessarily seem so at the time. Brandt presented a conservative nationalist case for the war.

The bravery and the humility of the soldiers were always present in Brandt’s depictions of encounters. His retelling of an exchange between an officer and some soldiers was a way to highlight these positive traits:

From the bag he [the Lieutenant Colonel] takes two small little packages [wrapped] in tissue paper and carefully unwraps them. Three Iron Crosses. In the other case are the bands. The people enter. Two soldiers and a reservist. They know what this is about. Their wan faces are a little embarrassed. The Lieutenant Colonel gives them a short speech. “Boys, because you recently did the patrol so well, because of Lyck, because of Bialla . . . I hope you continue to do your duty so well. . . .”⁵⁹

The captain instructed the three to write their mothers, and the sergeant noted that the reservist, a brash young man, “lit up like a Christmas tree.”⁶⁰ Brandt’s writing style underlines the scene he was setting. The simplicity of the sentences reinforces the authenticity of the scene, and of the soldiers. They were simple, earnest men who were just doing their duty. The scene was a sharp contrast to a Finnish soldier who had said a gun was constantly being pointing at him. Brandt’s respect for the German soldiers was always present. Brandt ended the report of his first encounter outside of Tannenberg,

remarking, “It is good luck to see the troops in the field, a gift to be permitted to report their victories and deeds. There is not a Russian army that can withstand them in the long run.”⁶¹ The emphasis here is on *Russian*. The Russians were thought not capable of defeating Germany. It is a sentiment that would carry through all of his reports.

Brandt conveyed the humanity of the German soldiers in a number of ways. It was often the sharing of a drink, cigarette, or meal that enabled the author to get more insight into the thoughts and lives of the soldiers. He noted that the soldiers had no idea what was going on at home and were clamoring for information. Such a statement could easily be interpreted as implying that people needed to write to the men doing their duty. The weather was also a way to create a bond with the fighting men. Brandt wrote:

The icy wind cuts the face when driving. At first you feel every muscle, but soon feel nothing at all. With great satisfaction, I decide that the woolen cap that covers the whole head, with only a section cut out for the face, does an excellent job. A cavalry patrol that just rode into the market of Filipowo, has the same disguise. The leader points to the cap and says to me briefly: “Good, no?” I nod with the most possible animation, because the wind takes my words away.”⁶²

In another instance, he mentioned a soldier who entered the room where Brandt was sleeping. Both were surprised to see the other. Brandt remarked, “We got along of course, and I still had some brandy in the field bottle; we warmed ourselves. The first frost had set in, and the situation of the furnace [in the room] seemed to have a catch. It burned, but the room did not get warmer.”⁶³ Brandt used these anecdotes to remind readers of the conditions that the soldiers endured and to solidify his own credibility because he was also enduring them. His use of dialogue drives his narrative in a particular direction, thus suggesting it was a conscious decision. This technique is a characteristic of literary journalism.

Brandt’s report on how one group of soldiers commemorated the Empress’s birthday was another example of his efforts to build a bridge between the home front and the front lines. The brief report described a church service attended by soldiers and citizens of all stations. Brandt claimed there was such a joyous atmosphere that it felt like Christmas, so much so that he expected to hear Christmas carols. These same services had, of course, occurred throughout Germany on the *Geburtstag der Landesmutter* (birthday of the nation’s mother).⁶⁴

Brandt’s discussion of the Christmas packages that were distributed to the soldiers is another attempt to create a bond between the two fronts:

“The great effort and love in these thousand six hundred packets,” says the Lieutenant. “You cannot believe how the poor and poorest toil to send the troops something. Poor hard hands knit the finest soft scarves, tired, anxious fingers bind such painstaking and pretty bundles together and wrap their thoughts and all their great feminine bravery with them. Now they also all have the feeling at the front that you care about them and care for them. Grog warms well; but every love warms here in the field, where not only the body freezes in dirt and wetness and deprivation. It is so: This time, the women fight our battles with us.”⁶⁵

It was clear that Brandt was hoping his reports would help raise the morale and efforts of the people at home while also providing sustenance to an information-starved civilian population.

Entering Russia

Once in Russia, Brandt constantly compared what he saw there with the way things were just beyond the border (in Germany). Entering into Russian territory confirmed Brandt’s preconceptions of Russia. As soon as he crossed the border, he noticed the difference. Even the smell was different in Russia. Travel was difficult in Russian-controlled Poland. In one report, entitled simply “The Russian Street,” Brandt noted with annoyance that the road to the train station was three times as long as it needed to be and was in such poor condition that it was even hard on horses. Finally, under the supervision of engineers, a new road was built. “On the one side white wood pillars and drainage and every ten meters was a lamppost. Traveling to the station was shortened by two thirds. The people were happy about their new road. ‘Now the war has brought something good,’ I said to an old woman, who shook her head in wonder. ‘Yes, but—it is for the time being the only thing!’ she reckoned.”⁶⁶

For Brandt, the above anecdote was emblematic of the general state of things on the Russian side of the border. Brandt noted that traveling from Filipowo to Przerosl fourteen days earlier would not have been possible by car. There was no proper path, but rather a stretch of land that was not being tilled at the time. It is worth pointing out that Brandt did not use the German word for street (*Strasse*), but instead used the word path (*Weg*) to identify the travel route. He credited German engineers for creating a passable street. “It is amazing how quickly the Russian paths can be improved by the German Army Command.”⁶⁷ Noting that he had traveled quite a few kilometers over the course of the past few days, he saw the results of German improvements everywhere. New roads were being built with proper drainage, and countless holes had been filled to make car travel possible. The improved roads took the author to new experiences that confirmed old prejudices. The drive allowed

him to observe long stretches of Russian land that he described as “dismal” (*trostlos*).⁶⁸ Areas that were difficult to till were simply abandoned and even the areas that were worked defied description. It was the same kind of land that lay a few miles beyond the border, but instead of grain, these fields appeared to be sown with stones. Brandt remarked,

It is not about a stretch [of land] that was not worked because of the war; one can clearly see the work, but the slovenliness with which it was handled is also clearly visible. The paltry and neglected impression of this field is almost depressing, [it] gives the landscape this remarkable, strange expression, which one a few kilometers beyond the border at first cannot fathom.⁶⁹

For Brandt, this stretch of land summed up his view of Russia: “This is Russia, as it is always presented in primitive fantasies. I know that there is another and magnificent Russia. I know that you cannot easily conceive the great country under a typical image. Nevertheless, this poor, neglected landscape with the North wind about it, with the wooden huts, with the residents who hold their caps on their chests when that car passes by, is to me, Russia.”⁷⁰ Brandt’s Eastern Front experience represented the essence of Russia: simple, poor, neglected, and harsh. The brutality of the Russian army was the martial manifestation of these traits.

While in Russia, Brandt was never quite at home. Brandt’s description of a house in which he was quartered was vivid enough to make the reader feel part of the group. Brandt noted that some soldiers had lit the room properly, but it would have been better had it remained in the dark:

The whole dwelling, in its arrangement and décor, spoke for the taste and sense of its proprietors, was a kind of garbage heap [*müllhaufen*]. In the dining room stood a table filled with precious porcelain plates on which were the remains of a variety of meals; some pictures were cut out of their frames, other papers, manuscripts, letters filled up the majority of the salon. The doors to the buffet were smashed, vomit on the desk. A few bronze figures were vilely mutilated. A strange smell was all about.⁷¹

Brandt suggested that this was typical of his lodgings in abandoned homes and cities. He and other Germans attempted to order things and to make things as livable as possible in alien surroundings. Brandt remarked that it was an eerie feeling to get insights into the private life of a family without wanting or trying to. Brandt and his companions had access to things that this family might not have revealed to their best friends, never mind to complete strangers.⁷² Trying to create order in a strange environment allowed Brandt to employ an interesting device to add a different dimension to his reportage: describing the discovery of half-written or and old letters or damaged documents.

The first time Brandt used this technique he was in a small rectory, where he found a document dated 1656, “*aus der Tatarenzeit*” (from the time of the Tatars).⁷³ He did not know if it was an original or just an excerpt from a book. What struck him, and what he may have hoped would strike his readers, were the similarities between then and now. After the Battle of Prostken (now Prostki, Poland), on October 8, 1656, a group of Poles and Tatars had invaded East Prussia.

The city of Lyck was completely and totally destroyed so that not one stone remained next to the other. In the district Lyck sixty-seven villages, a small town (*Flecken*), three churches, and three hospitals were reduced to ashes. Two thousand eight hundred people [were] hauled off and over two hundred killed. In Kalinowen eight hundred men were struck down or dragged off. The town of Oletzko was completely in ashes. In the district of Polommen the Tatars stole everything, Bialla they destroyed, Drigallen went up in flames. In Neuhof the bodies of the murdered inhabitants infected the air for a month. In Gilgenburg the entire population was massacred in the church. In East Prussia thirteen cities, two hundred forty-eight towns and villages, seven hundred thirty churches were burned to the ground, 23,000 people killed, four thousand abducted.⁷⁴

Brandt’s use of this document “*aus der Tatarenzeit*” was an attempt to link the past to the present. Kisch has called this technique “logical fantasy”⁷⁵ and it was an attempt to inspire action through the dissemination of truth. For Brandt, this document confirmed the barbaric nature of Germany’s eastern foe. More than 250 years had passed, but the truth was that at the same place the Tatars still acted in the same barbaric manner.

At the previously mentioned inn, Brandt read a letter that a young girl wrote to her father, and a locket of hair fell out of a packet that was still partially tied with a blue ribbon. Written on the packet were the words “*Biefe aus der Brautzeit*” (Letters from the engagement period).⁷⁶ There was no other trace of this family. There was a picture of a young blond girl, possibly the aforementioned bride when she was a child. The lives of the family that ran this inn would have been permanently changed by the war. Brandt’s inclusion of these details reminds the audience of the impact of the war on civilians in the East, perhaps hoping to evoke sympathy from his audience for the plight of cultural comrades. The letter was written in German.

Brandt discovered a guest book and concluded from the various signatures that this must have been a lively inn. The book’s last entry mentioned the quartering of Russians, who had made their presence known on the furniture and the cash boxes. In the same inn the reporter noted traces of the Russian *guests* that were even clearer. In one small *nest* (a pile of papers), he came

across Russian dispatches and an unfinished letter. Brandt wrote, “The typical phrases that the Russians used on first arrival in the East Prussian city were the same in the beginning of the line of the unfinished letter. . . . ‘It is not far from Berlin, Darling (*Liebling*), and there I will send you more beautiful things than from here. The campaign is almost over. . . . Before Christmas, we will see each other again.’”⁷⁷ Returning to his theme of hasty departures, Brandt wryly noted, “Meanwhile, the roar of German guns must have driven out the letter writer.”⁷⁸ The letter writer’s statement to his girlfriend or wife was not the only case of misinformation (or perhaps just misguided optimism) about the war that was passed on to the Russian home front. Brandt used this incomplete letter to reinforce themes from his earlier narratives. His assumption that German guns were the reason the letter was unfinished served to reinforce the message to the home front that German troops were winning the war in the East.

While staying in another place, Brandt discovered a satchel that contained newspaper clippings, a report, and a picture, all of which contributed to the picture that Brandt was trying to paint about the war and Germany’s adversaries. He observed that the official report was fairly circumspect, but the newspaper report was anything but. Similar to the reports Brandt himself was sending back to Germany, the report told Brandt what information their Russian counterparts had received about the war. Brandt considered it fortunate that he had found an article about a battle for which the outcome had already been determined. He reproduced a large portion of the Russian report, “Battle at Njemen bei Sredniki” (Lithuania) that had appeared in a Russian paper.

The Germans shoot without aiming. Their artillery shoots too far and has dealt us no harm, since the projectiles explode far behind. Actually they have not saved ammunition, humming in the air and howling incessantly, as with a metallic bass voice. Toward morning the Germans fled with all their might, without looking back, leaving on the battlefield mountains of dead, grenades, smashed carts, automobiles, motor bikes. In this fateful night they lost three flags, lots of guns, and five regiments were completely dissolved.⁷⁹

The report claimed there were so many German corpses that they could not be buried in three days.

Brandt was astonished at the falseness of the report that compared the German loss here, in Njemen bei Sredniki, with the loss at Tannenberg. Brandt then recounted an article from a Russian newspaper out of Minsk, the *Litovskaja Russija*, titled, “The German Animals.” The article included, as an example of German barbarism and stupidity, a report of a German soldier

cutting off the leg of a Russian soldier and having to carry him along on their retreat.⁸⁰ Brandt noted that this false report made it into the pages of the Russian newspaper, but that it was very unlikely that a copy of the report that he found in the same satchel that documented Russian atrocities would even be seen in print in the same paper. Brandt seemed oblivious to the possibility that if his own reports fell into the hands of his Russian counterparts, they might accuse him of the same.

In the same package of documents Brandt found a mass-produced drawing from Thomas Eyre Macklin called *The Angel of Peace* (*Der Friedensengel*). The drawing showed a wide-eyed, winged Kaiser with a bloody sword in one hand and a torch in the other. “His blood-stained boot stands on a heap of corpses and crushes the white page of a treaty. In the distance under bursting shrapnel and wafting smoke, armies storm one another. One sees the flags of England, France, Serbia, and Russia waving nobly next to each other.”⁸¹ Brandt remembered the night in front of the Royal Palace when he heard the Kaiser say, “Pray to God for our German army.”⁸² Brandt was outraged by the drawing. “The blood-red picture, the English help for Russia! A lie, wickedness that is all they have for their allies.”⁸³ In his report, Brandt juxtaposed his description of the British caricature of a blood-thirsty Kaiser with his memory of Wilhelm II on the balcony asking people to pray for the soldiers. Brandt knew that the world only saw the caricature of the Kaiser and not the man he saw on the balcony. He hoped that if the world could somehow see the man on the balcony that he saw, then perhaps people might have a better understanding of Germany’s position.

Brandt’s war reports (*Kriegsberichten*) were an attempt to relay to the German home front and the wider world a vision and version of the war. He employed the techniques that have come to be recognized as characteristic of German literary journalism in reports that were dramatic and well written and included both a sense of humor and an eye for detail. He told a story through a sequence of scenes. For example, in a six-day period, October 20 through 25, Brandt submitted three reports that are representative of his technique. On October 20 he filed “In Reconquered Lyck” (“Im wiedereroberten Lyck”), which describes the devastation that fighting had brought to a small town that he was familiar with before the war. The next report, dated October 22, “The Empress’s Birthday on the Border” (“Kaiserin-Geburtstag an der Grenze”) was discussed earlier. The third report, from October 25, was “Observations about the Russian Army” (“Beobachtungen über die russische Armee”).⁸⁴ It was an analysis of the state of the Russia military after about twelve weeks of battle. Included in this report was the Russian cavalry’s treatment of horses that was also recounted earlier. Each report could (and did) stand

on its own. Writing one after the other produced a clear comparison that permitted Brandt to make his point of view more effectively than any direct statement he might have made. Whether it was conversing with a German soldier about the merits of woolen caps or an old Russian woman about a new road, Brandt's use of dialogue confirmed the authenticity of his reports. Brandt certainly had a clear point of view and set the scene through his own eyes, although the lens through which he witnessed the action was certainly colored by cultural and political preconceptions. For Brandt, Germany was protecting its homeland from a ruthless Russian invasion. Brandt described a litany of abuses heaped upon civilians and animals, and the destruction of property that occurred during the brief period of Russian occupation of German soil. In the face of such a barbaric adversary, the German soldiers had maintained their bravery and humanity and had done their duty. In Brandt's mind, there was no doubt about the justness of Germany's cause.

Brandt and a Conservative Literary Journalism

In her 2009 Theodor-Herzl Lectures, Antonia Rados provided a brief history of modern war reporting. She divided it into three phases. The first phase began with the Crimean War and the reports of William Howard Russell for the *Times* of London. The reporters of that period were individualists and adventurers who might not have fully appreciated the risks that they were taking.⁸⁵ The First World War marked the second phase of modern war reporting, the era of the "war critics"⁸⁶ due to the scale and proximity (both personal and geographical) of the war. Rados wrote, "Who does not know Ernest Hemingway's impressive books, which are based mainly on real figures and events from the First World War or the Spanish Civil War? Hemingway, Reed, Orwell (*My Catalonia*), all war reporters or more precisely: all anti-war reporters."⁸⁷ Within this schema, Brandt's reports from the Eastern Front present an interesting dilemma. He vividly describes the carnage of the war, but he is not anti-war.

Brandt's reports cannot be simply dismissed as mere propaganda. His wartime experience was limited to the few opening few months of the war, and his reports included much more than accounts of German victories. What should be remembered is that while Brandt was in the field, the German army was very successful; but though the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes were decisive German victories, they were not the product of German propaganda. The praise that Brandt showered on the military in the autumn and winter of 1914 was not entirely unwarranted. Perhaps if he had stayed longer or had gone to the front later, he might have had a different experience. But such musing must be speculative at best, and Brandt's subsequent career

suggests otherwise. Brandt's work can be characterized as a conservative example of literary journalism.

As Cogley noted, efforts at objective recounting of the war were limited by sociohistorical context and Brandt's context was no different. *Fünf Monate* was the first publication of what would be a fairly prolific literary career. Brandt's novels are not part of the German literary canon, but he was well enough regarded that at least three of his novels—*Um die Welt mit Dir* (Around the World with You), published in 1933; *Christine von Milotti*, in 1935; and *Abschied von Mariampol* (Departure from Mariampol), 1936—were reviewed in *Books Abroad*, an English language journal.⁸⁸

After the war, Brandt's nonfiction remained sharply political and reflected the values that he espoused during the war, e.g., *So sieht die Weltgeschichte aus . . . Aufzeichnungen eines Zuschauers* (So Appears the History of the World . . . Notes from an Observer), published in 1926. There would be a second edition of this book in 1934 called *Europe without Masks*, in the preface of which Brandt announces his support for Hitler. Brandt also wrote a book about the Treaty of Versailles geared for children, *Versailles: The Story of a Historical Betrayal, Presented for the German Youth*, published in 1934, that denounced the treaty as a betrayal of the efforts he had witnessed on the Eastern front.⁸⁹

Brandt's disillusionment with the result of the war and the peace was certainly a factor in his decision to support Hitler. In October 1933, Brandt was one of eighty-eight writers, including Gottfried Benn, who signed the *Gelöbnis treuester Gefolgschaft* (Vow of most faithful allegiance) pledge of loyal followers pledging to support the German chancellor. Misguided as Brandt's decision was, Peter Fritzsche does offer an explanation that may apply to Brandt. As noted earlier, Fritzsche suggested that summer 1914 may have represented the real unification of Germany with the support of the war. Germany's loss created a strong sense of disillusionment among many Germans, especially those with conservative leanings. In this context, what Hitler offered was the opportunity to regain that feeling of unity, pride, and a sense of purpose. Considering Brandt's support from this perspective does not absolve him in any fashion. But it does offer an explanation for his transformation from a German citizen into Nazi supporter.

Brandt's later work and political choices should not diminish the importance of *Fünf Monate*. As he promised in the foreword, Brandt put into words what he felt in his heart. In the process, he developed a style of reportage that this study argues can be included among the early examples of German literary journalism.⁹⁰

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Notes

- ¹ Brandt, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront*, 1 (translation mine). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- ² Brandt, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* [Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports].
- ³ Eason, "Telling Stories and Making Sense," 125.
- ⁴ Kostenzer, *Die literarische Reportage*, 13.
- ⁵ Kostenzer, 15.
- ⁶ Kostenzer, 18.
- ⁷ See Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31–42.
- ⁸ Kostenzer, 20.
- ⁹ Kostenzer, 21.
- ¹⁰ Kostenzer, 23; see also Winter, *Das schwarze Wienerherz*.
- ¹¹ Kostenzer, 50.
- ¹² Kostenzer, 52.
- ¹³ Kracauer, "Unbekanntes Gebiet," 222, as quoted in Kostenzer, 67.
- ¹⁴ Eason, "The New Journalism," 51–65.
- ¹⁵ Reed, *Ten Days*.
- ¹⁶ See Josephi and Müller. "Differently Drawn Boundaries," 67–78; Segel, *Egon Erwin Kisch*, Kostenzer also identifies Kisch as the seminal figure in the creation of German literary journalism, Kostenzer, 68–72.
- ¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.
- ¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of the German perceptions of Russia at this time, see Paddock, *Creating the Russian Peril*, 1–21 and 60–101.
- ¹⁹ Habermas, 27.
- ²⁰ Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 11–82.
- ²¹ Koszyk, *Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 20–21.
- ²² Negt, *Keine Demokratie ohne Sozialismus*, 318, quoted in Camigliano, "Günter Wallraff" 406, 417n6 (translation Camigliano's).
- ²³ Benjamin, "Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows," 445–46, quoted in Harder, "Reporter und Erzähler," 159.

²⁴ Lukács, *Meister der Reportage*. 40f, quoted in Harder, 159.

²⁵ Harder, 159.

²⁶ Harder, 159–60.

²⁷ Benjamin, *Der Erzähler*, a.a.O., S. 439, quoted in Harder, 160.

²⁸ Harder, 160, 160n17.

²⁹ Camigliano, "Günter Wallraff," 407.

³⁰ The applicability of Wolfe to a German context is open to discussion. Tobias Eberwein notes that research on U.S. New Journalism has become almost a "leitmotif" in the German literature. While Eberwein notes that there is a recent trend toward examining German New Journalism, the relationship between the New Journalism and literary journalism is an open question. See Eberwein, *Literarischer Journalismus*, 83–84.

³¹ Kaplan, "Tom Wolfe on How to Write New Journalism," para. 12. See also Poerksen, "The Milieu of a Magazine," 9–29, 18.

³² Kaplan, para. 12; Poerksen, 18.

³³ Klaus, "Jenseits der Grenzen," 107, quoted in Josephi and Müller, 70.

³⁴ Brandt, Vorwort to *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront*, iii.

³⁵ Brandt, 20.

³⁶ Cogley, *Representing War*, 21.

³⁷ Brandt, 17.

³⁸ Brandt, 17.

³⁹ Brandt 18.

⁴⁰ Brandt, 18.

⁴¹ Brandt, 41.

⁴² Brandt, 15.

⁴³ Brandt, 80.

⁴⁴ Brandt, 81.

⁴⁵ Brandt, 71.

⁴⁶ Paddock, "Creating an Oriental *Feindbild*," 242. The story appeared in the morning edition of the August 20, 1914, *Berliner Tageblatt*, on page one.

⁴⁷ Brandt, 85.

⁴⁸ Brandt, 85.

⁴⁹ Brandt, 103.

⁵⁰ Brandt, 104.

⁵¹ Brandt, 104.

⁵² Brandt, 33.

⁵³ Brandt, 34.

⁵⁴ Brandt, 27.

⁵⁵ Brandt, 24.

⁵⁶ Brandt, 56.

⁵⁷ Brandt, 107.

⁵⁸ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Jünger, *Storm of Steel*.

⁵⁹ Brandt, 118.

⁶⁰ Brandt, 119.

- ⁶¹ Brandt, 12.
- ⁶² Brandt, 86–87.
- ⁶³ Brandt, 60.
- ⁶⁴ Brandt, 79.
- ⁶⁵ Brandt, 131.
- ⁶⁶ Brandt, 92.
- ⁶⁷ Brandt, 87.
- ⁶⁸ Brandt, 87.
- ⁶⁹ Brandt, 87–88.
- ⁷⁰ Brandt, 88.
- ⁷¹ Brandt, 61.
- ⁷² Brandt, 61.
- ⁷³ Brandt, 62.
- ⁷⁴ Brandt, 63.
- ⁷⁵ Camigliano, 407, quoting Hahn and Töteberg, *Günter Wallraff*, 49. See also Robeck, *Egon Erwin Kisch Beim Bochumer Verein* [Egon Erwin Kisch at the Bochum Club], 15ff.
- ⁷⁶ Brandt, 61.
- ⁷⁷ Brandt, 62.
- ⁷⁸ Brandt, 62.
- ⁷⁹ Brandt, 112, quoting from “Battle at Njemen bei Sredniki” (Lithuania). Brandt did not include the name of the newspaper in his account.
- ⁸⁰ Brandt, 113, quoting “The German Animals,” *Litovskaja Russija*, no. 823. Brandt gave no additional publication information for the newspaper.
- ⁸¹ Brandt, 114.
- ⁸² Brandt, 114.
- ⁸³ Brandt, 114.
- ⁸⁴ Brandt, “Im wiedereroberten Lyck” [“In reconquered Lyck”], October 20, 76–78; “Kaiserin-Geburtstag an der Grenze” [“The Empress’s Birthday on the Border”] October 22, 78–79; “Beobachtungen über die russische Armee” [“Observations about the Russian Army”], October 25, 79–82.
- ⁸⁵ Rados, *Die Fronten sind überall*, 43.
- ⁸⁶ Rados, 45.
- ⁸⁷ Rados, 45.
- ⁸⁸ Trenckner, Review of *Um die Welt mit Dir* [Around the World with You]; Morgan, Review of *Christine von Milotti* Brandt, *Christine von Milotti*; Eisenbrown, Review of *Abschied von Mariampol* [Departure from Mariampol].
- ⁸⁹ Brandt, *So sieht die Weltgeschichte aus . . .*; Brandt, *Europa ohne Maske*; Brandt, *Versailles*.
- ⁹⁰ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and Bill Reynolds for his patience and support. I especially want to thank colleagues at Southern Connecticut State University who helped at various stages of this project: Joel Dodson, Charles Baraw, Polly Beals, Jason Smith, Steve Judd, Steve Amerman, C. Michele Thompson, Darcy Kern, Tom Radice, Marie McDaniel, Siobhan Carter-David, and Camille Serchuck.

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