1913: The Year Before the Storm
by Florian Illies

Before the war to end all wars, there was the year to end all years. Use these questions to kick off your discussion of 1913: The Year Before the Storm.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rather than follow one narrative thread throughout the book, Illies packs many narratives into a chronology. What are the advantages of this kind of structure? Disadvantages?

2. Kafka christened the 1910s “the nervous era,” where do we see evidence of that?

3. Does Illies offer foreshadowing of the war to come following the year 1913? Or, if not, why might he leave that out?

4. Critics have written that this book presents the birth of modernism, with Vienna as its capital. What in the book represents modernism?
CHARACTER GUIDE

A guide to the 50 most frequently mentioned people in 1913: The Year Before the Storm.

Andreas-Salomé, Lou (1861 – 1937) Russian-German psychoanalyst and writer who wrote about Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud, all of whom were part of her circle of friends.

Bauer, Felice (1887 – 1960) Born in Silesia, engaged to Franz Kafka. His letters to her were published as Letters to Felice.

Benn, Gottfried (1886 – 1956) German Expressionist poet and essayist who also studied theology and medicine, Benn’s poetry was filled with images of decay and degeneracy.

Braque, Georges (1882 – 1963) French painter, who, together with Picasso, developed Cubism.

Brecht, Bertolt (1898 – 1956) German theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet. His plays were often influenced by his Marxist beliefs, and he was the leading proponent of the genre of epic theater.

Cézanne, Paul (1839 – 1906) French Post-Impressionist painter whose groundbreaking work series, Bathers, inspired artists such as Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp.

Corinth, Lovis (1858 – 1925) German painter known for his dramatic figurative and landscape paintings.

Döblin, Alfred (1878 – 1957) German novelist, essayist, and doctor, best known for his novel Berlin Alexanderplatz. He engaged with other important German cultural figures including Herwarth Walden, Bertolt Brecht, and Thomas Mann.

Duchamp, Marcel (1887 – 1968) French artist known for his “ready-mades” and for breaking conventional boundaries between art and the everyday. His Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912) created a scandal in Paris when it was deemed too shocking to hang.

Franz Ferdinand, archduke of Austria-Este (1863 – 1914) Born in Austria to archduke Charles Louis, brother of the emperor Franz Joseph, Franz Ferdinand was heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. He was assassinated with his wife Sophie in Sarajevo in 1914, sparking the onset of World War I.

Franz Joseph I of Austria (1830 – 1916) Emperor of Austria and king of Hungary, in 1914 his ultimatum to Serbia led Austria and Germany into World War I.

Freud, Sigmund (1856 – 1939) Austrian founder of psychoanalysis and influential intellectual.

Hitler, Adolf (1889 – 1945) German politician, leader of the Nazi Party, dictator of Germany (1933-1945), and central to the perpetration of the Holocaust. He spent his young adulthood in Vienna trying and failing to become a painter.
Jung, Carl (1875 – 1961) Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who developed theories of the collective unconscious and personality styles. He worked with Freud in the early development of the field of psychology, but their theories soon developed in different directions.

Jünger, Ernst (1895 – 1998) Highly decorated German soldier, author, photographer, and entomologist best-known for his World War I memoir Storm of Steel, a conservative look at war as a mystical experience.

Kafka, Franz (1883 – 1924) German-speaking Bohemian Jewish novelist and short story writer, widely regarded as one of the major figures of 20th-century literature. His best-known works include The Metamorphosis, The Trial, and The Castle. Engaged, but never married, to Felice Bauer.

Kandinsky, Wassily (1866 – 1944) Russian painter and art theorist credited with painting one of the first purely abstract works. Member of the artistic group Der Blaue Reiter along with Gabriele Münter.

Kessler, Harry Graf (1868 – 1937) Anglo-German count, diplomat, writer, and patron of modern art. His diaries "Journey to the Abyss" and "Berlin in Lights" reveal anecdotes and details of artistic, theatrical, and political life in Europe, mostly in Germany, from the late 1800s until his death in 1937.

Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig (1880 – 1938) German expressionist painter and printmaker. A founding member of Die Brücke, a key early group in the Expressionist movement.

Kokoschka, Oskar (1886 – 1980) Austrian artist, poet and playwright. His affair with Alma Mahler inspired many of his paintings, including one of his best-known works, The Bride of the Wind.

Kraus, Karl (1874 – 1936) Austrian writer and journalist, known as a satirist, essayist, aphorist, playwright and poet. Member of the avant-garde group Young Vienna and founder of the newspaper Die Fackel.

Lasker-Schüler, Else (1869 – 1945) Jewish German poet and playwright famous for her bohemian lifestyle in Berlin. She was one of the few women affiliated with the Expressionist movement.

Lenin, Vladimir (1870 – 1924) Russian communist revolutionary, politician, and political theorist. He served as head of government of Soviet Russia (1917-1924) and of the Soviet Union (1922-1924).


Macke, August (1887 – 1914) German Expressionist painter and leading member of Der Blaue Reiter.

Mann, Heinrich (1871 – 1950) German novelist who wrote works with strong social themes. Elder brother of Thomas Mann. His criticisms of fascism forced him to flee after the Nazis came to power.


Marc, Franz (1880 – 1916) German painter and printmaker, a key figure of German Expressionism and a founding member of the artistic group Der Blaue Reiter. He was married to artist Maria Franck and was known for works such as The Tower of Blue Horses.

Matisse, Henri (1869 – 1954) French artist commonly regarded, along with Picasso, as one of the artists who defined the revolutionary developments in the visual arts throughout the opening decades of the 1900s. The two first met at Gertrude Stein’s Paris salon and became lifelong friends as well as rivals.

Musil, Robert (1880 – 1942) Austrian philosophical writer whose unfinished novel The Man Without Qualities is generally considered to be one of the most important and influential modernist novels.

Nádherný, Sidonie (1885 – 1950) Czech noblewoman, writer, and patron of the arts. She was friends with Adolf Loos, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Karl Kraus.

Nielsen, Asta (1881 – 1972) Danish silent film actress popular in the 1910s and one of the first international movie stars. Seventy of Nielsen’s 74 films were made in Germany. She is credited with transforming movie acting from overt theatricality to a subtler naturalistic style.

Nolde, Emil (1867 – 1956) German-Danish painter and printmaker. He was one of the first Expressionists, and a member of the artistic group Die Brücke.

Picasso, Pablo (1881 – 1973) Spanish painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist, stage designer, poet, and playwright who spent most of his adult life in France. Co-founded the Cubist movement with Georges Braque. Among his most famous works are the proto-Cubist Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, and Guernica.

Pringsheim, Katia (1883 – 1980) Youngest child and only daughter of German Jewish mathematician and artist Alfred Pringsheim and his wife, former actress Hedwig Pringsheim. Married Thomas Mann.

Proust, Marcel (1871 – 1922) French novelist, critic, and essayist best known for his monumental novel À la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time).
Rilke, Rainer Maria (1875 – 1926) Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist. Among English-language readers, his best-known works include the poetry collections Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus.

Schiele, Egon (1890 – 1918) Austrian painter and protégé of Gustav Klimt. He was a major figurative painter of the early 20th century, his work is noted for its intensity and its raw sexuality.

Schnitzler, Arthur (1862 – 1931) Austrian author and dramatist, whose were often controversial, both for their frank description of sexuality and for their strong stand against anti-Semitism. Member of the avant-garde group Young Vienna along with Karl Kraus and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Schoenberg, Arnold (1874 – 1951) Austrian-American composer, music theorist, teacher, writer, and painter. He was associated with the expressionist movement in German poetry and art, and leader of the Second Viennese School. Member of the artistic group Der Blaue Reiter.

Spengler, Oswald (1880 – 1936) German historian and philosopher of history whose interests included mathematics, science, and art. He is best known for his book The Decline of the West.

Stalin, Joseph (1878 – 1953) Soviet revolutionary and politician of Georgian ethnicity, he ruled the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. While in Vienna in 1913, he wrote the “seminal” article Marxism and the National Question.


Trakl, Georg (1887 – 1914) Austrian poet and brother of the pianist Grete Trakl. He is considered one of the most important Austrian Expressionists and is best known for his poem "Grodek."

von Hofmannsthal, Hugo (1874 – 1929) Austrian novelist, librettist, poet, dramatist, and essayist. Member of the avant-garde group Young Vienna along with Karl Kraus and Arthur Schnitzler.

Walden, Herwarth (1879 – 1941) German Expressionist artist who is acknowledged as one of the most important discoverers and promoters of German avant-garde art in the early 1900s. The first husband of Else Lasker-Schüler, he sponsored artists such as the members of Der Blaue Reiter.

Wedekind, Frank (1864 – 1918) German playwright best known for his "Lulu" cycle. His work is considered to anticipate expressionism and was influential in the development of epic theatre.
Werfel, Franz (1890 – 1945) Austrian-Bohemian novelist, playwright, and poet primarily known for the novels The Forty Days of Musa Dagh and The Song of Bernadette. His friends included Max Brod and Franz Kafka, and he was the third husband of Alma Mahler.

Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859 – 1941) The last German Emperor and King of Prussia, reigning from 1888 until his abdication in 1918. His support for Austria-Hungary in 1914 led to World War I.

Woolf, Virginia (1882 – 1941) British writer who was considered one of the most important modernist authors and a pioneer in the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative device. A member of the Bloomsbury Group, she was best known for novels such as Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse.

NOTES