Delivering Humanity From the Menace of War: Commemorating Weimar

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Delivering Humanity From the Menace Of War: Commemorating Weimar

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“Memory is heavily contested terrain. Long after a drama has ended, long after the actors have departed, the audience, and the audience’s descendants, debate the drama’s meanings.”

Defeat in World War I plagued German society with uncertainty, resentment, and despair on a long road to recovery. In the midst of a collapsing Empire, Germans’ call for democracy, equality, and unity prompted the embattled country to begin its ascent as the Weimar Republic. Politically, socially, and culturally, Weimar was a place of thriving new ideals competing with more traditionalist standards. Cultural movements thrived in this atmosphere and produced new concepts of artistic, cinematic, and literary devices that portrayed Weimar in different ways. Within this vigorous culture, however, lay underpinnings of death and grief that manifested in various forms. Members of veterans groups and political parties memorialized and sometimes even glorified the loss of German soldiers through ceremonies and other commemorative demonstrations. Contrarily, prominent artists such as Otto Dix, Max Thalmann, and Käthe Kollwitz critically depicted the death of soldiers and civilians of Germany. Accordingly, these multifaceted outlets for ideologies and sentiments fashioned a unique death and mourning culture within Weimar Germany that filled emotional voids and eased the pain of war, but subsequently reflected the ways in which the memory of the war was itself contested terrain.

The times of revolution and instability in Weimar’s newborn stage facilitated open questioning of the devastated nation’s involvement in the war. Why did we fight it? How do we deal with this total loss? What was my son killed for? Is the preciousness of human life lost? The death and mourning culture attempted to bring meaning to each of these questions and, in

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doing so, offer consolation to citizens of Weimar at a most personal level. As Jay Winter writes, anyone approaching the cultural history of the war who does not acknowledge the private, solitary, level of the search for meaning cannot understand what was at the heart of war for millions.

Their war was imprinted with the wrenching experience of loss, the ‘meaning’ of which was sought at least as much in the existential as in the artistic or political spheres. It is true that the Great War introduced political issues to every dimension of social life, but some issues in wartime were both political and more than political.²

Winter’s statement expresses the greater cultural issue of the mourning process by emphasizing the importance of understanding the cultural history of Weimar Germany through an understanding of the meaning of wartime loses. Bereavement, he argues, offered closure to German people and served as one of the most diverse aspects of Weimar culture, with different people ascribing different political and cultural meanings to the war. This diversity is seen in large-scale political ceremonies and extravagant processions that glorified the fallen and also worked to advance partisan ideologies and influence memories of the war. Contrarily, on more personal levels, artists worked to answer the questions and convey the critiques that they and their German kin shared.

Weimar society showed no reservations in expressing its dissatisfaction with the First World War. More than any other aspect in Weimar culture, war commemoration stoked vibrant debate in the political realm. The Weimar Republic was born in a time of ideological conflict,

and the competition among communists, socialists, centrists, and conservatives fashioned Weimar into a uniquely chaotic country, emerging in a broader context of cultural change. Subsequently, differences arose in respect to how fallen soldiers were remembered and resulted in dramatically varying political war commemorations. For groups such as the Reichsbanner, an organization ideologically affiliated with the Social Democratic party (SPD) and largely comprised of anti-war of ex-servicemen, war memorials served a purpose greater than remembering the lost. These memorials functioned as platforms for survivors of the war to “frame the meaning of the past and connect the fallen to political collectives of the present” and simultaneously advance anti-war sentiments. They defined the legacy of war and its victims in an attempt to “reinstate the dignity of the individual, which was a pertinent task, given the fact that the ‘radical devaluation of the individual’ was one of the most substantial effects of mass death in the First World War.” As an organization primarily comprised of war veterans, the Reichsbanner placed great importance on the dignity of the individual. In doing so, it also criticized militaristic principles and pushed for peace. The veterans did not simply address the viciousness faced by German soldiers, but also memorialized fallen enemies, for they had endured many of the same hardships. It is evident that loss of human life took precedent over loss of territory or ideological influence.

Commemoration did not always come easy, however. In places where Reichsbanner groups wished to, or participate in, commemoration, opposing political groups often prohibited their involvement. For example, leaders of the Bayerischer Kriegerbund and Kyffhäuserbund barred Reichsbanner members from attending an unveiling of a war memorial of over 12,000

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4 Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*, p. 162.
fallen German soldiers.\(^5\) The Kyffhäuserbund, a strong nationalist political league, specifically opposed the Reichsbanner because of its anti-war sentiments. As a nationalist organization, war and militarism served as an important aspect of Kyffhäuserbund ideology and, thus, it opposed those who affirmed anti-war beliefs, such as the Reichsbanner. This case points to the conflicting nature of commemorations; even over fellow soldiers, opposing political groups failed to see eye to eye because of deeper ideological underpinnings. Such jostling for position highlighted the conflicts of Weimar political parties’ fights “to claim the fallen for themselves alone, and to use them for political bargaining.”\(^6\) The importance of partisan war commemorations and mourning culture of Weimar highlights a larger issue than simply grief. These disagreements point to the fundamental political divisions that once created and consequently destroyed Weimar.

The Communist party, or KPD, was also heavily involved in this aspect of Weimar culture. In comparison to the Reichsbanner, the KPD focused more on politicizing mourners by building a “revolutionary community”, which emanated extravagance and pompousness.\(^7\) This is best conveyed following the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the founding members of the USPD and KPD, respectively, in June 1919. Though not directly a result of the war, these casualties were the consequence of the revolution immediately ensuing the war. On the day of their funerals, tens of thousands of people processed through the streets of Berlin, while cars draped with funeral wreaths transported the martyrs to a small cemetery adorned in red flags, more wreaths, and revolutionary standards. As intended by the parties, the funerals of

\(^6\) Ziemann. *Contested Commemorations*, p. 136
their founding members were nothing short of an overstatement. Similar to the Reichsbanner, for the USPD and KPD, the commemoration of the dead signified more than commemorating loss. As Sara Sewell argues, “burial practices have often served as the cultural underpinning for ideologies.” Whether commemorating the fallen on the battlefield of war or martyrs in the political arena, communist funerary practices, signs, and symbols aimed to create a truly united revolutionary community. In many ways, the commemoration of Luxemburg and Liebknecht did just that. There were, however, other realms that approached this theme differently. Individualistic and personal mourning processes drew a striking contrast to the extravagant political commemorations. Even as they were individualistic and personal however, these mourning processes drew a striking contrast but continued to critique German involvement in the war. As Jay Winter argues, “Some issues in wartime, were both political and more than political. The experience of mass bereavement was one such issue.”

These primarily individualized processes and critiques, nonetheless, allow for a deeper analysis of the sociopolitical and cultural questions and issues of the time. Many of the previous commemorative ceremonies focused heavily on group participation and relaying broad sweeping ideas. The political implications of commemoration were important, but their large-scale extravagance often took away from the personal significance of remembrance. Furthermore, these politically fueled ceremonies often failed to recognize memory and mourning as personally as artists and their work did. Even on this intimate level, however, mourning advanced political critiques.

As a result of the ragged and demoralized state that German society was left in,

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8 Sewell, “Mourning Comrades: Communist Funerary Rituals in Cologne during the Weimar Republic,” p. 530
9 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 224.
opponents of the war were easy to come by and thoroughly expressed their dissatisfactions through artistic mediums.\(^{10}\) Otto Dix, one of the most important artistic figures of the time, captured the brutality and facelessness of mechanized warfare. His significance in war remembrance was unparalleled because, as a war veteran himself, “he knew how a shell could tear a man apart.”\(^{11}\) Created in 1924, his print *Dying Soldier (Figure 1)*, from *Der Krieg* [The War] series, reflected on the sheer brutality and ruthlessness of the war he experienced. It displays how death awaited its next victim, as though at any minute—that life could have been taken away without warning. Large gashes in the unrecognizable soldier’s face, chest, and arms, heighten the uncensored depiction of the soldiers’ devastating fight. “It was Dix who showed how to capture the infernal character of the Great War, for in this task allegory was far more powerful than photographic realism,” Jay Winter writes in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.\(^{12}\) His commemoration of the fallen was representative of what he experienced first hand on the front lines. Dix’s strong anti-war message throughout this series is also evident in the grotesque figure of the wounded soldier. This warrior was obviously in tremendous pain and Dix used him to depict the devastating effects of war on a German man. By consciously unveiling the physical damage done to this soldier and implying emotional heartache through the facial expression, Dix criticized what the war did to millions of young German men, both dismembering and demoralizing them.

Dix’s entire *Der Krieg* collection told a story about war at its most gruesome points and remembered the fallen in uniquely realistic ways. He, “used splintery ‘lines of force’ and heavy


distortions to convey his brutally twisted vision” of war. In another piece titled *Corpse in Barbed Wire- Flanders* (Figure 2), Dix used a distinctive technique of acid washing to create an imagery of decaying flesh. This distorted skeleton acted as a clear critique of what he had encountered during the war. Dix also introduced the concept of the faceless soldier, a national symbol of every fallen man, later termed as the Unknown Soldier. This combatant was nameless, faceless, had no rank, no regional or social background, but yet he epitomized the fallen soldier. Interestingly, Dix shared this ideology with the Reichsbanner. His stance explicitly rejected nationalist interpretations of the war by disregarding national affiliation and emphasizing that all fallen soldiers deserved commemoration for the brutality they endured. The brutality in these critiques also displayed techniques and representations of the body and emphasized the imaginative nature of Weimar culture. Dix’s uncensored portrayals served as examples of this imaginative characteristic that, without the freedoms of expression laid out in the Weimar Constitution and social acceptance of critiques, would not have otherwise existed. Furthermore, Dix and artists alike presented their work to society and encouraged other creative minds of Weimar to interpret meanings and messages of the cruelty man endured. Thus, in unveiling his work to Weimar society, Dix projected his personal mourning processes onto the masses.

When assessing artistic commemorations, it is necessary to understand that artistic critique of the war went beyond direct war representations. In fact, much of Dix’s other works concentrated on criticizing how soldiers were treated when they arrived home, a cultural issue in itself worth extensive attention research. Through works such as *War Cripples* (Figure 3) and

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14 Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*. 
The Match Seller (Figure 4), Dix pointed towards underlying cultural issues of the inability of veterans to reintegrate into society largely as a result of their disfigured appearance and inability to work. These paintings thus highlighted both the extensive, irreparable injuries caused by combat and the longer-term inability of veterans to reincorporate into society. Similarly to the previously mentioned Reichsbanner, Dix resented the war because of the negative effects it had on the people in the war including those on the home front, an aspect that cannot be ignored when referencing Weimar Germany.

Economic crisis persisted throughout the First World War and into the early Weimar period. A marker of this crisis was inflation and food rationing. “It pounds on the daily nerves,” Friedrich Kroner wrote in a diary entry, “the insanity of numbers, the uncertain future, today, and tomorrow become doubtful once more overnight.”

The rationing of food was closely tied to this period of inflation, but food shortages nonetheless became the daily reality. As a result, artists such as Max Thalmann took to art to express their criticisms. His series, Hunger!, contains sketches, paintings, and woodcuts that represented the suffering, starving German citizens. One of the more powerful pieces (Figure 5) from this compilation is an original woodcut of a skeleton lying on the floor still grasping for life. The agonizing depiction of death spoke to the larger context of Weimar society by underpinning the desperation for life among Germans. Although a direct contrast to the lively spirit of Weimar, Thalmann accentuated the culture of death that troubled Weimar’s existence.

Death plagued Germany well into the Weimar Republic’s years as a newly born democratic country. There was, however, something liberating about a lot of the artwork that

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16 Weitz, Weimar Germany.
was produced as it spoke to the modernity of Weimar culture. Artists such as Otto Dix, Max Thalman, and Käthe Kollwitz, took the times of violence, starvation, and despair and turned them into canvases to contextualize what their more personal views of death, mourning, and commemoration meant to Weimar culture. Nearly everybody knew what it felt like to lose a loved one, a friend, or an acquaintance to the cruelty of war, and some expressed their grievances publicly through artistic mediums. None, however, was as important and moving as Berlin artist Käthe Kollwitz. As Winter writes, her “lithographs A weaver’s rebellion (1898) and Peasant’s war (1908) established her as a master printmaker and visual poet par excellence of the suffering of the masses.”

Distressed by the loss of her own son, Peter, in the beginning stages of the First World War, Käthe Kollwitz’s interwar work reflected themes of loss and mourning in much of her interwar work. Her pieces served as political critiques, timeless depictions of cultural developments, and social havens to experience and share sentiments that arose from the loss of World War I. Essentially, they were intended to “avoid formalism and overelaboration, and to use drawing and printmaking to simplify and render immediately accessible the humanity of her subjects.”

Kollwitz’s son, Peter, was killed on October 30, 1914 in battle at age eighteen. As a volunteer, he died an honorable death, “synonymous with the self-sacrificing idealism of the youth,” something that Kollwitz recognized as a tragic wound that would never heal, nor did she expect it to. As part of her own mourning process, Kollwitz developed an idea to create a memorial sculpture of Peter’s body intended to commemorate the sacrifice of all of the young.

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17 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 108.  
18 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 108.
volunteers. After many trials and the inability to come up with an idea to adequately express her emotions, Kollwitz put the project aside in 1919 for six years. Throughout this time, Kollwitz kept a diary, frequently writing to her son, promising that he would be remembered, “I will come back, I shall do this work for you, for you and the others.” In October of 1925, she commenced work on one of her most famous and monumental pieces, *The Grieving Parents*. She finished the piece in 1931, eighteen years after her son’s death. She erected these sculptures of kneeling parents grieving the death of a son in the Belgian cemetery where Peter was buried. They still stand there today. The simplicity of this pair composition, the emotion on their faces, and the reservations of their posture convey the feelings universal to the German nation. They are not extravagant, but commanding, not detailed, but filled with emotion. The dense, grey,

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20 Käthe Kollwitz, as quoted in Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p. 109.
granite bares unalterable contours, a reflection of her own, and Germans’ in general, experience of losing a loved one. The experience of losing a loved one was desensitizing and unbearable. There is no signature, “no location in time or space—only the universal sadness of two aged people, surrounded by the dead like a flock of lost children.”

The daunting eighteen-year task enhanced ideas about the mourning process for families that lost loved ones and signified the lengthy, sometimes endless, period of bereavement. This monument at Vladslo, however, signified the history endured by all affected by the Great War.

Representations and tributes, however, still could not heal the wound of death for Kollwitz or any parents. As alluded to earlier, she found it difficult to understand what she had lost her son for. Witnessing the ramifications of defeat and tracking the sheer numbers of lost soldiers, was painful for many reasons. Most prominently, she had felt as though she had let her son down and that his whole generation had been betrayed, a feeling that challenged her in her own work:

This is one reason why it took so long for her to complete the monument, and why she and her husband are on their knees. They are there to beg for his forgiveness, to ask him to accept their failure to find a better way, their failure to prevent the madness of war from cutting his life short.  

This was a social critique implying that the older generation did not do enough to protect their children from the brutality of war, experiences also depicted in Otto Dix’s and Max Thalmann’s artworks. Kollwitz’s sculpture allowed for a reunion with her son; it was the connection she had yearned for, for eighteen years. Her ability to create a monument that not only spoke to her own

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21 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 108.
22 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 111.
grievances, but to “suggest a family which includes us all” is quite indicative of the influence on Weimar’s death and mourning culture.²³

Nearly Kollwitz’s entire interwar career was based on the grievance of her son and the critique of Germany’s involvement in the war. And though The Grieving Parents was the most well known of her works, she produced vast representations of Weimar’s mourning culture through prints and woodcuts as well. This search for “meaning” in the deaths of soldiers and lives of the living continued to engulf Weimar society in its search to be delivered from the travesties of war. Before the completion of The Parents Kollwitz created many woodcuts that exemplified her need for commemoration, not only of Peter, but all of the youth that had fallen during the war.

In 1922, she created a woodcut titled The People [Das Volk] (Figure 6) part of a seven-item portfolio titled War [Krieg]. This particular woodcut features six women left to grieve their losses. Dark space surrounds the women’s faces, which are characterized with thick, wrinkled lines, dark and emotional eyes, and auras of great disdain. It carried a societal message that referenced the solitude women were left to face when their sons or husbands did not return from war. “I am content that my art should have purpose outside itself,” Kollwitz wrote in a diary entry.²⁴ Her personal reflection in the art she produced was characteristic of the majority of Weimar society, which highlights her importance and influence in this death and mourning culture. She was able to take her own experiences and project them onto society through the cultural developments of the time. A woodcut from the same War portfolio, produced in 1923 is another piece of her work that allowed society to mourn with her rather than for her. The

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²³ Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 113.
Volunteers [Die Freiwilligen] (Figure 7) depicted her son, Peter, in line with his comrades, light emanating from their bodies, which are slightly bent towards the heavens to suggest a sense of spirituality and non-humanness. Although just one example of a mother mourning her son, this work and others by Käthe Kollwitz are suggestive of Weimar’s mourning culture because of her intent for the art to represent more than what is just on canvas. She aimed to represent Weimar society and its essential underlying motif of mourning. Her artwork was indicative of not only her experiences, but of the German nation’s experiences of losing a youthful generation.

Another piece from Kollwitz’s War collection made in 1923 was a woodcut titled The Parents [Die Eltern] (Figure 8). This work conveys different emotions from her sculpture in the German war cemetery, but it carries a similar message. It highlights the powerful emotions that surfaced upon the loss of a son. While the parents in her sculpture are stark and do not show much emotion, this depiction represented a complete loss and breakdown of family. The father’s hand covering his face and embracing the mother in his shoulder was a powerful image of the grief that seeped into every crevice of Weimar society. Everyone had experienced a loss in some aspect. Similar messages were portrayed in her bronze sculpture Lament [Die Klage] (Figure 9) made between 1938 and 1940. The carefully detailed hands covering half of her face accentuate her desire to bring her son back, much like other mothers of the time. Lastly, her bronze sculpture Pietà (Figure 10), reminiscent of Michelangelo’s own Pietà, displays a mother holding her dead son in her lap, kissing his forehead. On the anniversary of Peter’s death in 1937, Kollwitz’s diary entry read: “I am working on a small sculpture which has developed out of my attempt to make a sculpture out of an old person.” She continued, “The mother is seated and has
her dead son lying between her knees in her lap. There is no longer pain – only reflection.”25 Just as much of her work represented the larger picture Kollwitz’s sculpture Pietà indicated the shift from collective grief to remembrance of the individual. These messages helped console Germans, aiding in the process of coming to terms with the loss that the nation of Weimar suffered. Although some of her artwork was not finished until after the collapse of the Weimar Republic, for Kollwitz and Germans alike, the war’s legacy endured through time.

The importance of art in commemorations was unmatched in the context of Weimar society. As discussed, the works of Otto Dix, Max Thalmann, and especially Käthe Kollwitz shed light on three different aspects of the First World War’s effects. The gruesome and cruelty of war represented by Dix criticized the political powers that gave birth to the war. These menacing circumstances brought tremendous anguish to the families at home, an influential topic for Käthe Kollwitz who attempted to bring meaning to the loss. However, it was not just the fallen in battle who served as the objects of commemoration; strife and starvation within Weimar afflicted death upon a large amount of people as well. These sufferings were identified by Max Thalmann and exemplified through funerary rites such as that for Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The concepts portrayed in these different styles of commemoration, however, were reliant upon the modernization of Weimar, just as Weimar was dependent on these concepts to feed its modern culture. In other words constantly changing style, techniques, mediums, and modes of expression helped to create and maintain a modern Weimar culture.

The death and mourning culture converged with Weimar’s historical contexts. It infiltrated political, cultural, and especially social avenues through the different styles of art and

cere monies and shaped a fundamental understanding of Weimar’s fifteen-year existence. These commemorative practices and styles brought meaning to, and answered questions for, the German people. The strife and uncertainty that they experienced as a result of World War I was unprecedented and also produced a country so diverse that it was tearing at the seams. Furthermore, it opened new avenues of expression and discussion that had never been considered. Lastly, the death and mourning culture of Weimar Germany instituted essential processes for easing the agony of defeat. In a series of letters between Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, Einstein professed, “Is there any way of delivering humanity from the menace of war?” to which Freud responded, “Whatever makes for cultural development is also working against war”.26


Thalmann, Max. Hunger! N.d. Woodcut. Box 9ov, Loyola Marymount University Archives and Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.


Figure 9

Figure 10
Bibliography


Thalmann, Max. Hunger! N.d. Woodcut. Box 9ov, Loyola Marymount University Archives and Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.


