

The Memorial to Peter: A Social Investigation within the Politics of German Memory and the Great War

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The years immediately following Germany's defeat in World War I were a tumultuous period in German history. As Germany moved further from the nationalistic ideologies of the Wilhelmine Empire, it entered into a schizophrenic period of cultural, political and economic disarray. The sanctions of the Treaty of Versailles had a devastating economic and demoralizing effect on those who survived the war. Thus, the Weimar government attempted to recreate a new, more nationalistic, and more heroic history of Germany's involvement in the war, a history which greatly contrasted with the memories of those who had lived through the event. This fracturing of national history and lived experience prohibited the timely creation of a state-sponsored memorial practice.

An issue of primary importance was of how to remember and commemorate The Great War within a national as well as individual context. The act of memory does not necessarily imply a positive recollection of past events, and it is at this crossroads that Germany found itself in the early years of the 1920s as the ten-year anniversary of war mobilization approached. During this period, Germany was so profoundly divided among several different political groups that there could be no consensus on a national mythology, on any national symbols, nor on the construction of a national memorial.¹ It is the task here to investigate a history of the establishment of a commemorative practice in Germany and the place of the physical memorial within that context. This paper will begin by looking at the formation of memorials and German military cemeteries in Belgian territory. It will conclude with an examination of *The Parents*, a memorial created by Kathe Kollwitz for her son Peter who was killed on October 22, 1914, mere weeks after the start of the war. The lengthy time that Germany took to establish a national memorial is paralleled by Kollwitz's eighteen-year struggle to create a personal, and ultimately universal, memorial to her son. As an artist working within and affected by this specific historical framework, Kollwitz's post-war artwork reflects both public anti-war ideology and her own paralyzing grief. It is in Kathe Kollwitz's work that an intersection between private and public memory and memorialization can be found.

The Treaty of Versailles imposed harsh economic reparations, but also explicitly assigned responsibility for the war to Germany. Thus, the deaths of thousands of men remained virtually unacknowledged on a nationalistic level. How could these deaths be commemorated when they were so intricately connected to a humiliating loss? And since bodies of the dead remained in enemy territory, ordinary citizens were denied access to them. It was a costly enterprise for individuals to travel to the hastily erected burial plots in Belgium. Thus, the care and upkeep of German military cemeteries became the responsibility of the countries in which they lay, and little care and consideration would be given to aggressors buried in foreign soil.

In 1925, the Belgium and German governments reached an agreement by which the Official German Burial Service in Belgium cooperated with the French Service de Pensions and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to exhume and rebury the thousands of German war dead that lay all along the former Western Front. Four main German military 'collecting' cemeteries were created: Langemarcke, Roggevelde (in the town of Vladslo), Hoogledede and Menin.² In June of 1926, an organization was founded to begin the task formally of erecting memorials within these cemeteries. Due to the negative reception of German graves that lay along the Front, the team agreed to create gardens and modest memorials that blended in with the natural features of the landscape in contrast to the familiar white monumental, classical structures that dominated the French and Commonwealth cemeteries.

The German cemeteries have a vastly different appearance from those of the French and the British. Since Belgium was reluctant to give too much land to Germany, the German dead were denied individual graves: twenty bodies are buried together under one stone. German cemeteries were also only permitted to list the name of the dead soldier, not his age or rank. The Treaty of Versailles also denied Germany the use of white stone. Black slabs mark soldiers' graves (Figure 1). Both Vladslo and Langemarck also employ modestly sized figurative sculpture as commemoration in lieu of the architectural structures of the Commonwealth. At Langemarck, referred to

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¹ Dora Apel, "Cultural Battlegrounds: Visual Imagery and the 10th Anniversary of World War I in Weimar Germany," Diss. CUNY University and

Graduate Center, 1995, 10.

² Of those buried in these cemeteries 126,168 are known and 90,000 are unknown. In 1954, the *Volksbund* and the Official German Burial Service eliminated the Hoogledede cemetery; the dead were divided among Langemarcke, Menin and Vladslo cemeteries.

as the “student cemetery,” a bronze statue of four mourning men stands to the rear of the cemetery. At the Vladslo cemetery, the Kollwitz memorial stands today.

Because the concept of nationalism was so very important to a great number of Germans, an initial fervor of war instigated a large number of enlistments. The bourgeois as well as the proletariat lauded the heroic sacrifice to be made by the young men of Germany. However, by 1915 the anti-war movement had begun and the unified national spirit of 1914 disintegrated during the years of 1919-1924.

Ten years after war mobilization, President Friedrich Ebert declared August 3, 1924, a day of remembrance and commemoration in an attempt to incorporate the idea of mass death into a national mythology.³ In defining the purpose it was stated that the ceremony was to “enhance national unity in the hope that the entire population, every section of which sacrificed in the World War, will take part in the service, without consideration of political or economic antagonism.”⁴

The ten-year anniversary of war mobilization was also commemorated in various German cities by a series of anti-war newspaper articles, lithographic portfolios and photographic albums; a commemorative art exhibition was held in Leipzig. The art displayed in this exhibition contrasted drastically with the art of the political right, which offered concepts of heroism and honor in order to counteract the growing feelings of disillusionment and discontent felt among the German people.⁵ As outlined by Eric Hobsbawm in *Nations and Nationalism*, a number of German historians rejected the idea that World War I was a result of German aggression. These historians posited Germany’s role as that of helping Germans to strengthen the national identity forged by unification.⁶ The commemorative art forms that emerged from this ideology evoked nineteenth-century German art and included references to the German Renaissance, in which the idea of heroism and sacrifice were nobly portrayed in a Christian context. Included in the Leipzig exhibition, on the other hand, was Kathe Kollwitz’s *War* portfolio as well as Otto Dix’s *War* series and works by Max Klinger, Conrad Felixmuller, George Grosz, and Ernst Barlach. Many of the contributors, like Dix and Grosz, submitted images of the war itself in which the horrific reality of trench warfare was graphically exposed. Kollwitz depicted the pain and sorrow of those on the home front, gathering knowledge from a collected as well as personal memory of the war years.⁷

³ Apel 4.

⁴ Apel 4.

⁵ Apel 6.

⁶ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalities since 1790: Program, Myth and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 140.

⁷ Hobsbawm 140.

⁸ Elizabeth Prelinger, *Kathe Kollwitz* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992) 56.

Kollwitz’s *War* portfolio was begun in 1920 and she spent the next three years reworking a series of seven prints: *The Sacrifice*, *The Volunteers*, *The Parents*, *Widow I*, *Widow II*, *The Mothers* and *The People*. This format of the graphic cycle had played an important role in German art since the late nineteenth century, and Kollwitz had utilized the format before in *A Weaver’s Rebellion* (1897) and *A Peasant’s War* (1907). The *War* portfolio must be viewed against this history along with the other portfolios produced during the war by Willy Jaeckel, Frans Masereel, Ludwig Meidner, and Max Pechstein, as well as those made after the war by Otto Dix and Willibald Krain.⁸

The *War* portfolio is both a study of the idea of sacrifice, and a personal method by which Kollwitz attempted to come to terms with her son Peter’s participation in the war and the life that the surviving soldiers endured while at the Front.⁹ It is evidence of Kollwitz’s changing attitude towards the war. In the preparatory drawings for the first in the series, *The Sacrifice*, Kollwitz altered the figure of the woman from that of one weakened by grief to one strengthened by her rage.¹⁰ In the final woodcut, the mother holds her child up as if an offering, but both have closed eyes, blind to the mother’s decision and the child’s fate.¹¹ In the second print, *The Volunteers*, a group of young men follow the figure of death banging a drum and leading them towards the war. In the initial drawings, the central figure had the facial features of Peter Kollwitz. As Kollwitz progressed in her studies of the scene, these reminiscences disappeared and the young man became a representative of the universal youth marching towards war.¹² The stages of her work on *The Volunteers* underscore her preoccupation with attempting to understand Peter’s wish to volunteer and her own complicity in this and demonstrates a move from a personal to a universal reaction to the war.¹³

The Parents, the third print in the series, is a powerful woodcut, which Kollwitz later reworked into the granite memorial for the German military cemetery in Vladslo, Belgium. In the *War* series a couple clasps one another in grief over the loss of their child. The woman kneels into her husband, who grasps his wife with one hand and his head with the other.

Although prints four and five depict the same subject, images of widows, *Widow I* and *Widow II*, vary in execution. *Widow I* clasps an absent figure and *Widow II* presents the viewer with a dead mother and a dead child, which reflects the mother’s “inability to resist or protect.”¹⁴ In contrast, *The*

⁹ Prelinger 57.

¹⁰ Raymond Dobard, “Subject Matter in the Work of Kathe Kollwitz: An Investigation of Death Motifs in Relation to Traditional Iconographical Patterns,” diss. John Hopkins University, 1975, 64.

¹¹ Apel 34.

¹² Dobard 66.

¹³ Dobard 67.

¹⁴ Apel 35.

Mothers, print six, presents a strong oppositional and resistant stance to the advent of war. Elizabeth Prelinger asserts in her recent scholarship on Kollwitz that much of Kollwitz's post-war work reflects her dilemma between sacrifice and protection.¹⁵ The *War* portfolio is a clear account of this impasse. In her thesis, Prelinger furthers Raymond Dobson's early reading of the inherent Christian iconic references in much of Kollwitz's work.¹⁶ The image of the Madonna of Mercy would have been a familiar one to Kollwitz and her peers. The Christian notion of the Madonna with voluminous skirts covering the weak and innocent is echoed in the Kollwitz print. Kollwitz's women also create a physical barrier between the other on the outside and the children on the inside. The fearful expressions of the mothers oppose the inquisitive face of the small child who peers from beneath the barriers of the mothers' arms. Kollwitz later transformed this print into a bronze sculpture (*Tower of Mothers*, 1937-38) in which the children appear fearful and the mothers assume an unyielding posture. With a wide-legged stance and a flinging back of the arms in a strong gesture of defiance, these women counter the first print of the *War* series, *The Sacrifice*.

The last print of the series, *The People*, features a single mother with a wide-eyed child enveloped in her clothing and partially obscured by her large hand. Behind her is a crowd of fretful, angry, passionate people. The people express an unresolved agony in contradiction to the staid acceptance (or quiet defiance) of the mother. It was Kollwitz's continual struggle to reconcile her encouragement of Peter's enlistment, against the wishes of his father who thought he should resist until forced conscription, with her later guilt over this action. She tried throughout her life to find a balance between her own guilt and later anti-war stance with Peter's own wishes and patriotic desires.

Kollwitz submitted several of the prints from the *War Portfolio* to The *Kunstlerhilfe War* portfolio (1924), which offered a moral challenge to the militarist ideology and the nationalist mythology of heroism and honor. The hero and the cult of the fallen soldier became the centerpiece of the nationalists after the war and thus became a highly contested notion and a defining theme of the anti-war art. Grosz, Dix, Otto Nagel, Rudolf Schlichter, Heinrich Zille and Willibald Krain submitted prints for publication. Krain's images of the mother martyrs crucified for their passive, silent endurance of their sacrifice compliments Kollwitz's ideas on the complicated role of mothers during the war. The prints by Dix, Nagel, Schlichter and Krain contradict the romantic heroic notion of the soldier perpetuated by a nationalistic government with a soldier's lived experience in the war. The discrepancy in this collective

memory between official national history of the hero and the individual and private lives of the returned soldier and his family is also evident in the work of Kollwitz through her process for the memorial in Belgium.

In the preparatory drawings for the *War* portfolio, it is clear that Kollwitz moves from the personal to the universal. However, in the image of the *Parents*, the basis for the memorial, this method is more complicated. The solitary image of the *Parents* began in December of 1914, one month after Kollwitz received the news of Peter's death. She wrote in her journal that:

The monument would have Peter's form, lying stretched out, the father at the head, the mother at the feet. It would be to commemorate the sacrifice of all the young volunteers.¹⁷

These sketches and mock-ups recall the Christian idea of sacrifice as exemplified in the *Lamentation*.¹⁸ Kollwitz had utilized this image prior in her etching *The Downtrodden* from 1900 and employed it in the *Memorial to Karl Liebknecht* of 1919. (She also kept a print of Bellini's *Lamentation* in Peter's room).¹⁹ Kollwitz wished for the memorial to be created through community donations and be placed on the heights of the Schildhorn, looking out over the Havel. This implies that Kollwitz was aware of the impact her own personal memory would have upon the collective memory of a community in which many households lost 18-year-old students. On the 9th of December she further discussed the notion of noble sacrifice:

On your memorial I want to have your figure on top, above the parents. You will lie outstretched, holding out your hands in answer to the call for sacrifice: "Here I am."²⁰

Kollwitz actively questioned the purpose of war and the very act of sacrifice that fueled it. On August 27, 1914 soon after Peter departed for the Front, she noted in her diary that a local paper, the *Tag*, printed an article on the joy of sacrifice and she questioned:

Where do all the women who have watched so carefully over the lives of their beloved ones get the heroism to send them to face the cannon?²¹

Kollwitz initially accepted violence as a necessary means for Revolution, an ideology made visible in both her series *The Weavers' Rebellion* and *The Peasants' Revolt*. After the death of Peter, this violence is noticeably absent from her work.

Sometime between 1919 and 1924, a period in which there is little work on the memorial, Kollwitz was able to let the

¹⁵ Kathe Kollwitz Museum, *Kathe Kollwitz: Schmerz und Schuld* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1995) 69.

¹⁶ See Dobard.

¹⁷ Kollwitz 63.

¹⁸ Diary entry December 3, 1914. Angel Moorjani, *The Aesthetics of Loss*

and *Lessness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 114.

¹⁹ Moorjani 113.

²⁰ Kollwitz 63.

²¹ Kollwitz 62.

physical Peter go. That element of the mourning process is evident in the final versions of the memorial. Kollwitz detached the body of Peter, which was held by his parents in 1915. He became a body upon which they gazed down. In 1924, the body of Peter disappeared entirely.

It is clear from Kollwitz's sketches for the *War* portfolio, that she utilized the same image of *The Parents* for the finalized memorial. Her notebooks also included other sketches of parents in grief, physically connected in their grief as well as isolated. In reference to her diary entries, the notebooks reflect the trials that she and Karl underwent in the death of their son in their personal as well as shared grief process. In the published *War* portfolio, the parents clutch each other, support one another: they are unable to stand/survive alone. She separated them for the memorial. The figures retain the similar postures from the *Parents* of the *War* portfolio, but reflect a permanent isolation as they grieve, and it is through this space between them that those who grieve must also walk. Kollwitz removed the sacrificial body and left the inherently empty space.

Through her sketches for this portfolio, Kollwitz was able to find an acceptable image for the commemoration of her dead son as well as for the dead sons of Germany. The memorial, is perhaps, the final sheet in the portfolio itself. After the guardedness of *The People*, which is the final image of the portfolio, comes acceptance and, ultimately, individualized grief. In the summer of 1917 Kollwitz expressed in her diary the idea to place these memorial figures at cemetery where Peter is buried. She first proposed a bronze relief, but by November of the same year altered her idea to that of a sculpture in the round. By January 1924, her sketchbooks placed the figures at the entrance gate to the cemetery through which

visitors must pass. In Kollwitz's words "blocklike figures, Egyptian in size," and simplicity and monumentality became the final concept for the memorial (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

Until the sketches of 1928, the parents had unspecific features. They were to reflect all mothers and all fathers in the mourning of a generation of dead German youth. However, in April of 1928, Kollwitz changed the face of the woman from that of her model to her own features and subsequently modeled the face of the father as that of Karl Kollwitz.

In 1931, Kollwitz spoke of the sculptures as for Peter, that she was bringing them to him and it is clear that she had returned to a personal identification with her images. In contrast, Germany began to accept the works on a national level and donated two blocks of Belgian granite for her to carve the figures. The cemetery at Vladslo agreed to construct the pedestal for the sculptures and to lay the foundation, and the German national railway provided free transportation for the memorial.

On July 23, 1932, Kollwitz and her husband traveled to Vladslo for the installation of the memorial. Kollwitz's memorial compliments the notion of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the artifice that symbolizes the body that represents all bodies. Her figures represent the universal parents, the parents that represent all parents. The parents kneel, asking forgiveness: forgiveness for the break of faith with their son in his nationalistic spirit and forgiveness for failing to provide protection against an ideology that cut his life short. In a sense, the memorial suggests a family reunion, a forecast of what Kollwitz's religious beliefs promised her: a reunion with her son after her own death.

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Figure 1. Roggevelde Cemetery, 1914-1932, Vladslo, Belgium. Photograph by Jay Pingree.



Figure 2. Kathe Kollwitz, *The Parents*, 1914-1932, height 151 centimeters. Roggevelde Cemetery, Vladslo, Belgium. Photograph by Jay Pingree.



Figure 3. Kathe Kollwitz, *The Parents*, 1914-1932, height 151 centimeters. Roggevelde Cemetery, Valdslo, Belgium. Photograph by Jay Pingree.



Figure 4. Kathe Kollwitz, *The Parents*, 1914-1932, height 151 centimeters. Roggevelde Cemetery, Valdslo, Belgium. Photograph by Jay Pingree.