

A War of Images: Otto Dix and the Myth of the War Experience

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The loss of World War I (1914-1918) forced Germany into a decade of uncertainty: the conversion to democracy, crippling war reparations and runaway inflation plunged the country into dire socio-political upheaval. Despite such devastation, the army and the government perpetuated militant imagery through the popular press and other media: highly fabricated, idealised images of soldierhood proliferated throughout the 1920s. Simultaneously, the traumatic effects of combat on the nation's veterans were played down, exemplified by the reluctance to accept war trauma as a legitimate illness. This paper explores representations of soldierhood in the work of German soldier-artist Otto Dix (1891-1969) during the 1920s, focusing on how Dix's work negated the mythologizing of the war experience and exposed the effects of industrialized warfare on the body during a time when the government and the army sought to conceal these effects. The monumental battlefield pictures *Der Schützengraben* [The Trench] (1920-1923) and the triptych *Krieg* [War] (1929-1932), and the cycle of etchings *Der Krieg* [The War] (1924) reveal the artist's efforts to counter negative scrutiny of soldiers, particularly with regard to how the body was expected to survive the effects of industrialised warfare.

These works are reconsidered here as stinging pictorial critiques of the widespread idealization of militant masculinity in 1920s Germany. Virulently non-conformist in his projection of modern warfare, Dix challenged the popular, romanticizing imagery of the heroic, militarized male, his pictures tracking attempts to nullify the mythologizing of the war experience that pervaded popular media. With reference to the works' provenance, the socio-political climate and the artist's recollections, the genesis of Dix's battlefield pictures is re-evaluated within the contexts for which the pictures were originally intended.

I'm back again from hell
With loathsome thoughts to sell;
Secrets of death to tell;
And horrors from the abyss.
[...]
But a curse is on my head,
That shall not be unsaid,
And the wounds in my heart are red,
For I have watched them die.

Siegfried Sassoon, *To the Warmongers*, 1917.



Fig. 1. Helmuth Stockmann, 1919. *Volunteers with all weapons will secure Berlin. Enlist in the Reinhard Brigade.* Lithograph, 94 x 71 cm. Washington: American Library of Congress.

Found guilty of causing World War I, Germany's nascent democratic government grappled with crippling war reparations, social and economic upheaval, and the restoration of national pride. Such conditions, which plagued the Weimar government throughout its tenure, urged a re-assessment of the cost of the war to the health and economy of the nation (Willett, 1996). The government and army, reticent in acknowledging defeat and attempting to assign blame to homefront dissidence for the loss of the war through the so-called 'stab-in-the-back' theory, continued to promote an excessively militant brand of patriotism, accompanied by idealized literary and visual accounts of soldierhood (Mosse, 1990, pp.7-50).¹ While there were attempts in all the belligerent nations, through literary and visual means, to justify the loss of so many young men, the prevalence of heroic imagery in Germany was particularly marked. Weimar politics retained a high respect for, and glorification of, the military, and as the war itself became more distant, the

establishment of the myth of the war experience, as George Mosse termed it, gained a lasting resonance with those too young to fight in World War I (ibid, p.7). Idealising imagery helped counter the indigestible reality of industrialized warfare, promoting war as glorious and justified (Figs. 1-2), while recourse to age-old heroic imagery became increasingly prevalent and reinforced (Fig. 3). Instances of such material gradually increased throughout the 1920s and were distributed widely in publications such as the lavishly illustrated *Reichsarchiv* series and periodicals such as *Simplicissimus*.² Concurrent with the promotion of myth-making imagery, the German government – while pioneering in the establishment of a welfare



Fig. 2. Artist unknown, 1918. *Der gefallene Kamerad* [The Fallen Comrade]. This postcard is typical of so-called myth-making images. The dead soldier, head resting on a stone, is shown without wounds, accompanied by his faithful horse.

¹ The 'stab in the back' theory was the notorious *Dolchstoßlegende*, the legend of an undefeated German army betrayed from within. Military leaders such as Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg blamed dissidence on the home front as causing the loss of World War I for Germany. The *Dolchstoßlegende* openly recalled the fate of the heroic warrior Siegfried in the popular German Medieval epic poem, *Die Nibelungenlied* [The Song of the Nibelung]. In the poem, Siegfried is betrayed by Hagen, an enemy within Siegfried's circle.

² The entire catalogue of *Simplicissimus* may be found at: www.simplicissimus.info.



Fig. 3. Artist unknown, 1916. Calendar (detail), published by the *Berliner Tageblatt*. This image is one of many based on the image of Siegfried, the hero of the *Nibelungenlied*.

state, provided hopelessly inadequate assistance to heal the bodies and minds of veterans. The “doubtful legitimacy” attached to war trauma (Leed, 2000, p.35) in debates surrounding pension payments further emasculated physically and mentally disabled veterans, as the term became progressively associated with cowardice, and attitudes among the public were, as a result, characteristically ambivalent. To many ex-combatants, this must have seemed like an attempt to obliterate a shameful past, of which they were part. The absence of support, even for war heroes, is encapsulated in images of Iron Cross awardees forced into beggary (Fig. 4). The “real war,” states Modris Eksteins (2000), had ceased to exist by 1918; “thereafter it was swallowed by imagination in the guise of memory” (p.297). In Germany’s culture of defeat, (Schivelbusch, 2003, p.1), the need for restorative imagery was arguably greater; thus, veterans’ traumatic experiences were played down and cruelly pushed aside by those in power (Lerner, 2009). During a time when reactionary imagery was widely circulated, the extent of veterans’ injuries, and in turn their right to a pension, was disputed by the medical profession, working in tandem with the War Ministry (Lerner, p.120). Cruel, inhuman attempts to cure war neurosis included the infamous Kaufmann method, in which strong electrical currents were passed into the throats of *Kriegsneurotiker* (Ulrich, 2010, p.92). Its employment had two objectives: make the traumatised fit for work, or if at all possible, avoid substantial pension payments through a diagnosis of ‘hysteria’, which, unlike war neurosis, was not a listed illness.

This paper explores representations of soldierhood in the battlefield pictures of German soldier artist Otto Dix during the 1920s, focusing on how they functioned to challenge the mythologizing of the war experience in the popular press and expose the effects of industrialized warfare on the body during a time when the government and the army sought to play down these effects through questioning the masculinity of mentally and physically injured veterans. Images such as *The Trench* (1920-1923), the cycle of etchings *The War* (1924) and *War* (1929-1932) locate Dix amongst these traumatised soldiers, and

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Fig. 4. Photographer unknown, post-1918. A disabled veteran, with his Iron Cross First Class pinned to his uniform, begs on a Berlin street. Dresden: Deutsche Fotothek, Saxon State Library.

document his efforts to counter negative scrutiny of soldiers, particularly with regard to how the body was expected to survive the effects of industrialised warfare.³

Dix experienced the entire war on the front line, was wounded five times and awarded the Iron Cross for bravery in 1915. In common with many other soldier-artists, much of Dix's oeuvre is redolent of his status as a participant in the war; while no claim is made here that Dix's work can only be interpreted through his war experience, an examination of his work



Fig. 5. Richard Knötel, 1890. *Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig, 16. bis 19. Oktober 1813 - Heldentod des Majors von Krosigk bei Möckern, 16. Oktober 1813* [Battle of the Nations, Leipzig, 16-19 October 1813 – Heroic Death of Major von Krosigk near Möckern]. Colour print, 25 x 35 cm, republished 1913. Leipzig: Stadtgeschichtliches Museum.

from the perspective of the soldier uncovers the operative role of his war imagery – that of challenging the false image of the *Kriegserlebnis* projected by right-wing factions, which included much of the army's officer class.⁴ In addition, working-class Dix was particularly sensitive towards the treatment of veterans from the same social strata, whose post-war experience was strongly influenced by their social background. The working class soldier most often experienced the bloodiest battles first-hand and was therefore more exposed to physical and mental injury. It was these soldiers who suffered most in the so-called 'pension wars': unmanly demeanour and inborn weakness were attached to their bodies' failure to recover from combat

(Bourke, 1999; Holden, 1998).

³ For copyright reasons, illustrations of works by Otto Dix cannot be reproduced here. An essay (German) and illustration of *The Trench* is available on the website of the University of Heidelberg: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/2238/1/Schubert_Otto_Dix_das_Triptychon_Der_Krieg_1929_1932_2005.pdf. High-quality digital reproductions of *The War* can be found on the website of the Museum of Modern Art, New York: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=63259. An online guide to *War* is available on the website of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden: <http://www.skdmuseum/en/special-exhibitions/otto-dix-der-krieg-war/index.html>.

⁴ Numerous writers and artists, both liberal and reactionary, from all the countries involved in the War produced work in response to their experience. Reactionary material in Germany included the widely circulated and lavishly illustrated Hindenburg-Denkmal: Für das deutsche Volk, Eine Ehrengabe zum 75. Geburtstag des Generalfeldmarschalls, ed. by Karl Lindner and others (Berlin, 1923) and Ehrendenkmal der Deutschen Armee, 1871-1918, ed. by General d. Inf. a. D. Von Eisenhart Rothe, Volks-Ausgabe (Berlin and Munich, 1928). Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) is perhaps the best known of the anti-war German literature; British soldier-writer Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) is a comparable example of anti-war sentiment in the literature of the victorious nations. Many German artists who had spent time on the battlefields attempted to counter the huge volume of reactionary material, George Grosz (1893-1959), Hans Grundig (1901-1958) and Heinrich Hoerle (1895-1936) among them. For a detailed analysis of the art of World War I, see Cork, R., 1994, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War*. New Haven: Yale University Press. For a sustained study of the veteran's experience, see Leed, E., 1981, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge University Press.

Idealizing imagery, as Dix would have understood, was assisted by the traditional model of German masculinity prevalent before, during and after the war. This model was synonymous with a militant masculinity, defined as a physical, moral and aesthetic ideal: a muscular, well-proportioned physique, combined with steely mental resilience and a chivalrous disposition. Discourses surrounding the idealised male body and militarism emerged in relation to the Battle of Leipzig (1812-14), the largest battle in Western history before World War I, and in which the German kingdoms of Prussia and Saxony, alongside other anti-French forces, effected Napoleon's retreat from central Europe. This ideal became an integral part of military training from the mid-1800s onward in a drive to produce model specimens of masculinity and by 1914 had become firmly ingrained in German culture. It was a model that summoned imagery of a glorious past which mythologised and romanticised the concept of soldierhood, while the use of motifs such as outmoded weaponry were reminders of Germany's triumphs as a warrior nation.

It is significant that the Battle of Leipzig's one hundredth anniversary was celebrated just before the outbreak of World War I. In 1914, the memory of this great victory regained prominence as Germany went to war, through a plethora of images recalling the triumphs of 1812-1814 (Fig. 5). By the time Dix had begun *War*, such imagery had gained a foothold in the popular press. The sword-wielding, armour-clad central figure in the frontispiece of a 1928 German National Press publication is modelled on the legend of the handsome heroic knight Siegfried in the famous German Medieval epic poem *Die Nibelungenlied* (Fig. 6). In the poem, Siegfried, invincible in battle, is betrayed from within his own ranks and killed in a manner which is dishonourable to a knight, making the poem a romantic reflection of the stab-in-the-back theory. The integrity of body and mind in Siegfried's makeup was significant, "for it focused the image of man and gave it cohesion" (Mosse, 2000, p.101). Its success

lay in its restoration of pride, encouraging as it did a vision of warfare as a noble and meaningful sacrifice. While there were attempts in all belligerent nations to legitimize the cost to life, the myth gained a much stronger footing in defeated countries, culminating in Germany, with its eventual adoption in Hitler's bellicose rhetoric in the 1920s and 30s. It served to counter reports of widespread disillusionment with the officer class by lower-ranking, working-class soldiers (Bessel, 259), and instead projected an image of the army as a consolidated unit, weakened only, as Siegfried had been, by traitors from within the ranks. With the economy stabilized by 1924 and working-class uprisings effectively quelled, the pacifist movement was all but quashed by the ruling Social Democrats.⁵ As a result,



Fig. 6. Frontispiece to *Ehrendenkmal der Deutschen Armee, 1871-1918* [Memorial to the German Army, 1871-1918] (Berlin and Munich, 1928).

⁵ Bessel notes that pacifism found "no appreciable echo in the politics of Weimar Germany. 'Pacifist' generally remained a term of political abuse, not a badge of honour" (1993, p.262).

heroic imagery, which appeared in widely-read patriotic picture albums, far outnumbered anti-war imagery in the graphic and fine arts. By 1932, the year in which Dix completed his triptych *War* and by which time reactionary politics had gained overwhelming support in Germany, this legitimizing element had gained such a hold on culture that veterans who voiced their experience as positive and justified were those most warmly embraced, while those who voiced its negative effects were much less likely to be heeded, or even worse, branded as unpatriotic or cowardly.

The controversy surrounding Dix's painting *The Trench*, possibly more than any other work of art of the period, exemplifies the turbulence that existed in German politics and society during the period. A huge painting (now lost) whose composition situates the viewer in the trench with the shattered bodies of dead, decomposing soldiers, *The Trench* was surely designed to confront the viewer with the reality of mechanized warfare. Reactionaries' widespread appraisal of Ernst Jünger's celebrated, predominantly right-wing novel *Storm of Steel* (1920), in contrast to the negative press they levelled at *The Trench*, is indicative of the power of the myth.⁶ *Storm of Steel* is the memoir of Jünger's experiences on the Western Front, with graphic accounts of trench warfare; Jünger completely revised the book for a new publisher in 1924 – the so-called anti-war year – in which the author emphasises the notion of heroic blood sacrifice. However, Jünger's prose curbed the pain of loss through the glorification of a 'noble death': "Bravery, fearless risking of one's life, is always inspiring" (Jünger, p.213). Dix, on the other hand, eschewing any offering of false heroism, exposed the reality of warfare through the most visceral pictorial means possible, and thus executed possibly the most controversial painting of the decade. *The Trench* is clearly a re-visitation of the trenches in its depiction of the aftermath of an artillery attack on a German trench on the Western Front. When *The Trench* was exhibited in Berlin in 1924, prominent art historian Julius Meier-Graefe exacted a blistering derision of its artist in his very public criticism of the academy's president Max Liebermann's decision to exhibit the work, stating that:

This *Trench* is not only bad, but is infamy itself, with a pungent delight in detail [...], not of the sensuous kind but of the conceptual. Brains, blood, guts painted to make the mouth water. This Dix is sickening. Mr Dix probably works in the name of pacifism, the well-known theory of deterrence [...]. (Graefe, pp. 23-24).⁷

The multiplicity of body parts makes it impossible to identify any one figure, with the exception of the rotting, crucified corpse suspended over the trench in the middle ground. The decaying bodies reflect the description of one veteran, who said that "what was wretched about death was not the fact that men had been killed", but that wartime corpses were so "limp and mean-looking: this [was] the devil of it, that a man [was] not only killed, but made

⁶ Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* was revised a total of seven times, the novel somewhat changing in tone with each revision. Michael Hofmann's 2003 translation is based on the eighth and final edition, published in 1961. See Hofmann's introduction to his translation for an illuminating critique of Jünger's modifications to the novel.

⁷ "Dieser *Schützengraben* ist nicht nur schlecht, sondern infamy gemalt, mit einer penetranten Freude am Detail [...] nicht am sinnlichen Detail, sondern am begrifflichen. Gehirn, Blut, Gedärm können so gemalt werden, daß einem das Wasser im Munde zusammenläuft. Dieser Dix ist [...] zum Kotzen. Wahrscheinlich hat Herr Dix in aller Einfalt für den Pazifismus wirken wollen, die bekannte Abschreckungstheorie." Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the German are my own.

to look so vile and filthy in death, so futile and meaningless, that the sight of him was hated” (West, 1917, p.67).

On a deeply personal level, *The Trench* represents the artist’s attempts to release the traumatic grip of the war: a desperate attempt to release oneself from the overwhelming psychological burden of the horror of the trenches and the dying utterances of fallen soldiers.⁸ In an earnest tone, Dix said of the painting:

As a young man, one does not realise that one is extremely stressed out internally. For years, at least ten years, I had these dreams in which I had to crawl through shattered homes (serious tone), through corridors through which I could barely pass. The ruins were continually in my dreams. It’s not that painting for me is packed with fear, no. But [the war experience] was a certain part of my being. That is without a doubt. (Wetzel, 1965, p.745)⁹

The excessive realism and attention to detail separates *The Trench* from other images that the artist had executed to date and is, in effect, a soldier’s monument to (and defence of) those who fought in the trenches. “That is how it was on those autumn days in the trenches south of Soissons,” remarked fellow veteran, Alfred Salmony, then curator at Cologne’s Museum of East-Asian Art (1924, p.8). Willi Wolfradt, a critic who, unlike Meier-Graefe, was a strong supporter of young German artists, published the first monograph on Dix in autumn 1924 and responded directly to Meier-Graefe’s criticism, stating that “Julius Meier-Graefe has for example described [The Trench] as disgraceful. [But] it was painted to sicken, not to comfort...just as a frontline soldier paint[s]. [Dix] spares no brutality of expression, no bloodlust, only to be seen to act... to break the terrible *forgetfulness* of the people...Dix is a single obstruction against the subtle little picture, which acts as if nothing has happened.” (Wolfradt, pp.13-14).¹⁰ Wolfradt reinforces Dix’s status as participant, as a *Frontschwein* of the trenches. *The Trench* reaffirms Dix’s kinship with veterans, as one of the many millions of survivors in whose psyche alone the death-cries of comrades were still heard and whose suffering continued at the hands of a government who sought to question their bravery and make them all but invisible. Following a visit to a hospital for the facially-disfigured, Erich Kuttner, founder of the largest association of disabled veterans during the Weimar years, protested against governmental policy in his article *Vergessen!*:

⁸ There is no sustained study of Dix’s artistic responses to the war experience. However, useful sources are: McGreevy, L., 2001, *Bitter Witness*, New York: Peter Lang; Hartley, K. S., 1992, *Otto Dix 1891-1969*, London: Tate Publishing; Fox, P., 2006, *Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix*, *Oxford Art Journal*, 29. Available through: Boole Library, University College Cork website www.booleweb.ucc.ie [Accessed 6 June 2010].

⁹ “Als junger Mensch merkt man das ja gar nicht, daß man im Innern doch belastet war. Denn ich hab jahrelang, mindestens zehn Jahre lang immer diese Träume gehabt, in denen ich durch zertrümmerte Häuser kriechen mußte, (ernst) durch Gänge, durch die ich kaum durchkam. Die Trümmer waren fortwährend in meinen Träumen...nicht, daß das Malen für mich auch nicht ‘die Angst’ gepackt, nein, aber es war eben ein bestimmter Teil...vielleicht auch meines Wesens. Das ist ja ohne Zweifel so.”

¹⁰ “Meier-Graefe z. B. hat es geradezu ‘infam’ genannt... Wie halt so ein Frontschwein malt... Er scheut keine Brutalität des Ausdrucks, keine Blutrünstigkeit, um nur gesehen zu werden, zu wirken...die furchtbare Vergeßlichkeit der Menschen zu durchbrechen... Dix ist eine einzige Obstrukton gegen das subtile Bildchen, das so tut, als ob nichts gewesen ist.”

How many people have the slightest idea that there are still about twenty military hospitals in Berlin with more than two thousand inmates...and how many of those who know about this have asked themselves how a man's body might look...after two, three, five or six years of medical treatment [...] located in remote loneliness [...] here one can find [...] the men without faces. The uncomfortable existence of these war victims is forgotten. (1920, pp.81-82)

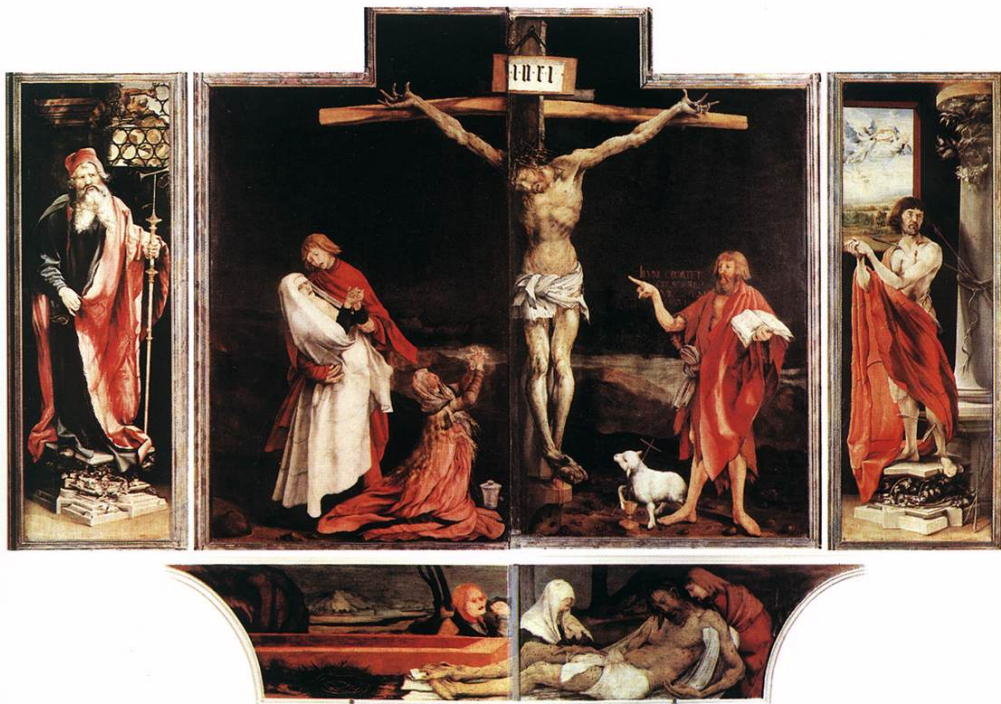


Fig. 7. Matthias Grünewald, 1506-1515. *The Isenheim Altarpiece* (closed view). Oil on wood. 269 x 307 cm. Colmar (Alsace): Musée d'Unterlinden.

It is a widely known fact that photography of battles was not allowed and that the most shocking images of the war took several years to reach the public, if at all (ibid, pp.1-13); with the most horrifically maimed veterans hidden away, little wonder then that ex-soldier Dix's painting gained a certain potency.

The composition of *The Trench* constitutes the building block for the central panel of the triptych, *War*, which possibly surpasses *The Trench* in its gruesomeness and recalls Matthias Grünewald's rendering of the crucified Christ in his *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Fig. 7). Grünewald had been recently 'rediscovered' and, incidentally, heralded as the greatest painter that northern Europe had ever produced, by Meier-Graefe (Crockett, 1992, p.79).¹¹ Grünewald's altarpiece was created for the hospital order of the Anthonites, and, during Grünewald's time, to care for sufferers of a condition called ergotism, or St. Anthony's fire. The image of the pock-marked, bloodied body of the tortured Christ was intended to provide

¹¹ Julius Meier-Graefe was possibly the most esteemed and widely-read art critic in Germany in the first quarter of the twentieth century. However, he very rarely supported contemporary European art. To gain insight to his views on art, see Meier-Graefe, J., 1908, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, London: William Heinemann. For a critical appraisal of his work, see Moffett, K. 1973, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic*, Munich: Prestel Verlag.

spiritual healing for the sick. Similarly, Dix acknowledges the suffering of comrades in a landscape ground up with the blood and flesh of soldiers. Dix's use of the triptych format, the inclusion of entombed soldiers in a predella, and the rich, grimly luxuriant transparent glazes recall the tragic splendour of Grünewald's enduring image of agony. A decapitated head crowned with barbed wire (bottom left foreground, central panel), almost invisible in reproductions but almost rolling at the viewer's feet when one stands before the painting, clearly alludes to Christ's crown of thorns and betrays a deliberate attempt to associate the soldier's suffering with Christian sacrifice, sealing this image's societal function: that of defending and justifying the recollections of German veterans, and acknowledging their suffering.¹² Recourse to Grünewald's enduring image of agony within the context of the martyred soldier was hardly accidental. As much as heroic imagery of soldierhood was bound in German tradition, so too was imagery of the crucified Christ. The multi-panelled altarpiece



Fig. 8. Unknown photographer, 1916. Trench on the Somme battlefields. In *Reichsarchiv: Somme-Nord, 1. Teil: Die Brennpunkte der Schlacht im Juli 1916* [National Archives: Somme-North, Part I: the Focal Points of the Battle in July 1916] (Berlin, 1927). Unpaginated insert.

was the pictorial focus of Christian churches and the Crucifixion one of its most popular subjects. In addition, emphasis on suffering is closely identified with the Northern tradition of painting, and as an adherent of Lucas Cranach and Hans Baldung Grien, in addition to Grünewald, Dix was bathing his 'altarpiece' in an iconographic tradition that could compete with militant idealism. Dix said of the image:

The picture began ten years after the First World War. I had made many studies during those years, in order to process the war experience artistically. In 1928 I felt ready to tackle the big theme [...]. At this time many books in the Weimar Republic were again promoting notions of the hero and heroism, long since reduced to absurdity in the trenches of the War. People had begun to forget the terrible suffering the war had brought to them. From this situation arose the triptych [...] I did not want to cause fear and panic, but impart knowledge about the awfulness of war and thus awaken people's powers of resistance. (Hagen, 1964, p.4)¹³

The validity of Dix's *War* as a stab of authenticity (and deterrence) is delineated most clearly when compared to the many mythologizing photographs of well-manicured trenches and

¹² It is true that reactionaries as well as liberals utilized Christian iconography in their war-related texts and images; Christianity was the common faith and the reserve of neither faction. Reactionary imagery, however, tended to use Christian iconography as a means to project war as legitimate sacrifice, not as terrible suffering.

¹³ "Das Bild entstand zehn Jahre nach dem ersten Weltkrieg. Ich hatte während dieser Jahre viele Studien gemacht, um das Kriegserlebnis künstlerisch zu verarbeiten. 1928 fühlte ich mich reif, das große Thema anzupacken [...] In dieser Zeit übrigens propagierten viele Bücher ungehindert in der Weimarer Republik erneut ein Heldentum und einen Heldenbegriff, die in den Schützengräben des 1. Weltkrieges längst ad absurdum geführt worden waren. Die Menschen begannen schon zu vergessen, was für entsetzliches Leid der Krieg ihnen gebracht hatte. Aus dieser Situation heraus entstand das Triptychon [...] Ich wollte also nicht Angst und Panik auslösen, sondern Wissen um die Furchtbarkeit eines Krieges vermitteln und damit die Kräfte der Abwehr wecken."

cosy, almost homely images of life behind enemy lines that filled the *Reichsarchiv* series of the 1920s (figs 8-9). While the myth “sought to mask war and legitimize the war experience, [and] displace the reality of war” (Mosse, 1990, p.7), *War*, in effect, de-legitimizes it.

In 1924, Dix exhibited his cycle of etchings, *The War*, for the first time in Berlin. Based largely on the artist’s numerous wartime drawings, and to some extent his study of mummies in the Palermo catacombs and Ernst Friedrich’s photographs of maimed veterans (see below), as a unit they form a pictorial record of the daily trials of the frontline soldier, recording the close contact and intimate knowledge of the subject that only one who had experienced war could hope to achieve. The catalogue produced for the launch of the series contained a foreword written by French pacifist writer and fellow veteran, Henri Barbusse, with whose novel, *Under Fire* (1916), Dix associated his etchings. The historical moment, the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, the so-called ‘anti-war’ year, when furious debates between Left and Right on social and political issues directly related to the consequences of the war reached a peak, was crucial to the exhibition’s message.

While Dix’s war imagery overall was not motivated solely by an unfavourable attitude to war, the anti-war context within which the etchings were deliberately placed cannot be ignored. Overwhelming evidence points to the cycle as a virulent response to the government’s treatment of veterans, and there are few indictments of warfare as powerful as *The War*, or in its time, anything that challenged right-wing politics and its idealizing imagery with such ferocity. Wolfradt’s opinion that *The War* was Dix’s most effective work to date (1924, pp.14-15) is reflected by gallery owner Hermann Abels’ response to the etchings in a letter to Karl Nierendorf: “If the new etchings are to be



Fig. 9. Felix Schwormfädt, 1923. *Life Behind Enemy Lines*, in *Hindenburg-Denkmal für das Deutsche Volk 1871-1918* [Hindenburg Memorial for the German People 1871-1918] (Leipzig, 1923), p. 129.

considered a German memorial to the unknown soldier, this is not just an error of judgement in your endorsement of them, but an outrage that every frontline soldier must take as the deepest insult.” (1924).¹⁴ Nierendorf was then prompted to write to Dix: “Nearly all bookshops do not want to put this book in their window display for fear of having their windows smashed. The German book trade has become very swastika-oriented (1924).”¹⁵

The organisation and treatment of the subject matter of *The War* clearly point to one who had lived the war experience, - while the series may at first appear to have no logical order, to the war veteran, it made complete sense. The disordered and unexpected process of

¹⁴ “Wenn [...] die neue Radierfolge als ein deutsches Denkmal “für den unbekanntten Soldaten” gelten soll, so ist dies nicht nur eine Entgleisung in der Wahl der Anpreisung, sondern eine Unverschämtheit, die jeden Frontkämpfer auf das Tiefste empören muss.”

¹⁵ “Fast alle Buchhandlungen weigern sich das Buch auszustellen aus Angst, daß man “die Fenster einschlägt” [...] Der deutsche Buchhandel ist eben sehr verhakenkreuzelt.”

daily life mirrors the content of Barbusse's novel. The etchings are titled with the locations where the artist and his unit saw battle, thus producing a photojournalistic account: snapshots of the everyday experience of warfare. In addition, Dix's return to the theme through his pictures easily reflect Michael Hofmann's remarks on Ernst Jünger's seven revisions of *The Storm of Steel*: "Jünger tinkered with the novel, one would have to say, obsessively [...] As well as being one of the earliest books on World War I, *Storm of Steel* is also one of the newest" (2003, p.xii). Jünger's and Dix's 'tinkering' with their memories of the War evidences that their work functioned as a means of coping with the persistent memory of the war. However, Jünger's writing is peppered with the outmoded brand of heroism and the right-wing patriotism perpetuated in popular culture. Referring to traumatised soldiers as cowards, a sentiment that would resonate more comfortably with those who needed to blame someone or something for the loss of the war, he stated: "I have always pitied the coward, in whom battle arouses a series of hellish tortures, while the spirit of the brave man merely rises the higher to meet a chain of exciting experiences" (2003, p.158). Dix's opposing ideological standpoint surely led him to align himself with the Socialist, Barbusse. There is nothing celebratory or glorious in Barbusse's writing or Dix's imagery, either in the events of the living or the portrayal of the dead. His pictures are the processing of the war's legacy, recalling it with striking vividness almost six years after the end of the war.

The mastery of technique deployed in Dix's oeuvre is constantly referred to as an obsession with the obscene and revolting and, indeed, one may question why such a profusion of dead bodies populate Dix's work in comparison to other artists of World War I, a fact that appears to substantiate claims for Otto Dix as a pornographer of gore. Indeed, historian Theodore K. Rabb singled out Dix's prints in particular for criticism: "[T]he unrelenting gruesomeness of the images [...] arouse revulsion and dismay rather than any admiration for the artist" (2011, p.191). Yet, this obsession is equally revelatory of an artist who had a need to describe and record as faithfully as possible.

Later, in 1924, Dix accepted an invitation to exhibit the etchings alongside Käthe Kollwitz's series of woodcuts, entitled *Krieg*, and Ernst Friedrich's collection of photographs entitled *Krieg dem Kriege* [War against War] (published in book form just before the exhibition), in Friedrich's newly-founded International War Museum in Berlin. In 1924 in particular, the myth of the war experience, employed with tenacity in recruiting posters and other media, minimized the visibility of maimed veterans; in German film, staged scenes replaced actual events and very few wounded or dead German soldiers (but plenty of well cared for wounded men) appeared. Such imagery instilled a sense of lost opportunity to prove one's manhood in Germans who were too young to take up arms in 1914. The exhibition provoked outrage when Friedrich displayed some of the most shocking images in his shop window, with police confiscating the images at bayonet point. But support came from liberals, notably from war veteran and pacifist writer, Kurt Tucholsky, who described Friedrich's collection as "the most shocking and horrible photographs imaginable, unlike anything I had ever seen" warning that "no written work can come near the power of the these images [...] Whoever sees these and does not shudder is not a human being, but a patriot" (1926, pp.313-314).

While it may be argued that the photograph is less prone to fabrication than drawn or painted imagery, the work of an ex-soldier is not so easily discredited. Alongside the content of Kollwitz's imagery and Friedrich's photographs, which were exhibited with antimilitarist captions and commentary, Dix seems to say: *I am a veteran of the war and this is what has happened to me and millions of others; we have experienced horror beyond human imagination in which even the most mentally robust soldier crumbles.*

In common with Friedrich's purpose, Dix sought to counter those heroic, idealised images that identified the soldier with Germany's military and industrial might. The result is a visual legacy that negates every facet of the myth and exposes the physical and mental damage exacted on the living, and forces passage through the mired stench of the battlefields. *Dead Men before their Position near Tahure* shows the two decomposing heads of soldiers, one of whom is identified only by his dog-tag. In *Dead Soldier, St. Clement*, the soldier is shown as a discarded, slaughtered animal, his eye clouded with decay and his tongue forced out of his mouth. *Mealtime in the Trench - Loretto Heights* could not be further from the constructed imagery of the photo albums. A soldier eats while the steam rising from his flask is suffused with the fetid odour of decomposition. His only companion is a rotting cadaver who is simultaneously being eaten by the worms.

Bravery is implied here also, in that the veteran who survived such a nightmare had proven his valour. Considering the social landscape, and the recent furore surrounding *The Trench*, Dix understood that such imagery would be received quite differently by those who had fought in the war than by ordinary citizens. The reception of the images by civilians measured the toughness of the non-combatant against that of the veteran, challenging in some measure the doubt attached to the masculine worth of traumatised soldiers.

The sensationalism aroused by these images has led to assessment of the prints as reflective of a pungent delight in *grotesquerie* rather than a drive to accurately communicate the reality of trench warfare, but within the context of the anti-war year, anything less graphic would not have served the purpose. While right-wing factions, steadily growing in number, considered another war necessary to repudiate the decisions made by the Allies at Versailles and recover from the 'stab in the back', Dix's gruesome imagery served to counteract the myth of endurance on which the 'stab in the back' theory depended.

To conclude, *The Trench*, the triptych *War*, and *The War* resulted from a will on the part of the artist to uphold the moral sanctity of the soldier and to counteract the doubt attached to war trauma as a legitimate illness by revealing to the public the true viciousness of the war. The loss of identity through the concealment of maimed veterans and the generalizing of the war experience through mythologizing imagery is confronted through the pictures' restoration of the soldier's agency. Within their socio-political context, Dix's imagery functioned to counter the media's idealisation of soldierhood by responding to criticism of shattered veterans through visual recollection of traumatic events; as an ex-soldier, the picturing of his own memory served as evidence of the horror of industrialized warfare and addressed the opinions and attitudes of an ambivalent society that either failed to grasp or chose to forget the extent of veterans' sacrifices.

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