Imagining the Absent Dead: Rituals of Bereavement and the Place of the War Dead in German Women’s Art during the First World War*

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I: Introduction

Reflecting on war and death in 1915, Sigmund Freud predicted that dealing with wartime fatalities would pose a major social challenge for the belligerent societies.\(^1\) Due to the vast scale of the conflict and the enormous numbers of casualties, death had suddenly become an inescapable reality of ordinary daily life, as civilians were forced to confront, and attempt to come to terms with, violent mass death. The levels of battlefield fatalities were unprecedented in European warfare, rising to over nine million by 1918.\(^2\) The numbers of those grieving for the fallen exceeded this figure by a considerable margin. By the end of the war, hardly a family in the main belligerent states had escaped some form of bereavement.\(^3\) For Freud, the degree of alienation, distress and paralysis felt by his grieving contemporaries was compounded by false expectations of the war and unrealistic attitudes to death. Bereavement, he argued, could only be overcome if people adopted a more rational attitude and granted death its natural place in life.\(^4\)

While this may have represented sensible psychoanalytical advice, it was, perhaps, unusual counsel from a father with three sons at the front.\(^5\) From the earliest phase of the conflict, the meaning of death in war and the place of the fallen in society were central and difficult questions for European civilians, many of whom were deeply ambivalent regarding the reconciliation of private loss with the notion of heroic sacrifice for the nation. Drawing on the visual responses to the war produced by German women, this article addresses both the practical and the cultural implications of bereavement in wartime. Military burial practices and the absence of the bodies of the fallen had a fundamental impact on the civilian experience of wartime death. For German women artists, art acted as a tool through which

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they could reimagine long-established funerary rights. As the conflict wore on, moreover, female artists began to contest the traditional role of the proud and dignified female mourner in German society by representing extreme and disconsolate grief in their work.

II: Postwar and Wartime Bereavement

The commemorative iconographies and ceremonies of the postwar period in Europe have been central to the study of mourning in First World War historiography. A number of scholars have considered the long-term implications of mass death and mass bereavement in tandem with the political and social consequences of the war, and the work of Jay Winter and others has heightened our understanding of both war memorials and commemorative ceremonies by emphasizing their role in communal consolation and public recognition of sacrifice. According to Winter, the postwar cult of memory cannot be fully understood if considered simply as a political manifestation or a restoration of national identity—it should also be seen as a means of dealing with grief. While this more layered reading of war memorials in particular effectively links postwar cultural representation and commemoration to the wartime experience of loss, the temporal distance to the war is crucial. The war memorials, the vast majority of which were erected after the Armistice, offered interpretations of wartime death that responded to the very specific circumstances and needs of the postwar world. Many referenced broader narratives of brave conduct and self-sacrifice and were deeply intertwined with the national experiences of either defeat or victory. Yet, at least in the German case, the strongly politicized culture of remembrance and the emerging radical artistic representations of the 1920s should be differentiated from the rituals of mourning and cultural expression that emerged during the war years. A soldier’s death on the battlefield and its meaning were more delicate issues while the conflict was still ongoing. In the midst of the war and its carnage, questions of loyalty to the men at the front, national duty and sacrifice had a different impact on the way families and communities perceived and mourned their losses. Since there was also much less space given to public ceremonies of commemoration during the war, privately conceived responses to loss are of particular relevance.

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Although research in the field is slowly shifting from postwar commemoration to wartime rites of bereavement, and from public mourning to private and familial grief, the manner in which contemporaries sought to cope with their grief while the fighting and dying continued remains an elusive subject. The impact of the conflict on the social and emotional patterns of bereavement was profound, and a number of comprehensive urban and regional histories of wartime Germany have begun to address the ways in which people’s daily lives were affected by the omnipresence of death. Locating personal loss within the broader frames of religious or patriotic convictions, for example, was an important coping strategy for many German civilians. In the case of rural Bavaria, Benjamin Ziemann has shown that women often displayed a religiously inspired fatalism when writing about wartime loss and hardship. Analysing death notices in Freiburg newspapers, Roger Chickering has highlighted the degree to which the patriotic rhetoric employed slowly disintegrated over the course of the conflict. In the Italian case, Oliver Janz has demonstrated the prevalence of religious and nationalistic language in the obituaries of fallen soldiers. The experience of intense grief was by no means exclusive to the experience of war, but war added an unfamiliar dimension to mourning. The violent nature of wartime death, the geographical distance from soldiers’ remains and the inability of bereaved individuals to engage in conventional burial rites were peculiar to wartime loss and compounded the emotional burden of the bereaved. Uncertainty about the circumstances of a soldier’s passing, and the difficulty of reconstructing time, location and cause of death made it more difficult for grieving relatives to fully accept their losses. In addition, the relatively young age of many deceased soldiers reinforced the perception that death in war was unnatural and tragic. Under such novel circumstances, bereaved civilians invented a variety of symbolic and substitute rituals that were merged with traditional funerary rites. The unsettling experience of war was universal and helped to facilitate the formation of ‘communities of mourning’ on European home fronts. Individuals and families thus anticipated and remembered loss collectively. Many people bonded over their shared experience of bereavement and new social networks surfaced, evolving from loose ‘circles’ of mourning during the war to more formally organized widows’ or veterans’ organizations in the 1920s.

III: The Female Mourner

The figure of the female mourner occupied a prominent place in many wartime and postwar societies. Public discourse on death and sacrifice during the war gave rise to a moral economy that outlined strict guidelines for female bereavement, in which a strong emphasis was placed on dignified composure. Women were supposed to endorse male sacrifice and bear the consequences of soldiers’ deaths as their contribution to the national war effort. Hence, the woman’s role as a proud mourner served to reinforce national unity and consensus. In 1915, German military and religious authorities published correspondence guidelines for mothers and female relatives who were writing to soldiers at the front; blueprints which promised the receiver strength and ‘brave endurance of whatever these heroic times herald’. Roger Chickering has described an incident in wartime Freiburg in which a priest reprimanded a bereaved woman who had broken down in tears before the congregation at a church service. Mainstream wartime society simply did not tolerate public displays of emotional pain: it was understood as ‘incongruous, if not unworthy and suggested weakness, self-indulgence and failure of nerve’. Oliver Janz has argued that a decidedly male-dominated cult of the fallen developed in Italy where women’s emotional distress was given no public space. Wartime society aimed to channel women’s bereavement and defuse their distress by honouring their heroic sacrifice. The idea that wartime sacrifices should be borne with pride and that loss had to be endured with silent grace was thus deeply imbedded in German, but also in British, French and Italian war culture. This moral code was constantly reinforced by the army, the churches, the media and also by leading members of the women’s movement. According to Susan Grayzel, moreover, the task of mourning assigned to women in wartime Britain served to enhance the value of a soldier’s death. In September 1914, for example, the Times published a number of articles that insisted that bereaved women should dress and act in public in a manner that visibly demonstrated their unfailing patriotism.

The existing research on mourning during the war points to an intriguing gender dynamic evolving from the experience of bereavement. Joan Damousi’s pioneering work on mourning in Australia outlines the way in which women’s shared experience of loss...

22 Ibid.
24 For example, Eduard Le Seur, Die Aufgabe der deutschen Frau im Krieg. Vortrag von Pastor Le Seur (Stuttgart, 1916); Albert Malte Wagner, Der Krieg und die Aufgabe der deutschen Mutter (Gotha, 1915); Marie Feesche, Vom segnenden Leid in harter Zeit. Gedichte (Hannover, 1915).
became the foundation for a wartime identity that asserted claims for recognition and compensation. In the cases of Canada and Britain, Suzanne Evans has argued that women publicly presented themselves as heroic mothers of martyrs and unequivocally supported their sons’ sacrifices. Several belligerent states, moreover, took to decorating mothers for their fallen sons and gave women special roles in official commemorative ceremonies. One example for the British case is the unveiling of the tomb of the unknown soldier in London in November 1920. The gold star pilgrimages to war graves in France, which were financed by the US Congress and allowed mourning American mothers to visit their sons’ graves from 1930 onwards, also exemplify the moral force of female bereavement. The value attributed to maternal and spousal sacrifice provided a foundation on which distinct female identities could be established. Bereaved women demanded, and were often accorded, a social status in wartime and postwar societies that was not given to bereaved fathers, brothers or sons. The prime sufferers of war within the male population were the veterans, and particularly wounded veterans, and not mourning civilian men. Importantly, however, the public face of female wartime grief was invariably expected to be restrained, composed and dignified.

Notions of appropriate female mourning were influenced to a degree by wartime demographics, which contributed to the creation of a conspicuous group of female mourners. The division of German war losses into age groups, for example, demonstrates that 20- to 24-year-olds proportionately suffered by far the most fatalities over the period of the war (39.86% of the total losses between 1914 and 1919), followed by the 25- to 29-year-olds (23.05%). Both age-groups accounted for over one million war dead and were mourned for by women who invariably had a very close maternal or spousal relationship with the deceased. The loss of a son, for example, was portrayed as a particularly distressing event in women’s cultural responses to war. Filial death was understood as a reversal of the natural biological order, according to which parents rarely died before their children and mothers did not survive their sons in such large numbers. Women’s art therefore became a tool to express the sort of disconsolate bereavement that was contained and framed as heroic in public war culture. Yet while their work represented quite a new artistic response to wartime death, elements of it emerged from older traditions in the social practice of bereavement.

26 Damousi, The Labour of Loss.
28 Grayzel, Women’s Identities, p. 230.
The figure of the female mourner took on considerable anthropological resonance. A number of studies have emphasized not only the importance of rituals of bereavement for communities, but have stressed the social function of the female mourner. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, rituals of bereavement and funerary rites follow a clear gender divide. The performance of rituals of mourning, and the public expression and endurance of grief, have traditionally been the preserve of female family members or professional female mourners, while men have tended to play a more passive role. This cross-cultural phenomenon is most convincingly linked to a biological explanation according to which women, as givers of life, also have a special role in the rites of death. This research suggests that the mourning process, and rituals of bereavement, have traditionally helped societies find meaning in death, a need that has a particular urgency in times of war.

IV: Art as a Source

The figure of the female mourner and the theme of wartime bereavement are central motifs in the art produced by German women during the conflict. A whole variety of images deal with the emotional, physical and practical challenges of wartime loss and thus act as highly informative sources for historical enquiry. Grief and mourning are difficult subjects to historicize, and differences between public and private mourning are not easy to quantify. Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau have pointed to a ‘great silence’ in language after the war and linked people’s difficulties in giving verbal expression to their emotional reaction to violent mass death to the lack of cultural and linguistic references that describe this novel experience. Women’s wartime art thus testifies not to the absence of communication about wartime death but to the visual quality of such communication and the painful, and therefore potentially therapeutic nature of expressing grief. Women’s art represents a form of communication that is arguably uniquely suited to capturing the experience of profound female bereavement. As cultural artefacts, the power of artistic images lies not only in their ability to mediate grief by employing ‘traditional’ tropes—akin to the function Jay Winter has ascribed to war memorials—but also in their potential to overcome the limitations of language.

As with other visual material, women’s art represents a constitutive historical source that is not merely illustrative, but acts as evidence in and of itself. Thus, the images artists produced during the war years do not simply support findings from written source material, but often offer fresh information and original insights into women’s experience of war. Many of the images produced by female artists during the war are testimonials of...
deeply personal experiences and represent an important interface between the private and the public. As cultural products of their time, women’s artworks not only responded to current events but were also shaped by them, and the themes and issues addressed in their work have a broad relevance for German women in wartime society. As Frank Becker has argued in his book on the art of the wars of German unification, the challenge for the historian is to identify the larger contemporary significance of a particular piece of art and to recognize motifs that exceed the relevance of a single image. In common with Becker’s approach, this article endorses Umberto Eco’s deconstruction of images as visual signs that are—just like written signs—part of a universal cultural code that can be read, understood and interpreted.

The subjective and essentially fictional character of art thus offers opportunities, just as it poses problems that need to be addressed in a considered, nuanced approach. As Peter Paret has noted, given that an artist’s ultimate intention generally remains in the realm of speculation, much of the creative process is beyond historical explanation. Images are often open to a range of different interpretations, which can result in contrasting, and possibly conflicting, historical assessments. Yet the historian arguably faces similar limitations when working with more conventional personal narrative material or literary sources. A useful interpretation of artistic source material ideally requires information about the artist’s background, the context of production and the publication of an image. This type of detail, however, can be scarce, fragmented or merely suggestive. Yet an image can still provide meaningful evidence if the relevant motifs or available information can be placed within the cultural or historical context.

V: Women’s Wartime Art

The art produced by German women during the First World War shows a remarkable degree of aesthetic, stylistic and thematic cohesion. The three images reprinted below were rediscovered as part of an extensive survey in German local and national archives. Between 1914 and 1919 over thirty professional female artists based in different parts of Germany produced war-related images. Much of their work consists of stark, expressionistic wood- and lino-cuts and addresses the themes of wartime death, sacrifice and bereavement. The images examined here represent a thematic sample of their wartime œuvre. With the notable exception of Käthe Kollwitz and her work, German women’s wartime art remains largely unknown today. While representations and

allegorical depictions of women had previously been a feature of some war art, the degree to which women portrayed themselves and their experiences during the First World War was unprecedented. The work produced by female artists represents a particularly remarkable change in agency regarding visual responses to war. One reason for this was the professionalization of female art training from the 1880s, a process which equipped a significant number of German women from the middle and upper classes with the skills to express observations or experiences artistically. In addition, the mass mobilization of societies and the widespread involvement of civilians in the war effort created a sense of participation that was reflected in cultural representations. The different perspectives on the war depicted by the new combatant and civilian war artists contrasted sharply with traditional scenic portrayals of battle, a genre that went into sharp decline after 1914. Women’s art also differs significantly in thematic focus from the work produced by male civilian or soldier-artists during the conflict. Male artists on the home front tended to produce images that expressed unequivocal support for the war, thus arguably compensating for their civilian status, while frontline experiences prevailed in soldier art. The theme of bereavement, and the figures of either mourning men or women, rarely feature in male wartime art.

From the first weeks of August 1914, German women responded to the war artistically, and as the conflict wore on they evolved and became more complex. Initially, in common with their male colleagues and most of Germany’s cultural elite, many female artists publicly supported the war and engaged actively in the process of national mobilization. In the opening phase of the conflict, a number of female artists used their skills to design posters that rallied their compatriots to the national cause. Many others were involved in war work and participated, like Käthe Kollwitz, in the National Women’s Service, while still more, including Berlin-based Hannah Höch, volunteered as nurses. The considerable initial support and self-mobilization for the war by female artists waned, however, and by 1916 the high death tolls on the western and eastern fronts had fundamentally altered their perception of the conflict. Several of the artists had lost a male relative at the front and it had become increasingly difficult to believe in a

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52 Hannah Höch, Archive of the Association of Berlin Artists, BG-VdBK 147.
self-evidently righteous war. This changing attitude to the war is reflected in women’s art, as wartime death and mourning became the prevalent subjects of representation. The depth of the emotional and physical pain of bereavement conveyed in many of these images was aggravated by feelings of guilt for supporting the war and national mobilization in its initial phase.\(^\text{54}\)

The distinctive nature of the female aesthetic response to the conflict in Germany is perhaps best understood as women’s wartime expressionism, a genre that represents a significant, and greatly overlooked, chapter in the history of German modernism.\(^\text{55}\) From the 1890s, the conservative paradigms and structures of the German art world had been challenged and changed by Secession and modernist groups.\(^\text{56}\) The conflicts over ideological shifts and stylistic innovations polarized the cultural community, but by the early twentieth century the avant-garde had succeeded in winning an audience, a host of wealthy patrons and a commercial market. In the period leading up to the First World War, German modernism flourished and the formation of the *Brücke* group in 1905 and *The Blaue Reiter* in 1911 reflected the growing momentum of what commentators came to call the expressionist movement.\(^\text{57}\) Studies of the period emphasize the fractured nature of the movement, its loose boundaries, and the absence of either a universal style or ideology. They also make it clear, however, that the prewar period was a powerful moment of artistic experimentation with an influential aesthetic appeal.\(^\text{58}\) The practice of abstraction, visualization of emotions and alternative concepts of artistic beauty employed by German expressionist artists resonated with many of their artist colleagues and represented a key inspiration for a number of female artists in Germany. Although women’s involvement in modernism is generally viewed as marginal within the male dominated avant-garde groups, it is important to stress that the Secession exhibitions, expressionist galleries in Berlin and Dresden and female artist associations were all forums in which female artists displayed modernist-inspired art both before and during the First World War.

This, then, is the context in which the three images by Sella Hasse, Katharina Heise and Martha Schrag that are considered in this article were produced. All three artists came from middle-class backgrounds, had been trained in private academies in Berlin and Dresden, and, in the cases of Hasse and Heise, had studied in Paris before 1914. Martha Schrag, born near Leipzig in 1870, and Sella Hasse, born in the same region in 1878, had established careers in prewar Germany, exhibited several times at the Berlin Secession, and won prizes and held solo exhibitions in Berlin and Dresden before and


during the conflict. An exhibition devoted solely to Hasse’s work was displayed at the Richter gallery in Dresden in 1916, a key platform for expressionist art, while Martha Schrag and her colleagues from the Chemnitz Artists’ Association published a series of war-themed folios in support of charity projects. Neither of these two women suffered a war-related bereavement in their immediate family, but both were part of kinships and communities of mourning on the home front, a bonding which deeply influenced their artistic output during the war. Katharina Heise, born near Magdeburg in 1891 and the youngest of the three artists, was in the process of establishing a career and had moved to Berlin just shortly before the outbreak of the conflict in 1914. The death of her fiancé Oskar Hesse at the front in 1916 had a crucial impact on her work. All three artists created a series of images during the war that directly addressed the human cost of the conflict, and the examples reproduced below are representative of their work. The intention here is not to offer an absolute interpretation of the images or detail the artist’s individual œuvre, but rather to focus on the visualization of grief in war and the manner in which traditional, peacetime rituals of bereavement were disrupted by the conflict and reimagined by women in their art.

VI: The Bodies of the War Dead and Military Tradition

The exclusion of civilians from military burial practices impacted greatly on families in mourning on the home front. More than anything else, it was the permanent geographical distance from the war dead and the absence of the loved one’s remains from the bereaved—the vast majority of the over two million German war dead were buried outside Germany—which characterized the experience of loss for most families and hindered the process of coming to terms with bereavement. The circumstances of battlefield death and the material claim of the German Army over the bodies of the fallen added a profound and lasting strain to the mourning process of bereaved relatives. Although it should be stressed that, in the context of the armed forces, a soldier’s death had never been honoured as highly as between 1914 and 1918, and burial practices had undergone considerable change in the nineteenth century, they were not designed to console the families of the fallen. In the opening phase of the war, soldiers were usually buried directly on, or near, the battlefield and the spot was marked with a simple wooden cross. The long duration of the conflict and the sheer scale of the deaths, however, forced changes in military burial practices. The maintenance of thousands of graves scattered over hundreds of miles of inaccessible terrain soon proved to be too costly and too difficult to sustain. A solution was found in

61 Katharina Heise Papers, City Museum Schönebeck.
the establishment of war cemeteries behind the lines, in which fallen soldiers were buried by their comrades. Newly introduced discs allowed for the identification of corpses, and graves were carefully marked on special maps. While careful marking could theoretically provide families with the exact coordinates of the grave, in reality the majority of graves could not be visited until after the war, and others were never visited at all. The enormous numbers of fatalities suffered by the army led to the formation of a new department, the Department for War Graves (Kriegsgräberfürsorge), in the Ministry of War in 1916. It was within the Department’s remit to regulate burials, and to suggest adequate architectural plans for the construction of war cemeteries and artistic designs for planned commemorative sites. The feelings of families on the home front regarding the burial of soldiers, however, were not taken into consideration as the architects of German memory sought to represent national values, a coherent sense of Germanness and historic pride. The burial of a soldier was strictly regimented and remained fully under military control throughout the war. In contrast to the British case, for example, no personal epitaphs chosen by next-of-kin were allowed on a soldier’s grave. The death of a soldier was considered an army matter and in death, as in life, the soldier’s body belonged to the military authorities. Even after the Armistice, the repatriation of soldiers who were buried on distant battlefields was not permitted by the German authorities.

VII: The Burial of the Absent Soldier

The following lithograph, produced in 1916 by the Berlin-based artist Katharina Heise, depicts a very unusual funeral procession led by three women and a child. The figures, all female and dressed in full-body mourning robes, move along the walls of a cemetery towards the entrance gate. The body language of the women clearly signals grief and torment. The most significant section of the image, however, is the empty space between the four leading figures and the rest of the funeral procession. This vacant space reveals the crucial absence of a coffin, thereby rendering the scene fundamentally different from a conventional peacetime funeral. In Heise’s image, the corpse is replaced by a void. Yet, despite the missing body, the funeral proceeds. The chief mourners are exclusively female, indicating that a male relative had died, most probably a fallen soldier, possibly husband to the woman in black and father to the small child.

The staged nature of the scene in Heise’s image emphasizes the significance of what even in peacetime circumstances is a highly symbolic element of the rites of passage: the burial of the body. The funeral is customarily seen as representing a transitional phase in which the deceased finally passes from the world of the living to the realm of the dead and thus signifies a new phase in the mourning process. The funeral is essentially a ritual in which death is acknowledged and accepted and represents the moment in which a family and community publicly bid their farewells, and the bereaved assume their new

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66 Kriegergräber im Felde und daheim. Herausgegeben im Einvernehmen mit der Heeresverwaltung (Munich, 1917).
67 Koshar, Germany’s Transient Pasts, pp. 86–92.
68 Winter, Sites of Memory, p. 27.
69 Robben, Death, Mourning, and Burial, p. 10.
identities as, for example, widows. The corpse-less funeral scene depicted by the artist therefore demonstrates a strong desire to process grief and obtain the sense of closure that a regular burial grants to the bereaved.

Heise places the funeral procession at the gates of a Christian cemetery with prominent crosses. The consecrated grounds that the bereaved are about to enter reference the consoling function of religious burial customs and highlight their importance in guiding the bereaved through tragedy. Heise’s lithograph shows that Christian burial rites continued to provide a relevant frame of reference on the home front in times of war and mass dying. They represented a familiar process through which contemporaries dealt with the very unfamiliar phenomenon of wartime death, and provided a ritual that allowed the bereaved to regain some form of control over the mourning process. As we have seen, the artist’s fiancé fell on the Western Front that same year, 1916, an experience of loss that represented a vital stimulus for her art.

Heise’s curious funeral procession demonstrates that although ordinary burial rites continued to be relevant to the bereaved, they took on novel forms, and, indeed, the invention of substitute funerary customs was a broad phenomenon in wartime society. According to Benjamin Ziemann, bereaved parishioners in Bavaria, for example, asked priests to bless or bury the material possessions and decorations of fallen soldiers that

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71 Ibid.
had been returned to their families. The demand for these services increased so much that the diocese of Regensburg in Bavaria barred priests from agreeing to such requests.\textsuperscript{72} The desire of bereaved relatives to perform traditional funerary rites was by no means confined to Bavaria. In wartime Paris, for example, a number of families who had no body to mourn attended the funerals of soldiers who were essentially strangers to them, and others organized the burials and a mourning congregation for the war dead who either had no family or no means.\textsuperscript{73} The adaptation of traditional customs to wartime circumstances thus became a routine for relatives of fallen soldiers.

Many families in mourning during the war, however, were left with a void—no body, no ceremony, and no grave—making any form of closure even harder to attain. The pain caused by the distance between German women and the far-off graves of their fallen sons, lovers and husbands is strongly evoked in a letter by Margarete Schiel, a mother of five whose husband and eldest son were both fighting on the Western Front. On 28 November 1917, which was \textit{ Totensonntag}, a German religious holiday on which the dead were commemorated and flowers were brought to their graves, she wrote to her son Otto:

\begin{quote}
On this day one is in a totally different frame of mind. The dark atmosphere has a lot to do with the stormy weather and the people in their black clothes, carrying the wreaths. It is much quieter than usual. Deep thoughts move one’s attention away from the ordinary. One thinks of the loved ones who were taken by death. The spiritual eye moves to the distant hero-graves. How many mothers, sisters or brides, think of their fallen love on this day? How much they would like to decorate their graves. But it is war...\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

The letter suggests that tending a grave was viewed as a traditional part of the mourning process that should be carried out by bereaved relatives. The reference to the absence of a place of mourning for the relatives of the war dead is very revealing, indicating that the lack of a grave heightened the sense of disorientation that came with bereavement. There was neither a public marker of the identity of the deceased, nor of his memory, both of which are seen to have important functions for bereaved relatives.\textsuperscript{75} The desire to be near the grave of a fallen husband or son motivated some women to appeal to the highest authorities to request repatriation, which they viewed as a just reward for loyal service. Writing directly to the Kaiser in May 1918, one Bavarian widow hoped to win his personal support in her quest to repatriate her husband’s remains.\textsuperscript{76} As Gail Holst-Warhaft demonstrates in her history of mourning, war-enforced separations of the bereaved and the remains of the dead caused extreme distress for families and could, for some, indefinitely prolong the mourning process.\textsuperscript{77}

Individual Germans also carried out their own personal and very private rituals as a means of dealing with wartime bereavement. Käthe Kollwitz, whose son Peter was killed on the Western Front in October 1914, turned her son’s bedroom into a shrine that she

\textsuperscript{72} Benjamin Ziemann, \textit{Front und Heimat}, p. 439.
\textsuperscript{73} Trevisan and Julien, ‘Cemeteries’, pp. 445–6.
\textsuperscript{75} Davies, \textit{Death, Ritual and Belief}, pp. 93–110.
\textsuperscript{76} Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann (eds), \textit{Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg. Wahn und Wirklichkeit: Quellen und Dokumente} (Frankfurt/M., 1994), p. 209.
\textsuperscript{77} Holst-Warhaft, \textit{The Cue for Passion}, pp. 172–3.
visited in order to feel close to him. In order to keep his memory alive she decorated the room on birthdays and religious holidays. In a letter to her elder son Hans, written in February 1915, she professed that, ‘His bed is to us something similar to what his grave would be. He lay in it with his hiking gear, his soldier’s cap, it is still full of his beloved body.’ Kollwitz longed to visit her son’s grave in Flanders, but was not able to travel to Belgium during the war. The request she submitted with her husband for the repatriation of her son’s corpse was rejected and it was not until 1926 that she finally undertook the pilgrimage to the military cemetery in Belgium where Peter was buried. The distance to the grave of her son and her inability to conduct burial rituals and mourn by his grave profoundly affected the artist and exacerbated her grief. Again, this was a difficulty faced by women and their families more generally.

Few grieving women in Germany were in a position to overcome the physical distance between themselves and their dead men, but Frankfurt artist Lina von Schauroth went on a personal mission to retrieve the body of her nephew who had been killed on the Eastern Front. She had encouraged and helped her under-age nephew to volunteer for military service by using the contacts of her late husband, a high-ranking officer in the German Army. These contacts probably also helped her to complete her mission and she returned with the body, thereby enabling her family to attend the actual burial of their fallen relative. As she stated later in life, she felt indebted to the mother of the young man and obliged to return her son’s body to her. While this example should be viewed as an exception, it nevertheless illustrates the importance for the bereaved of creating a physical proximity to the deceased. The question was less pressing for relatives who were mourning a soldier who had died in a hospital in Germany, as these men were buried in separate sections of existing cemeteries near the hospitals, which made visits to the graveside possible.

The strong desire to be near the remains of fallen loved ones was an international phenomenon. Writing about French war widows, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau describes how bereaved women strove to create a physical proximity to the remains of relatives who had died at the front. In France, many women divided their bereavement into a series of ‘befores’ and ‘afters’: before and after seeing the battlefield, before and after visiting the site of the grave, and before and after the repatriation of the body in the rare cases where this was possible. Testimonies reveal that some found consolation in making the journey to be near the remains of a male relative, but visits were usually fleeting and most women deplored the irrevocable physical absence of the corpses of the war dead. Some French women went so far as to take matters into their own hands, and

80 Letter Käthe Kollwitz to Hans Kollwitz, 8 June 1926, Ibid., p. 196.
82 Ibid.
83 On the example of Freiburg, see Chickering, The Great War and Urban Life, p. 321.
Jay Winter and Susan Grayzel have written of an increasing number of cases in which soldiers’ remains were privately exhumed and relocated. The French Government came under such pressure from grieving relatives that in 1920 the legal regulations were officially adjusted and some 300,000 war dead were returned to the care of their families.

VII: Imagining the Absent Dead

In circumstances that made visiting the graves of deceased relatives extremely difficult, what could be described as metaphysical reunions or encounters between women and the war dead became common. Käthe Kollwitz, for example, writes in her diaries about dreams in which her dead son appeared. References to sustained conversations with deceased soldier-relatives can be discovered both in cultural representations and conventional personal narratives and testify to the continued presence of fallen men in the lives of the bereaved. Another example can be found in the correspondence of the Hamburg-based artist Ida Dehmel, who wrote to her husband, the poet Richard Dehmel, about her attempts to find peace in conversations with her son nine months after he fell at the front in January 1917. But finding solace in post-mortem relationships did not come easily, and Dehmel expressed doubts as to whether she would be strong enough to overcome the temporal limitations that separated her from her dead son. The absence of corpses thus turned the focus of women’s grief onto the attempt to reassert their bond with the dead. While the bodies of the war dead were physically absent, they were omnipresent in women’s imaginations. Bereavement thus had a profound impact on the way mourners viewed the world and their surroundings, and a number of cultural representations produced during and after the conflict show a fluid understanding of the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead.

A very striking artistic testimony, in which bereaved women invoke the presence of the dead, is the lithograph The Lamentation by the Chemnitz-based artist Martha Schrag. The image, produced in 1916, is a compelling representation of the grave intensity of women’s bereavement. It features a gathering of wailing women with their backs to a group of dead and dying men. Although the artist herself did not lose a family member at the front, much of her war art expresses empathy with anxious and bereaved women. The title Lamentation refers to the communal ritual of mourning performed by the assembled women. The body language of the bereaved women is a particularly striking feature of the lithograph, in which Schrag starkly depicts gestures and postures of agony and despair. Their hands are key indicators of grief, some of the women are resting their heads in their hands, others are clutching their skulls, while

85 Winter, Sites of Memory, pp. 23–24; Susan R. Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War, pp. 239–40.
88 Davies, Death, Ritual and Belief, pp. 146–63; Winter, Sites of Memory, pp. 54–77.
91 Gerhard Hahn, Martha Schrag, pp. 19–21.
others still clasp their hands in prayer. The artist shows an entirely female circle of women who are facing, or dreading, the loss of a son, brother, husband, fiancé or friend in the war.

Schrag’s image directly addresses the phenomenon of mass death in wartime. The suffering men in the left corner of the image evoke associations with a chaotic battlefield scenario, although no military paraphernalia identify the men unequivocally as fallen soldiers. Schrag has stripped the men of their uniforms and weaponry as if to revert them to their civilian identity. The image places both men and women in close physical proximity, yet there appears to be no interaction between the two groups and the women do not tend to the men’s bodies. This indicates the geographical distance between the home and fighting fronts, between women and their dying male relatives. Schrag’s design reflects men’s omnipresence in women’s minds despite the distance and points to women’s longing to be at their men’s side during their last moments.

Women on the home front were usually completely unaware of the exact moment that their son, brother, or husband had been killed, and sought to gain detailed knowledge of the final moments of their deceased loved ones as a means of comprehending death and transcending grief.\(^{92}\) The comrades of fallen soldiers often wrote to the relatives of the

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deceased to give them some details regarding the circumstances of a soldiers’ death. These letters clearly provided some consolation but as the exact location, nature of wounds and level of pain were rarely communicated to mourning relatives, wartime death was rendered difficult to fully understand. As detailed information was rarely forthcoming, however, closure was invariably difficult to obtain and Bernd Hüppauf has suggested that the missing physical proof of their death fed the hope for a return of the dead in women’s consciousness.

From the female perspective, death on the battlefield thus remained a largely abstract phenomenon; it was the grief that came with death that was concrete and immediate. Visual depictions of their anguish may therefore have been of particular relevance to women on the home front, who would generally neither have witnessed soldiers dying on the battlefields, nor actually touched the corpse of their dead loved ones. Both images, Heise’s re-enacted burial scene and Schrag’s imaginative reunification of the bereaved and their dead, represent visual attempts to overcome the constraints of wartime mourning. The images served not to transcend grief, but to transcend the physical distance from the remains of the fallen.

VIII: Wartime Grief

The expectation that women should bear loss gracefully and proudly support male sacrifice, as they were not giving their own lives on behalf of the nation, frequently featured in public discourse in wartime Germany. As indicated above, the gendered understanding of wartime sacrifice was a European-wide phenomenon during the war years, but had a particular relevance in German history where it had a long tradition. Detailed commentary on the subject of dignified female mourning for heroic male death dates back to at least the middle of the eighteenth century. During the Seven Years War, the Berlin academic Thomas Abbt directly addressed mothers’ conduct in wartime and published a pamphlet on patriotic wartime death in which he presented Spartan mothers as strong and admirable figures who would stir their offspring to meet their death in war and who understood their sons’ survival as a shameful disgrace. During the First World War, Abbt’s work was referenced by German intellectuals who sought to reassert the tradition of heroic death and dignified mourning.

publishers reissued his pamphlet during the conflict and his ideas were disseminated to a broad audience.  

In Germany, the Wars of Liberation and Unification spread the image of heroic patriotic death and glorified military values. The social and gender identities of contemporaries were deeply shaped by these concepts. In public representations and ceremonies, for example, women performed as dignified and serene mourners, but were to show no sign of tragedy, emotion or pain. Pride in, and acknowledgement of, the deeds of the fallen dominated the national memorial culture. Since both periods of conflict were associated with the formation and foundation of the German nation, military values were revered and celebrated. A constructed memory of those wars persisted throughout the nineteenth century and inspired the language of sacrifice during the First World War. The idea of patriotic sacrifice thus became deeply intertwined with concepts of German national identity. 

Research for the period of the First World War suggests that women generally endorsed heroic sacrifice and publicly demonstrated their pride as mothers of fallen heroes. In the case of Germany, Hans Binder’s examination of women’s wartime literature contends that there was a universal spirit of support for the war effort. Loyalty to the fighting soldiers meant that a number of female writers knowingly and publicly accepted their fate as widows and bereaved mothers, and even embraced it. Yet Binder’s study presents only a partial picture of female bereavement during the war. While the identity of the proud sacrificial mother and wife was undoubtedly a powerful wartime construct, and although many women may have embraced the concept of heroic motherhood in public, private responses to loss were often much

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98 The Berlin Professor Gustav Roether, for example, endorsed Abbt’s ideas in the early months of the war. See Historische Zeitschrift, 116 (1916), p. 150.  
99 Both Reclam and Xenien published commented editions in 1915.  
The images reprinted here point to a disparity between the public and private face of grief and emphasize the difficulty of the situation that bereaved women found themselves in during the war. They demonstrate little evidence of proud or willing sacrifice but instead highlight the pain of female loss.

The linocut Grief (Der Gram), produced by the artist Sella Hasse in 1917, offers a very explicit visual testimony to the despair and disconsolation of wartime loss. It deals with the intense pain of bereavement and suggests that loss engendered not only emotional, but also physical suffering. Although the artist herself did not lose a close relative in the conflict, she was deeply affected by the forces of war. Her wartime sketchbooks reveal that she regularly visited a home for recovering soldiers in her hometown of Wismar, and visually captured the destruction of the war and its impact on the home front. Hasse’s stark image features a nude woman with an expression of intense distress on her face. Large, dark-circled eyes and drawn lips emphasize her despair. The raw aesthetics of the piece match the emotion it depicts: the uncovered, unmasked suffering of a women in mourning. Far removed from conventional artistic beauty, Hasse’s linocut does not an attempt to aestheticize grief or mourning. One central part of the composition of the image is, however, marked by its absence: the human object of the woman’s grief.

Figure 29.12: Sella Hasse, Grief (Der Gram), linocut, 1917.
Source: Kupferstichkabinett. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

106 Schabbelhaus Wismar, Personal Papers Sella Hasse.
The atmosphere of death is further evoked by the presence of the raven, a black-plumed, carrion-eating bird whose claws scratch the woman’s shoulder and whose beak appears to be aimed at her eyes, or possibly her heart. Traditionally viewed as a bad omen, birds belonging to the crow family (corvids) had a well-established cultural significance in northern Europe in the early modern and modern periods. Ravens, for example, were seen as heralds, delivering the news of someone’s passing. The image could therefore represent the traumatic receipt of the news of the death of a loved one at the front. Medieval Europeans believed that crows represented the souls of those who had been unjustly killed and had not been given the honour of proper Christian burial. Another interpretation could cast the raven as the war itself, or the malevolent bringer of death. In Northern European folklore the raven acted as a type of vulture and was closely associated with war, a connection that was prevalent in many cultural references to ravens hovering above battlefields and following advancing armies.

The woodcut conveys the initial shock and unbearable pain of loss by linking grief with self-harm. The most striking element of the image is the gaping wound in the woman’s chest through which she has torn out her own heart, indicating that the physical and emotional pain of grief and sorrow could be so intense as to be life-draining, and the impact of bereavement too much to bear. The woman’s heart in the image is not simply broken, but has been cut out of her body; impacting on her will to live. Although visual references to grief were rarely this graphic in women’s art, their existence nonetheless illustrates the self-destructive impulse that grief could engender. As noted by Werner Fuchs in his study on death in modern society, bereavement often causes depression that reduces the mourner’s interest in life. Some of the bereaved show attempts to create a proximity to the dead by removing themselves from the world of the living by wearing particular types clothing, by fainting, and even through suicide. There is some evidence for such extreme forms of bereavement in wartime Germany. Tim Grady, in an article on the commemoration of German-Jewish soldiers, cites an example in which one couple committed suicide after losing their son in the war. In May 1915, Käthe Kollwitz also recorded two cases of bereaved women committing suicide in her diary. The entry in question illustrates the degree to which the artist was perturbed by the extreme reaction. Both incidents occurred in Berlin, and both women drowned themselves, one over the loss of her only son, and the other after her husband was killed at the front. The artist, who was personally bereaved by the loss of her own son, commented ‘I think there must be many more’.

IX: Conclusion

In 1932 Kollwitz unveiled her sculpture *The Grieving Parents* (*Die trauernden Eltern*) at the German military cemetery in Vladslo in Belgium. The sculpture consists of two separate

110 Käthe Kollwitz diary entry, 17 May 1915, Tagebücher, p. 186.
figures, representing the artist and her husband, kneeling at their son’s grave. For Kollwitz, who had expressed her desire to create a memorial to her son Peter and his fallen comrades soon after she learnt of his death in October 1914, this was an important moment in her journey of bereavement. The artist had struggled for years to find an adequate artistic form to represent her loss and, like many of her contemporaries, was deeply conflicted over the ideals for which her son gave his life. A consistent theme in her diary and correspondence is the absence of a grave and the distance to his remains. Placing a permanent representation of herself and her husband by her son’s grave was an attempt finally to overcome the separation of the war years and unite the bereaved with the dead.

Women’s unfamiliarity with distant battlefields, combined with their physical separation from the final resting places of their beloved dead, fostered a sense of incomprehension that hindered closure and, as the example of Kollwitz illustrates, could last for years. The absence of bodies, in particular, intensified the depth of women’s bereavement. In Germany and elsewhere women responded by adapting private rituals of bereavement to wartime circumstances, a phenomenon expressed widely in German women’s art. Through their work, female artists were able to profess the sort of profound grief and emotional distress that had no place in the public performance of proud bereavement in wartime society.

Placed within the context of wartime cultures of mourning, the art produced by women during the First World War highlights the link between cultural representation and social rituals of bereavement. German female artists used their work as a means of reimagining burial rites and reclaiming the dead for families and female relatives in wartime Germany. A number of studies have looked at the widespread need to mourn in response to the enormous human cost of the conflict, but have tended to locate the practice primarily in the collective forms of commemoration of the postwar period and focused on memorials, ceremonies, or pilgrimages. The emphasis here, by contrast, is on visual responses to loss while the conflict was ongoing. Pre-1914 patterns of heroic wartime mourning and their historically gendered dimensions have been largely overlooked by historians, but they fed directly into the moral codes that governed wartime society and determined attitudes to both the war dead and the bereaved during the First World War. The manner in which the public expression of grief was politicized and moralized, and the degree to which this clashed with private emotional responses to wartime loss, were central to the experience of bereavement. The art produced by German women during the war reveals the level of emotional conflict and psychological distress suffered by the bereaved and thus represents a valuable body of sources that shed light on the emotional history of wartime mourning.

111 Käthe Kollwitz, Die Eltern (1932), Vladslo, Belgium; Hannelore Fischer (ed.), Käthe Kollwitz, die trauernden Eltern. Ein Mahnmal für den Frieden (Cologne, 1993).

Abstract

Drawing on women’s visual responses to the First World War, this article examines female mourning in wartime Germany. The unprecedented death toll on the battlefronts, military burial practices and the physical distance from the remains of the war dead disrupted traditional rituals of bereavement, hindered closure and compounded women’s grief on the home front. In response to these novel circumstances, a number of female artists used their images to reimagine funerary customs, overcome the separation from the fallen and express acute emotional distress. This article analyses three images produced during the conflict by the artists Katharina Heise, Martha Schrag and Sella Hasse, and places their work within the civilian experience of bereavement in war. By depicting the pain of loss, female artists contested the historical tradition of proud female mourning in German society and countered wartime codes of conduct that prohibited the public display of emotional pain in response to soldiers’ deaths. As a largely overlooked body of sources, women’s art adds to our understanding of the tensions in wartime cultures of mourning that emerged between 1914 and 1918.

**Keywords:** World War I, art, wartime death, burial practices, mourning, home front, Katharina Heise, Martha Schrag, Sella Hasse

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