

German Encounters with  
Modernism, 1840–1945



**Peter Paret**

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

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To  
Isabel

“Of the things that now lie behind us, what is still sacred to us today? From now on no one, no one can return across the sea of blood of this war to the past, and life from the past.”<sup>17</sup>

Marc’s hope that the war would be a new beginning is a tragic reminder of the idealism as well as of the anxieties and delusions that ran through European society before 1914. It also points once more to the combative energy at the core of expressionism and to its perhaps necessary belief that it could tear itself from its antecedents even though – as the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* proclaimed – it was building on the past. Together with other directions of art at the time, expressionism continued the destruction, begun generations earlier, of a universally understood aesthetic and replaced it with the liberated insights of the individual artist. If the results of these insights varied in quality, at its best expressionism constitutes a major achievement in modern art.

But however unique its aesthetics, the social and institutional history of expressionism followed more familiar paths. Its exhibition and publication politics did not differ radically from those of other artists or from those of the immediately preceding secessionist generation. Indeed, expressionism emerged in Central Europe at a time more favorable to innovation in the arts than the preceding decades had been, with more receptive segments of the art public, an expanded art market, and new museums better able to support it. Many of the major battles that helped expressionism to succeed within a few years of its birth had been fought and won earlier, when the social and cultural crisis in Central Europe, which expressionism reflected and in the works of a few artists transformed into general truths, was not yet as evident as it became in the last decade before the First World War.

## The Great Dying

### ■ Notes on German Art, 1914–1918 ■

The encounter of German art with the First World War is a vast subject, much of it still imperfectly understood, characterized by a variety rather than uniformity of responses. Large patterns can nevertheless be identified in the artists’ reactions to the outbreak of the war, their attitudes during the war, and their use or rejection of the war as a theme in their work. These general tendencies deserve attention. But we must also recognize that the insights they convey are limited. They result from the coming together of many particular reactions that are at least closely related; but they do not eliminate the unique and different, and if pushed too far they falsify.

The outbreak of war was greeted with enthusiasm in Germany, especially in urban society, and at first many artists joined in the general exaltation or, like Käthe Kollwitz, soberly but without protest prepared for the challenges ahead.<sup>1</sup> Only a few people openly opposed the war from the start – Hans Baluschek, a founding member of the Berlin Secession, and the minor expressionist painter Willy Jaeckel are two exceptions. Nor did Max Beckmann when calling the war a “magnificent catastrophe” evince much joy.<sup>2</sup> Popular reactions seem to have been similar in France, more subdued in England, sharply divided in the states of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In all countries, the early enthusiasm was driven not only by nationalist sentiments, fantasies of revenge – whether for the murder of Francis Ferdinand or the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine – and a newly emphatic disdain of foreigners,

but above all by loyalty to the community that appeared to be threatened by outside forces. And in all countries as well, whatever initial enthusiasm existed did not last.

In the reaction to the outbreak of war among middle- and upper-middle-class Germans, the social identity of most artists and of the majority of the art public, a number of elements stand out. Evidently a belief in the superiority of German culture was widespread in these groups, as was the assumption after fighting began that German culture was a target of enemy hatred. The rhetoric of cultural superiority was not unique to Germans, but it seems that in Germany with deeper conviction than elsewhere, culture was politicized both as an object and as a force. The well-known "Manifesto of the 93" of October 1914, signed by several artists, among them Max Liebermann, is a defensive expression, addressed to the non-German world, of this attitude.

German artists did not necessarily share these assumptions of their social group, and even the "Manifesto" did not claim cultural superiority. Before 1914 most established artists had links with the art and artists of other countries. Many had studied in foreign schools, participated in foreign exhibitions, and were in touch with foreign colleagues. They thought of their work in a European not only in a German context. That was as true of a conventional realist like Anton von Werner as it was of a Franz Marc. Only small factions closed themselves off to the non-German world and took a stand against alien art, which usually meant art that departed from conventionally realistic, romantic, or mythic conceptions. Unlike the broader middle-class public, artists did not generally equate the unique characteristics of German art with superiority over the art of other nations. That balance between the appreciation of native and alien values wavered, but did not collapse, with the coming of war.

Claims of German supremacy, linked to a cultural mission that justified not only defensive war but soon also conquest, were advanced with particular stridency by art historians and critics, many of whom – like Wilhelm Worringer and Julius Meier-Graefe – were associated with one or the other modernist direction. Even Karl Scheffler, editor of *Kunst und Künstler* and for two decades a dedicated champion of French impressionism, now anointed the German people possessors of

a supranational *Weltkultur*, whose duty in this war was to grow into a spiritual as well as political *Herrenvolk* – a formulation by a fastidious aesthete that would have been comic had it not reappeared a decade later in the rhetoric of National Socialism. Through an extraordinary lapse of good sense and decency, Scheffler even opened the pages of his journal to an article by the art historian Emil Schäffer, who demanded that Belgium deliver its most prized artworks to German museums as a "war indemnity," presumably for having had the temerity to resist the German invasion. In a widely circulated article, Schäffer's proposal was indignantly rejected by Wilhelm von Bode.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps because artists did not write as frequently for publication, only a few are known to have made similar statements of patriotic hysteria – Lovis Corinth being a notable example. Others were able to express their patriotism in words and images without trying to degrade the opposing side. But the war could also be welcomed without reference to the enemy, for its own sake.

The concept of war as catharsis was present in the initial reaction of many artists and intellectuals to the outbreak of war. Again this was a European phenomenon. Disgust with the hypocrisy and materialism of modern life, and the fear or hope that a vast bloodletting was needed to sweep them away, were staples of modernism. The very magnitude of the conflict that now began, some people believed, would break down class and political divisions, rid the individual of selfish concerns, and cleanse society of the corruption into which it had fallen. In the third week of August, Ernst Barlach wrote to his cousin Karl that he believed the war was a deliverance from the egocentricity of daily life, which would raise the individual German and the German people to a higher level.<sup>4</sup> Franz Marc expressed similar views but gave the interpretation of war as a force for moral good a demonic turn. In April 1915, when he had come to know the hardship and danger of active service, he nevertheless wrote his wife: "The war doesn't differ much from the bad times before the war. What once was done in the imagination, is now actually done. But why? Because we could no longer tolerate Europe's dishonest morality. Spilling blood is preferable to constant cheating. The war is as much an atonement as it is a self-imposed sacrifice, which Europe has accepted in order to 'come clean' with itself."<sup>5</sup>

That a man of Marc's sophistication, who was neither a chauvinist nor an enthusiastic supporter of the war, could even for a moment think that to kill and be killed was preferable to go on living in an ambiguous, fragmented culture, throws a glaring light on the sense of isolation some intellectuals and artists felt in modern mass society. For other artists, neither the flaws of society nor their own professional or personal difficulties were sufficient reason for seeking a bloody alternative. On nearly the same day in April in which Marc described war as a necessary atonement, Beckmann noted that it was amusing to see "how the much cursed and lamented peacetime now advances with iron logic to the status of paradise" – which no doubt more accurately expressed the opinion of most Germans.<sup>6</sup>

Still, Marc's letter deserves to be read with care. The decisive formulation in the sentences just quoted is "to come clean" with oneself – *mit sich ins Reine kommen*. We know that in these years concepts of clarity and purity suffused Marc's thinking. In the next letter to his wife he declared that since the age of the Gothic, European art had been ruined by "the poisoning disease of the cult of the individual . . . by attaching too great a value to personal concerns," and added, "we must shed this completely."<sup>7</sup> In his own work he regarded abstraction as the means by which he could achieve greater purity, because in abstraction one's natural weaknesses would disappear. But perhaps it was no more than a desperate effort to find something positive in the new situation that led him to see war as a tool with which to create purity and clarity in human existence.

The degree to which emotional demands and aesthetic goals joined with Marc's experience of combat is indicated by a third letter in these last months of his life, a letter in which he writes not about art and culture but about himself as a soldier: "I have managed to make myself liked by all of my comrades . . . of course, in my unit I am the only one who is not ambitious for medals and promotions. Such people [we might read, people of such *Reinheit*] are in demand and easy to like."<sup>8</sup> These lines suggest how in one man feelings, wishes, aesthetic concerns, and the experience of war acted on one another. But the same general tendencies and similar personal characteristics in another artist would lead to different results.

## I

How did German artists react in their work to the new conditions brought about by the war? The question addresses not only creative responses but also responses to changes in exhibition policy and the art market, and in the interests and receptivity of critics and the public. For many it was a surprising and at first comforting recognition that fighting on an unprecedented scale, which by the end of the first year had already led to hundreds of thousands of casualties, did not bring the customary activities of life before 1914 to a halt. In a characteristic statement, the introduction to the 1916 yearbook of the Goethe Society, a central cultural institution of the educated middle classes, drew the lesson: "The struggle of nations continues with unabated bitterness . . . But despite all convulsions, thank God, the works of peace proceed on their calm, certain path, sheltered by the fighting armies. In astonishing ways, man's ability to adapt to even the most terrible situations is revealed everywhere."<sup>9</sup>

Peaceful existence continued, but under changed conditions, of which the inroads the dead and wounded made in every activity were only the worst part. Two new themes now confronted the artist. One was the impact of the war on society; the other was war itself. Both pose the question how was it possible to function as an artist at a time in which each person's immediate and larger environment was suffering terrible damage? And further, how would artists interpret the processes of destruction at the front and their impact on the rear areas and on the country?

Not to fight while others were in danger had psychological consequences for those who were safe and those who were not. Some artists now declared that they, too, were soldiers. But that could be claimed only by men who neither knew nor could imagine the filth and terror of battle, and who held an exalted notion of the significance of their work. Beneath the rhetoric, most combatants and noncombatants probably understood the difference. After Barlach had been demobilized from his reserve battalion and was restored by the freshness and beauty of the "magnificent spring" of 1916, he found his conscience trembling whenever he imagined artillery fire at the front.<sup>10</sup> How one

dealt with guilt feelings for being safe, or conversely with fear at the front and with envy of those safe in the rear areas or at home, could mean much in the life of the individual. But important as the emotions were for the particular person, we cannot generalize and quantify them, and can do no more than speculate on the effect that the many individual psychological constellations had on society as a whole.

How artists interpreted war, on the other hand, readily lends itself to analysis. First, an obvious but important point: Not every sketch, painting, or sculpture dealt with the war. Many artists continued to explore themes that had occupied them previously – Hans Thoma and Wilhelm Trübner, for instance, or Max Liebermann, if we exclude the few, rather marginal lithographs he contributed to the new weekly *Kriegszeit* in the early months of the war. Otto Müller's work has even been judged as undergoing a "thematic narrowing." Although Müller was in the service, except for one lithograph the war left no trace in his voluminous output of nubile females in decorative landscapes. That the war passed by so many artists was often a function of age – in 1914 Thoma was seventy-five, Liebermann sixty-seven, and Trübner sixty-five years old. But that their landscapes and genre pieces were widely welcomed as oases of peace and beauty also constituted a quirky parallel to attitudes before the war, when large sections of German society, beginning with the emperor, demanded an art that ignored such unpleasant and frightening subjects as poverty and social strife.

Those artists who did not avoid war, whether as a new theme or as the continuation of earlier work, had several options. If they were not themselves soldiers, or civilians attached to the armed forces, whose duties took them to or near the front, they could depict the war with greater or lesser degrees of realism by imagining it, or treat the unknown symbolically. They could also come to know the war directly as official war artists.

A few, like Eduard Thöny, the *Simplicissimus* cartoonist, who before the war had made the overbred military aristocracy a favorite target, were given long-term assignments. But most were men who applied for permission to join a headquarters some distance from the front for a limited period, usually at their own expense. The results of these sojourns were not impressive. The most important exception were the

watercolors that Max Slevogt painted in October 1914 in Belgium and Northern France. He lasted less than three weeks with the headquarters of the 6th Army before, horrified at the slaughter, he fled from the war – to use his own words. The elegiac sadness of his reportage was helpless before the brutal dynamic of its subject, and the constrained realism of the run-of-the-mill war art was even less likely to satisfy those at home who longed for serious interpretations. "The drawings of artists in the front lines," Barlach judged early in 1915, "lack verve and are simply boring. I think the experience [of war] occurs not in the eyes but in the heart and mind . . . [One must] experience it internally, not as spectator."<sup>11</sup>

Often, actual service, which immersed the artist in the military world rather than exposing him to it briefly as a privileged visitor, seems to have released forces that could not be generated otherwise. But perhaps that was not necessarily the case. Kirchner in his self-portrait in uniform, his mutilated arm proclaiming him the victim of a war crime, Dix and Beckmann with their visions of trenches and field hospitals as two circles of hell, obeyed no historical laws, but reacted to new stimuli as they could and had to react. It is also difficult to say how much their being German contributed to the specific character of their work. But whether for their particular qualities or because stylistic developments took different directions across Europe, it remains true that very little in French and English art at the time compares with Beckmann's and Dix's images of physical, animalistic suffering.

An etching like Beckmann's *In the Great Surgery*, which shows a specific place and what is done there, also symbolizes by its intensified, distorted representations conditions and emotions that extend far beyond the scene depicted. Nevertheless it is useful to distinguish such works and those that in one form or another leave representation far behind. In 1914 Slevogt had found it impossible to make use of what he had seen in Douai and Lille. He needed two years before, in Barlach's words, he came to experience the war internally. The two sequences of lithographs, *Symbols of the Times* and *Faces*, which appeared in 1916 and 1917, show what his art had now distilled: The ghosts of dead soldiers, who continue to fire and strike at the enemy with their own hacked off arms and legs; a mass grave with thousands of mourners and the legend at the edge of the image:

Across frontiers, across the land,  
Endless sorrow spreads its wings.

Five of these prints first appeared in Paul Cassirer's short-lived journal *Der Bildermann*, which points to changes in attitude of many artists since their enthusiasm or unquestioning patriotism of August 1914.<sup>12</sup> Text and illustrations of *Der Bildermann* show Germany at war and enveloped by war from a perspective that is neither unambiguously pacifist nor openly critical of national policy, but is nevertheless shaped by a horror of the great dying, which after two years of fighting was hollowing out German society. Again war and the continuity of peace at home appear side by side: Liebermann's calm picture of a restaurant terrace, crowded with well-to-do guests; a harsh, tragic landscape by Kirchner; Heinrich Zille's working-class family, which receives the news of the death of their husband and father, together with his iron cross; August Gaul's profound animal scenes, which celebrate not only German victories but also the coming spring and the peace it may bring. Corinth characteristically stands apart with another of his knights in armor personifying the nation's will to fight on. But the most aesthetically and emotionally powerful images are symbolic representations of killing and dying: Slevogt's *Symbols of the Times*, Kosschka's *Passion Christi*, Barlach's giant figure from a modern dance of death, who crushes everything around him.

These visions hold up the basic truth of the times to a society that, as other lithographs in the journal assert, the war has not redeemed and morally restored, but further corrupted. A sequence by Ottomar Starke, *The New Society*, pillories war profiteers and the shameless selfishness of men and women who ignore even bemedaled, crippled soldiers reduced to begging in the street – motifs that George Grosz will develop further in *Neue Jugend* and *Weisse Blätter* and that become a staple of Weimar modernism. Slevogt and Barlach accuse, but leave the causes of the catastrophe in the dark; Starke and Grosz transform the accusations into social criticism. Advocacy and caricature often submerge the aesthetic strength of their work. But the accusations also blend with aesthetic and political tendencies of European modernism as such, and in Dada and other movements find a dynamic that crosses the frontiers.

## II

If in German art of these years the theme of war itself – scenes of organizing and training men, of combat, and of the consequences of combat – is less prominent than one might expect, art has a great deal to say about the country and society that are at war. After August 1914, as before, paintings, graphics, and sculptures interpret large segments of German life, of which they themselves are a part. We are told even more of this world if we disregard the separation between high art and popular and applied art. Posters and postcards exhibit no false pride and embrace areas of life that more demanding artists may avoid for fear of the obvious and commonplace: the soldier parting from his wife, the power of a letter from a loved one, children lonely for their fathers, the hero on leave, visits to a grave. Commercial art seeks a common denominator, and postcards in particular often do injustice to their public, which might well be receptive to more honest, nuanced versions of the message. But their sentimentality and frequent brutality also give voice to feelings that are widely held.

Once again we are faced with motifs that are present in all countries and that – relatively minor differences apart – are executed in generally the same manner. But there are two clear differences: the treatment of the enemy, which in Allied posters and postcards stressed his brutality and criminality to far greater extent than was German practice; and the treatment of one's own casualties, which in Germany is more emphatic, not only in popular but also in elite art. Especially in the first half of the war, the German public was inundated with works that presented unrealistic, trashy, idealizing scenes of combat. That was neither surprising nor unique to Germany. But at the same time, Germans could see paintings and graphics in exhibitions and buy pictures and books that – in the words of one of these publications, the introduction to Baluschek's portfolio of pictures from the front – “reveal war in its terrible actuality.” Not that Baluschek had the first-hand knowledge or power of the imagination to show combat in its modern reality, but he did not minimize the enemy's ability and courage nor the high German casualties.

It is impossible to quantify and statistically analyze the totality of art, high and popular, that was produced during the war. But the

impression persists that German artists, even in works aimed at a broad public, stressed the harshness of combat and the high casualties of their side somewhat more than French and British artists tended to do in representations of their own forces. I have already hinted at this in connection with Beckmann and Dix. The difference – if it does exist – may in part be related to German censorship policies, which afforded such motifs rather more scope than was customary in other countries and, incidentally, also disapproved of belittling the enemy.<sup>13</sup> Certainly efforts in France and Great Britain to exhibit or publish works that neither minimized nor idealized one's own casualties could encounter great difficulties.<sup>14</sup> It may be that German artists exploited their greater freedom in this respect; but it is also possible that German censors and German artists were responding to the same tendencies in their culture.

What were the nonaesthetic intentions of artists who chose the war itself as a theme and underlined its horrors – as distinct from the cripples, beggars, and orphans to which it led? And how do we evaluate the results? The graphics of Slevogt, Beckmann, and Barlach – to stay with artists already mentioned – are sometimes interpreted as accusations against the political and social system that caused the war, or at least proved unable to bring it to an end. Other readings are also possible. Images of war in all its horror may carry the message this is what our enemies have imposed on us – which would help explain the acquiescence of the censors – or less judgmentally, this is an inevitable part of national rivalries. Or even: War is a natural social phenomenon. Barlach's murdering giant has many predecessors in European art, monsters that personify not only war but also pestilence, famine, and human sinfulness. Or finally, the visions published in *Der Bildermann* and elsewhere may simply be efforts to come to terms with and show in representations or symbolically the overpowering event of the times. That in the end the pictorial message of *Der Bildermann* was too harsh and its statement of the need to end the slaughter too explicit, even for German censors, is indicated by its brief life. The 1916 Christmas issue was the last to appear.

In an important and beautiful essay Thomas Nipperdey has examined the psychological message of the national monument in imperial Germany and has sketched out its historical significance.<sup>15</sup> Nipperdey

demonstrates that in the last decades before the war, the monuments and the many memorials erected to Bismarck, the creator of the Reich, represented the nation no longer as a cultural realm that at last had regained its fabled political unity, but as an increasingly embattled community, confronting an uncertain fate and certain sacrifice. The cult of death these monuments celebrate – in motifs, in words, and in their massive, somber style – certainly expresses more than the views of a few sculptors. It reflects a well-defined element in German culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. It would be surprising if the cultural pessimism of the time, in its particular German version, did not find new nourishment after war broke out. Its later consequences – especially an extreme sense of German particularity and the pathological expansion of the cult of death – are easily traced in the nationalist freecorps culture after 1918, and in National Socialism.

Not only the ideological falsification and exploitation of war in German art, but most, perhaps all, of its most powerful interpretations of war, were created after 1918. War memorials and monuments in cemeteries and churches expanded the forms of expression. They usually idealized service, combat, and death as the heroic payment of a debt that men and their families owe the nation; but some ignored causation and motives and were wholly expressions of grief. The end of the war made possible new, more embracing perspectives. But these new ways of seeing the war were only in part the result of peace. The artists who chose the First World War as a subject had lived through the war either as soldiers or civilians, and now brought their experience with the war to bear on their work. Nor had the war come fully to a close in November 1918. Organized violence in the form of revolution, civil war, raids into territories now occupied by Poles, assassination, and political terror continued to mark German life, and in 1933 again to dominate it.