

The Tools of War and Industry: The Erasure of the Family in Käthe Kollwitz's *Der Krieg*

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Where are my children now? What is left of their mother?
One boy to the right and one to the left, my right son and my left son,
as they called themselves.

One dead and one so far away, and I cannot help him,
cannot give to him out of myself.

All has changed forever. Changes, and I am impoverished...

Käthe Kollwitz, January 17, 1916¹

War is a complex beast and a cruel revealer of unacknowledged truths. It is a machine of blood and steel that easily sweeps people into its initial waves of patriotism; it captures the minds and bodies of people through its ability to personalise, mythologise, and even mystify the great unknown of the battlefield. War, as T.S. Eliot described it, is “the still point of the turning world.”² World War I was the first large-scale industrial war.³ Man and machine were fused together through the innovation of weapons such as grenades, poison gas, submarines, warplanes, and the machine gun.⁴ Furthermore, World War I was a war of illusions: war was seen as an adventure and the nationalistic duty of every citizen regardless of age or gender. Although the nature of trench warfare restricted the primary action to the front lines, aviation brought the conflict home with the bombing of urban centres.⁵

This encircling violence resulted in women's absolute entry into the war machine. On the home front, women were ushered into civilian defence units and the labour force. Like many of their husbands, sons, and brothers, some women willingly answered the call to arms as a demonstration of their national sympathies and familial solidarities. However, not all women pledged their support for the war effort, and these dissenters instead positioned themselves within the pacifist movement.⁶ Come the war's end, the irreplaceable loss and the destruction of their identities within the home and nation-state nullified whatever victories women patriots and pacifists alike might have achieved.⁷ World War I proved that blind patriotism could entice women just as well as it could men. Throughout the period it was believed that “great sacrifices must be made to reach great goals.”⁸ Yet at what costs were these sacrifices to be made?

Käthe Kollwitz's remarkable woodcut series *Der Krieg* (The War) created between 1921 and 1923, offers grim reflections on war linked to ideas of human labour and industrialised culture. Interestingly, however, Kollwitz's images do not express the carnage of the front lines, but instead illustrate the struggles of the women and children left behind. These

images portray the suffering and the sweeping sacrifice of the home front. *Der Krieg* has previously been interpreted as a series that is transparent about the effects of war.⁹ While this interpretation is partially correct, it is vital to note the industrialised nature of war in the early-twentieth century; as such, one cannot separate the discourses of war and industry, particularly in relation to World War I. This understanding, then, shifts the questions that we typically ask about war. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which the loss and destruction that resulted from the war were produced through an industrial complex. This paper argues that *Der Krieg* explores the issues of how people at the home front, as well as those on the front lines, were used as tools of war, just as a hammer or wrench would be used as tools of industry. A close examination of *Der Krieg* reveals Kollwitz's attack on the industrial evolution of the war machine, particularly in relation to its outcome on the traditional social structure of the family.

Domestic space within the nuclear family has typically been considered a safe space in modern, European cultures. Although the traditional family structure has in many ways oppressed women, it has also served as a refuge. As the home front was mercilessly incorporated into the tools of industrialised war, however, this construction of the family as a place of retreat was torn apart. Beginning with images that recount the decimation of the German family as a consequence of war, Kollwitz uses her later images to propose different models of survival. By the end of the series, *Der Krieg* illustrates how people at home can be meaningful agents in their own lives through a community model. Kollwitz's series is monumental in form and universal in feeling. The first two images, *Das Opfer* (The Sacrifice) and *Die Freiwilligen* (The Volunteers) depict the mechanical motions of offering life, liberty, and soul to the state [Figs. 1-2]. The following three images, *Die Eltern* (The Parents), *Die Witwe, I* (The Widow, I) and *Die Witwe, II* (The Widow, II) exemplify the harsh realities of the aftermath of war and the breakup of the family collective [Figs. 3-5]. The final blocks, *Die Mütter* (The Mothers) and *Das Volk* (The People), while depicting the demise of the family unit, also signal the solution of where to find solace in the aftermath: the community [Figs. 6-7].

Involving upwards of seventy million soldiers, nine million of whom lost their lives, World War I set off shock waves that were felt world-wide long after the Armistice of 1918.¹⁰ As the war dragged on, thirteen million men in total, nearly twenty per cent of Germany's population in 1914, were called up to serve in the Germany army.¹¹ By 1918, with casualties mounting, the German army began to experience significant problems with recruitment and morale.¹² Soldiers were no longer viewed as husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, but as replaceable bodies needed to fill the spaces on the front lines. If men were considered expendable instruments of the war machine, so, too, were women. As the ones left behind, the economic and domestic duties of the nation were placed squarely on the shoulders of Germany's women. Through the advent of the women's rights movement and a rapid industrial revolution before the war, women had both a desire and need to work outside of the home.¹³ Where, why, how, and what women did in the workforce was largely dependent on the cultural understanding of the woman as a worker. This understanding was deeply rooted in the theory of the social contract, where the family was cast as natural and politically

neutral.¹⁴ Connected with this framework was the notion that women were naturally suited for the family.¹⁵ Because much of women's work and life occurs in the private sphere, women's involvement in both the war and industry, then, was obviously much more limited in comparison to men. Through this line of thinking, a woman's most important occupation was her role as mother, and, as such, whatever duties she took outside of the home must fulfil that responsibility.

Kollwitz addresses this notion of motherhood through her first image of the series, *Das Opfer* [Fig. 1]. Compositionally, this image presents an emaciated woman gingerly offering up her slumbering baby to the world. Alternating pools of darkness and light surround both mother and child. Both are naked, yet the mother's bony arms, which awkwardly crane the child to meet the unknown, conceal the baby's gender. The woman reveals all of herself for inspection. Her womb and breasts are given a type of worn value: these are the necessary tools of her trade, in constant service of others. She evokes the image of a machine that works only to produce the next generation of Germans, exemplified by her robotic gesture and tightly shut eyes. It is important that Kollwitz chose to depict a woman as the one sacrificing and being sacrificed: this dramatic performance is heavily encoded within the particular modes of gender power. Early-twentieth century German, masculine dominance



Fig. 1. Käthe Kollwitz, *Das Opfer* (The Sacrifice), 1923, woodcut, 14 5/8 x 16 1/16". © DACS 2014.

is illustrated through the powerlessness of the automaton mother.¹⁶ The German state has always figured prominently in ordering women's sexuality. For example, the cultural and socio-economic conditions of Germany in the nineteenth century played a vital role in the invitation to and regulation of women in the workforce. Although it was necessary to have women in the workforce at that time due to war and economic turmoil, women were constantly reminded of their original duties: to serve the nation through domesticity. Low wages, unskilled positions, and little job security were characteristic of the type of labour that industry required of women.¹⁷ The devaluation of the work performed by women served to reaffirm the perception that they were unfit for the tasks they executed. The family, therefore, was the best protection against economic vulnerability. Despite the understanding that women were not considered breadwinners, they were still viewed as workers of the state: labourers under the constraints of motherhood and the home.

Kollwitz's mother figure is hardened, her eyes smoothly closed. This is not her child but a citizen of the state, regardless of its gender. To great effect Kollwitz uses printmaking's contrasts of light and darkness to create a highly dramatic and emotional image. In this block, the mother emerges out of the dark to the foreground, announcing herself as the primary candidate for inspection. She, not the child, is to be the object of focus for the viewer as she has just accomplished the greatest duty of her gender. Between the gradations of light and darkness, symbolising innocence and despondency, the mother displays her sacrifice for her country. Germany's women, Kollwitz illustrates, are simply incubators for future generations.

If *Das Opfer* is to be understood as an initial claim by the state on women's bodies, then Kollwitz's second image, *Die Freiwilligen*, [Fig. 2] should be thought of as the outcome of that offering. Here Kollwitz portrays a company of five men led swiftly by the horrific figure of death. The two men on the far right gaze in awe towards the unseen destination on the left, grasping their throats while their mouths gape open as if in prayer. By contrast, the two central figures' reactions to death's grip are just the opposite. The figure on the right throws back his body in agony, rendering only his silent scream to view. On his right, he clutches his young comrade, who slackly rests, emotionless, between his deathly crew. The only subject left for focus is death himself, banging his war drum to signal the dance of death. This *danse macabre* illustrates the concept that all are equal before death. As the war dragged on, this understanding was proved time and again as soldiers were no longer viewed as individuals, but instead as machines, one of many and easily replaceable. The dehumanisation exhibited in *Das Opfer* not only demonstrates how reproductive politics are regulated from birth, but also how bodies are not individually owned, but rather claimed by both society and the state.

It is important to note that, although the state-manufactured, -regulated, and -owned body was tangible through the war effort, Kollwitz chose to represent these bodies as caricature-like forms. Through her choice of medium, Kollwitz reveals her intent to remove the series from the realm of visibility that imitates the precision of technology. *Das Krieg* thus creates tension between the state-sanctioned notion of man as machine, and Kollwitz's portrayal of the soldiers as human beings. These are not photographic images but easily identifiable man-

made woodcuts, meticulously carved and formed by the artist's fallible and humane hand. In this way, Kollwitz is striking against the grain of her era, in which the machine was thought to encapsulate everything.

As the War drew to a close in November 1918, its deep and indelible marks were beginning to be revealed through a new cultural life, one that would fully emerge in the 1920s.¹⁸ In an effort to offset widespread feelings of disillusionment and soften the hardship of defeat, General Hindenburg placed the fault of Germany's losses on traitors and enemies both inside and outside of the state.¹⁹ Additionally, working-class uprisings from the November Revolution of 1918-19 added fuel to the debates between nationalists and anti-war powers over how best to memorialise World War I.²⁰ A significant feature of this debate was the question of the heroism of the soldier and related notions of manliness and duty. For many anti-war artists, the language of heroism was bitterly sardonic: war issued chaotic images of incomprehensible death, social disorder, individual fragmentation, and, for some, a new social organisation. Artists such as Otto Dix of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement, and László Moholy-Nagy of the Bauhaus School, sought to create a national collective memory that would serve to obstruct any future wars. Kollwitz herself was an integral part of this thread. However, while many of her contemporaries sought to create works that would evoke the clean "objectivity" of the photograph and magic realism, Kollwitz chose instead to harken back to pre-war expressionism, and her choice of the dated medium of woodcut has political as well as aesthetic significance.



Fig. 2. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Freiwilligen* (The Volunteers), 1923, woodcut, 13 3/4 x 19 1/2" © DACS 2014.

Censorship was eliminated under the progressive Weimar Republic, thereby allowing for the increase of radical experimentation within the arts. The Neue Sachlichkeit movement depicted reality through a practical engagement with the world.²¹ This is evident in works by Dix and Georg Scholz, which depict shapely, three-dimensional figures against a backdrop of smooth colour and defined reality. Correspondingly, the Bauhaus school was interested in combining the rationality and functionality of simplified forms with the idea that mass-production was consistent with the individual artistic spirit.²² These movements were rooted in the pursuit of a futuristic artistic ideal, one prompted by the arrival of the machine. Before 1910, avant-garde art had excluded the influence of industry.²³ As the industrial revolution's hold became stronger, early modernist art became increasingly associated with primitivism. Instinct and spontaneity, understood as natural, rather than machine-age uniformity, distinguished early modernist work like Kollwitz's and the ensuing advocacy for individualism. However, the machine soon became important to the advancement of the arts in the years just prior to World War I.

By the end of the century, the second generation of the international Arts and Crafts movement had adopted some industrial methods for their artistic production.²⁴ If industry could be turned into the servant of creativity, there no longer seemed to be a gap between handwork and the machine. Kollwitz seems to have viewed this transition differently. Although her primary medium had been the lithograph, she turned to the woodcut, perhaps



Fig. 3. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Eltern* (The Parents), 1923, woodcut, 13 13/16 x 16 3/4" © DACS 2014.

out of personal and creative necessity. In *Das neue Kollwitz Werk* she wrote: "I started the war series as etchings, but was not satisfied with the results. I therefore destroyed all but [...] two; whereupon I tried a few lithographs on the same theme. In the end I found the most satisfactory interpretation in woodcut."²⁵ Only the grainy pattern of the woodcut could effectively display Kollwitz's immense and varied expressions of grief and confusion. It is not coincidental that her characters are flat, bold and dense in perception, and created in direct opposition to the realistic and industry-driven works of the Bauhaus or the Neue Sachlichkeit. *Der Krieg* was meant to serve as a reminder that the lives affected by war were not expendable like machines, but precious and unique. Although Kollwitz was an integral part of The New Objectivity and Bauhaus' desire to create a collective memory, she did so in a way that highlighted humanity rather than industry.

Kollwitz fought against the machine, both in her theory and her actions. If the human being was transformed into a cyborg built for war, then Kollwitz tried to regain that humanity which was lost along the front lines and home fronts by recalling the purely human emotions of compassion, fear, wanting, loneliness, and despair. She worked



Fig. 4. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Witwe, I* (The Widow, I), 1923, woodcut, 14 7/8 x 9 5/8" © DACS 2014.

through her images as a point of reference before the war, when humanity still possessed the courage and ingenuity that revered life. Kollwitz's next three images, *Die Eltern*, *Die Witwe, I* and *Die Witwe, II* reveal the cruel realities of war through the breakup of the family collective.

The devastation of World War I left none untouched, including Kollwitz herself. Her youngest son, Peter, was killed at Dixmuiden, Flanders, in the fall of 1914.²⁶ Her grief was channelled into the two life-sized figures of a mourning mother and father, portraits of herself and her husband. These studies are perhaps her most important sculptures and were later replicated in the third block of her series, *Die Eltern* [Fig. 3]. *Die Eltern* shows two stooping figures, moulded together in their unfathomable grief. No facial features are depicted, thus leaving only the severe lines to hint at an expression of feeling. Contorted bodies signal the agony of the couple. They serve as concrete and unflinching proof of the destruction of faith and the misery of being left behind. The man, as the head of the family, must comfort the mother in her loss, yet he bends from the weight of the burden, only to succumb himself. They are all that remains of their family. Kollwitz fuses the two distraught characters into one almost perfectly rounded shell. Line works as Kollwitz's ally as it aids in the description of the shapes and spaces. Although sharply crafted, the only allowance for exact detail rests in the depiction of the father's hands. Rough and worn, they serve to cradle his and his wife's misery.

Continuing with this theme, Kollwitz created two depictions of war widows, *Die Witwe, I* and *Die Witwe, II* [Figs. 4-5]. *Die Witwe, I* represents a woman who is cradling herself, her head resting on her right shoulder and her eyes tightly shut. She is reminiscent of the baby offered up to the state in *Das Opfer*. She is alone, left with no one and nothing to comfort her. She appears to be the only one left of her family. *Die Witwe, II* is similarly rendered. Unlike the former widow, however, this woman is presented cradling a slackened baby on her chest.



Fig. 5. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Witwe, II* (The Widow, II), 1923, woodcut, 11 13/16 x 20 7/8" © DACS 2014.

She lies like a stone statue, the top of her head resting on the floor, having succumbed to her despair. The baby, lacking movement, appears dead alongside the mother. What more do these women have to give? They have given their homes and loved ones and are left with nothing. If the family is gone, what is to become of women?

With the arrival of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, more and more women were called to take jobs outside the home. Many traditionalists were quick to condemn industry as destructive to the family and, by extension, to society. As Elizabeth Gnauck-Kühne stated in her 1907 text, “Die Deutsche Frau um die Jahrhundertwende” (The German Woman at the Turn of the Century), “We must take to heart what the statistics and experience tell us about women’s work; [it has] shown us that women cannot realise their maternal instincts... Only children bring the women identity, not work.”²⁷ When Kollwitz created these images in 1923, the issue that recurs in her work is the same as that expressed by Gnauck-Kühne: the problem of the woman without a family. Before the war, a woman’s place was in the home as a mother and wife. In the wake of World War I, a problem arose regarding what to do with the thousands of widows who now outnumbered the population of remaining men. Clearly, Germany had to re-evaluate the role of the family and its intrinsic ties to the notions of nationality and strength. Instead, the role of the community had to be used as the focal point for Germany’s restitution.

The years following World War I brought much reason for protest. Hunger and



Fig. 6. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Mütter* (The Mothers), 1923, woodcut, 13 1/2 x 15 3/4" © DACS 2014.

malnutrition ravaged millions of Germans. To meet emergencies, the government began to overprint money. Inflation increased, finally wiping out all savings and many investments. By the end of 1918, the German mark had lost about three-quarters of its 1913 value.²⁸ As prices rose, the costs of housing, fuel and food outstripped wage increases and unrest spread, particularly in urban areas. Additionally, the new Weimar Republic struggled to support the millions of war widows, orphaned children, and men who could no longer work because of their injuries.²⁹ As both the public and private notions of the family had now faltered, Kollwitz utilised *Der Krieg* to propose different models of how people at home could once more become meaningful agents in their own lives. For example, in the last two blocks of the series, she created stoic images of the people left to survive in post-war Germany. Together the figures in *Die Mütter* and *Das Volk* became the community, the means for Germany's salvation and future. These are not malleable tools of industry, but mortal characters capable of feeling and understanding. If the family unit is gone, then all that is left is a feeling of solidarity in which the community takes care of one other. This understanding contrasts with the



Fig. 7. Käthe Kollwitz, *Das Volk* (The People), 1923, woodcut, 14 3/16 x 11 13/16" © DACS 2014.

previous rhetoric of the family unit as being the centre of the state. Kollwitz, therefore, illustrates a different model of domestic agency.

In *Die Mütter*, Kollwitz sculpts mounds of eyes, arms, hands and heads, each covering and covering themselves and their children [Fig. 6]. These, presumably, are representative of the war widows and children left behind. They are a mound of darkness, discernible only by the whites of their eyes and the fleshy blank spaces left for the construction of their hands. These women are not singled out like the other women in *Die Witwe, I* and *Die Witwe, II* but are represented as a single group. They are a community. Unlike her other blocks, Kollwitz creates emotionally varied gazes for each of the women and children. If the eyes are supposed to be the window to the soul, then it appears that Kollwitz uses this notion to her advantage to individualise each member of the company. This is a community, made up not of robotic drones but of individuals.

Kollwitz continues her exploration into the new model of domestic agency in her final block, *Das Volk* [Fig. 7]. Flanked by two teeth-gnashing, grimacing individuals, a mother takes up the majority of the canvas. As illustrated by her stoic demeanour, she and her child are the image of rebirth. Although a gangly and unlikely group, together they make up the new community of Germany. *Das Volk* shows individuals masked by darkness and only revealed by the light of their faces. Their bodies are blackened out to reveal each separate person. This new domesticity does not lie in the construction of the home, but in the ability of every person to take care of one another. This notion not only proposes the freedom of women from their domestic ties, but also demands the construction of a new social framework that, ideally, would be found in the flailing Weimar Republic.

World War I baptised the coming century in a pool of blood, leaving no one untouched by devastating loss and the anxiety of the unknown. Kollwitz's *Der Krieg*, a collection of seven intricately carved and delicately reasoned portrayals of post-war reckoning, describes a multitude of emotions. *Der Krieg* reveals an uncommonly depicted aspect of war: the home front. Through her personal and public grief, Kollwitz actively imagines the birth of a new Germany. This Germany, as she illustrates, would have to emerge out of the shadow of the war machine. Since the family structure had been so mercilessly destroyed by the industry of war, Kollwitz proposed the formation of a new community-centric domesticity and posited this source of strength as a solution to Germany's social problems and a counteraction to the memories of a brutal war.

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