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Art as Political Struggle: George Grosz and the Experience of the Great War

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Cover Page Footnote

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Art as Political Struggle: George Grosz and the Experience of the Great War

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, author Erich Maria Remarque details the life and wartime experience of fictional German soldier Paul Bäumer. Near the end of the novel, Bäumer's comrade Albert Kropp is critically injured and taken to an army hospital. Bäumer accompanies his friend back to the home front, suffering from a battle wound himself. After spending weeks at the hospital and witnessing the horrors of this experience, Paul is forced to seriously contemplate his life and what he has been forced to endure as part of his military service:

I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. I see how peoples are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another ... And all men my age, here and over there, throughout the world see these things; all my generation is experiencing these things with me ... What will happen afterwards? And what shall come of us?¹

As Paul remarks, the experience of an individual has validity since it often reflects the experience of many; the First World War was a conflict that had devastating consequences for the German people on a political, social, and personal level. As such, this passage is emblematic of the ordeal suffered by those affected by the war. German artist George Grosz is one example of an individual whose life was transformed by the course and outcome of this conflict. Coming into his own career as an illustrator and painter during the Great War, Grosz serves as a powerful stand-in not only for his own personal sentiments of the conflict but also for the sentiments of many German soldiers and political activists. The illustrations and paintings of George Grosz present the ideal media for understanding the dehumanization of soldiers during the conflict, war wounds sustained as the result of new technology, religion and its interplay on the frontline experience, and the reaction to government wartime policy in conjunction with nascent socialist and communist sentiments among the growing number of war discontents.

A contextual understanding of Grosz's upbringing and early work as a student of art helps set the stage for further analysis of his wartime works and their reflection of the themes that came with his subsequent experience of the First World War. George Grosz was born in Pomerania in 1893. The son of a Franco-Prussian war veteran turned bar owner, Grosz grew up in an environment that stimulated his interest in art and aesthetics. The artist, in his autobiography, fondly recalls instances of his relationship with his father and how this relationship fostered his appreciation of beauty, including an anecdote he shares in which he would watch his father prepare the bar and observe "the shapes and the labels of the bottles, and [be] ... enchanted by the colorful pictures on the cigar boxes."² Though his father died when he was six years of age, Grosz recounts times spent with his father in his study peering over illustrated magazines, "[burying his] nose in sensational pictures of the Russo-Japanese war or of the battles waged by [the] ... brave colonial troops in the African bush."³ These works had a

¹ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1928), 210.

² George Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Allison & Busby, 1955), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

tremendous influence on his future work as an artist in the sense that they reflect that same charcoal medium employed in his most signature works. Grosz began work with drawing from an early age in his artistic career, even prior to his study at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts.

These experiences were formative for George Grosz in that they honed his prewar notion of the brutality of armed conflict at the start of the twentieth century. Grosz was interested in the depiction of battle in art from the early years of his artistic career. An open romantic, the artist discusses his initial fascination with martial themes interwoven with an idealized notion of the army. For example, Grosz describes how he drew inspiration from works of “the great historical illustrators” who depicted “prodigious martial feats of knights in armor and similar themes.”⁴ These themes of virtuous armed service were a popular fount of inspiration for the young Grosz at a time in his career when “portraits of men in uniform, meticulously executed” and the cavalry charge of hussars presented to him an idealized notion of war.⁵ These fairly clean depictions of war were coupled with what Grosz refers to as “horrific panoramas”—paintings of battles displayed at fairs in which one would pay to peer through a slit in a barrier in order to amuse oneself with finding out what a battlefield was like.⁶ These shows were overly violent and sanguine, which speaks to the pent-up interest in war that would become a ghastly reality with the outbreak of the First World War; they were “artless and crude” yet held “a fundamental human appeal,” which spoke to, if only subtly, “the horrors and the lust for destruction inherent in that small rebellious flea that goes by the name of man.”⁷

An interest in the idealized side of artistic expression began to fade with Grosz’s service in the German imperial army at the outbreak of the First World War. In his autobiography, the artist has little to say specifically about the conflict, especially regarding any sort of detailed account of life on the front or the experience of the battlefield. This is telling in that it speaks to just how drastically the war impacted Grosz’s view of the world and thus his artistic direction. In the chapter of his book entitled “Private George Grosz,” the artist states rather succinctly:

What can I say about the First World War, a war in which I served as an infantryman, a war I hated at the start and to which I never warmed as it proceeded? I had grown up in a humanist atmosphere, and war to me was never anything but horror, mutilation and senseless destruction, and I knew that many great and wise people felt the same way about it.⁸

The artist’s words that war had always been a subject of contempt in his formative years may seem contradictory in light of the above account of his fascination with artistic depictions of battle. However, this passage speaks to the contrast between Grosz’s pre- and postwar experiences of the brutality of early twentieth century warfare; whereas his artistic interests had led him to see military service in a romantic and clean light, his first-hand experience in the First World War showed him that war is nothing of the kind. This quotation is also noteworthy because it further expresses the artist’s opinion that many people shared his distaste for war and all of its terrible consequences. The works of Grosz are useful in terms of understanding the

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

collective experience of the war because the artist put down on paper—through the use of paint, pencil, and charcoal—what others felt themselves. “At least I had the courage to say openly what so many merely thought deep down,” Grosz remarks in his autobiography, discussing how his art was influenced by a mistrust in traditional authority and the notion of the righteousness of absolute patriotism.⁹ These themes are also contained in the works of Grosz; as the artist states clearly, “I could fill pages with this theme, but everything I could say has been recorded in my drawings.”¹⁰

As established, George Grosz clearly believed that his cause was common among others who had experienced the war on the German side. He also expressed the belief, as conveyed in the above quotation, that his works were artistic representations of this understanding of the First World War and by extension, the understanding of many of his contemporaries. As such, it makes sense to examine a number of his works as each piece depicts unique themes understood not only by the artist, but by the common citizens at the time. One work that contains a plethora of themes would be “The Funeral” (1918).¹¹ This work represents the painted works of Grosz as opposed to those that were lithographs or drawings with pen or charcoal. In the piece, the viewer can experience a chaotic funeral scene in which a number of figures form a parade of sorts past a building. A skeleton rests on a casket drinking from a bottle as a priest with a clerical collar raises his hands in either a benediction or religious admonition. Following the procession are a number of manic figures carrying assorted items such as swords, horns, and umbrellas. All of these figures display a vaguely human yet highly abnormal characterization, particularly when it comes to their faces; they tend to have obtusely rounded visages, strangely melted or deformed expressions, or heads that resemble animals. In terms of lighting, the chaotic nature of the painting is solidified by the contrast of dark tones with stark reds and oranges that give the entire scene a battlefield-like ambiance.

At first glance, there appears simply to be a cacophony of imagery present in the painting which defies meaning. Yet, upon closer inspection several themes become apparent. The first would be the dehumanization of the soldier during the war. In the foreground of “The Funeral,” one can see a figure in a blue suit. This figure has a clearly pronounced bird-like head, complete with a beak and enlarged eyes. With his head visibly angled down, as if in a state of dejection, he grasps what appears to be a Bible and does little more than cast a glance at the crowd gathered for the event. He also seems to stand aside from the procession—a part of the festivities yet ostracized, nonetheless. It appears that Grosz was attempting to portray a sense of disembodiment or dissociation with human nature through this figure, which makes sense given his military service. The artist joined the army out of youthful enthusiasm in 1914, but grew to hate the experience and was ultimately released the following year for medical reasons. Grosz states of his brief service that he “... hated being a number and not merely because [he] ... was a very small one.”¹² For the artist, the experience of being in the army had a demeaning effect; he felt that he was nothing more than a cog in a war machine fighting for reasons that he himself did not share. While he “stood up as best [he] ... could to [the] ... disgusting stupidity and brutality” of his superiors, Grosz laments that he could not “manage to beat them at their own game.”¹³

⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹¹ All of Grosz’s works as well as images mentioned in this paper are found in the Appendix.

¹² Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, 79.

¹³ Ibid.

Without the opportunity to express his own volition and agency as an individual, his tenure led him to hate the war as an experience that robbed him of what it meant to be human.

Grosz used his artwork to express disillusionment with the war effort and the military establishment, institutions that dehumanized those who participated in war. This sentiment was echoed by many of the artist's contemporaries. Letters from the front were subject to censorship by military officials and were not always faithful to the true conditions of the battlefield or the thoughts of the soldiers writing them. However, there are still personal accounts of the war's dehumanizing effect on soldiers, including one letter written on October 7, 1914, near the onset of the conflict. Addressed to the soldier's brother-in-law, this letter expresses a sense of defeat and frustration of purpose from the front lines:

I have no idea what we are still fighting for anyway, maybe because the newspapers portray everything about the war in a false light, which has nothing to do with the reality ... everyone who still supports the war is not any longer a human being.¹⁴

In this example, there is a stark dichotomy created between those who had direct experience with the war and those who did not; whereas some who had not seen the horrors of the battlefield supported the war out of a misplaced sense of patriotism, soldiers on the front lines could no longer delude themselves into thinking that the war was being conducted for a good cause. This division is so intense that the writer of the letter questions the very humanity of the supporters of the war. Similar to the way that the figures in "The Funeral" are blissfully ignorant in their dehumanized state, so, too, were proponents of the war devoid of their humanity due to their acquiescence to the carnage of armed conflict.

In much the same way that Grosz went from a hopeful romantic enlistee to a disillusioned veteran, soldiers on the front line also expressed their own personal dehumanization caused by the war. This is seen in the letter from Franz Blumenfeld, a law student who joined the army in August of 1914 and died in December of the same year. At the beginning of his series of letters home, Blumenfeld expresses excitement to participate in the war, stating, "If there is mobilization now, I ... must join up" so as to increase "[my] chance of going to the Front quite soon."¹⁵ Yet a month later, conditions at the front caused him to reconsider his previous enthusiasm:

This war seems to me ... to be so horrible, inhuman, mad, obsolete, and in every way depraving, that I have firmly resolved, if I do come back, to do everything in my power to prevent such a thing from ever happening again in the future.¹⁶

Blumenfeld had only served for a few months before his death, but he expresses a sentiment similar to that of Grosz regarding the dehumanizing qualities of war, as informed by personal experience. In this example, one can see how the author highlights the inhumane quality of war, noting how the war itself (and by extension, the soldier himself as a participant in it) is utterly

¹⁴ Christine Brocks, trans., *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, ed. Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Press, 2010), 51.

¹⁵ A. F. Wedd, trans., *German Student's War Letters*, ed. Philipp Witkop (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

depraved. These potent words convey the same sense of emotional detachment seen in the bird-like figure in Grosz's work.

For many soldiers, the war was dehumanizing in the sense that the entire purpose and conduct of the war left them with the sense that through their participation in the conflict, they had lost their humanity. Yet dehumanization had more sinister and subversive qualities in the context of the First World War. There are certainly more light-hearted references to the dehumanizing conditions at the front. For instance, a letter from a student of chemistry named Willi Böhne speaks to this theme in the context of trench warfare. Böhne makes light of his back-breaking work by acknowledging the animal-like labor associated with fortifying at the front, remarking on the long and arduous process of digging trenches. "We are simply nothing more than moles," he states, "for we are burrowing trenches so that the [English] ... shan't break through here." However, darker understandings of the inhuman conditions of war became manifest as the conflict progressed, especially when it came to characterization of the enemy. According to a passage from material collected by the Institute for Applied Psychology about experiences at the front, "The enemy is nothing but an obstacle which has to be destroyed."¹⁷ Here, accounts of soldiers' perceptions of wartime killing reveal the degradation of the enemy to the status of an inanimate object; the realities of early twentieth century warfare allowed for killing on such a massive and systematic scale that taking a life was viewed as nothing more than a task or goal to be completed. Other examples from the report by the institute detail the effect modern weaponry had on the objectification of the enemy in the act of killing. In one instance, the report states that "there [were] some who would target and shoot Russian units in nearby trenches with their telescope for hours and hours as if they were practice targets in a shooting range."¹⁸ Here, too, one can discern the degradation of the enemy to a mere object, a mentality enabled by the technology of the time. Because the telescopic sight allowed for a soldier to kill an enemy from extreme range, and such an enemy could not foresee his own death, killing was deprived of its agency and objectification occurred.

Just as George Grosz's brief experience in the military led to his feeling of personal dehumanization (and subsequently, to his depiction of such a theme in his art), so, too, did other soldiers both view the war experience in dehumanizing terms and fall victim to objectification of the slaughter of the enemy. Yet "The Funeral" holds many other themes, prominent among them the nature of injury during the war. This can be seen particularly through the presentation of faces in this work. In "The Funeral," Grosz plays with the notion of human form in his wild depiction of faces amongst the figures in his work. For instance, to the right of the bird-like figure there is another figure with a visage that appears to be melting. With eyes full of emotion, he looks off into the distance to the right of the view of the painting. Apart from the odd shape of the head, the viewer can also see a number of wrinkled deformities on his face. Grosz additionally paints another figure to the right near the bottom of the piece that sports a gaunt and disfigured look as well. His overbearing forehead and exposed and jagged teeth convey an uncomfortable and unnatural range of emotions.

An interesting dynamic of physical injury is that it was associated with the mental strain consequent to the wartime experience. While the slaughter on both sides of the conflict was intense and inhuman, as the above examples demonstrate, most soldiers would avoid making reference to the specifics of that which they faced. This was based on the common notion among men at the front that "if you did ruminate much on the real meaning of the things you do and the

¹⁷ Brocks, *German Soldiers in the Great War*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

things that are done to you, your nerves would crack in no time.”¹⁹ This led to the value of being “determined to forget,” and subsequently avoiding “telling the worst part of this war in ... letters and instead, ... [using] euphemisms ... to avoid acknowledging traumatic or painful facts.”²⁰ Thus, it is challenging to ascertain from the personal records of soldiers at the front just how gruesome the war wounds that they witnessed were. Yet this is not to say war wounds did not exist; on the contrary, records do exist of just how horrible they were, particularly those involving injury to the face. For instance, as seen in [Image 1] and [Image 2], injury to the face as a result of the destructive power of early twentieth century weaponry had the potential to distort and disfigure the face in ways that parallel the figures in “The Funeral.” As seen in [Image 1], efforts were made to rectify these injuries; in the case of this French veteran, one can see how a skillfully sculpted mask covered the concave facial injury this man suffered. However, this is a shallow remedy for the disturbing nature of the wound, and it makes sense that soldiers were often unwilling to discuss the particularities of these types of injuries.

This documented war injury concerns a grievous wound to the face, yet this is not to say that soldiers did not show concern for themes revolving around facial injuries in their letters. Soldiers tended to show a certain propensity to be more profoundly disturbed by injuries to the face. For instance, Erich Kuttner, a veteran-turned-deputy of the Reichstag, recalls his visit to an army hospital that specialized in facial injuries. Gravely noting that “these men are not just war-disabled,” but rather “they are war-crushed,” Kuttner relates his horror at the way these men had been scarred from injuries in the conflict.²¹ A telling scene occurs in his report when he has the opportunity to more closely examine the extent of the wounds of one soldier in particular; seeing the bandages removed and a hole the size of his hand where the man’s jaw had once been, Kuttner laments in a sickeningly romantic way how “one can find people from whom the war has taken the most beautiful and noble part of their body - ... men without faces.”²² In more abstract terms, soldiers on the front also had to come to terms with injuries to the face. In the letter of Benno Ziegler, a student of medicine killed in October of 1914, one can see the words of a man attempting to come to grips with injuries witnessed on the battlefield and his own personal mortality:

I am counting [on the protection of God] more than ever ..., for truly the war-horror seems to have reached its climax. O God! How many have those hours been when on every side gruesome Death was reaping his terrible harvest. One sees someone fall—forward on his face—one can’t immediately recognize who it is—one turns the blood-covered face up—O God! It’s you! Why had it to be just you!²³

Here one can see a more veiled and disturbed account of injuries sustained in combat. The frantic attitude adopted by Ziegler, especially considering that this was a letter being sent home, shows the mental toll exacted on witnesses of battlefield casualties. While Ziegler is unwilling to recount exactly what happened, his disheartening letter to his family back home indicates that he

¹⁹ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Brocks, *German Soldiers in the Great War*, 80.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wedd, *German Students’ War Letters*, 5.

had seen enough—that he was not concerned with painting an idealistic picture of the front. Yet the injuries he had witnessed were likely too grotesque to merit a more detailed and specific description. Also, his references to battle wounds in this passage are vague, but, nonetheless, he makes note of his fallen comrade’s bloody face, which is an indication that the injury may have been similar to the depiction in Illustration 2 and, thus, too challenging to put into words.

Physical injuries were not the only wounds sustained in the First World War. Mental ailments also came about as a result of the brutal fighting on the battlefield. As previously noted, the faces of the two figures in Illustrations 1 and 2 not only display symptoms of facial wounds sustained in combat, but they are also emblematic of a distinct shift in the portrayal of human form in art. Far from the realism of Grosz’s previous works before the outbreak of the war, the figures in “The Funeral” are vaguely anthropomorphic yet depart from what is commonly understood as human form; they have unnaturally round or oddly shaped heads, often stunted or peculiarly shaped bodies and limbs, and their skin tones run the gambit of red to orange to a sickly pale shade of yellow-brown. This unique artistic liberty may have been the product of Grosz’s desire for artistic experimentation, but more so it likely reflects the interplay of his artistic expression with the mental wounds he grappled with near the end of the war. The artist himself was institutionalized briefly at the mental hospital near Görden, a common experience of soldiers plagued by psychological injury. While the exact number of men treated for mental illness as a result of conflict is difficult to ascertain due to the “[army’s] tendency to consider psychiatric disorders as ... disciplinary, rather than medical” in nature, it is estimated that 613,047, or 4.58% of the German army, were treated as psychological casualties.²⁴

Mental injuries were anything but new, yet when war-wounded patients began arriving in German hospitals displaying “shaking, stuttering, tremors and tics, muteness, deafness, and paralysis,” German doctors began developing diagnoses that “were less a reflection of sustained medical injury than of the awe inspired by the war’s new powerful weapons.”²⁵ Faced with “modern methods of destruction ... associated with new and mysterious pathologies,” the medical field during the war struggled to understand these new illnesses and how they could be explained.²⁶ Yet when the tremendous cost of waging the war was brought to the attention of the German government, attempts at diagnosing these mental wounds took on decidedly economic and class-driven trappings. While the proto-understanding of psychological illnesses began to develop in the mid-nineteenth century, serious discussion of these types of wounds began at the beginning of the war with a German doctor named Hermann Oppenheim. Head neurologist and director of the makeshift hospital founded at the Museum of Applied Arts in Berlin, Oppenheim was originally sympathetic to the hysteria diagnosis as accurately accounting for the strange behaviors he was facing. Hysteria, in the context of mental illness, was used to describe a mental breakdown that might have resulted from a traumatic event but was ultimately traceable to a predisposition for the condition or other form of constitutional weakness inherent in one’s character. However, after further examination, Oppenheim began to endorse the resurrection of a psychological theory known as traumatic neurosis in order to more accurately diagnose these mental injuries. This medical understanding, controversial when it had first been proposed in the

²⁴ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 239.

²⁵ Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

1890s due to its construal as a threat to economic productivity, suggested that psychoses were in fact caused by the experience of conflict rather than a predisposition for mental weakness.²⁷

The reintroduction of traumatic neurosis in the context of the First World War was met with extreme antipathy and aggression, most especially from those who harbored suspicion of the economic consequences of such an alternative diagnosis. Because hysteria “became entangled with notions of work and productivity,” opponents of traumatic neurosis diagnoses thought that this new diagnosis would allow “work-shy individuals” to claim that they could no longer work and instead receive government pensions.²⁸ In reaction to the prospect of permitting traumatic neurosis into the purview of battlefield diagnosis, German psychiatrist Alfred Hoche warned that “a grave and thankless task will await the German medical profession” if this idea were allowed any traction, “since all kinds of ... nervous disorders, which will have arisen without any external causes, will be traced back to demands of battle.”²⁹ Indeed the vociferous movement against factoring in war experience as a cause of psychological trauma was motivated by economic concerns as German officials sought to avoid the problem of what they called “pension hysteria.” Thus, it was seen as a patriotic duty to protect against what psychiatrist Walter Cimbald described as “the introduction of an elusive and uncontrollable concept” known as “accidental hysterics.”³⁰ Yet, these efforts ignored the realities of the injuries and robbed veterans of the opportunity to seek proper treatment for their very real wounds. While even Oppenheim himself recognized that understanding mental wounds in such a way would be costly in that pension claims would skyrocket, he firmly asserted that traumatic neurosis was a more medically faithful diagnosis, and that “we have to admit that the aversion with which many of us approach this activity” of determining the proper diagnosis for psychological injuries, “is not exactly suited to keeping judgments free, pure and just.”³¹ It is clear that many soldiers in the German army, Grosz included, suffered mentally from the demands and horrors of the war, yet they were dismissed as being either weak-willed or insubordinate and had to fight against the tide of medical professionals who wished to write off their injuries in the name of economic expediency.

One more principal theme that is exhibited in “The Funeral” would be religion. This can be seen in two primary places in the work itself. The first and most obvious is the priest-like figure at the front of the funeral procession, recognizable by his dark dress and a clerical collar around his neck. With a cross in hand, this figure ominously raises his hands in the air as if to offer a warning or exhortation. His face is serious, his pursed mouth and expressionless eyes giving off an air of sternness. The second appeal to religious themes can be seen more abstractly in the fact that the scene presented in this piece is a funeral. While the chaos that surrounds the casket is anything but reverent and peaceful, as is often expected of a funeral scene, the basic trappings of a religious ceremony are certainly present, albeit difficult to see. As he notes in his autobiography, Grosz was not a particularly religious man. Yet in his recollections, he expresses an understanding of the sublime nature of spiritualism, particularly pertaining to his experiences returning to Berlin in 1916. Noting the scenes of once lively men who haunted the streets in a war-torn stupor, Grosz notes that while “I did not believe in God, I could not conceive of a world

²⁷ Ibid., 63.

²⁸ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

³⁰ Ibid., 65.

³¹ Ibid.

without heaven or hell,” for “heaven and hell are found side by side here on earth.”³² Here one can see the artist’s understanding of religious experience even though he personally did not subscribe to any sort of faith.

Soldiers at the front seemed to assert a different mentality when it came to matters of religion. Whereas Grosz understood the idea of faith, yet lacked it himself, those at the front often relied heavily on religious belief to steel themselves in the fires of combat. Many examples exist of soldiers at the front discussing their newfound faith as a result of the trying circumstances of combat. Karl Aldag, a student of philosophy killed in battle in January, 1915, relates how he had heard it said that “the men often tell one another how much more religious our people have become owing to this war.”³³ Later in his series of letters around Christmas, Aldag goes on to tell of how he believed that “the Feast [i.e. Christmas] will make a deeper impression than ever and therefore will bring a blessing, in spite of war.”³⁴ This illustrates an important point—that despite being surrounded by constant slaughter and incoherent violence, many men were able to actually grow in faith as they attempted to resist succumbing to the evils of battle. This sentiment is shared by Werner Liebert, a student of law, as well. In his letters, Liebert discusses how he once had little faith but was later convinced to “believe in immortality and in a meeting again in the other world” as “objects of firm faith.”³⁵ Again, one sees here a strange inversion of the violent environment of the battlefield in a sudden and convincing expression of religious belief in spite of the horrors of war.

One telling example of the utility of religious coping strategies during the thick of combat comes from Hermann Droege in a letter to his wife in 1914. Discussing a particularly fierce bout of artillery fire that he had experienced in combat, Droege relates how the roar of combat helped him develop a healthy understanding of faith in times of desperation:

On the battlefield in the heaviest artillery fire: My beloved! I have no idea if I will still get away alive today. If I do fall, you can be assured that my last thoughts were with you and with my dear parents. It is terrible. The earth is trembling. Today I have really learned how to pray and feel relieved and I will go into death strengthened and consoled.³⁶

Here, one can see the nature of faith as a solution to the uncertainties of the battlefield; despite his terror in the face of war and the potential of an unpredictable death at the hands of an artillery barrage, Droege clings to religious belief as a source of comfort. Additionally, this belief seems to manifest in a more meaningful way as a result of the immediacy of the situation in which he is presented. Whereas this individual may not have been very religious prior to the war, the uncertainty of battle acted as a sort of trial by fire in which Droege rapidly grew more overtly religious to cope with the immediate threat to his personhood.

As can be seen in all of the above examples, much can be gleaned from the painted work of George Grosz; however, painting was not the only medium on which the artist experimented and put into a visual medium his thoughts and experiences of the war. He was also a prolific

³² Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, 80.

³³ Brocks, *German Soldiers in the Great War*, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

illustrator who created a number of charcoal and pencil drawings both during and following the First World War. These works were largely the product of his experimentation during his leave of absence from the army in 1916. During this time, Grosz spent time in Berlin and put onto paper his anti-war sentiments as a product of his traumatic wartime service to that point. These motivations persisted after the war had concluded as well. Grosz's drawings exhibit a number of themes, an important one among them being class struggles and the budding socialist and communist movements in contemporary Germany.

Grosz himself certainly held seditious political views during and shortly after the war. This is evidenced by his participation in the Spartacist uprising, a short-lived revolt in Berlin led by German communists that was swiftly put down. Yet the artist seemed to hold mixed views about socialism and the struggles of the workers. The artist expresses sympathy for those who resisted the culture of money and material gain at the time, as seen in his discussion of one of his artistic patrons during the war. In describing this patron, Count Harry Kessler, Grosz tells of how "he lacked the modern attitude to money, and when it came to art ... he would never bargain, not even when the price had been grossly inflated."³⁷ While he admits that he never grew intimate with this man, Grosz's admiration of Count Kessler for not being obsessed with decadence and spending money in a wasteful fashion shows an implicit criticism of the capital-driven nature of German society at the time. His participation in political activism after the war ended was even more explicit, such as the time detailed in his autobiography in which he made "political speeches" and was "lifted ... shoulder high" as people around him shouted "'Long live the working class!'"³⁸ Yet Grosz's political beliefs are ambiguous as to the full extent of his fidelity to socialist values. Despite participation in the aforementioned political rallies, Grosz notes that he gave speeches "not out of any conviction, but because everybody was expected to add his penny-worth, and because I had not yet learned better."³⁹ In fact, one can see that Grosz notes with bitter irony the contrast of his proletarian exhortations and the realities of his upbringing and personal opinions. Whereas members of the working class had joined the war in enthusiasm at the beginning of the conflict, the artist notes that "for me, war had none of the liberating effects it had for so many others, releasing their deep inhibitions and freeing them from the slavery of humdrum jobs."⁴⁰ While his art plays on the theme of class warfare and the marginalization of the poor, Grosz makes it quite clear that he "had never joined in the beatification of the proletariat."⁴¹

Despite his ambiguous political beliefs, it is clear that such socialist themes are contained in Grosz's illustrated artwork. One piece that demonstrates these themes would be "Toads of Property." Drawn in 1920, the work is done in pen and ink on paper. In this piece, the viewer can see a scene of a factory with several disheveled and distraught figures. These figures range from a crippled man in uniform, presumably a war veteran, to a woman with her child. They all look downcast and downtrodden, staring either into the distance or abjectly toward the ground. The foreground is a different story. Looking at the miserable scene behind them with an air of annoyance, several plump businessmen sit and chat over a table strewn with playing cards, coins, and paper money. With cigarettes in their hands and mouths, they seem to preoccupy themselves with seemingly important matters as the figures behind them wallow in dejection.

³⁷ Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

This piece speaks to the rhetoric evoked by the socialist and communist elements in Germany during the time of the war. The work caricatures both the industrialists and the workers as a means of emphasizing the dichotomous class struggle common in the speeches and letters of German socialists like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Expressing the sentiments of the extreme left wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Luxemburg criticized more moderate members of her party for complicity supporting “a capitalist war for imperialistic expansion.”⁴² For these radical individuals on the fringe of the political scene, the First World War was not a necessary clash of nations or a gesture of patriotism, but rather a war of imperialist and capitalist aggression. In light of their communist sentiments, the war was particularly egregious in that it facilitated the deaths of the working class on the battlefield. Expressing his concern that the war was part of a capitalist scheme, Liebknecht implored “the German people [to] ... fight imperialism, fight in a political struggle, in cooperation with the proletariat of the other countries ... [to] stop this genocide.”⁴³ This recognition of the ramifications of a global conflict on the prospects and interests of the working class is echoed by Luxemburg when she expressed how “this war, which the people did not want, did not blaze up for the welfare of the German ... people,” but rather “is an imperialistic war, a war for the capitalist monopoly of world markets ... for industry and capital.”⁴⁴ This theme is seen in “The Toads of Property;” instead of expressing outward concern for the workers, the capitalists in this piece engross themselves in business concerns and are divorced from any ethical concern for the well-being of their fellow countrymen. Also seen in the work are the images of workers whose faces are painted with grief and hopelessness at the conduct of the war, which speaks to Luxemburg’s admonition of how she “no longer ... [saw] laughing faces, smiling cheerfully from the train windows to a war-mad population.”⁴⁵ In the eyes of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, the fate of the German working class and the proletariat across Europe were placed precariously in the callous hands of a selfish bourgeoisie, as the work in question demonstrates.

This communist rhetoric culminated in the short-lived Spartacist Uprising in early January of 1919. The revolt resulted in a sweeping defeat of the radical socialists who had decried the war in the previous years. As Grosz notes in his autobiography, the early years of the German republic were years of “clamor, rumors, cries, [and] political catchphrases” that saw “Karl Liebknecht ... murdered by a soldier” and “the corpse of Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Red Rosa,’ ... thrown into a canal.”⁴⁶ This violent uprising based on communist agitation is captured in the work “Blood is the Best Sauce.” In this piece, two smugly content businessmen can be seen in the foreground drinking champagne and discussing presumably light matters over a fine dinner. Yet the events in the background are anything but casual; surrounded by fearsome men armed with rifles, pistols, and cudgels, two figures can be seen falling to the ground in violent capitulation. One figure raises his hands up in a last ditch attempt at preserving his life against the club of an incoming soldier while the other figure lies dead on the ground, blood freely flowing from a bayonet wound. In reality, the political situation on the home front in Germany during the war was fairly undivided due to control by the government. Despite “strong dissatisfaction with [their] own government for its failure to negotiate a peace settlement,” the

⁴² David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 171.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁶ Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, 116.

German people did not cause very much political tension against the war, and “with the exception of the ... Spartacists, there existed no revolutionary challenge to the status quo.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Grosz’s close connection with this movement is seen in his symbolic portrayal of the uprising in this work. Despite claiming that his political beliefs were misguided in his autobiography, Grosz’s radical politics at the time show through in the violent lamentation expressed in the work, as the socialist ideas espoused above were destroyed by the strong arm of the government in both a literal and figurative sense.

Related to the theme of socialist and communist rhetoric against the war effort is the idea of the heavy-handed and tyrannical government. This can be seen in another of Grosz’s works, a piece entitled “Fit for Active Service.” This work, started in 1916 and finished by 1917, contains a number of important elements. In the scene presented in the piece, one can see a medical board observing an examination. The members of this board appear to be rather bored based on their crossed arms and slouched postures. In the center of the room, there is a putrid skeleton, covered in entrails as if it has been rotting for some time. With his ear pressed against the chest of the skeleton, a doctor gives his affirmation that the subject is fit for service in the military. Two military officials dressed in uniform oversee the whole process and bear expressions of amusement. In the background beyond the walls of the building, a scene of industrialism is visible from the smoke billowing from factories.

This piece can certainly be understood in context of the progressively extensive lengths the German military was willing to go to in order to find recruits by the end of the war. However, more generally speaking, the work belies the robustly unilateral actions taken by the German High Command to mold the nation into an engine of war. In 1916, Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg came to power within the German High Command. Recognizing that full economic, political, and social control was necessary in order to wage war against the Entente, Hindenburg spearheaded a number of reforms that curtailed the rights of workers in favor of the war effort. By increasing hours and expectations for production as well as putting women, children, and wounded veterans to work in factories, Hindenburg’s policies accelerated the already high level of worker exploitation in the country.⁴⁸ Working off of the notion that “he who does not work shall not eat,” the High Command pushed for measures that would place restrictions on the potentially disruptive activities of workers. This included the so-called auxiliary labor bill, or *Hilfsdienstgesetz*, a piece of legislation mandating that “every German from the age of sixteen to sixty was to be obliged to do war service for the Fatherland” in the sense that workers were not allowed to strike or instigate unrest, nor were they allowed to move from one job to another.⁴⁹ What resulted was a grave sense of antagonism and mistrust between the military and the working class, as the workers felt that the government was making unjust demands of them. This is seen in “Fit for Active Service” through the symbol of the skeleton; rather than respecting the individuality of the worker, the High Command treated labor as a piece of machinery in the grand scheme of military victory. This is reflected in the sentiment shared by many leftist groups that the High Command’s “militarization of society was almost an end in itself.”⁵⁰ Setting aside the radical elements of the socialist movement, such as the Spartacists, workers during the war were primarily concerned with maintaining their rights despite the pressures of waging a global war. Yet, just as the military officials in Grosz’s work approve the service of the skeleton, even

⁴⁷ Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War*, 221.

⁴⁸ Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1976), 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

though this figure is clearly *not* prepared to serve his Fatherland, the German High Command was dedicated to “[rejecting] the old scheme of attempting a degree of cooperation between capital and labor” and proposed instead “a militarization of the economy.”⁵¹

As can be seen in the discussion above, the various works of George Grosz, both during and immediately after the war, help to elucidate the themes of the German experience in the First World War both in terms of the artist’s personal struggles and the universal struggles of workers, soldiers, and common citizens. In many ways the overall theme of Grosz’s artistic mission can be seen in “To Them Peace is Assured.” A piece composed on paper with pencil, this work is a simple depiction of the aftermath of a battle. Amongst potholes and scorched earth, jagged crosses mark the haphazard graves of soldiers fallen in combat. The line of graves leads the eyes to the background of the picture toward an ominously billowing cloud of smoke and an obscured sky. The stark atmosphere presented here is reminiscent of the totality of the fighting during the war; just as how the scene of a fresh battlefield rings with staleness and a lack of hope, so, too, did physical injuries and mental breakdowns pursuant to service in the conflict carry with them drawn out consequences. Also, as the name of the piece attests, despite the morbidity of the scene, the fact remains that these individuals who have died have finally been granted rest. In contrast, survivors of the Great War in Germany had to contend with the ever-changing political situation manifest at the end of the war. This is seen in Grosz’s political involvement with the Spartacists, a group eventually crushed in an uprising in 1919. All in all, the piece sums up the competing themes of Grosz’s work and life and, by extension, the common experience of the war in Germany: hope for an abatement of the horrors of modern combat, yet apprehension about the political and social realities that lay ahead of them after the conflict had ended.

In conclusion, the artistic work of George Grosz during and shortly after the First World War reflects the personal sentiments of the artist as well as elements of the common German experience of the war as a whole. In these pieces, the viewer can see the realities of physical and mental wounds and the political struggles associated with these maladies. An understanding of the battlefield experience is also conveyed in these works, including the tendency to dehumanize the enemy or the soldier himself, as well as allusions to religious belief as a source of respite in combat. The political dynamics of the war can also be seen in Grosz’s art, particularly when it comes to understanding the radical leftist agitation throughout the war culminating in the Spartacist Uprising. These political themes, by extension, branch into the German government’s conduct of the war and the relationship between capital and labor. All in all, George Grosz’s maxim that “art divorced from political struggle was pointless” is seen full well in the stylistic yet evident portrayal of the themes of the First World War through the medium of art.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 70.

⁵² Grosz, *A Small Yes & A Big No*, 92.

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Appendix

Image 1

Image 2



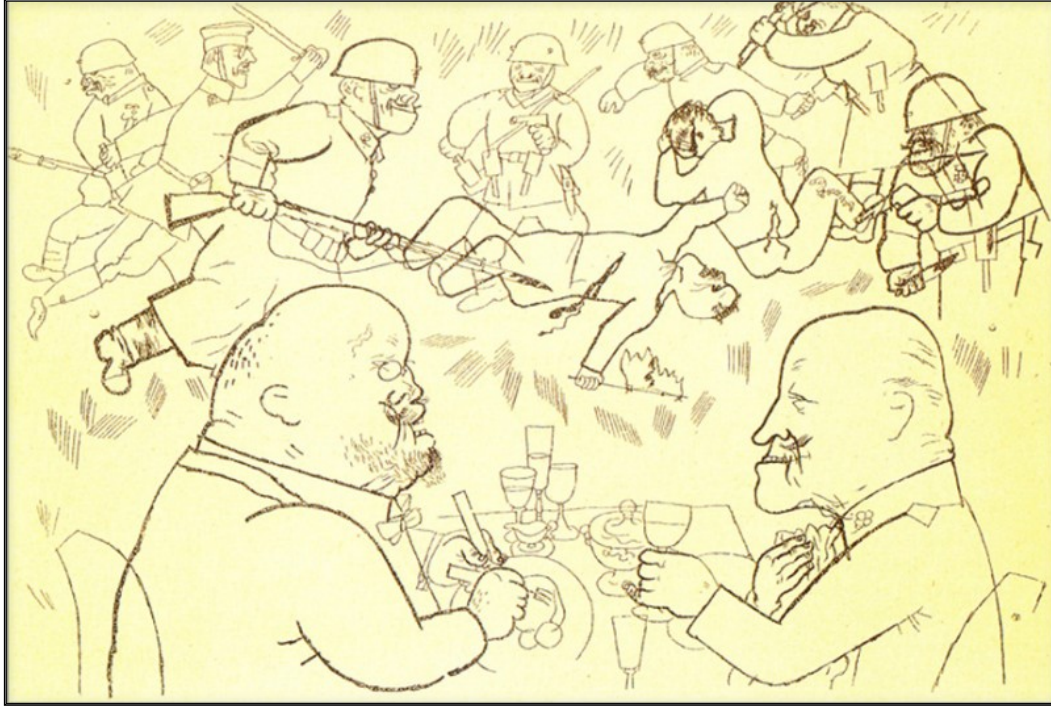
"The Funeral" (1918)



“The Toads of Property” (1920)



"Blood is the Best Sauce" (1919)



“Fit for Active Service” (1918)



“To Them Peace is Assured” (1920)

