Peter Kollwitz died on the night of October 22/23, 1914, three days after the beginning of fighting at the Battle of the Yser River in Flanders; he was the first member of his regiment to be killed. His parents were notified of his death by the authorities on October 30. The Germans had declared war on August 1, and in the wave of patriotic fervor that followed, Peter, age 18 years, had volunteered. When he had asked his parents’ permission to join the military, his physician father, Karl, said no, but his artist mother, Käthe Kollwitz, equivocated and then, somewhat reluctantly, supported Peter’s choice. Although she soon had second thoughts, it was too late! She was to agonize about her initial support for his volunteering long afterward.2

Eight German units, largely made up of young volunteers with little training, experienced major casualties fighting a battle-hardened Allied force.3 Overall, 25,000 student volunteers were killed in Flanders. Their sacrifice entered German history as the “Massacre of the Innocents.” Their loss was romanticized and became one rationalization for the German command’s first use of mustard gas4 in battle later in the war.

Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) was nationally known for her illustrations of revolutionary causes at the time of Peter’s death. In her series Peasants’ War, memorably her Black Anna powerfully encourages men to fight.5 Depicting parental loss, Woman With Dead Child—Pietà (1903) uses Peter at age 7 years as her model for the dead child! Kollwitz held him across her lap as she drew their joint reflection in a mirror.

By December 1, 1914, she had conceived a plan for a war memorial dedicated to Peter but abandoned it because of its complexity. Her diary6 records the depth of her bereavement and her many failed efforts to find a suitable memorial design. She turned to Goethe for solace, choosing a phrase from his book, Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, as her life’s metaphor, “Seed corn must not be ground”; that is, a nation’s future depends on its youth, who must not be squandered in war. She wrote:

Peter was seed for the planting which should not have been ground. He was the sowing, I am the bearer and cultivator of a grain of seed corn. . . . I want to serve faithfully. Since recognizing that, I am almost serene and much firmer in spirit.7

She felt consoled when she knelt “down and let him pour through”8 her. Still, it was nearly 3 years after Peter’s death before she was able to fully resume her work. In 1918, she used her nurturant metaphor publicly to oppose those who called for one final renewed sacrifice of youth, to fight to the end. Fully one-third of German men aged 19 to 22 years had died at the beginning of this war.9

She wrote that they should have been the seed for the next generation—and no more could be sacrificed!

It was only after she had come to personal terms with war in her graphic series War that she found the will to faithfully complete her memorial sculpture to Peter, Mourning Parents. Completed in 1923-1924, Kollwitz’s series War includes 7 stark, black and white woodcut prints reflecting her personal witness to suffering. Kollwitz wrote novelist Romain Rolland in October 1922:

I have repeatedly attempted to give form to the war. I could never grasp it. Now finally I have finished a series of woodcuts, which in some measure say what I wanted to say. There are seven sheets, entitled: the Sacrifice [by a mother of her child to those who declare war]—the Volunteers—the Parents—the Mothers—the Widows [two sheets]—the People. These sheets should travel throughout the whole world and should tell all human beings comprehensively: that is how it was—we have all endured that throughout these unspeakably difficult years.10

Unlike other artists, she did not show combat or the devastation of war; this was the war as experienced on the home front.

Reminiscent of Peter, The Volunteers (II) are swept along by patriotic fervor, unaware that Death himself is their drummer, his arm locked in a strangulation. Standing over the shoulder of the lead volunteer, pulling him forward. The central figure is in an aesthetic ideological trance: all deluded, innocent young men. In The Mothers (cover), women’s arms are locked together. They press inward and allow no entrance to the intruders, war and death. Two children peer out from their protective embrace and another child is held tightly to her mother’s breast. For the concluding print, the common People are bitterly staring out at the havoc wreaked by war.

In 1932, nearly 18 years after Peter’s death, Kollwitz’s granite sculpture Mourning Parents was placed at the entrance to the war cemetery in Belgium where Peter is buried; the parents compassionately look out over 25,000 crosses. Karl is kneeling in grief, body erect, self-clasping, and Käthe is kneeling too, bent forward, her head bowed in reverence, remembering their loss, love, and the futility of war. Ten years later in the midst of another war, Kollwitz completed her final graphic, returning to the theme “Seed for the planting must not be ground.”11 A single woman, now more determined than before, spreads out her arms wide around a new generation of boys to hold them back from war. That year, 1942, her grandson, Peter, her son’s namesake, died in World War II, and soon afterwards, her home was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid. Despite all this, she insisted to the end of her life that “someday a new ideal will arise and there will be an end to all wars.”12 But her hope is yet to be fulfilled when a new century brings new forms of sacrifice, with the forced abduction of children as soldiers in some parts of the world.

James C. Harris, MD

REFERENCES