

Remembrance and Redemption

A Social Interpretation of War Memorials, by **Jay Winter**

MY AIM HERE IS MODEST: not to deconstruct and expand but rather to shrink and focus the framework in which we view contemporary commemorative forms. Shifting the scale of vision from the national and grandiose to the particular and ordinary might help transform our understanding of monuments. In villages and towns throughout Europe, small groups of people have always tried to find meaning in the relationship between sites of memory, where commemoration happens, and collective remembrance. It is this communal activity and its achievements that I shall explore.

Why shift the focus from high to low politics, from capital cities to obscure towns, from national leaders to average citizens? For one reason, great national sites of memory are exceptional, their histories a misleading guide to other, humbler sites. For another, contemporary cultural history emphasizes the mix of many voices. The study of society is no longer the top-down study of dominant groups; cultural history is a chorus, with some voices louder than others, to be sure,

but never sounding alone. Memories are personal as well as social, and sites of memory are created not only by national leaders but also by local communities. Without these communities of ordinary men and women, these “social agents” who perform much of the work of remembrance, collective memory would not exist.

I want to argue here that these “memory activists”¹ often constitute powerfully unified groups, bonded not by blood but by experience. They share the imprint of history on their lives. They work, quarrel, and endure together; they support each other. At such times, their bonds are sufficiently strong to allow us to call them “fictive kin.” Indeed, these “fictive kinship groups” are key agents of remembrance.²

What do we mean by “cultural memory”? One helpful definition comes from the work of Jan Assmann: “the reusable and available texts, images and rites of each society, with the preservation of which it stabilizes and spreads its self-image; a collective shared knowledge, preferably (but not necessarily) of the past, on which a

group's sense of unity and individuality is based. The topoi and narratives that appear in monuments need an institutionalized communication, without which their reuse cannot be organized. Therefore, we do not only inquire into the history, form and meaning of the monuments as artefacts, but also into

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the history of their use and their reuse.”³ Although I would question whether stabilization should be a function of monuments—especially regarding the memory of the Nazi Holocaust—the definition is a useful starting point for my argument, for the presentation of a matrix of activity that encompasses the small act alongside the grand gesture, particular and personal agendas alongside the larger social imperatives of legitimization.

To describe social processes happening on several levels at once requires that we consider *who* is doing the work of remembrance. I use the term “remembrance” to describe a social process; “memory,” both individual and collective, is its product. Remembrance is active and transitory; it has a beginning and an end, an existence in space and time. Its very delimitation is its strength as a heuristic device. Collective remembrance, the process of public recollection, is the act of groups of people who gather bits and pieces of the past and join them together for a public that will express and consume the constructed memory. What such groups create is not merely a cluster of individual memories: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

How might we apply the idea of “cultural memory” to the subject of the war memorials of 20th-century Europe? Although some of the monu-

ments to war are indeed grandiose and self-serving tributes, many of them manage to transcend state-sponsored triumphalism and to approach the familial and existential realities of wartime loss and death. In the most affecting of these, the tension between remembering and forgetting—between the desire to remember and the impulse to forget—is visible, almost palpable. Many such monuments are “nonofficial” memorials, the work of individuals and groups brought together not by the state but by the need to speak out and to grieve. Created by those who have experienced the trauma of war as an overwhelming, sustained, and mass experience, such memorials work at the intersection of private memories, family memories, and collective memories. Three such memorials, all created in the aftermath of the First World War, are worth examining.

The first memorial is British—quintessentially British. It is the practice of commemorating the moment of the signing of the Armistice that ended the First World War by observing a two-minute silence on November 11, at 11 A.M. This practice operated at the local level from 1919 through 1938, and seems to be reviving again today. It was sanctified by an extraordinary moment, when a temporary war memorial—the Cenotaph erected in London for the victory parade of July 19, 1919—became the permanent and imperial symbol of the wrenching losses of the Great War. The two-minute silence was first observed six months later, on November 11, as an echo of the astonishing gathering of more than 1 million men and women in London around the Cenotaph in

Whitehall. The Cabinet never anticipated that this catafalque would be so magnetic; they saw it as temporary, and instructed the architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, to employ light materials, easily assembled and disassembled. But after the people had voted with their feet to adopt this site as a permanent memorial for the Lost Generation of the Great War, the Cabinet commissioned Lutyens to reconstruct it in stone. There in Whitehall, in the heart of official London, it remains to this day. Simple and ecumenical, the memorial is extremely affecting; by saying little, it says much about the exhaustion and mourning that accompanied the hard-won victory. Moreover, by using pre-Christian notation, the Cenotaph underscored that the Empire was honoring all its victims of war, not only Protestant and Catholic but also Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and those with no religion. Despite the palpable discomfort of the Anglican clergy, Britons of the day sought beyond the church for a place to mourn, for a site that was sacred. And in the Cenotaph they found it.

At the Cenotaph on July 19, 1919, the local and the national became one. As such, both memorial and moment were astonishing and exceptional, never to be repeated. Instead, collective memory was decentered, reworked, reiterated in thousands of local war memorials built in the 1920s and scattered throughout the country. The two-minute silence was (and is) a part of such decentered observation, a meditation about absence, about the million British men whose deaths—whose everlasting silence—it so movingly evokes. Every year from 1919 to 1938, the two-minute silence on November 11 was observed when the King placed a wreath on the Cenotaph. What was the nature of this moment? Through the extraordinary work of a pioneering social survey, we know something about the individual, personal, even hidden memories that the ceremony inspired. In the late 1930s, a group called Mass Observation investigated and recorded the re-

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sponses of ordinary people to the two-minute silence; the results are revealing. Mass Observation found that people did not think about the Empire, or about nations or armies, but rather about those no longer alive. “It’s for the people who lost theirs, it should be kept for them to think of the ones they lost,” said a sixty-year-old woman.⁴ The work of memory was thus inscribed in the meditations of individual men and women about the fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and friends who had perished in the “war to end war.”

The two-minute silence can be understood as a form of secularized prayer. Arresting all other activities for a moment, it forced people to remember. Telephone operators pulled the plug on communications. Traffic stopped. Quotidian business was interrupted. During the Second World War, the practice was suspended, and after 1945 it was relegated to a holiday known as Remembrance Sunday. Removed from daily life, however, the ceremony lost meaning and atrophied. But even without such official intervention, it would inevitably have faded, as other tasks and other memories crowded out the earlier images and gestures. Once the memory of the bereaved was lost, once those who remembered the dead had themselves died, the original charge of the moment was lost, and the silence would become simply an absence—a void.

The second memorial, less well known but no less real, is the social bonding effected between disfigured men, men with “broken faces,” disabled soldiers with horrific casualties—what the French call “*gueules cassées*.” Situated on the borderland of private and public recollection, this type of memorial is characterized by poignant isolation. Those who had the war almost literally engraved upon their faces were marked and isolated by their wounds. Their road back to civilian life was so obstructed that many gave up entirely the struggle to demobilize, to return home and to resume their lives. Instead, they turned

to each other, in lonely brotherhood. Doing so, they formed organizations that pressed for their rights and created places where they could go without embarrassment—without frightening others. Thus they constructed a social reality through which they could experience—remember—the simple dignities of daily life that they had lost and would never recover on their own. Kinship here meant survival in the most straightforward and mundane ways.

Such groups existed in every combatant country. But their language was not national but personal and private. They acted socially, to be sure, but in ways that confirmed their status as pariahs. They were themselves sites of memory, but as such so extraordinary that many people had trouble even looking at them. It is a sad paradox: these men bore the marks of war so directly that they—and the particular price of war that their experience embodied—could not be confronted.

The third type of remembrance encompasses the emergence of groups—fictive kin—who were bound together by bereavement and who created war memorials to attest to their grief and remember their dead. Unlike the two-minute observance, however, and also unlike the *gueules cassées*, the memorials created by such groups were neither silent nor private. The gathering together of fictive kin—the work of remembrance—took various forms. The conventionally religious looked to the churches. Others sought to bring back the dead through séances, frowned on by the clergy, but popular nonetheless. Groups of spiritualists, either family members or extended kin, met in a domestic setting where a medium would “reunite” the living with the spirits of the dead. Here the deceased would hint at the nature of life after death and console their survivors. “It’s all right,” the dead would say, reassuringly. “I’m safe and well. You can go on living.” The *gueules cassées* struggled with the need to hide the living face of war; in contrast, through séances the bereaved sought

to bring back to visibility—albeit momentarily—the face of the dead. In both cases the gaze was troubled. How could it not be so?

Just as troubling is the gaze of another group of people engaged in a similar kind “memory work.” The story of Peter Kollwitz and his mother, the artist Käthe Kollwitz, is known to many. Peter, aged eighteen, volunteered for military service on August 4, 1914, one of about 140,000 German men who volunteered at the start of the war (4 million would eventually be mobilized). These idealistic youths—mostly students or in middle-class occupations—are often considered representative of *Kriegsbegeisterung*, of German “war enthusiasm.” In fact, that “enthusiasm” lasted only briefly and was limited to a narrow part of the population. Among Peter Kollwitz’s circle, though, it was real enough.

The sight of troops marching to war convinced Peter that he had to sign up before the reserves were mobilized. “My fatherland does not need my year yet,” he told his skeptical father, Hans, “but it needs me.”⁵ Enlisting his mother’s aid in getting his father to agree, Peter joined up along with his close friends and classmates. At first, the principle of sacrifice on the part of the youth of Berlin made sense to Käthe Kollwitz. Her lifelong belief in a “calling” informed her ideas about both her work as an artist and her service to her country; Peter’s decision to volunteer seemed to fit that framework. But when news of battle and casualties first reached Berlin, she began to believe that it was “vile,” “idiotic,” and “harebrained” that these young men, at the beginning of their lives, were going off to battle.⁶ Peter Kollwitz said farewell to his mother on October 12, 1914. Ten days later he was dead, killed in Belgium in a field twenty kilometers northeast of Ypres. For the rest of her life, Käthe Kollwitz grieved for her son. But that story has been told. Here I want to concentrate on one facet of this grief. The historian Emmanuel Sivan has shown how Israeli families, after the 1948 War of

Independence, created kinship bonds among the friends of their fallen sons, friends with whom they had served and who were lucky enough to have survived. In a different time and place, Käthe Kollwitz and her family did the same.

Hans and Käthe Kollwitz's grief was characterized by ritual. They left Peter's room intact, put flowers on the table next to his bed, and tried to conjure up his spirit in the room. Friends came by and, in Peter's room, read letters and texts with the bereaved parents. They put a Christmas tree behind the bed, with a candle for each of Peter's eighteen years. Over the years, additional candles were added, to mark the age he would have reached had he lived. Birthdays were observed there. Peter's room became a sacred space for his family and for those who joined them in the act of remembrance.

Such gestures took place not to extend the traditional forms of family gathering, but rather because the process of healing was so difficult, so slow. Käthe Kollwitz would sit in her son's room and try to commune with him. At times she drew strength from this effort; other times she mourned that "I walk in twilight, only rarely stars, the sun has long since set completely."⁷ The black sun, the cloud of depression, was a constant companion.

Peter's friends gave comfort; among them she found some solace. She corresponded with them, welcomed their visits. To them she was "Mother Käthe" or "Mother Kollwitz." "I must retain my feeling of connection to the boys," is how she put it on October 9, 1916.⁸ Her son's companions thus became part of her household and her life.

This informal "adoption" of those familiar young men who had shared Peter's fate, both the living and the dead, marked Kollwitz's life and became the centerpiece of her commemorative art. Before the First World War, her work encompassed many subjects, including historical and epic themes—peasant uprisings, great

protests and their suppression. After 1914, images of historical tragedy receded; images of family tragedy loomed large. Her art became more maternal, more familial; the collective suffering portrayed in her earlier drawings, etchings, and sculptures gave way to the personal grief of the

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family.

Early on Käthe Kollwitz determined to create a war memorial for her son and for his generation. Her first idea was to form a single family circle in stone; sketches for this show two parents holding their dead son. Eventually the son became detached from the parents and ultimately he disappeared. No doubt some of this shift in iconography—from nuclear family to extended family—reflects the progressive stages of mourning, of the slow and terrible effort to let her son go. But it reflects also Kollwitz's commitment to gather into her family those young men who had endured the horrific war.

On June 25, 1919, she wrote hopefully, "If I live to see Peter's work [the memorial sculpture] completed and good, commemorating him and his friends on a beautiful site, then perhaps Germany is past the worst." On October 13, 1925, she described the project thus: "The mother should kneel and gaze out over the many graves. She spreads out her arms over all her sons." Seven years later the memorial was inaugurated in the German military cemetery at Roggevelde near Langemarck and Ypres in Belgium. It is a sculpture of Käthe and Hans Kollwitz, on their knees, in front of a field of graves, including that of their son. The mother's arms are not extended, but wrapped around her own body; the father's arms are similarly wrapped

around himself. The parents mourn this "flock of children," this ill-starred generation, whose elders could not prevent the disaster that had enveloped them. Only with difficulty can the visitor find the plaque on which the name of Peter Kollwitz is written. He has become one among many, a

child mourned by the parents of a family once large, now reduced to two old people unable even to support each other in their separate grief. All they can do is beg on their knees for forgiveness, and offer their love and their grief, fixed in stone.

To consider this extraordinary monument is to contemplate the border between metaphor and lived experience. To say that those mourned at Roggevelde were Käthe Kollwitz's lost sons is, in one sense, poetic license. But in another sense, her incorporation of her son's generation into her own family was an essential element of her effort to express the "meaning" of the war for her generation. One family's loss was terrible; how much more terrible the loss of so many young men, so much promise, so much hope. Like many others, hers was a family defined by those no longer there. Millions of families were so defined after the terrible years from 1914 to 1918.

The smaller and more intimate the canvas, the stronger and more continuous is the thread connecting place and experience, sites of history and the agents of remembrance. Once we leap to the national level, such organic links are almost always stretched to the breaking point and beyond. This is not, to be sure, a universal rule. There are exceptions; the two-minute silence observed in Britain in the 1920s and '30s is one. Some recent national monuments embody poignant mean-

ing and inspire strong feeling; the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington comes immediately to mind. But more often it is true that local activity, and small-scale activity at that, can best preserve the original charge, the emotion, the conviction that went into the work of remembering war and its victims. Monumentality is rarely the language of the small social solidarities that make remembrance meaningful.

What is the relevance of these instances of commemoration, bounded by the tragedy of the First World War, for the consideration of contemporary monuments? I have argued that commemoration is contextual; and that context is as much local and particular as it is national and general. After the Second World War, and in the final decades of this century, these same issues have been addressed again and again. To some degree the same patterns of collective remembrance in small groups can be observed post-1945. But it is painfully apparent that the work of mourning through commemoration in this period has meant confronting even more daunting challenges. I refer not to the famous—and often misquoted—statement of Theodor Adorno as to the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz; Adorno enjoined us to try to create art even in the face of such odds. My point is rather that the very concept of aesthetic redemption, central to much commemorative activity after 1918, was profoundly compromised after 1945.

Julia Kristeva has provided a framework in which to articulate this contrast. Using a vocabulary derived from psychoanalysis, she has explored the power of religious and artistic forms to express the anguish and hope of men and women in mourning. Kristeva has suggested that “religious discourse” along with “aesthetic and particularly literary creation,” “set[s] forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological

representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse.”⁹ “Symbolic collapse” threatened all those who tried to understand the meaning of loss of life in the Great War. Art and ceremony helped shore up these symbols, through which grief could be expressed and bereavement endured. Following Kristeva, we can see how not only individuals but also the symbols of meaning were “resurrected” during and after the First World War. Thus expressed and revived, these images and icons were shared by millions in mourning. Such an approach clarifies much about the cultural aftermath of the Great War, and the flowering in its wake of older languages of suffering and loss. But what of the period after the Second World War? What space was left for the “resurrection of symbols”? The process of breathing life into the symbolic language of romantic, classical, and religious reference, so visible after 1914, was much more difficult after 1945. The search for “meaning” after the Somme and Verdun was hard enough; after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that search has become infinitely vexed.

After the Second World War, the same flaring up of older languages once appropriate to a period of mass mourning did not take place. After 1914 there was a profusion of apocalyptic images in art and literature. After 1945, in commemorative activity, some echoes of this can be heard; but the rest is silence. Different voices emerged; other cultural forms appeared. Many of them were abstract, more liberated from specific cultural and political references and less accessible to mass audiences. Whether or not these abstract images possess the same power to heal as did older symbolic forms is a difficult question. My guess is that they probably do not.

But despite the difficulty—the seeming impossibility, even—we continue to search for meaning in the aftermath of war. Consider, for instance, the ongoing controversies that have attended two commemorative sites in Berlin. The first is Schinkel’s 1818

Neue Wache, on the Unter den Linden in the heart of the city. The gatehouse of the old Hohenzollern Palace, symbol of Prussian tradition, this small neoclassical building has had a long history as a site of commemoration: first consecrated to the memory of the Prussians who fought in the Napoleonic wars, rededicated in the Weimar era to the soldiers of the Great War, refashioned by the Communists into a memorial for the victims of fascism. The fall of the Berlin Wall brought yet another transformation. In 1993 a work by Käthe Kollwitz, *Mother with Her Dead Son*, was placed in the center of the building, and in front of this sculpture is the dedication, “To all victims of war and dictatorship.”

Part of the controversy that has surrounded this memorial was aesthetic; the original statue was recast and enlarged to suit the dimensions of its new setting. But the more serious issue was the deployment of the artist’s work for political purposes. Then-chancellor Helmut Kohl and his advisers argued that the rededication of the Neue Wache and the use of Kollwitz’s sculpture symbolized important changes in the German attitude to war and militarism. Kollwitz’s pietà was intended to strike a note of sadness, to evoke the sorrow of war and oppression. To the degree that the work itself is devoid of militaristic or nationalistic rhetoric, this memorial does indeed achieve the government’s ostensible agenda. But as many observers have noted, this project seemed to serve other agendas as well. For one, the wording of the memorial, the dedication “to all victims of war and tyranny,” conflated those killed during the Third Reich with those killed during the Communist regime in East Germany. This rhetorical move did not match the effrontery of Ronald Reagan’s visit to the war cemetery at Bitburg, where the American president paid homage to Germans, including soldiers of the Waffen SS, who had lost their lives in the Second World War. Nonetheless, by equating the

victims of the two regimes, the Neue Wache memorial effectively equates Nazism and Communism. And as if this were not insensitive enough, the choice of Kollwitz's pietà was wholly inappropriate for a memorial whose public might reasonably be understood to include Jews. Its selection,

symbolic weight demanded of a memorial to the Holocaust located within sight of the bunker of the man who conceived the Final Solution. And even were it possible to agree on what might fittingly "symbolize" or evoke the crime against the Jews, it is dangerous and possibly destructive to situ-

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from among the many war memorials created by the sculptor, suggests that this is not intended as a site for Jewish memory. Not only does the powerfully resonant Christian iconography make it difficult for Jews to share in the commemoration, but it also argues against an interpretation and understanding of the Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people, and not as a parallel (of whatever kind) to the sacrifice of Christ. A similar controversy has arisen over the placement of Christian crosses at Auschwitz. In both places the unfortunate use of Christian motifs hinders the ability of many people, especially Jews, to mourn the consequences of a staggering catastrophe in Jewish history planned and executed by a government in Berlin.¹⁰

The same confusion of motive and message has marked the protracted debate over whether to construct a Holocaust memorial in Berlin and what form this memorial might take. [Editors' note: in June 1999 German authorities approved Peter Eisenman's competition-winning scheme.] The chosen site is not far from the Neue Wache: a large empty plot near the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, and also near the site of Hitler's destroyed bunker. That no consensus has developed as to what the monument should represent and in what style it should be built is not surprising. The dilemma may be intractable, for no work of art could possibly support the

ate such a memorial, literally and figuratively, within the framework of the rebirth of a united Germany. A stone's throw from the reopened Reichstag, the site of the memorial is part of a large tract whose monuments are intended to tell the story of the past and envision the future. The rhetoric of national rebirth is inappropriate—to say the least—to a monument to the Holocaust. The best way for Germany to remember the Holocaust is to refrain from grandiose gestures. Indeed, this is the argument that underscores the widely expressed desire—which apparently is not shared by the current political leadership of Germany—that no single national monument to the victims of the Holocaust be built in Berlin. The city already contains many small monuments of this kind, which are meaningful in large part because they are localized, human-scaled, domesticated, far from the grand schemes of urban and national renewal.

And so I am brought back to my central argument—that the smaller the scale of a monument, the more likely it is that the monument will faithfully express the cares and sentiments of those who wish to remember. And this continues to be an essential consideration in monument building, for if the forms of commemoration have changed over the course of this destructive century, the impulse to create them has endured. Today, as earlier in the century, we can hear a

chorus of commemorative voices. We, the survivors of two world wars and much else besides, are more and more uncomfortable with the idea of "aesthetic redemption" and its Hegelian underpinnings. And yet the search for meaning in this, the most violent of epochs, persists. It persists, despite the urging of some postmodernists that we give up the effort entirely. I suspect that the activity of remembrance, and the creation of places of collective experience, is irrepressible, expressing fundamental truths about the need of ordinary people, of many faiths and of none, to face the emptiness, the nothingness of loss in war, together.

Notes

1. I owe this phrase to Carol Gluck, of Columbia University, who used it in her fall 1998 lectures on "war and memory in the 20th century."
2. For a fuller explanation of my use of the term "fictive kin," see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter 2.
3. Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: Beck, 1992), 11.
4. Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory* (Leamington Spa: Berg Press, 1994), 110.
5. Hans Kollwitz, ed., *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*, trans. R. and C. Winston (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1955), 243.
6. Regina Schulte, "Käthe Kollwitz's Sacrifice," in *History Workshop Journal* 41 (1996), 211.
7. *Ibid.*, 212.
8. *Ibid.*, 213.
9. Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis: A Counter-Depressant," in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 25.
10. See Reinhard Koselleck, "Bilderverbot: Welches Totengedanken?" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 8, 1993, 9.

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