

Through the Eyes of Soldiers:  
Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and the Experience of World War I

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The year 1914 inaugurated four long years of warfare on a scale the world had never seen before. Mechanization and improved technology made killing frightfully efficient. Poison gas caused the deaths of thousands, while new and deadly artillery allowed dozens of infantrymen to be slaughtered in the blink of an eye. The landscape of Europe was pockmarked with thousands of shell holes and craters, and entire villages were destroyed. Thousands of livestock and horses perished. Yet the greatest irony of World War I was that in four years the frontlines remained largely static. Millions of soldiers spilt their blood for the price of a hill or a few yards of earth. It was a four-year long stalemate, a tied game which was forced into overtime as both sides refused to concede the fight. The object of World War I was attrition—to slowly gnaw away at the opposing side by throwing as much of one's own manpower at the enemy as one could afford. The losses were staggering and the gains were insignificant. Yet there remains a wide range of World War I topics beyond military battles and statistics. Recent scholarship has begun to focus on the cultural aspects of this great conflict, but much work has yet to be done. One area which has to date received inadequate attention is the personal experiences of German artists at the front and how the war shaped the works they created during four years of battle, trauma, and extreme hardship. How was the initial enthusiasm for the war, and the gradual disillusionment with the fighting expressed in the works of German artists? This essay will analyze the changing attitudes toward the war as depicted through the works of Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, both artists who served in the war, and compare their experiences to the overall experience of Germans in World War I.

The announcement that Germany was at war sent shockwaves across the nation in 1914. The government made sure that the media would present only the approved version of the war: Russia and its allies had mobilized and Germany was going to war to defend itself.<sup>1</sup> The

shocked German people quickly rallied to support their nation. Parades and celebrations swept through Germany's major cities like a tidal wave of patriotism. Imperial flags hung from every window and patriotic ribbons decorated every buttonhole. Germans of all social classes and political parties united in support of the war-effort. Squabbles of the earlier years were swept away by the voices of thousands of cheering Germans and marching troops. Even the internationalist and pacifistic Social Democratic party pledged allegiance to the nation and support for the war effort.<sup>2</sup> The ruler of the German Empire and king of Prussia, Kaiser Wilhelm II, declared, "For me there are no parties any longer, there are only Germans."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the popular belief, and the one promulgated by the government, was that the war would eliminate all the social and political problems of the previous age. The battlefield would erode away social classes and meld Germans into one united people. Political parties would vanish as Germans became of one mind and joined together in a single national community.<sup>4</sup> The war would sweep away the last remnants of the social and political problems and usher in a new era of national prosperity. Germany would emerge victorious over Europe by Christmas, and the age of German unity would begin.<sup>5</sup>

Not all Germans, however, were swept away by the flood of patriotism, nor did everyone contract "war fever." There was genuine fear and panic in some cities and towns as people anticipated shortages and economic strife. Entire life savings were withdrawn, and people stockpiled food and other necessities.<sup>6</sup> Others remained skeptical about whether the war was truly the answer to all of Germany's problems. The year 1914 found the two Expressionist artists, Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, uncertain as to the benefits of the war. Beckmann called it "the greatest national catastrophe,"<sup>7</sup> and Dix did not volunteer until a year later, when army service became inevitable<sup>8</sup>. A common belief amongst intellectuals and Expressionists was that

the war would be a purifying force, an agent of liberation which would free man from all ties to the present age and return him to a primitive state. Indeed, a cataclysmic force was needed to destroy all that was flawed and undesirable in humanity. Apocalypse would blast away everything corrupted and leave in its wake a purified and natural man. Nearly all intellectuals of the day were obsessed with the idea of catastrophe as a force for renewal, and welcomed World War I as the harbinger of chaos that would restore the human soul. Artists, teachers, students, and writers volunteered for the army in droves.<sup>9</sup> Although Beckmann and Dix were not cheering in the streets at the outbreak of war, they did believe that the war would restore man and usher in an era of improvement.

Despite his reservations, Dix believed that chaos and destruction war would wash away all that was flawed in man and begin an age of new life. His worldview was based upon the ideas of the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. When Dix volunteered and became an artilleryman in 1915, he carried in his knapsack a Bible, a sketch book and pencils, as well as a copy of Nietzsche's *The Joyous Science*.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche's perspective on war, explains art historian Matthais Eberle, provided the basis for Dix's own interpretation of the idea of "war as chaos as renewal." For Nietzsche as well as for Dix, the world exists as a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Death, then, is not an end, but a new beginning. The world is restored and humanity purified by destruction and chaos which burn away all that is old and fetid.<sup>11</sup>

These Nietzschean ideas as well as early fervor and optimism about the war are reflected in Dix' wartime portraits, all of which were painted in 1914 before he experienced the war himself: *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet*, *Self-Portrait as Mars*, and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. In the first year of the war, Dix, as well as the majority of the German population expected a quick and purifying victory. His portraits reflect his early belief in the restorative

qualities of war. In *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet* (Fig.1) indistinct shapes and colors swirl behind Dix's head. The eye is immediately drawn to the whites of Dix's eyes, which form an abrupt horizontal line near the center of the canvas. His gaze is unwavering and his eyes dart sharply from beneath his artilleryman's helmet. Dix's eyes are alert, and he seems to be waiting, listening, thinking, and always at the ready. His ruddy cheeks suggest exposure to the elements and participation in battle. The helmet itself is set off by gold braid and embellishments, and the buttons on Dix's uniform shine with equal brilliance. *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet* depicts Dix's early fascination with war and his belief that struggle will bring out the best qualities in men. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Fig.3) continues to build on this theme, by taking the of a purifying struggle one step further. In this portrait, Dix's animal qualities have been unleashed. Indeed, the face is harsh, and the bulging muscles of the neck suggest a bull-like strength. Indistinct and chaotic colors swirl behind Dix's head, setting him apart from the background. Again, the eyes dart out abruptly, but in this portrait, they suggest less human intelligence and more brute instinct. The jaws and eyebrows are both blunt and distinct, indicating strength and toughness. A single-focus and purpose is suggested by the bald head, for in war, vanity is irrelevant. The Dix in this portrait is a man driven by instinct and passion, not reason. As Dix would later discover firsthand, man's animal qualities are the ones which emerge on the battlefield. The portrait evidences Dix's own "war fever" by glorifying the animal nature and strength of a soldier over his human reason.

The third self-portrait from 1914 is Dix's *Self-Portrait as Mars* (Fig. 2). Where *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet* emphasized a soldier's alertness and reason and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* emphasized man's primal nature, this portrait emphasizes man's relationship to machines during war. Unlike the other two portraits, the central figure in *Self-Portrait as Mars* is

obscured. The canvas resembles a broken mirror with each fractured plane containing its own images. Here again Dix depicts himself wearing an artillery helmet, but he does not emerge from the chaos as a distinct individual. Dix portrays himself as the orchestrator of the chaos, as Mars, the Roman god of War. Man creates war and chaos, and war and chaos in turn purify and restore man. The human mouths oozing with blood behind Dix's head suggest destruction and death. The fractured planes, the harsh lines, and the strategic use of color suggest explosions and artillery fire. Yet Dix remains impervious to the chaos around him, for the chaos itself is what makes him. Dix emerges from the swirling images of war as an iron-jawed superman. These three portraits express how Dix was at first enamored with the prospect of war and saw it as a purifying and strengthening process. By 1915, however, his self-representations would change dramatically as he painted himself in uniform and entitled it *Self-Portrait as a Target*.

Despite his initial skepticism, Max Beckmann's early opinion that war would be a disaster for the nation soon gave way to an altogether different approach as he, too, was carried away by "war fever." He came to agree with Dix and other Expressionists that war would blast away the corroded aspects of society and that order would result from chaos. Yet Beckmann was also hopeful that the struggle would return man to his primitive and natural state.<sup>12</sup> He believed man's true nature had been suppressed by modern society and technology, and through war these things would be washed away, leaving behind the true primitive man.<sup>13</sup> Also influenced by Nietzsche, Beckmann believed the chaos of war would weed out inferiors and in the end only the supermen would be left standing.<sup>14</sup> Matthais Eberle explains how Beckmann believed war made life significant because it forced man to choose whether or not to accept the hand he was dealt.<sup>15</sup> Beckmann also agreed with the majority of Germans that the war would unite them into a single community. He wrote, "We agreed that it really would not be so bad for our present quite

demoralized society if the instincts and drives were all to be focused again by a single interest.”<sup>16</sup> In sum, Beckmann believed that war was an aspect of life, a force for change which would return man to his natural state, a struggle which would weed out the flaws of man and society and unite the remainder into a cohesive whole.

Despite his earlier comment that the war was “the greatest national catastrophe,” Beckmann’s opinions changed, and he adopted an optimistic perspective on the benefits of the war. His attitude in the early days of the conflict was overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps this attitude stemmed from his desire to paint history as it happened, to create art that remained relevant to the times.<sup>17</sup> He maintained an objective perspective on war and used his experiences as a medical orderly to inspire his artwork. His art allowed him to create meaning and purpose out of the war. Like his paintings, his writing reflects this optimism and fascination with war as a force for positive change:

The incredibly grand noise of battle out there... It’s like the gates of eternity bursting open when a great salvo like this sounds across the fields. Everything evokes space, distance, infinity. I wish I could paint that sound. Oh, this expanse and uncannily beautiful depth! Masses of men, ‘soldiers,’ continually streamed towards the centre of this melody, towards the decision over their lives.<sup>18</sup>

Even after he became acquainted with suffering and death in the early months of the war, Beckmann held onto his view that war was simply an aspect of life, and an altogether amoral experience. War was simply a phase of chaos in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Beckmann said: My will to live is now stronger than ever even though I have already witnessed terrible scenes and have died vicariously several times. But the oftener one dies the more intensely one lives. I keep on drawing, this secures me against death and danger.<sup>19</sup>

Beckmann's objectivity and optimism regarding the war is reflected in his early drawing *Declaration of War* and his painting *Self-Portrait as a Medical Orderly*. Done in drypoint in 1914, *Declaration of War* offers first-hand insight into the "spirit of 1914" and the various reactions to the beginning of World War I. It reflects Beckmann's own changing feelings as to whether the war would be a beneficial force for national renewal or whether, as he initially believed, it would be the nation's biggest blunder. In the sketch, roughly fifteen figures crowd together around a newspaper, anxiously bumping and pushing against one another for news of the war. Each of the faces depicts a different reaction. The figures in the foreground express keen interest, shock, and surprise. Behind them are semi-distinct figures expressing anxiety and fear, and in the center of the image, an individual expresses a mixture of anger and determination. In the background, people exclaim with shock and press into the crowd for a closer look. Interestingly, Beckmann chose not to depict the swell of patriotism in 1914, but instead the less enthusiastic reactions to the outbreak of war. Such a drawing would have undoubtedly not been popular with the German government, for it depicted varying responses instead of a united burst of patriotism. *Declaration of War* exhibits Beckmann's own uncertainty as to the war, but also his determination to rise above the crowd like the main figure in the center and welcome the war's ability to wash away the old and renew the German community. *Self-Portrait as a Medical Orderly*, painted in 1915, further reflects Beckmann's change of heart from initial skepticism to a decision to welcome the war and immerse himself fully in it and be renewed by the process. It demonstrates his objectivity in response to the war and his decision to accept it no matter what horrors it brought. Beckmann holds a paintbrush in his left hand which reaffirms his commitment to continue drawing no matter what he experienced. He wrote, "I've seen some wonderful things. In the semi-darkness of the emplacement, half-dressed men



streaming with blood to whom white bandages were just being applied. An embodiment of grandeur and pain. New ideas for the Scourging of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> The war inspired his art, changed it, and he hoped, would improve him through the experience.

The early zest for the war did not last, and even Dix and Beckmann’s initial enthusiasm turned to disillusionment. Despite the Kaiser’s promise that the war would be concluded by December, the fighting dragged on into 1915. As the lines stagnated, the war ceased to be a war of movement, and became a war of attrition with largely unsuccessful German offensives. As battles decimated German armies and casualty lists became ever longer, the initial fervor for the war began to wane. The military had increased its control over the government after the war began, but the state functions remained inefficient. Bureaucratic mismanagement due to the strains of war resulted in both food and labor shortages at home, and discredited the military in the eyes of civilians.<sup>21</sup> Discontent mounted as it became clear to Germans that their high expectations for the war would not be fulfilled.<sup>22</sup> Historian Richard Bessell points out that prior to World War I, Germans experienced a long period of relative prosperity and accepted a stable economy and abundance of goods as “normal.”<sup>23</sup> When the war turned the economy on its head, Germans felt that the government had betrayed them by failing to provide basic necessities.<sup>24</sup> High expectations at the outset of war set the standard for huge disappointment when it became obvious that the ‘new era’ was no different from the old, and that the government was inadequate both at waging war and providing the basic necessities to its people.

Lack of food led to demands for an end to the war as people lost faith in the government.<sup>25</sup> Germany was unable to produce adequate supplies of food due to the Allied blockade of German ports, poor harvests, and labor shortages.<sup>26</sup> Germans waited in long queues for inferior quality goods, and often, by the time they reached the front of the line there were no

more goods to be had.<sup>27</sup> Many honest but desperate people were forced to steal or deal illegally on the black market in order to feed themselves and their families.<sup>28</sup> City dwellers and farmers were pitted against one another in demands for food, with urban people accusing farmers of hoarding, and farmers claiming that city folk were robbing them.<sup>29</sup> The winter of 1916-1917 became known as the “Turnip Winter” because when the main course was not turnips, it was products made from turnips. The result was widespread starvation and increasing discontent. Worst of all, an influenza epidemic took the lives of many already weakened by malnutrition.<sup>30</sup>

Schools were closed because there was not adequate coal to heat the classrooms, or because the military had begun using the buildings as headquarters. While the men fought at the front, women took up the factory jobs they had left behind, and children were left unsupervised as both their parents were away from home. There was a growing fear, real or not, that the with fathers fighting, mothers working, and children staying home from school, normal family life and healthy moral standards would erode away completely.<sup>31</sup> This fear of moral degradation increased hostility toward the government.

Although soldiers at the front remained relatively well-fed in spite of the shortages at home, overall conditions were much worse. Just as at those at home waned in their support for the war, soldiers also began to view the conflict as a colossal disappointment. The trenches did not mould German fighters into a classless fraternity; rather, divisions were intensified by the structure of the military hierarchy. Officers came predominantly from the privileged Junker class, and often abused their subordinates, enlisted men with lower social standing.<sup>32</sup> Trench life was a mix of mind-numbing boredom and horrifying bloodbaths.<sup>33</sup> Casualties were staggering as both sides pummeled one another relentlessly and made pointless attempts to advance beyond the stagnant front. “War fever” ended for the soldiers even more quickly than for civilians at

home, as the “spirit of 1914” was silenced by the battles of Verdun and the Somme.<sup>34</sup> Soldiers witnessed their comrades blown apart and destroyed beyond recognition by artillery shells and saw entire regiments wiped out by machine gun fire. Poison gas blinded thousands and others suffocated to death over a period of four weeks. An average of 465,600 German soldiers died annually<sup>35</sup> with a loss of 15.4 % of the total number of soldiers mobilized for World War I.<sup>36</sup>

The soldiers quickly recognized war for what it truly was: not a glorious adventure where gentlemen soldiers battled one another to become heroes, not a purifying experience that would eliminate classes and unite Germans into a single community, not a chaotic force that would wash away the old and create new meaning and new life, but an ugly, pointless slaughter of hundreds of thousands of men, a perpetual nightmare with no end in sight, and an experience devoid of meaning and of purpose. They dug in and prepared themselves for a long siege. The will to be a hero, to be renewed and refined by the experience of war, was replaced with the desire to survive the next offensive, and to find some kind of meaning in the senseless killing and destruction.<sup>37</sup>

Soldiers were astounded at the transformation within themselves. War ceased to have heroic meaning, and was no longer a spiritual quest for renewal and improvement. The experience of battle did not change them into heroic supermen but instead transformed them into automata that killed with machine-like efficiency. Killing was reduced to an amoral, autonomic function which required no thinking on the part of the soldier. It became easy to kill because death was anonymous in the melee and chaos of battle, and it was usually impossible to know whom one killed.<sup>38</sup> Historians Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker explain that the experience of being surrounded by mass death caused a kind of hypnosis in the soldiers which overcame even those most opposed to violence.<sup>39</sup> Former shock troop soldier Ernst Jünger glorified his experience of

battle in his post-war novels, calling war a “storm of steel” which enveloped all participants and remade them into amoral killing machines that were refined through the experience of violence and death.<sup>40</sup> In the post war years, soldiers were largely unable to communicate the overpowering feelings of being surrounded by death and becoming so desensitized to violence that no second thought was given to becoming participants in the slaughter.<sup>41</sup> War was not a liberating experience but a process of enslavement to the ideals of destruction and death.

The exchanges between home front and battlefield in the form of letters and direct contact also contributed to dissatisfaction with the war as both sides learned of one another’s conditions. In addition to sending and receiving letters, soldiers often went on periods of leave, were recalled to work in the factories, or were discharged because of injury.<sup>42</sup> They were shocked by the failure of the government to provide for their loved ones at home, and civilians were likewise appalled by the tales of destruction told by the soldiers.<sup>43</sup> There were simply not enough censors during the war to prevent morale-damaging accounts of trench warfare from reaching the home front, nor could they stop civilians from complaining about the hardships at home. Early in the war a German literature professor, Philipp Witkop, collected and published a volume of letters from the front. He carefully selected only those letters which typified the patriotic spirit of 1914 to inspire and encourage readers at the front and to create a lasting cultural legacy of the war.<sup>44</sup> By 1916, however, soldiers were no longer writing letters which depicted war as a glorious struggle for national unity, and newspapers and booksellers ceased publishing them altogether for they evidenced a growing pessimism toward the war that the government found distasteful.<sup>45</sup> Government attempts at censorship failed due to the large volume of letters.<sup>46</sup> Opposition at home continued to mount as tales from the front convinced civilians of the pointlessness of the war. Soldiers, too, balked at a continuation of the war.

According to Bessell, “soldiers described the war as ‘a swindle,’ and the early enthusiasm of 1914 dissipated into “outright defeatism.”<sup>47</sup> Insubordination and desertion were widespread as many soldiers saw no point in sacrificing their lives in futile endeavors during the last months of the war.<sup>48</sup> Morale steadily declined throughout 1915-1918 and reached an ultimate low at the time of the Armistice when Germany realized it had truly been defeated.

Firsthand experience of the front shook both Dix and Beckmann’s beliefs in war as an agent of positive change, and their artwork from 1915-1918 provides vivid insight into the experience of frontline soldiers. After volunteering in 1915 at age twenty-three, Dix trained first as an artilleryman and then as a machine gunner. He was promoted several times, and eventually sent to the eastern front. A wound from shrapnel almost took his life, and he afterwards became an aerial observer. He retired from the army with the rank of sergeant and an Iron Cross.<sup>49</sup> His artwork from the latter half of the war depicts disillusionment with his former Nietzschean ideas of the restorative properties of chaos. Dix’s early experience of the war was similar to Beckmann’s in that he desired to create something meaningful out of war and accepted war as an aspect of life that should be represented in art. Dix said:

The war is something beastly: hunger, lice, mud, insane noises. Just everything is different. Look, before the earlier pictures I have had the feeling that one side of reality was still not represented: the ugly. The war was a hideous thing, but nonetheless overwhelming. In any case, I could not miss that! One had to see man in this chaotic condition in order to know something about him.<sup>50</sup>

He later added that, “Everything I saw was beautiful.”<sup>51</sup> But as time went by, Dix realized along with the thousands of other young men who experienced combat that war was not as glorious as they had first supposed. Dix’s changing attitude toward the war is best evidenced

in his departure from classical realistic style.<sup>52</sup> He embraced fully an Expressionistic style, noting that the harsh lines, bold blocks of color, swirling shades, and crude appearance was best suited for depicting the chaos and destruction around him.

As Dix experienced more of the war, he became preoccupied with the relationship between man and machines and began depicting them in his art. Matthais Eberle explains that for the Expressionists, technology had proved itself to be incompatible with society, and the artists hoped in 1914 that the war would free man from his ties to mechanization and return him to a primitive state. Yet Dix realized that instead of freeing man from technology the war only enslaved him further. Man created technology, and technology destroyed man by mechanizing destruction, thus making killing more efficient than ever before. Machines drove troops' advances, and humans were fed into the meat grinder of war as if on an assembly line. The war offered no redemption of society, no purification of humanity for it was driven not by natural processes but by mechanization.<sup>53</sup> Dix realized that as men became enslaved to machines, they absorbed the very qualities of the machines and became automatic in their ability to kill. Machine-like efficiency mixed with man's animal nature to create a hybrid man-beast-machine, and man's primal nature reached the zenith of expression through technology as his own potential for destruction was amplified by the machinery he worked with. Dix realized that war unleashed the beast in man and also enabled him to become seamlessly integrated with machinery, master it, and integrate it into his primal nature. In post-war years, the ironic nature of prosthetics was not lost on Dix. He saw that man had used machines to wreak havoc during war yet the end result of machine-driven destruction was that man himself became mechanized!

*Hand-to-Hand Fighting, Charging Infantryman, Falling Ranks, and Direct Hit* represent Dix's preoccupation with the relationship of man to technology, the mechanized destruction on

the battlefield, and the animal nature of man as amplified by machine power. In *Hand to Hand Fighting* (Fig. 6), soldiers bite, claw, struggle, and tear at one another with animal-like ferocity. Their faces are devoid of any indication of reason; instead the fighters are driven by passion and brute nature. The sketch is a jumble of twisted bodies, an orgy of primitive violence and killing. Dismembered limbs are scattered throughout the image, an indicator of man's capacity for manic cruelty when his animal nature is unleashed. *Charging Infantryman* is a clear depiction of man as beast and machine. In this image, a soldier cuts a striking diagonal across the page as he charges headlong into battle, his rifle pointed menacingly in front of him. His teeth are bared in an inhuman snarl, and he is hunched over into the posture of an ape. Man has been reduced to his primitive nature though mechanized war, and rushes into battle like an insane grizzly bear possessed by the killing power of the rifle. In *Falling Ranks* (Fig. 7), infantrymen are scattered like tin soldiers by an enormous explosion. Technology has reduced them to matchstick figures, featherweight pawns in a game of mechanical supremacy. They charge into battle and fall in orderly ranks, one after the other, as the enemy decimates their numbers with mortars and grenades. Angular-shaped soldiers lie twisted into unnatural positions and their bodies radiate out from the center of the blast like the points of the sun's rays. Machines rule supreme as scores of men are destroyed by a single artillery blast. *Direct Hit* (Fig. 8) builds upon the theme of mechanical supremacy. In this image, a soldier is blasted into unrecognizable bits by the dead-on hit of an artillery shell. Such an event was not uncommon during World War I, and soldiers who were killed in this manner were simply listed as "missing in action" because there was generally not enough of them left to identify.<sup>54</sup> Arms and legs spiral out from the center of the blast as the machines again emerge victorious.

Dix struggled with the ideas of technology as the enabler and intensifier of destruction, which could not improve man or create a better society, and his initial desire to see the war as a renewing process. In spite of the horrors he experienced at the front, Dix held on to the philosophical idea of “birth, death, rebirth” and that man and society could be improved through struggle. “Painting,” Dix said, “Is the effort to produce order; order in yourself. There is much chaos in me, much chaos in our time.”<sup>55</sup> Dix’s wartime sketches *Shellhole with Flowers* (Fig. 10) and *Grave (Dead Soldier)* represent his lingering desire to create order and meaning out of the war. In *Shellhole with Flowers*, Dix depicted the war-torn landscape as giving birth to new life. The drawing shows an enormous crater in the earth surrounded by a proliferation of flowers and grass. It is a striking contrast between images of spring, sunshine, and rebirth and depictions of destruction and death. The shellhole looks fresh, the points of the blast still radiating out from the center. Although shells destroyed the earth, new life would spring forth from the ashes of war. Dix’s drawing symbolizes his desire to believe that the war had an ultimate purpose and that renewal could indeed result from destruction. *Dead Soldier* echoes this theme. The body of a fallen soldier is covered by grass and blossoming flowers, which signifies Dix’s belief in the renewing process of war. The body is not left exposed in No Man’s Land, but is mercifully buried by Mother Nature, by the new growth enabled by destruction. In the drawing, man is slowly absorbed by the earth from whence he came. Flowers and grass sprout from his body, a sign that there can be beauty and renewal even in death.

Beckmann’s experience at the front after 1915 differed from Dix’s in a variety of ways. The images he depicted were largely unrelated to war, and those drawings he did make of the war were usually images of the surgeries he witnessed as a medical orderly. His philosophy, too, was altered by the war, yet it remained distinct from Dix’s ideas in several ways. While Dix



wrestled with finding meaning in the war and ultimately found a satisfactory answer he could live with, Beckmann was unable to find any purpose in the killing and did not come to terms with the war until his later years. Direct experience of the war destroyed his belief that war would be a purifying process which would improve humanity.<sup>56</sup> Beckmann now saw that the senseless waste of lives eliminated the possibility of renewal and the only outcome of the slaughter was the gain of a few yards or an insignificant hill. Hundreds of thousands of men senselessly marched like lemmings into the meat grinder of war without any reason or purpose. By 1915, he began to sketch scenes of the suffering and pain he saw around him in the hospitals. He expected something beautiful to come out of destruction, and was devastated when the reality of war proved to be so ugly and empty. He wrote, "Oh, this infinite space, whose foreground you continually have to fill up with junk so you don't see its awful depth too clearly. What would we poor mortals do if we didn't continually equip ourselves with ideas about God and country, love and art, in an attempt to hide that sinister black hole. This endless desolation in eternity. This loneliness."<sup>57</sup> Beckmann was so disturbed by what he saw and disappointed with the failure of his own philosophy to find meaning in the war that he experienced a nervous breakdown that led to his discharge from the army in 1917.<sup>58</sup>

Beckmann's artworks from the latter period of the war express his longing to find purpose in the suffering around him and his inability to construct meaning out of the destruction. *The Grenade* (Fig. 11) is a frightening picture of suffering and death on the battlefield. In a style similar to Dix's, Beckmann presented a chaotic image. The artistic style is unrefined, blunt, and Expressionistic. In the background of the image a grenade explodes, sending shrapnel and sparks into the bodies of the ranks surrounding it. Men flee from the blast, expressions of inhuman horror painted on their faces. In the foreground lie the wounded: One is clutching at

his throat and gasping for air, another seems to have been shot through the head. Perhaps the most horrifying of these wounded soldiers is the figure closest to center whose face has been ripped open leaving the jaw muscle and bone exposed to the open air. On the far right an officer raises his arm in the command to continue the advance, further underscoring the futility of mass death. Beckmann experienced daily the flood of wounded resulting from such pointless offensives. In

*During an Operation*, *Head Operation on a Wounded Soldier*, and *The Morgue*, Beckmann depicts the horrific suffering of soldiers in World War I. In both paintings, suffering is clearly visible on the distorted faces of the patients. In the former, doctors and nurses crowd around the injured man, some holding his limbs down, others prodding him with surgical instruments, suggesting perhaps an amputation. One can almost hear the patient howling in pain. A similar situation is depicted in the latter, with the sedated soldier's head being pulled backwards for medical treatment. Hands holding different instruments approach the soldier from all angles of the drawing. The patient's eyes are not visible, but his mouth conveys a pathetic expression of pain and misery. *The Morgue* is Beckmann's most graphic and cynical depiction of wartime medical treatment. Three distorted bodies lie on gurneys with different parts of their bodies wrapped in gauze and their faces covered with bits of sheet. Doctors perform an autopsy on the body at right, peeling back skin to expose the ribcage. The soldier at center is missing part of his foot as well as his right hand. The soldier on the far left appears to have died of a head wound. Orderlies in the background place the dead into simple wooden coffins and heave them upright, presumably to lean them against the wall. Beckmann presents a morbid picture of the so-called "fruits" of combat, and the work expresses his attempt to find purpose and meaning in the war itself. In *Theatre du Monde—Grand Spectacle de la Vie*. *Man with a Crutch in a Wheelchair*,

Beckmann depicts a survivor of combat and of frontline hospitals. The drawing is scratchy and unrefined, lending a grisly quality to the individual depicted. A former soldier wheels and pushes himself with a crutch, his mouth open in anguish, and his eyes pleading and haunted. His indistinct and misshapen limbs suggest that something horrible has happened to him, and his wild hair implies some kind of trauma. Overall, Beckmann's wartime sketches illustrate not only his desire to allow his art to be inspired by the war, but also his disappointment with his failure to find any redeeming value or purpose in the slaughter and with the failure of his philosophy to hold up to the trials of war. Beckmann sought to find meaning in the experience of war, but realized it was a pointless void. The war did not purify man for the better, bring him closer to nature, or eliminate social classes. The war's only purpose was purposelessness.

The works of Dix and Beckmann embody the disillusionment the German people felt during World War I. Their sketches and paintings captured the patriotic fervor of 1914 and encapsulated the initial hopes and expectations of many people at the time. Otto Dix's self-portraits and Beckmann's portrayal of the declaration of war expressed the feeling that the war would unite the German people into a single community and society would be perfected through the struggle. As the war dragged on into 1915 and conditions at home worsened, Dix's and Beckmann's work likewise expressed this growing disillusionment and discontent. The artists also portrayed the devastation Germans felt when the war turned out to be the complete opposite of what they had desired and expected. They, along with other Germans at home and at the front, searched for meaning in the conflict, and in some instances found that their personal philosophies did not stand up to the test of combat. Dix's fascination with the relationship between man and machine expressed the disgust of many as they saw man further enslaved by technology in mechanized war. Beckmann likewise expressed the feeling that the war was a

hopeless void without meaning and a conflict whose only outcome was to send nine million people to their deaths. War as viewed through the eyes of artist-soldiers is an aspect of the conflict few historians have explored. Given the importance of the human aspect in history, one can hope that in future years more historians will take an interest in the cultural and social history of Germany in World War I.

Artworks Discussed in this Essay

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet*, 1914

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1914

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait as Mars*, 1914

Otto Dix, *Hand-to-Hand Fighting*, 1917

Otto Dix, *Charging Infantryman*, 1916

Otto Dix, *Falling Ranks*, 1916

Otto Dix, *Direct Hit*, 1916-1918

Otto Dix, *Grave (Dead Soldier)*, 1917

Otto Dix, *Shellhole with Flowers*, 1915

Max Beckmann, *Declaration of War*, 1914

Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait as a Medical Orderly*, 1915

Max Beckmann, *The Grenade*, 1915

Max Beckmann, *During an Operation*, 1914

Max Beckmann, *The Morgue*, 1915

Max Beckmann, *Head Operation on a Wounded Soldier*, 1915

Max Beckmann, *Theatre du Monde—Grand Spectacle de la Vie. Man with a Crutch in a Wheelchair*, 1914



Fig. 1

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet*, 1914



Fig. 2

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait as Mars*, 1914

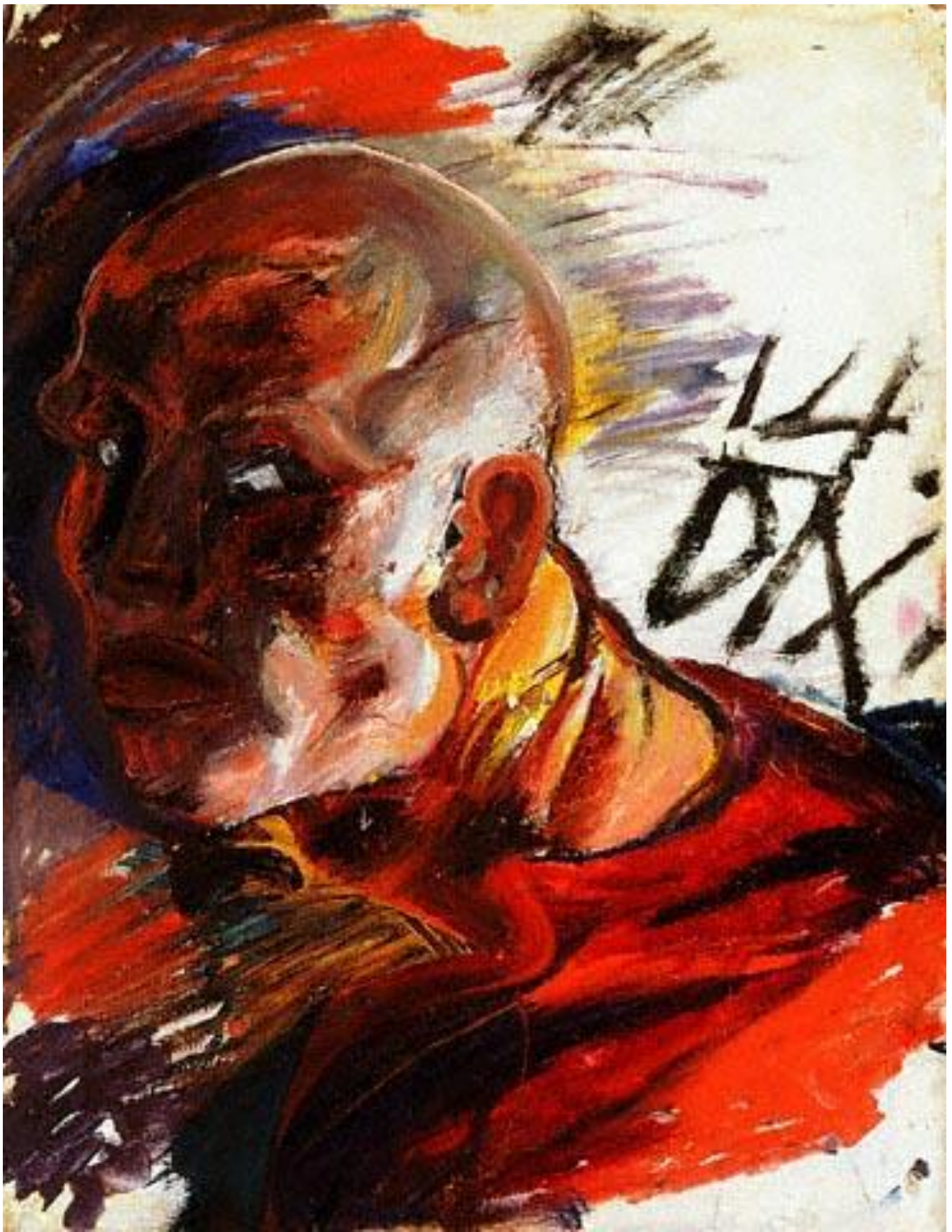


Fig. 3

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1914





Fig. 4

Max Beckmann, *Declaration of War*, 1914



Fig. 5

Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait as a Medical Orderly*, 1915



Fig. 6

Otto Dix, *Hand-to-Hand Fighting*, 1917



Fig. 7

Otto Dix, *Falling Ranks*, 1916



Fig. 8

Otto Dix, *Direct Hit*, 1916-1918

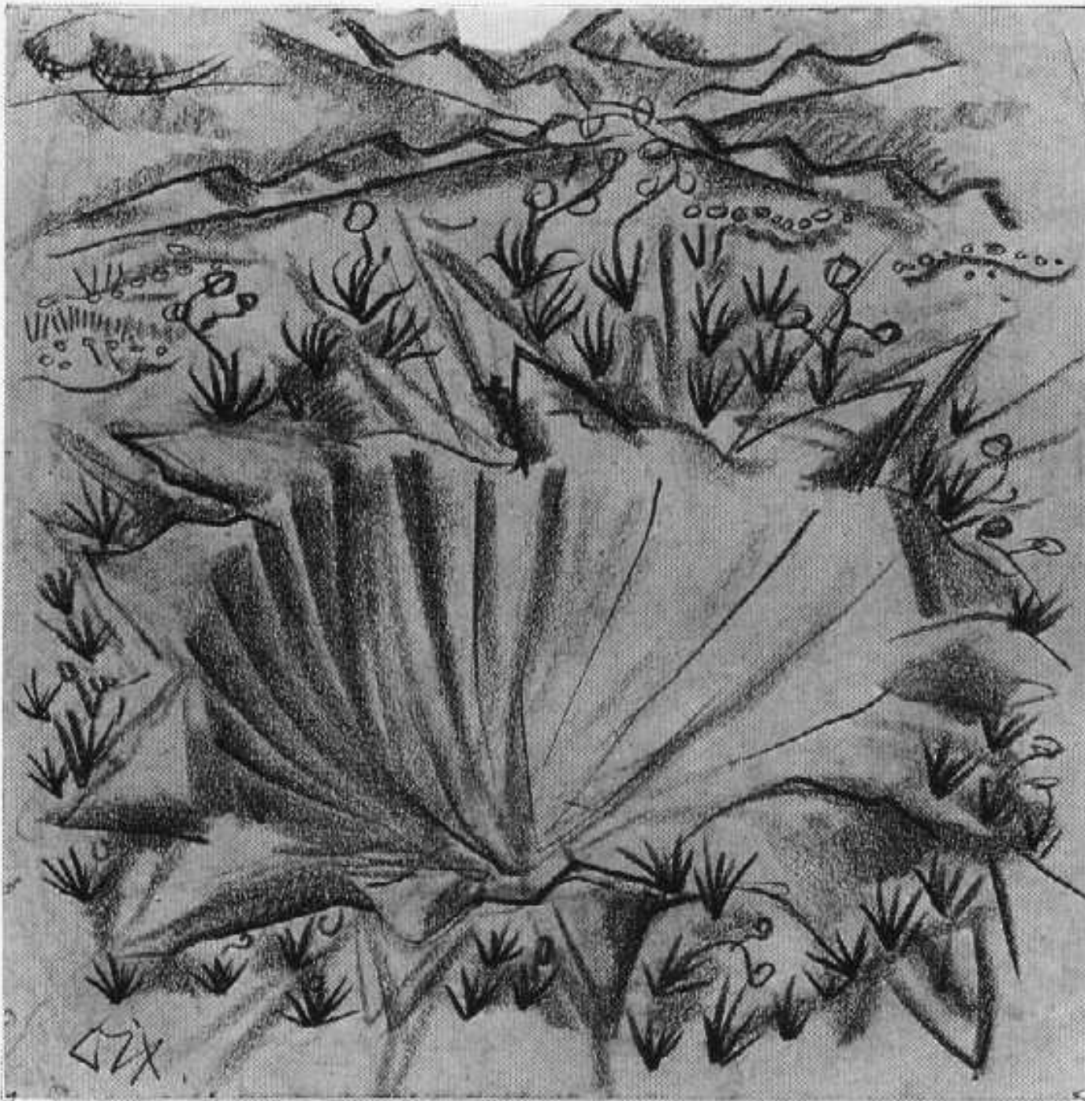


Fig. 9

Otto Dix, *Shellhole with Flowers*, 1915



Fig. 10

Max Beckmann, *The Grenade*, 1915

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## Notes

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- <sup>41</sup> Strachan. The First World War: To Arms, 308.
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