The private search for the public meaning of the Great War in

Britain, France and Germany

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MHIS321 Twentieth Century Europe

At the end of 1918 Europeans sought to comprehend and justify the meaning of the Great War and the catastrophic loss of life that it had caused. On the 11th of November 1918 the armistice came into effect and the guns on the Western Front fell silent. The Great War left in its wake the greatest number of combatants killed of any previous conflict throughout history, with 9.4 million dead among the belligerents. The loss of loved ones killed in the war created unprecedented universal mourning and grief that was experienced by millions in British, French and German communities. How private searches for meaning were displayed in public by those that witnessed the Great War can be studied utilising personal stories found in literature, the language of grief and meaning can be found on epitaphs and memorials that can be physically witnessed in European communities today. This essay will discuss how the private search for meaning of the Great War across all social structures of Britain, France and Germany was displayed and mediated in public expressions of bereavement in monuments, memorials, commemorations and epitaphs. In addition, this essay will discuss the way in which private searches of the war's meaning were expressed publicly in literature, art and cinema.

The First World War’s catastrophic effects shaped and defined twentieth century Europe, politically, culturally and socially. Of those 9.4 million killed, 2 million were German, 1.3 Million French and nearly 900,000 British. They left behind grieving widows, orphans and parents. The numbers that can be assessed are staggering; by 1920 there were 525,000 war widows in Germany, 600,000 in France and 240,000 in Britain. For instance, Alec Reader, a private in the British Civil Service Rifles, who was killed on the Somme in 1916 and one of the nearly half killed who have no known grave, was the eldest of 5 children, having 3 sisters.

2 Ibid., p. 924.
and a brother and also 4 grandparents. German soldiers killed amounted to 3 per cent of the total population and it can be argued that similar if not greater numbers of grieving family members and friends were affected. Taking into account these numbers, it can be argued that ‘virtually an entire society was probably in mourning; an entire society formed a community of mourning’ in their quest for meaning.

The view of ‘communities in mourning’ after the Great War was suggested by Jay Winter as a means of comprehending the mass scale of bereavement in Britain, France and Germany. Memorials, monuments and commemorations are still today the most physical outwards expression of how the private search for meaning of the Great War was displayed in public. Winter describes grief as a state of mind, bereavement a condition and mourning as ‘a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement’. Mourning drew communities together; private grief and bereavement could be endured collectively. Communities sought meaning ‘within the confines of national culture’ and varying national repertoires of cultural forms and practices. Within these limits, societies emphasised the search for the Great War’s meaning in monuments and memorials. Memorials and monuments were erected and commemorations organised largely by local communities which also raised the funds for local memorials and monuments in Britain, France and in Germany, thus creating even more a sense of ownership, unity and community values for which the soldiers had lost their lives. By the end of the 1920s there were roughly 36,000 memorials to the dead of the Great War in Britain, one for every community. Similarly, in France, *monument aux morts* or monuments to the dead were erected in the centre of every community. In Germany, *Kriegerdenkmals* – war memorials – were erected largely from medieval memory, such as the Teutonic theme of the Tannenburg memorial. Wolfgang Natter argues that the erection

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5 Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 14-18, p. 212.
of memorials during the Weimar Republic sought meaning not just in grief but as ‘fundamental matters not of certitude but interpretation and political struggle’. The private search for meaning was emphasised and sometimes flaunted in commemorations, in a ‘show of mourning, so conspicuously was it displayed’. The unveiling of the Cenotaph in London resulted in a procession of hundreds of thousands of grieving pilgrims, provoking the Church of England to denounce the show of mourning as a cult and ‘cenotapholatry’. Moreover, Goebel argues that memorials could not be politically neutral as carriers of ideological messages, seen largely by the medievalism of British and German commemorations. To those in mourning however, commemoration was devoid of extravagance or ‘carriers of political ideologies’, it is a place where private meaning could be reconciled as collective mourning in the search for the Great War’s meaning. For Rose Reader, mother of Alec Reader, the Cenotaph served as a ritual of grieving that had so far been denied to her. Dressed in mourning she laid at the Cenotaph a laurel of roses from her own garden with the simple yet poignant inscription: ‘My Alec, Rest in Peace’. Memorials and monuments were a foci in the ‘ritual of separation’, the bereaved could seek solace and meaning and in the case of Rose Reader and millions like her as a substitute for the grave of her missing son.

Memorials, monuments and commemorations allowed people a ritual of separation and the endurance to mourning collectively for the absent dead or missing. How many came to privately search for meaning can be seen publicly in some of the inscriptions that families, largely British, would have inscribed on the grave stones of their loved ones. Epitaphs are deeply personal and give the historian a glimpse into the language of grief and how some families sought meaning from their loved ones’ deaths. Some express grief, patriotism, religious faith and sacrifice. For instance, the epitaph of Private Robert Morrissey who was killed in October 1914 shows a deeply patriotic inscription by his family in their search for

12 Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, J4-18, p. 177.
13 Hanson, The Unknown Soldier, p. 345.
15 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 79.
16 Hanson, The Unknown Soldier, p. 371.
17 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 113.
meaning: ‘He died for England’s glory away from the Erin’s isle’.\(^{18}\) Moreover, the epitaph written by Mary Parsons for her son Private Langley, who was 21 when he was killed in August 1915, shows both grief and religious meaning to his death: ‘Mother waited for his return to clasp his loving hand but God postponed the meeting’.\(^{19}\) In France many wanted the body of their loved ones returned to their local parish to be buried within their community in the traditional way. Germany, on the other hand, approached burials in the same manner as the medieval tone of memorials; cemeteries ‘metaphorically obliterated the memory of the individual in favour of national symbols’.\(^{20}\) Moreover, a clause in the Treaty of Versailles required all crosses on German war graves, individual or mass, to be painted black as a representation of their dark cause. It became difficult for the defeated Germans therefore to seek meaning at the grave of their loved ones. Kathe Kollwitz, a German artist who lost her son in the early stages of the war, is an example someone who sought to commemorate and seek the meaning of the death of her son at his grave. Kollwitz sculptured the figures of a grieving mother and father overlooking not just the grave of her son but those of every soldier buried at Roggevelde German war cemetery. Like many families seeking meaning in Britain and France, Kollwitz found some peace and healing during this ritual of separation at the grave of her son.

Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker have argued that ‘Mourning was first and foremost an individual ordeal experienced in dreadful solitude’.\(^{21}\) Countless mothers, fathers, wives and children who had lost loved ones, including veterans, sought to express their private emotions towards the war’s meaning in public by writing, filming, or painting them. By doing so they sought to heal and alleviate their private grief in the public province. Literature, cinema and art can be a powerful expression of someone’s inner most thoughts and emotions and the Great War created unprecedented searches of meaning to conflict in general. Many after the war began to see its meaning as an act of futility. A feeling that the older generation had betrayed the younger was felt among many in Britain, France and Germany. A few made this meaning public in poetry and literature. Rudyard Kipling, whose


\(^{20}\) Hanson, The Unknown Soldier, p. 417.

\(^{21}\) Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 14-18, p. 219.
only son was killed in 1915 at the battle of Loos and among those who had no known graves, was an outspoken supporter of the war during its early stages. However, as the slaughter increased his rhetoric faded, although not refuting the justification for war against German militarism. Kipling’s private search for meaning of the loss of his son can be to an extent be observed in his 31 Epitaphs published in 1919, and his moving verse titled The Common Form: ‘If any question why we died, tell them, because our fathers lied’.22 Similarly, the French writer Maurice Barrès anguished: ‘why should the old people remain alive, when the children who might have initiated the most beautiful era in French history march off to the sacrifice!’23 The feeling of guilt was also voiced in Germany. Kathe Kollwitz’s mourning parents were sculptured as kneeling, begging forgiveness and asking ‘him to accept their failure to find a better way, their failure to prevent the madness of war from cutting his life short’.24 That search for meaning expressed publicly was as much of a heart break for Kollwitz as it was for Kipling; grief and the search for its meaning were universal.

Primary source literature provides to the historian perhaps the greatest glimpse into the private searches for meaning of those in mourning after the Great War. Writers, from their own experiences or fictional characters, wanted to convey to the reader some form of meaning to the events of the Great War. In Germany, the use of literature to convey private meaning of the Great War in public was challenging. The Allied nations largely saw the meaning of the war as justified opposition against German militarism and a campaign for self-preservation and democracy. In contrast, German authors struggled to find meaning beyond the mourning of two million dead and ‘could offer their readers little tangible solace, profit, or glory for four and a half years of suffering and loss’.25 German literature did however attempt to express meaning to fill the void of defeat. German literature of the Weimar period has been described by Natter as being weighted towards having a war-affirmative meaning.26 This was promoted by people such as Anton Kippenburg of the German Society for Foreign Book Trade as a ‘political task’ in continuing a nationalistic
agenda. In contrast, writers such Bruno Vogel in his novel Long Live War! A Letter intended to provoke memory of the mass destruction of lives for the benefit of the few. To Vogel, that was the meaning of the Great War. Similarly, another German, Erich Remarque published perhaps the most well-known anti-war novel of the Great War, All Quiet on the Western Front. Like Vogel, Remarque wanted to convey meaning of the war as futile. The success of these anti-war novels created heated debate of whether anti-war or war-affirmative literature truly represented how Germans saw their private search for meaning represented in public. For instance, although it is hard to gauge the numbers of those supporting or opposed to the pacifist meaning of All Quiet on the Western Front, reader reactions were published in mass circulated newspapers for 6 months after its initial release.

One of the post powerful visual representations of how many in France saw the war’s meaning can be seen in Abel Gance’s film J’accuse. The film presents the haunting theme of the return of the dead; the war dead have come to pass judgement upon the living and ‘to see if they are worthy of our sacrifice’. Gance reveals a longing to create some sort of meaning out of the war, and it can be argued that this idea of being haunted by the dead was not just experienced in France but also in Britain and Germany. For instance, the writings of Siegfried Sassoon frequently use ghostly images. Sassoon’s poem ‘Sick Leave’, recounts visitations of ‘the noiseless dead’ to ‘whisper to my heart’. Sassoon through his poetry sought meaning to not only to make sense his own experiences but to make sense of the war as a whole. Similarly, Vera Brittain, a nurse in France during the war, conveys a life surrounded by the dead who are ‘with me always’.

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28 Ibid., p. 18.
29 Abel Gance, J’accuse (Lobster Films, 2008)
31 Ibid., p. 48.
works of Siegfried Sassoon, who in similar ways struggled with the war’s meaning. These writers made public their private search for meaning in literature as a way of coming to terms with their traumatic experience. In conveying her private meaning, Brittain saw herself as a representative of her generation’s search for meaning, prompting ‘an integration of the private with the public’. The German artist, Otto Dix, created art work that was, like Sassoon, largely focused on the futility of war and the horror and death that it delivers. Dix expressed an apocalyptic meaning to war and the misery and death that the war leaves in its wake. It can be argued that the longing to seek meaning, imagined as ‘survivors perched on a mountain of corpses’ was universal, ‘whatever form it took, this invocation of the dead is an unmistakeable sign of the commonality of European cultural life in this period’.

The agonising loss of 9.4 million war dead created an unprecedented number of communities in mourning throughout Britain, France and Germany, each longing to seek meaning to the catastrophe of the Great War. A language of private grief was expressed publicly in epitaphs and collectively in monuments in memorials. In doing so, many sought healing collectively within their own nation’s cultural and political boundaries. However, although grief and the search for meaning are primarily experienced in solitude, this private agony of loss and quest for meaning were publicly conveyed in works of literature, art and cinema. Because the search for meaning is largely shaped and defined within a nation’s cultural and political boundaries, there are similarities and contrasts between Britain, France and Germany on how private searches for meaning became represented in literature, cinema and art. On the one hand, many in Britain, France and Germany approached generational guilt and the horror and futility of war with a similar preoccupation with the dead. On the other hand, although there are numerous German anti-war works in literature, the nationalist political agenda of supporting war-affirmative literature in Germany was in the ascendancy and largely contrasts the popularity of anti-war literature and cinema in Britain and France. The examination of how British, French and German’s private search for meaning of the Great War became public, demonstrates the

36 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, p. 17.
37 Ibid., p. 227.
importance of understanding the language of grief and how many displayed their private search for meaning to the Great War in public.

**Bibliography**


