

Chapter 27 Primary Source Activity



In terms of human lives, World War I was extremely brutal and costly (textbook pages 709–710). One young German soldier killed in 1914 was the son of the artist Käthe Kollwitz, who is famous for her strong woodblock prints and sculptures showing human suffering. In her diary of the war years, Kollwitz reflected on her son's death and the wastefulness of war. ♦ *As you read the excerpts, think about how personal experience influences an artist. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Käthe Kollwitz's War Diary

[August 27, 1916]

Read an essay on liberalism. . . . It showed me all the contradictory elements within myself. My untenably¹ contradictory position on the war. How did I come to it? Because Peter [her son] sacrificed his life. What I saw so clearly then and what I wanted to preserve in my work now seems to be once more so dubious. I think I can keep Peter only if I do not let anyone take away from me what he taught me then. Now the war has been going on for two years and five million young men are dead, and more than that number again are miserable, their lives wrecked. Is there anything at all that can justify that? . . .

[October 11, 1916]

Everything remains as obscure as ever for me. Why is that? It's not only our youth who go willingly and joyfully into the war; it's the same in all nations. People who would be friends under other conditions now hurl themselves at one another as enemies. Are the young really without judgment? Do they always rush into it as soon as they are called? Without looking closer? Do they rush into war because they want to, because it is in their blood so that they accept without examination whatever reasons for fighting are given to them? Do

the young want war? Would they be old before their time if they no longer wanted it?

This frightful insanity—the youth of Europe hurling themselves at one another. When I think I am convinced of the insanity of the war, I ask myself again by what law man ought to live. Certainly not in order to attain the greatest possible happiness. It will always be true that life must be subordinated to

the service of an idea. But in this case, where has that principle led us? Peter [her son], Erich, Richard, all have subordinated their lives to the idea of patriotism. The English, Russian, and French young men have done the same. The consequence has been this terrible killing, and the impoverishment of Europe. Then shall we say that the youth in all these countries have been cheated? . . .

Where are the guilty? Are there any? Or is everyone cheated? Has it been a case of mass madness? . . . I shall never fully understand it all. . . . Is it a breach of faith with you, Peter, if I can now see only madness in the war?



Death. 1934 Lithograph

Source: *The Diary and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*, ed. Hans Kollwitz, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Northwestern University Press, 1988).

¹ Cannot be defended

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Questions to Think About

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| <p>1. What idea does Kollwitz say motivated her son and other young Germans to rush to war?</p> <p>2. How, according to Kollwitz, do her son's actions compare with those of young men in other countries?</p> <p>3. Recognizing Ideologies At this point in the war, what are the conflicting feelings that</p> | <p>Kollwitz has about war and patriotism? How does her son's death add to her confusion?</p> <p>4. Activity Write a journal entry describing your own feelings about war and patriotism. Compare your feelings with those that Kollwitz expresses in her diary.</p> |
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