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This paper starts with the two most significant ‘war’ cycles to be produced in Weimar Germany, Käthe Kollwitz’s seven woodcuts of 1923 and Otto Dix’s 50 etchings of 1924. While these dates may appear to place them outside the time frame of interest to this conference, the cycles represent the culmination of the artists’ long struggle to give expression to the war experience, which remained for many years elusive and unsatisfactory, subject to many changes and revisions. Both had responded to the outbreak of war with a similar excitement and curiosity but came to see the war in quite a different light.

For neither artist was the cycle the final or full expression of their wartime experiences. Kollwitz’ struggle to produce a fitting memorial to her fallen son, which began soon after his death in October 1914, arguably lasted for the rest of her life, each image and work representing a consolidation of a position revealed in the diaries as being the result of an intellectual struggle rather than the unmediated emotional response assumed by many critics. Many of the images in Dix’s cycle have their roots in sketches and paintings produced during his time in the trenches

The cycles reflect the artists’ gendered experience of the war. While for Dix’s soldiers the experience of war is direct and unmediated, the sacrifice is at one remove for those in Kollwitz’ cycle: their role is to relinquish, commemorate and mourn the men they love. Kollwitz’s work mainly bears witness to the effects of war at home – the only one of her woodcuts to depict soldiers presents a trancelike image of young volunteers before their first experience of battle. In Dix’s fragmented account, we can see the cynicism and disillusionment born of experience: storybook heroes are scarce in this cycle, which is strong on images of suffering and endurance, of the pragmatism that allows soldiers to eat, rest and seek pleasure amidst corpses and shells. Very few of the 50 images show soldiers engaged in combat, and even here the depiction is of the sneaky ambush, the indignity of crawling forward on hands and knees or wading, disorientated and impersonalised through mud and gas. There are images of

withdrawal, of the remnants of companies presenting themselves for inspection and of course images of venal soldiers getting drunk and visiting the brothels behind the lines.

My paper fits into the 'memory and mourning' strand of the conference. As well as offering an account of the gendered nature of the experience and artistic expression of war, I will be raising questions about the role of artists as witnesses to war. Both Dix and Kollwitz in their war cycles offer a highly personal, uncompromisingly honest account that neither sanitises nor glorifies the suffering and sacrifice of war, nor renders it meaningless, but reflects the enormity of its effects on the creative human spirit.