

The Political, Visual and Symbolic Ambiguities of Johannes Matthaeus Koelz *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (1930-37)

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Collection: New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester

To what extent can one commemorate the dead of war without commemorating the legacy of militarism? *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* suggests a struggle between direct condemnation and sentimental memorialization.

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In *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* by Johannes Matthaeus Koelz (1895-1971), commemoration and condemnation consolidate to form an ambiguous memorandum to the experience of total warfare. Painted in Germany between 1930–1937, the triptych comments on the legacy of the First World War and the subsequent rise of National Socialism. Although the work indicates a pacifist rebuttal of warfare, the triptych's conflicting elements of conservatism, pacifism and traditionalism make the work especially difficult to situate amongst the turbulent discourse of German inter-war art. '*Thou Shalt Not Kill!*' presents a dichotomy between the futility of warfare and – as one contemporary put it – the 'psychological dogma that man is inevitably a fighter,' innately linked to the aspirational figure of the soldier-hero.¹

In 1937, Bavarian artist Johannes Matthaeus Koelz was arrested for the possession of pacifist propaganda: 'some fifty satirical poems of anti-military tendency.'² In a bizarre twist of fate, the arresting officer, an Inspector 'Müller', remembered Koelz as the officer who had saved his life at the battle of Verdun in 1916. Inspector Müller granted Koelz forty-eight hours to leave Germany, during which time Koelz hurriedly attempted to destroy *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* by cutting the triptych into pieces at the local saw mill. Koelz distributed the pieces to various trusted friends and family, and fled to Prague. The fragments: *Heads of Two Old People*, *Dead Soldier*, *Girl in National Costume* and *Boy's Praying Hands* are all that remain of Koelz's triptych; these were donated by his daughter Ava Farrington to Leicester's New Walk Art Gallery in 1998. A photograph taken during the triptych's construction has been used to digitally remaster the original 230 x 510 cm canvas; graphically resurrecting it as the monumental work it once was (fig.1).³

On the left-hand panel of the triptych, a line-up of German figures stands in cohesive arrangement to represent a collective, pious *Volk* (peasantry). German soldiers in military uniform stand at the forefront of the line-up, clutching at their weapons, readying

themselves for battle. The right-hand panel reciprocates their will to fight, presenting a congregation of Allied peoples posed for war. Individual costumes and physiognomies identify regional associations that evidence the all-inclusivity of warfare. On both sides, bishops oversee the blessing of war and use their faith to propagate submission to the Divine Will. The central panel exposes the deceit of the Church and presents the finality of death as the war's only salvation. A crucified soldier is suspended amongst a desolate no-man's land, accompanied by the skeletal remains of a slumped comrade and the rotting corpse of a French soldier.

This article examines the political, visual, and symbolic ambiguities of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* as a work of inter-war pacifism. The legacy of the First World War cast a disconcerting shadow across German culture during the 1920s and 30s, catalysing a series of tormenting questions: how to make sense of the war, how to integrate the legacy of defeat in the post-war world, how to come to terms with death on such a scale?⁴ The legacy of defeat and the polarisation of German society is especially evident in Koelz's formidable triptych. In *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* a distinct commentary of leftist condemnation of warfare is challenged by a nationalistic rhetoric of jingoistic commemoration. I shall seek to situate the complex iconography of the triptych amongst a plethora of polarising responses to war. Further, when analysed in relation to examples of pro and anti-war imagery, Koelz's triptych cannot be bracketed into a specific genre of works, but ambiguously combines a social realist style with a pacifist, anti-fascist critique. The first section explores Koelz's complex position as an 'inner émigré' artist, working on his triptych in secrecy during the early years of the Nazi regime, until his subsequent exile in 1937. The second seeks to explore Koelz's problematic rendering of patriarchal masculinity as a personification of war; upholding the male body as the ultimate site of self-sacrifice. The third addresses Koelz's manipulation of Christian doctrine to highlight the religious sanctification of war and the dialectical tension of sacrificial imagery. I argue that, despite its anti-violent title, Koelz's triptych is a work of ambivalent conservatism, a moderate expression of two contradictory modes of memorialisation: commemoration and condemnation.

Johannes Matthaeus Koelz: anxieties and conflicts

Born at the end of the nineteenth century in rural Bavaria, Koelz was a 'keen sportsman', a 'fitness fanatic' greatly fond of the outdoors and rural life.⁵ In 1915–1919 Koelz, a Captain with the 7th Company Bavarian Regiment at the Western Front, was involved in a number of major military offensives including Verdun, where he was awarded the Iron Cross. It is plausible that, enthused by his military service, he 'was likely proud of his physical prowess and self-reliance.'⁶ His orthodox background, nationalistic outlook and outwardly militaristic nature made Koelz an unlikely advocate of pacifism.

The dual connotations of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* can in part be attributed to the turbulent climate of political instability catalysed by the collapse of the Weimar Republic. Literary scholar Elizabeth Boa reflects: 'though many were left with a horror of violence and a profound sense of the absurdity of war ... Weimar politics were stamped by an extraordinary respect for, and even glorification of things military.'⁷ Established in 1919, The Weimar Republic sought to stabilise post-war Germany with a new form of democratic government. The legacy of Germany's defeat proved insurmountable; plagued with crippling war debt, a world financial crisis and internal instability, the democratic Republic failed to appease those on either ends of the political spectrum. The conflicting symbolism visualised in Koelz's triptych is inseparable from the dichotomy of Weimar society, consumed by opposing ideologies.

From the time of Hitler's ascent to power in 1933, visual culture became increasingly utilised as a socio-political weapon. A bellicose form of nationalism became assimilated into German culture, proliferating Nazi conceptions of the heroic man, the valour of war and the duty of the soldier. Koelz can be seen to dialectically engage with a National Socialist aesthetic; working between resistance and conformity by absorbing elements of National Socialist cultural policy, yet simultaneously rejecting the dogma of belligerent nationalism. In *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* Koelz ambivalently comments on a range of political and ideological anxieties in order to address the physiognomy of conflict.

After 1933, the so-called art of 'inner emigration' developed amongst an ideological grey area of aversion and accommodation, an area based upon a 'nonconformist attitude that cannot be classified as either unambiguously private or unambiguously anti-fascist.'⁸ Artists of the 'inner emigration' were opposed to the Nazi regime, yet chose to remain in Germany after 1933, seeking to caution fellow citizens of an insidious nationalism by use of cryptic allegory. Koelz himself can be aligned with an 'inner émigré' voice, working on his triptych in secrecy during the early years of the Nazi regime, until his subsequent exile in 1937. Koelz's triptych can be considered an ambiguous statement of 'accommodation and aversion': absorbing elements of National Socialist cultural policy to simultaneously critique belligerent militarism. The triptych symbolically engages with the threat of National Socialism by allegorical allusion to the futility of war. Like Koelz, artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity) movement such as Otto Dix, assimilated their allegorical works into a body of romantic realism in order to avoid Nazi censorship. Artists of the 'New Objectivity' manipulated accepted modes of naturalism to subtly critique Nazism – their cryptic, subjective motifs critically engage, yet purposely avoid direct confrontation with Fascist ideology.

Koelz, comparable to many inner-émigré artists, worked somewhere between the dichotomy of resistance and conformity – absorbing elements of National Socialist policy,

yet subconsciously rejecting others. Koelz's anti-war statement – *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* – ambiguously combines a National Socialist approved realist style with a pacifist, anti-fascist critique. His triptych can be considered an ambiguous statement, an inner emigrant image of 'accommodation and aversion': an allegorical attack on Nazism. Koelz's triptych, painted in secrecy, privately engages with aggressive militarisation in the form of discursive symbolism. The crucified gas-masked soldier in the central panel denounces war and its propagators – perhaps forewarning the consequences of Nazi war-mongering (fig.2). *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* is a confusing assemblage of anti-war sympathies and painterly beautifications; a multifaceted annulment of militarism (fig.3). Koelz's aesthetic conservatism denies the work a satirical potency; inadvertently beautifying death with an allusion to florid naturalism. Further, Koelz upholds conceptions of patriarchal masculinity in an international line-up of troops poised for battle. This evocation of militarised masculinity is a troubling expression of chauvinism which may be seen to uphold the dogma of self-sacrifice. The depiction of soldierly death is a statement of degeneration, construed as a defeatist subversion of militarism. Ultimately the work acknowledges the true outcome of war: death. It is notable that the triptych – which Koelz destroyed for fear of persecution – would possibly have been condemned by the Nazis (although paradoxically admired for its stylistic naturalism).

Art historian James Van Dyke documents similar contradictions in the work of Franz Radziwill, a contemporary of Koelz. He notes that the stylistic complexities in the 'grim romanticism' of Radziwill's realism are difficult to situate amongst the plethora of artistic responses to the First World War. Van Dyke states 'Radziwill's depictions of trench warfare never matched the conventional pathos and heroic physiognomies of specialists in the genre.'⁹ Like Radziwill, Koelz's work cannot be comfortably placed amongst a political spectrum of left or right-wing ideals, and has as such been neglected by art-historical discussion. Like Koelz, Radziwill was foremost a landscape and still life painter, working in a realist style. His work, too traditional in subject matter to be identified as Expressionist, and too mundane for New Objectivity, occupies something of a no man's land amongst art historical discussion. During the early Nazi occupation of Germany, Radziwill's work remained inoffensive to the authorities and was even exhibited in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1934. The political connotations of his work remain unaddressed and underrepresented in art historical scholarship. This is also evident in the limited scholarship on Koelz, as his work is bracketed with leftist Expressionists – even though his pacifism is far removed from an avant-garde radicalism. Van Dyke notes how scholars have used either iconography or 'ideology critique' to characterise Radziwill's work, without 'taking into consideration the full range of potential relationships between different artists, conventional art and official propaganda.'¹⁰ In the same sense, bracketing Koelz's triptych into a discourse of inter-war pacifism simplifies the complexity of Weimar politics – of an officer, seemingly proud of his military achievement yet disillusioned by defeat.

Koelz's political and ideological anxieties can be linked to an entrenched regionalism, a distinct form of nationalism that found comfort in the conception of a rural *Heimat*: sentimental notions of a Germanic homeland. His depiction of a modest *Volk* denotes a nostalgic evocation of pre-war society. The *Volk*, dressed in traditional costume, painted in exquisite detail, adhere to a conservative, romantic personification of German heritage (fig.4). Similarly, the Allied assemblage on the right-hand panel forms a stereotypical line-up of national characters: a French-African Rhineland soldier, an Italian, a 'Tommy' and a Russian.¹¹ Koelz typecasts nationalities, presenting an identifiable assemblage of the masses. In his biography Koelz shows a fervent devotion towards the country for which 'I had risked my life a thousand times over, when I was young and trusting – my fatherland!'¹² The triptych can be construed as an uncomfortable expression of a man displaced by war; a manifestation of affectionate nostalgia, and a longing for pre-war identity. Indeed, Farrington suggests that her father 'had a fixation about the way in which the ordinary man, paid for the stupidity, the nationalistic fervour' and 'the religious cynicism in every system.'¹³ Koelz was not affiliated to a specific political party, but his son Siegfried identified him as the bearer of 'communist ideas', perceiving in his volkish imagery a humanistic association with the common man.¹⁴

In the 1930s Koelz's conservative *Heimat* imagery found favour amongst the ranks of the newly appointed National Socialist regime. A disconcerting development in Koelz's career is captured in his biographical accounts. He recalls the moment his publisher 'Herr Berg', introduced a man in 'the uniform of a general in Hitler's storm troops.'¹⁵ The general – identified as Gauleiter Wagner – had approached Koelz with a commission to paint a portrait of Hitler, to be sold as the title page of a book distributed at Christmas in German-speaking countries.¹⁶ Koelz notes the 'truly seductive' artist's fee for the commission, outlining 'only one snag' – he would have to 'don the little brown shirt.'¹⁷ The commission was politely refused under the pretence of prior engagements.¹⁸ Both Ava Farrington and art historian Charlotte Burns present Koelz as the 'man who wouldn't paint Hitler'; yet Koelz produced a preliminary drawing for the proposed painting of the Führer.¹⁹ The sketch, drawn from a photograph of Hitler, further demonstrates the complexity of Koelz's apparent left-leaning outlook. Simon Lake, of Leicester's New Walk Gallery, does not rule out the possibility that Koelz met with the Führer. He had initially suggested that 'Koelz always boasted of working from life. It goes against everything we know of him that this (sketch) was made from a photograph.'²⁰ There has been scant art historical analysis of Koelz's sketch of Hitler, perhaps due to its controversial implications. In the public sphere Koelz is presented as 'The artist who snubbed the Führer.'²¹ An article published in the *Guardian* (2001) – 'Drawing of Führer casts new light on tale of heroic stand' provoked a swift rebuttal from family members, keen to preserve the memory of their father as an anti-war

advocate.²² The controversy of Koelz's legacy highlights the contentious nature of inter-war pacifism, borne from the violent polarization of Weimar politics.

The works of inner émigré artists formed part of an ambivalent discourse that sought to accommodate, yet subvert National Socialism. Conversely, Koelz continued to produce work that dialectically engaged with recognised forms of National Socialist art. This incongruity evidences a tension between direct condemnation and a reticent complicity. When compared to inner emigrant denunciations of war, Koelz's subdued pacifism may evidence a private allegorical attack on war. However, when contemplating the two outer panels of the triptych, the work is further complicated by the propagation of a patriarchal masculinity. Koelz promotes the soldier as the site of war, unanimously commemorating the victims of battle – yet synonymously upholding the absurdity of warfare.

Commemoration and condemnation: masculinity and the 'troop machine'

In the central panel of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* a dead soldier is shown in the skeletal stages of decomposition. Skeletal recesses replace facial expression, dehumanising the image of the soldier as a cadaver of war (fig.5). The uniform of the combatant is the only indicator of identity; an iron cross hanging from his jacket indicative of bravery. Although Koelz depicts death as an eventuality of war, the cadaver is subdued by a painterly realism, displacing visible suffering with the finality of death. The painterly beautification of death can be seen to challenge a narrative signalling the utter annihilation of war.

The war works of Koelz's contemporary Otto Dix provide an illuminating comparison. Unlike Koelz, Dix outlines a critique of warfare through the fragmentation of bodily features. Dix's war cripples, depicted as conflated bodily organs, suggest the legacy of war via the reanimation of the corpse. Shocking bodily deformations critique the redemptive associations of war, whilst unanimously denouncing the sanctity of the war hero. The war cripple becomes a motif for the dissimulation of the soldier. Burns maintains that Koelz, much like Dix, 'sought to awaken a stupefied mass to the real consequences of warfare.'²³ However, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* does not evoke the anguish of war with the same expressive force or critical commentary as Dix's augmented war cripples. Koelz's skeletal imagery is more comparable to conservative observations of death found in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century German Renaissance. The observational details of Koelz's imagery can be compared to that of fifteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer's anatomical observations of the human skull. This figurative realism is incongruous with the radical denunciation of war found in the Expressionist works of Otto Dix and George Grosz. In works such as *Skin Graft*, (1924) by Dix, the horrors of war are brought back to permeate the streets of Germany. Death is a much preferable fate to that of the war cripple, whose deformation came to symbolise the corruption of an inept Weimar society.

It could be argued that Koelz's triptych presents a similar critique of militarised society, reversing the masculine heroism of the soldier, thereby challenging the jingoistic masculinity of National Socialist imagery. Koelz presents a loss of identity through the anonymity of the skeletal corpse, but ultimately does not distort notions of masculinity with the same Expressionist force as that of Otto Dix. The skeletal symbolism of death in *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* functions more as a memento mori, a stark reminder of the transience of life in the face of war. The triptych deconstructs the mystification of masculine virility and reiterates the notion that in the face of war we are all equal in death.

Thou Shalt Not Kill! presents the militarisation of masculinity through an international line-up of troops poised for battle. Klaus Theweleit's psychoanalytic reading of the gun in inter-war Germany is pertinent here: 'guns have the capacity to do something of which the soldier is normally incapable: they can discharge and remain whole ... the metal of the gun barrel appears almost to take the place of the soldier's bodily armor; to function, then, as his ego.'²⁴ Their guns symbolise an extension of the soldierly ego, a masculinised attribute of war. Theweleit comments of the soldier that 'ultimately, they themselves become the shots spreading outward, bullets hurtling from the military machine toward their body targets.'²⁵ Similarly, the triptych denotes how man has become synonymous with war; both the left and right-hand panels of the triptych depict soldiers clutching at their guns, their veins protruding with adrenaline as they ready themselves for war (fig. 4, fig.6). The soldier is thus fused with a belligerent aggression; the ego of the soldier is extended and maintained through the possession of a gun.

Theweleit's concept of the 'troop-machine' offers further insight into Koelz's triptych. The 'troop-machine' is not independent, it has no autonomous existence; it is supported and maintained by society. It is connected to the state via an umbilical cord that 'feeds it with bread, spare parts and ammunitions' – what Theweleit delineates as the 'energy-machine.'²⁶ *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* presents the 'energy-machine' as a conglomeration of state and religion. This network is a construction that helps to endorse and propagate the figure of the soldier as a hero. In a line-up of dutiful mothers, impressionable sons and duplicitous clerics, Koelz comments how the soldier is manipulated to form part of an international troop-machine. The soldiers in Koelz's triptych are mechanised by their guns, spurred on by their unwavering faith in the Church, and impelled by a jingoistic sense of duty. Koelz can be seen to subvert the aspirational figure of the soldier in the form of the cadaver, yet at the same time he dialectically reinforces patriarchal conceptions of masculinity through his assemblage of an international 'troop-machine.'

The same motif of the masculine body is utilised by artists supportive of the Third Reich to portray the mechanised soldier as the epitome of masculine aspiration. In Hans Schmitz-Wiedenbrück's triptych *Workers, Farmers, Soldiers* (1940) the three pillars of the 'troop-

machine' are represented. The nationalistic figures of the soldier, worker and farmer are elevated to icons, symbolizing an exemplary construction of dominant masculinity.²⁷ Schmitz-Wiedenbrück employs masculine gender norms to promote the fascist message of total mobilisation: a mass mechanisation of people propagated by nationalism. In contrast, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* represents the 'troop-machine' as an international line-up of soldiers poised for battle. The triptych successfully comments on the homogenising nature of warfare and the overwhelming societal pressure to conform to a masculinised notion of heroism.²⁸

The stoic gallantry of Koelz's international line-up of mechanised troops mobilised for war is, however, undercut in the central panel by the disconcerting imagery of a crucified soldier. The soldierly hero is exposed as a victim, crucified by the 'energy machine'; a chivalric conception of masculinity propagated by state and Church. The crucified 'hero' effectively deconstructs the concept of chivalric masculinity, presenting war at its most definitive eventuality – death. The hyper-masculine figure of the soldier is defined as a victim of his own self-image; a casualty of belligerent militarism. Theweleit presents the character of the soldier as 'the ideal man of the conservative utopia: a man with machinelike periphery, whose interior has lost its meaning.'²⁹ The triptych can be read as an aggressive denouncement of this newly mechanised man; idyllic masculinity is juxtaposed with the skeletal remnants of war. Koelz rejects the battlefield as a place of valour by the negation of the hero motif. In this interpretation, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* deflates notions of masculine bravado, establishing the site of war as a vacuous hell – the front line as a 'modern day Golgotha.'³⁰

Although the painting denounces the heroism of war, the evocation of the soldierly male paradoxically reinforces the equation of masculinity and militarism. The line-up of soldierly bodies emphasises the notion of a hierarchical male superiority, confounded in the chauvinism of war. The women depicted in the triptych are negated to subsidiary positions and are portrayed as passive counterparts to an accompanying *Volk* of peasants and clergymen, united in their ratification of war. Some of the women are depicted with their hands clasped together in a state of prayer, reinforcing a link between passive femininity, the Church and the endorsement of militarism (fig.7). Koelz depicts the soldierly male as a product of patriarchal society compounded of the twentieth century; his existence marked by the 'bestial state of his drives.'³¹ The social agencies and human 'modellers' in the triptych – figures of femininity and representatives of the Church – are shown to structure and maintain the traditional conceptions of militarised masculinity. Koelz's emulation of the collective mass as a hierarchical *Volk* seeks to highlight the false veneration of militarism through established gender roles. However, in doing so, Koelz inadvertently reinforces a conservative propagation of the male body as a site of war.

Koelz's depiction of militarised masculinity in his line-up of machismo physiques can be linked to a Jüngerian sense of comradeship and militaristic jingoism found in the collective mass of the troop. Ernst Jünger was a First World War veteran, holder of the Iron Cross and Blue Max, and author of wartime memoir *Storm of Steel* (1920). He was a zealous pro-militarist who remained a rallying-point and object of fascination for the Fascist Right throughout the Third Reich.³² In his memoirs, Jünger comments on the virile troop mass: 'primitive man, the cave-dweller, sallies forth naked as ever, with the savagery of his unfettered instincts.'³³ Koelz's line-up of militarised soldierly bodies reinforces the notion of the troop as 'primitive man,' a collective image of masculinity inexorably linked to war. The same conservative depiction of the soldier was utilised in the advancement of nationalistic war propaganda, linking the male physiognomy with the might of the soldier. The turbulent legacy of the First World War, spurred on by the 'stab in the back' legend, allowed nationalists to utilise this inherent militaristic chauvinism for ideological gain. The ideological reverence for the soldier figure under National Socialism further venerated the image of the male body as a site of war.

Thou Shalt Not Kill! - The ambiguity of religious iconography

During the interwar period, religious imagery gained political momentum in the commemoration and condemnation of war sacrifice. *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* is an ambivalent image of crucifixion that presents the polarising quality of religious imagery. The work wrestles with a satirical denouncement of Christianity, and sacrificial advancement of holy war imagery. A sophisticated *Kreigstheologie* presented war as a struggle of faith, a struggle of light and darkness, the final hour propagated by an inherent religiosity.³⁴

Borrowed from the format of an early Netherlandish triptych of the fifteenth century, the compositional arrangement of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* engages with medieval notions of worship and ritual. The fundamental nature of the triptych format traditionally allows for the veneration of a central emulative figure flanked by a procession of apostles to the outer wings. In the context of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* the three panels of the triptych format allow Koelz to convey a cohesive narrative permeated by religious connotation. Koelz's triptych can be seen to satirise the emulative figure of the martyr; replacing it with a crucified cadaver that transforms the Passion of Christ into a condemnation of holy war. The universality of religious symbolism has allowed firmly embedded political-religious concepts to be used for ideological promulgation. Ironically, the religious format of the triptych may therefore also contribute to the commemoration of holy war. Koelz's triptych draws upon the iconography of crucifixion, pain and suffering, in order to invert the symbolic profundity of the triptych format to express his disdain for the Catholic Church. Koelz condemns representatives of the religious chaplaincy on the outer panels of his triptych as the apostles of war: highlighting the hypocrisy of Christianity's sanctification of warfare.

'Thou Shalt Not Kill', the sixth commandment, is Koelz's satirical attack on the very basis of Christian theology. Koelz's choice of title is a scathing indictment of the German episcopal hierarchy, which he depicts in the painting in direct contradiction of its doctrinal teachings. The title can also be seen as a rebuttal of belligerent National Socialist propaganda that validates killing – reminding viewers of the alleged sanctity of life. The triptych directly addresses the hypocrisy of a Church that espouses the sanctity of life, whilst unanimously promoting the glorification of war. Koelz's disillusionment with his Catholic faith is well expressed in his biographical accounts. He declares: 'I did not pray. My faith in the Almighty had been blown to smithereens long ago, in stinking holes in the bloodstained earth of Flanders.'³⁵ Koelz could not forgive the Church for propagating a blind obedience, a religious mysticism that condemned the ordinary man to cannon fodder.

During the First World War, the combatant powers exploited the religiosity of the populace. The Church facilitated the rationalisation of the war's enormous human toll, promoting a pious obedience to national aims. The Church and state spoke of a national interest and honour, of self-defence and survival. On all sides, governments, media and cultural figures presented these arguments in highly religious forms; the religious indoctrination of war proved highly effective.³⁶ The creation of the triptych coincided with the signing of the Reichskonkordat in 1933. This treaty, between the Holy See and Germany, required the Catholic Church to take an oath of loyalty to the President of the German Reich. It is likely that Koelz saw this to be a betrayal of his faith, an endorsement of Nazism indicative of the Church's surrender to fascism.

Thou Shalt Not Kill! cynically engages with religion in order to deconstruct notions of *Heldentod*: heroic death in the presence of God. It comments on a blind obedience, a pious mysticism that devised the war as a sacred experience. At the onset of war many bishops and prominent clerics declared their service to the German state, presenting a public profession of faith in the state's war aims.³⁷ Numerous bishops and priests performed blessings on troops preparing for war, and sometimes blessed the weapons of war themselves – an ironic subversion of Christian principles which Koelz chose to depict in his triptych. Clerical endorsement of holy war contributed to an aggressive nationalism that propagated the sanctity of war. The exclusionary German term '*Gott mit uns*' or 'God is with us (and only us),' summarised this religious indoctrination of warfare.³⁸

The outer panels of the triptych portray divergent congregations of the faithful, guided to war by their respective clerics (fig.8, fig.9). The clerics, identifiable by their holy vestments, dominate the outer panels of the triptych, and assemble representatives of the *Volk* in collective prayer. Their dominance signifies the religious indoctrination of the masses, a unanimous submission to the Divine Will: a blind obedience to a just war. Whilst it may be expected for clergy to support their nations at the time of war, Philip Jenkins points out,

that ‘in practise they went far beyond any simple endorsement and became vocal, even fanatical, advocates.’³⁹ Koelz’s triptych asserts the charade of war: a façade composed of excessive religiosity and xenophobic tropes. Koelz attests that he has ‘lost his faith in the Almighty’ and in *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* presents a condemnatory image of religious inversion.⁴⁰

Thou Shalt Not Kill! utilises the known conventions of crucifixion, adopting a painterly realism to provoke a receptive engagement with atrocity. Koelz employs existing conceptions of pain and suffering derived from the Renaissance, in order to solicit an emotive reaction to the horror of warfare. Art historian Mitchell B. Merback attests that ‘juxtaposing the terms “atrocious” and “realism” creates an uncomfortable semantic friction and anticipates a painful revulsion.’⁴¹ The triptych is an example of a ‘painful revulsion’, a pictorial dismemberment of the human body in the wake of total warfare. According to Merback ‘direct depictions of human cruelty and destructiveness, bodily violation, pain, suffering and death are ... among the most powerful representations that can circulate within a culture whose facility with images makes them possible in the first place.’⁴² Images of pictorial atrocity catalyse an array of emotions ranging from fear and horror, pity and guilt, to disgust and shame. For medieval people, the motif of the ravaged human body, bleeding from inflicted tortures, lay at the centre of religious doctrine, belief and devotional practice.⁴³ Koelz’s Christ-like pseudo martyr imagined in the figure of a crucified soldier, and presented in the triptych format, addresses this constellation of religious convention and spiritual practice.

The ambivalence of the crucifixion motif – a form of punishment, and a symbol of sacrifice – makes it an ideal means of addressing the paradoxes of holy war. Christ’s suffering may be construed as a form of aspirational sacrifice, the epitome of an ideal selflessness. Koelz can be seen to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the pseudo martyr, an avoidable casualty of a futile war. The ideology of sacrifice – laying down one’s life for a greater cause – validated and glorified the participation in the mortal combat of war; the act of dying in war is presented as nothing less than a sacred undertaking.⁴⁴ Koelz draws upon existing examples of the sacred, known depictions of martyred death, in order to manipulate conceptions of the divine. He utilises the imagery of a mortally wounded soldier, a crucified combatant and a mutilated corpse, in order to address sympathetic perceptions of pain linked to our own moral conscience and conception of bodily suffering. For Merback, wounds are transformed into spectacle – ‘we glimpse in it our own future in disarray.’⁴⁵ *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* presents the human body as the gruesome site of war – evoking the timeless warning of memento mori: remember death. Koelz utilises known conceptions of the martyr, of bodily pain and suffering, to comprehend the ruinous effects of war. The demolished body of the soldier thus functions as a cult image, a Christ-like rationale of suffering nobly endured. In Koelz’s triptych, crucifixion presents the spectacle of the body in pain as both dreadful and

painterly, abject and glorious; an ambiguous portrayal of sacrifice dependent on the emulation of Christ.

After 1918, traditional religious imagery became utilised by an international community looking to make sense of the war. Religious, classical and romantic tropes allowed the bereaved masses to alleviate their grief in the spiritual: religiosity became the consolidation of a 'universality of bereavement'.⁴⁶ During the interwar period the 'universality of bereavement' allowed pacifists and propagators alike to manipulate claims of holy war and sacrifice. The reception-history of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c.1516) evidences a politicization of religious imagery after the impact of the First World War. Exhibited in Munich during 1917, the altarpiece came to symbolise a cathartic experience; 'it was as if the spectators suddenly understood the meaning of the Passion anew; what had once been so familiar, or *Heimlich*, had now become uncanny ... in its familiar unfamiliarity.'⁴⁷ The *Isenheim Altarpiece* became a self-image of a martyred people, a manifestation of a German national spirit seeking the redemptive qualities of war; finding comfort in the unity of identifiable sufferance. The conviction that God Himself, through Christ, experienced the violence of human life – was a concept deeply entrenched in the legacy of war.⁴⁸ The importance of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a work of contemporary significance is presented in the numerous war triptychs of the twentieth century. For example, in his work, Koelz engages with the *Isenheim Altarpiece* to allocate new meanings to the triptych format. The martyred soldier in Koelz's triptych, although aligned with Christ, is deflated – the symbolism of martyrdom inverted to suggest that there is no redemption in war. Unlike the martyred Christ of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Koelz's pseudo-Christ is not mourned by a holy gathering. The soldier-martyr eerily levitates amidst a vacant no-man's land, suspended on a barbed wire cross. The transposal of religious imagery in the inter-war period presents a dyad of political and religious ideals linked to the legacy of war.

Conclusion

Thou Shalt Not Kill! is a work of personal, political and spiritual significance: a complex construction of subjective importance. Reflecting on her father's work, Ava Farrington suggests 'The message is yours for the taking. For me, it is a tribute to Everyman, the man on the barbed-wire cross.'⁴⁹ In my opinion, the work – as Farrington indicates – has no singular, definitive meaning; its purpose, to reflect upon and question both the meaningful and meaninglessness of war. I surmise that 'the man on the barbed-wire cross' is in fact Koelz himself. The triptych is testament to Koelz's identity as a soldier, disillusioned by defeat and alienated by his experiences of warfare. Koelz's work is defined by conflict, of inner as well as outer turbulence, catalysed by the anxieties of Weimar Germany. The resultant contradictions of his monumental triptych evidence the 'difficulty of seeing things clearly in a world of powerful mystifications.'⁵⁰

Koelz's political and ideological anxieties present a problematic contextualisation of *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* as a work that unanimously condemns yet commemorates war. How could the experience of war and a familiarity with mass bereavement be integrated into the lives of those who had returned?⁵¹ I have argued that the triptych is presented as a product of a man looking to make sense of the war, estranged from a post-war society of polarising extremes. Jay Winter notes in *Sites of Memory* (1995) that war memorials after 1918 evoked dual motifs: 'war as both noble and uplifting and tragic and unendurably sad.'⁵² War memorialization thus presented a duality of meaning, an ever-shifting dichotomy of condemnation and commemoration. The duality of sacrificial imagery, as discussed, is inherently problematic. To what extent can one commemorate war dead without commemorating the legacy of militarism? *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* evidences a struggle between direct condemnation and sentimental memorialization in Koelz's imagery of soldierly sacrifice.

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Images

- Fig.1 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph, 230 x 510 cm ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.2 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, 'Dead Soldier', central panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, 133.8 x 68.5 cm ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.3 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, part of 'Girl in National Costume', right panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.4 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, right panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.5 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, central panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.6 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, left panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
- Fig.7 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, section of left panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.
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Fig.9 Johannes Matthaeus Koelz, section of right panel, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* (c.1930–37), oil on panel, photograph ©The Estate of Johannes Koelz 2017.

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⁷ Boa (2000), p.59.

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⁹ James Van Dyke, *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History 1919-45* (Michigan, 2011), p.18.

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¹² Farrington (1995), p.65.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.43.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.61.

¹⁶ Gauleiter Adolf Wagner was Bavarian Minister of the Interior 1933 and Cultural Affairs 1936, and close friend of Hitler.

¹⁷ Farrington (1995), p.61.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.62.

¹⁹ Michael Clifford, 'The Man Who Wouldn't Paint Hitler', Video (60mins), The History Channel (2008).

²⁰ Simon Lake, cited in Maev Kennedy, 'Sketch Poser from Artist Who Snubbed Hitler', *Guardian* (6 October 2001), <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/oct/06/arts.highereducation>, accessed 9 February 2016.

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