A Call for Rebellion:

Ernst Barlach's Illustration for Reinhold Van Walter's poem, *Der Kopf*

Lindsay Inglis

University of Manitoba

Ernst Barlach created ten woodcuts that heroicize Russian peasants for Reinhold von Walter's poem *Der Kopf,* or, *The Head*, published by Paul Cassirer in 1919. *Der Kopf* describes the time leading up to the Russian Revolution. By focusing on the poverty of the workers and peasants in a poem that takes place two years prior, this artistic collaboration encouraged the German Revolution by reflecting upon the poverty of both countries.

Reinhold von Walter, a Baltic German living in St. Petersburg, immigrated to Berlin during the Great War and in 1918 worked as a translator in a prisoner-of-war camp in Gustrow, where he met Ernst Barlach.[1] His philosophical poem *Der Kopf* celebrates the Russian Revolution.[2] For von Walter poetry was a way of transforming his miseries and frustrations into art, it was his way of cleansing his soul.[3] *Der Kopf* centers around a beggar king, the 'head,' being carried by a tall, strong, blind peasant (figure 1).[4] Von Walter relates the blind peasant to St. Christopher, who carried a child across a river to safety without knowing it was the Christ child.[5] Von Walter's peasant is blind just as St. Christopher was blind to the image of Christ; turning the beggar king into a Christ-like figure. The head and the blind man carrying him work together; they could not survive without each other.[6] Von Walter criticizes those who do not feel compassion for those who are suffering. While describing the luxury of the wealthy, he warns them that while the peasants are poor today, tomorrow it will be the wealthy.[7] Von Walter describes the greed of the rich and the anger of the poor and compares the poverty in the world to a bone bare of any flesh.[8] The peasants are asking for compassion, they are starving.[9] This poem describes a disconnect between the mind and body; the beggars' minds are fed with horrific imagery of poverty, but this does nothing to fill their stomachs.[10] People are so hungry that this is all they can focus on.[11] Von Walter describes the head as a master in this realm of horror, saying that soon the mind and body will come together and their stomachs will be as full as their

minds.[12] He is promising that their suffering will come to an end.[13] Von Walter describes the same story that was continuously run in all of the newspapers: the soldiers had to retreat for tactical reasons but that they will prevail.[14] The head explains how the decline of the people has become a spectacle.[15] The poem ends with the head writing poetry, encouraging the people to rise up in revolution and rebel against the war.[16] The peasants and the workers want to crumble the current foundations of their society which overworked them and drove them into poverty. They want a revolution.[17]

There were two revolutions in Russia in 1917, the second to rectify the result of the first.[18] The first occurred because the Tsarist Government had failed to prepare Russia for the War and so were considered to be the enemy of the people.[19] The government was overthrown in March, but without a plan for a new government. Hampden Jackson states that "the workers put the bourgeoisie into power without making any stipulations about land-ownership or for an eight-hour day."[20] They replaced the Tsarist Government with a capitalist government, which lead to the second revolution.[21] As Leon Trotsky explained, "the revolutionaries were begging the liberals to save the revolution … [while] the liberals were begging the monarchy to save liberalism."[22] When Vladimir Lenin returned from Berlin he stated that "there must be another revolution aimed at giving power to the soviets, land to the peasants, bread to the starving, and peace to all men."[23] Lenin went on to lead the October Revolution, which the Bolsheviks, primarily working class revolutionaries, won, replacing the capitalist government and creating the first communist government.[24]

In 1906 Ernst Barlach traveled through southern Russia to visit his brother, who was working there as an engineer.[25] There he witnessed firsthand the struggle of the peasants.[26] Barlach wrote: "I found in Russia this amazing unity of inward and outward being, this symbolic

quality: this is what we human beings are, at bottom all beggars and problem characters … it shines out of the Slav, while others hide it."[27] This was a defining realization for Barlach and his art, he began to focus on depicting beggars. Alfred Werner believes that this trip is where Barlach found his unique manner of expressionism.[29] Instead of focusing sympathetically on their struggle he portrays them as heroes taking action, as in his 1914 sculpture *The Avenger* (figure 2). Barlach wrote in his diary in September 1914: "to me [*The Avenger*] is the crystalized essence of the war, the assault of each and every obstacle, rendered credible."[30] Barlach stated that he had begun the sculpture years before but stopped working on it because the composition seemed incoherent. In 1914 however, he wrote: "the unbearable is necessary."[31] Groves demonstrates that "the sense of life as a tragic struggle developed early in his life … [and that he] gained early insight … into suffering both physical and spiritual."[32] Throughout his childhood Barlach's mother spent months at a time in mental institutions.[33] He had a strong sense of familial responsibilities throughout his life.[34] After the death of his father in 1884, when Barlach was fourteen, the family was left in financial distress.[35] He was sent to Trade School, specializing in sculpture. Barlach traveled through small towns and in 1910 settled in provincial Gustrow.[36] As Werner describes, "Barlach was a provincial recluse … he avoided Berlin, where the majority of his colleagues lived."[37] When the war first broke out Barlach supported it and volunteered at a day centre for children whose fathers were at war and mothers had to work.[38] He later spent eleven weeks in training camp but was considered unfit and never called for active service.[39] His opinion of the War quickly changed however, and as Paul Raabe describes "he gave utterance from the midst of death and destruction to the call for compassion and brotherly love, for silent contemplation of eternal values."[40]

Paul Cassirer, an art dealer, began representing Barlach in 1908, earning him a regular income.[41] Cassirer was from a prominent artistic family that had moved to Berlin in the 1880's. Melissa Muller explains that the family "[rose] to prominence within a single generation – in parallel … with Berlin's rise from a provincial town to a cultural metropolis."[42] Cassirer was encouraged by his family "to pursue [his] genuine and strong passion for art," beginning an art gallery and publishing house in 1898.[43] In 1911 Cassirer began to hold avant-garde literary meetings in his gallery that were organized by the political journal *Die Aktion* [The Action].[44] During these evenings young poets, who were mostly unknown, would read their poetry aloud.[45] As Raabe describes, "much of the poetry was strange and not always entirely comprehensible."[46] The Great War, the Russian Revolution, and Germany's revolution, which began in November 1918, inspired artists and poets to try to influence a radical change in political and economic structures.[47] As Ralf Beil explains "politically minded artists wanted to play a role in the creation of a new form of government … they wanted to reach the masses."[48] When Cassirer was promoting Post-Impressionist artists, such as van Gogh, he could not understand "why writers hardly ever came to his shows."[49] He believed that art and literature were linked and promoted them equally. In 1910 he started a periodical, *Pan*, that embraced Expressionist art and literature and was "an important vehicle for expressionist writers," publishing plays, short stories, and poems that were often political.[50] Cassirer began another periodical in 1914 entitled *Kriegszeit* [Wartime]; although he quickly replaced it with the more skeptical *Der Bildermann* [The Illustrator].[51] Beil demonstrates that "for the expressionists, the end of World War One and the revolution of 1918-1919 presented an opportunity to expand the awareness of their ideas beyond their own circles to the broader population."[52]

In his art Barlach pursued the depiction of "human destiny stripped of all its trappings, exposed to the final issues of life and death, struggling for insight, swinging between despair and bliss."[53] Barlach abandoned naturalism and turned towards a gothic-inspired style.[54] Werner explains that "[Barlach] did not allow any contemporary style to influence him."[55] During the war Barlach made sculptures and lithographs that focused on poverty, human loss, and intense emotional hardship.[56] As Groves demonstrates "the concept of immense suffering occupied Barlach's mind with increasing anguish towards the end of the war."[57] The images of Russian peasants stayed with him from 1906; he saw them as heroic, and that is how he portrayed them in both his woodcuts and his sculptures. Cassirer published von Walter's poem with Barlach's woodcuts in 1919, one year after the war ended, yet the theme of suffering was still prominent in Barlach's work; he continued to see suffering in the world, and that is what he chose to portray. Von Walter's poetry is filled with historical and biblical metaphors; instead of focusing on that imagery Barlach highlights the peasants in each of his woodcuts. Barlach's first woodcut for the poem is the title figure, the head; a small figure whose body is not visible, lying down on a wooden platform looking dwarf-like (figure 3). The head prepares poems, inciting the people to rise up in rebellion against the War. The figure of the head is seen as a beggar king with a functionless body; although he does not look physically strong he is leading the revolution. This figure is meant to empower each and every peasant and worker, reminding them that they have the power to rise up heroically and help the revolution. This poem is not only a celebration of the Russian Revolution but, published in Berlin, was also meant as an encouragement to the ongoing German Revolution.

As Chris Herman explains "the First World War had devastated the German economy."[58] The workers continued living with shortages of food and fuel for heating as they did during the

War.[59] The German Revolution was inspired by the Russian Revolution, both drew from ideas of Marxism. When this poem was published in 1919 the Russian Revolution had ended over a year before, but the German revolutionaries were in the midst of their upheaval. As A. J. Ryder explains "the success of the Russian revolutionaries was felt as an encouragement by the [German] socialists."[60] This poem, published in Germany, identifies with the poverty in Russia prior to the Revolution, relating it to the contemporary poverty in Germany, and encouraging the rise to revolution. In the summer of 1919 a bourgeois republic was established in Germany and the workers were beginning to suffer.[61] There were nearly five thousand strikes that year with over fifty thousand factories affected.[62] As Jackson explains "the [German] industrial workers had no intention of accepting a parliamentary republic as Utopia, they had not given up the idea of Soviets."[63] The German Socialists admired and were inspired by the Russians; their government was overthrown on March 13, 1920.[64]

The inscription at the start of the poem is from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. He describes how opposites such as day and night only appear as opposites, but that they are actually one and the same; just as the mind and body appear different from one another but are a part of a whole.[65] It is an allusion to the idea that while Russia is not the same as Germany, their revolutions can be viewed as one in the same. German revolutionaries can be as victorious as their Russian counterparts. The head writes poetry to call a revolution among the Russian peasants and workers the same way von Walter wrote this poem to encourage the German Revolution. Just as von Walter turned a beggar into a king, Barlach turns peasants into heroes; for these artists the two are the same.

Barlach's eighth woodcut for the poem is entitled *Despair and Rebellion* (figure 4). One figure, Despair, is bundled up and crouched over in a hopelessly desperate attempt to stay warm.

The other figure, Rebellion, is crying out with one arm raised. He is worn down and thin, his clothes are too big for him and do nothing to shield him from the cold. Rebellion is shown putting all his energy into crying out, fighting against the government that has created this level of poverty within Russia. He is not hiding his face in a desperate, yet useless attempt to stay warm as is Despair; he is rising above despair, rising in rebellion. Towards the end of the poem when the head writes poetry urging the country to rise up in revolution, he reinforces their anger towards the conditions in which they live and reminds them that if they want change they need to resist the war.

While this poem portrays the lead up to the Russian Revolution, it acts as an allusion to the German Revolution. This poem and the images it contains was a message to the peasants and workers of Germany: if they want to see a change in their conditions of poverty they must continue supporting the strikes and the revolution.

End Notes

1. Der Kopf (The Head) https://www.moma.org/collection_ge/browse_results.php?object_id=18449 (visited on December 18, 2016)
2. Ibid.
3. Interview between Professor Oliver Botar and Professor Simone Mahrenholz, December 2, 2016.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Hampden J. Jackson. *The Post-war World: A Short Political History, 1918-1934.* London: V. Gollancz, 1935, p. 150, 152.
19. Ibid, 151-152.
20. Ibid, 151.
21. Ibid, 152.
22. Leon Trotsky, and Max Eastman. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1932, p. 129.
23. Hampden J. Jackson. *The Post-war World: A Short Political History, 1918-1934.* London: V. Gollancz, 1935, p. 152.
24. Ibid, 153.
25. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 3.
26. Ibid.
27. Alfred Werner. *Ernst Barlach*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, p. 13
28. Ibid, 14.
29. Ibid.

30. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 69.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid, 3.
33. Ibid, 3.
34. Ibid, 3.
35. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 3; Jerrold Holmes. "Ernst Barlach." *Parnassus* 2, no. 4 (1930), p. 19.
36. Alfred Werner. *Ernst Barlach*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, p. 4-5
37. Ibid, 5.
38. Ibid, 18.
39. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 7.
40. Ibid, 5.
41. Paret, Peter. *German Encounters with Modernism 1840-1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 162
42. Melissa Müller, Thomas Blubacher, Gunnar Schnabel, and Monika Tatzkow. *Lost Lives, Lost Art: Jewish Collectors, Nazi Art Theft, and the Quest for Justice*. 1. Publ. in Great Britain.. ed. S.l.]: Frontline Books, 2010, p. 12
43. Ibid.
44. Paul Raabe. *The Era of German Expressionism.* Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1974, p. 17, 37.
45. Ibid, 38.
46. Ibid, 38.
47. Roy F. Allen. *German Expressionist Poetry*. Twayne's World Authors Series; TWAS 543. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979, p. 106.
48. Ralf Beil, and Claudia Dillmann. *The Total Artwork in Expressionism: Art, Film, Literature, Theater, Dance, and Architecture, 1905-25*. Trade ed. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p. 144.
49. Paul Raabe. *The Era of German Expressionism.* Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1974, p. 17.
50. Paul Cassirer, Berlin https://www.moma.org/collection_ge/artist.php?artist_id=11881&role=3 (visited December 14, 2016)
51. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Ida Katherine Rigby, and Stephanie Barron. *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of*

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52. Ralf Beil, and Claudia Dillmann. *The Total Artwork in Expressionism: Art, Film, Literature, Theater, Dance, and Architecture, 1905-25*. Trade ed. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p. 144.
53. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 4.
54. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Ida Katherine Rigby, and Stephanie Barron. *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism.* Documents of Twentieth Century Art. New York : Toronto : New York: G.K. Hall ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993, p. 109.
55. Alfred Werner. *Ernst Barlach*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, p. 5.
56. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Ida Katherine Rigby, and Stephanie Barron. *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism.* Documents of Twentieth Century Art. New York : Toronto : New York: G.K. Hall ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993, p. 109.
57. Naomi Jackson Groves. *Ernst Barlach, Life in Work: Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics, Dramas, Prose Works and Letters in Translation*. Königstein Im Taunus: K.R. Langewiesche Nachfolger Hans Köster, 1972, p. 8.
58. Chris Harman. *The Lost Revolution: Germany, 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982, p. 144.
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60. Ryder, A. J. *The German Revolution, 1918-1919.* London: Published for Historical Association by Routledge and Paul], 1959, p. 5.
61. Chris Harman. *The Lost Revolution: Germany, 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982, p. 144.
62. Ibid, 145.
63. Hampden J. Jackson. *The Post-war World: A Short Political History, 1918-1934.* London: V. Gollancz, 1935, p. 42.
64. Chris Harman. *The Lost Revolution: Germany, 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982, p. 144.
65. Eleni Papamichael-Paspalides. "The Concept of One in Heraclitus." *Revue De Philosophie Ancienne* 23, no. 1 (2005): 41-54, p. 52.

Figure 1) Ernst Barlach, *Beggar Majesty*, 1919, woodcut, 13.6 x 14.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

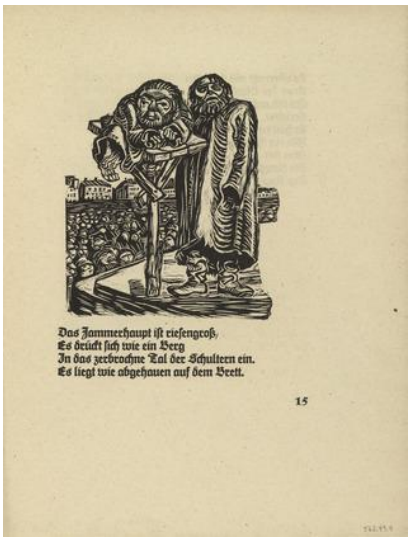


Figure 2) Ernst Barlach, *The Avenger*, 1914, bronze, 43.8 x 57.8 x 20.3 cm, Tate Modern, London.

Figure 3) Ernst Barlach, *Der Kopf*, 1919, woodcut, 13.6 x 14.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

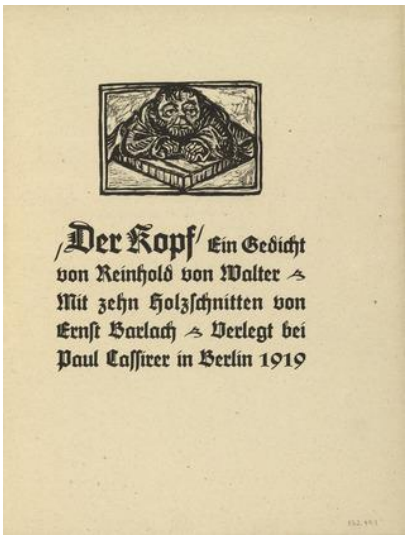
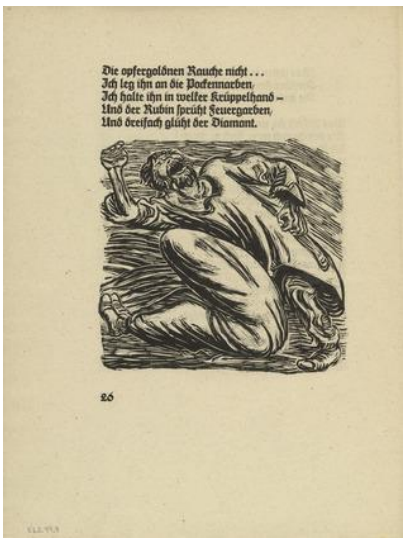


Figure 4) Ernst Barlach, *Despair and Rebellion*, 1919, woodcut, 13.6 x 14.4 cm, School of Art Collection, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.



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