

Käthe Kollwitz on the Rise of the Nazis (1930-33)

Abstract

The diary entries of the Berlin-based artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) grew shorter and far less frequent in the late 1920s than they had been in the years immediately after the First World War. During all of 1929, she wrote just six entries, totaling perhaps a dozen paragraphs, and this pattern held for the following years, too—ten entries in 1930, and just six again in 1931. Kollwitz's entries also focused in these later years of the Weimar Republic more and more exclusively on her circle of family and friends. Unlike earlier years, she rarely commented on politics after 1929, and none of her entries from this period once mentioned the Nazi Party explicitly or any of its leaders (her diary's first mention of Hitler came only in June 1934).

The sparseness of her diary writing stemmed partly from her increasing age and declining energy, as Kollwitz acknowledged in a brief New Year's entry in 1931. She echoed that sense of exhaustion entry in a New Year's Eve 1932 entry, in which Kollwitz reflected on what it meant for her generation to finally give way to a new one, a transition that Kollwitz tried to see in a positive light. The fact that Kollwitz rarely recorded her thoughts about the political situation in Germany during the last years of the Republic, however, did not mean that she had simply resigned herself to the tide of events. Kollwitz remained vigilant and very much engaged, especially in the summer of 1932. She poured a lot of her energy at this time into the July 1932 unveiling of her long-planned memorial to her son Peter, who was killed in battle in October 1914. The memorial, located in the cemetery where Peter lies buried, stood as a witness to horrors of war and a testimony to Kollwitz's longstanding engagement with the pacifist movement.

Source

Late December 1930

[...]

Creeping evil reactionary measures in all areas of life. Ban of the Remarque film.^[1] A bad time will come, or it already *is* a bad time. Unemployment in all parts of the world.

[...]

January 1st, 1931

Nothing is left of the old interest in reviewing the year just gone by. One just trudges on.

[...]

Fall 1931

[...]

Enormous upheaval. International shocks to capitalism. A true turn in global events.

[...]

Sunday, July 31st, 1932

In Cologne during the Reichstag elections. The three of us go to vote. It is terribly humid again. Hans travels to Trier. In the afternoon we hoped to take a short boat trip on the Rhine, but a thunderstorm prevented us from doing so. In the evening we went to the busy street "Hoher Weg," where we sat in a café while waiting to learn the election results.[2]

[...]

Late August 1932

[...]

I would have liked to travel to the anti-war congress in Amsterdam.[3]

The German Nationalists [DNVP] are in charge politically. Papen. A mood of resignation: Let him show what he can achieve. Special tribunals on the suppression of the "smoldering fratricidal war."

[...]

Silvester 1932

Konrad!

And in the spring Gertrud Goesch! And I'm constantly worried about Georg, and Karl is suffering so often. And Lise and I with our *tired* heads and hearts.[4]

And all the suffering around us. *And yet one could see and say positive things*: It is a time of change – we perish, but something new and better is coming. Certainly, but physical exhaustion goes along with mental exhaustion. It is a great effort to hope when one is so tired.

[...]

July 1933

On January 30, 1933 Hitler became Reich Chancellor. Then everything happened very quickly.

On February 15, Heinrich Mann and I have to resign from the Academy [Akademie der Künste, trans.]. Arrests and house searches. In late March we spent two weeks in Marienbad, where we went with the Wertheimers. In mid-April we came back, deeply determined to stay.

Complete dictatorship.

April 1st boycott against Jews.

Dismissals. Hans is still in office.

On May 10 books were burned. On May 21st we hear the news that Clara Zetkin is dead.

On Saturday, July 1st, all physicians belonging to the Social Democratic Association of Physicians [Sozialdemokratischer Ärzteverein] are banned from taking insurance. Karl, too.

Now in July, the Communist Party no longer exists, nor the Social Democratic Party, nor the Democratic Party, nor the German Nationalists, nor the Bavarian People's Party, nor the center Party. In all of Germany there is only the NSDAP now.

There is no opposition newspaper.

Everyone is brought into line.

Meanwhile we live and work. I am working on a group of sculptures, “Mother with two children,” [*Mutter mit zwei Kindern*]; by the end of September, I have to vacate my studio at the Academy. Work is going well.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Authorities prohibited *All Quiet on the Western Front* from screening anywhere in Germany, after Nazi groups disrupted the premiere in Berlin and threatened more such actions, ed.

[2] Kollwitz’s entry did not include those results, but the Nazi Party won just over 37% of the vote, making it the largest party in the Reichstag by far. This was the election for which she and other leading figures in Germany had written their “Urgent Appeal!” in June, in which they argued that that the KPD and SPD needed to create a unified list of candidates in order to stem the rising tide of Nazi electoral support, ed.

[3] The French writers Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse had called the antiwar congress in response to Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in September 1931. The congress gathered together 2,195 delegates from 29 countries, ed.

[4] Kollwitz mourned two significant deaths in 1932, those of her brother Konrad and her cousin Gertrud. The year also brought worries about her own health, as well as that of her husband Karl, her sister Lise, and Lise’s husband Georg, ed.

Source of original German text: Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz. East Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1989, pp. 652–655, 668, 670–71, 673.

Translation: GHI staff

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