

VLADSLO

German Soldiers' Cemetery

The Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof (German Soldiers' Cemetery) near the village of Vladslo is virtually a mass grave. The remains of more than 25,644 German soldiers are here.

Musketier Peter Kollwitz, Imperial German Army, is one of them. Originally buried at Esen, Peter's remains were moved to Vladslo, with thousands of other soldiers, in the mid-1950s.

Peter Kollwitz, age 19, died on 22 October 1914 when his unit was attacking Belgian defences at nearby Diksmuide. A Belgian officer graphically described these desperate German attempts by young, often untrained, German recruits:

"The enemy has concentrated many fresh troops opposite Dixsmuide and given the order to take the town, cost what cost. Scarcely an assault has been beaten off when they arrive again with ever-increasing strength. What have they been promised to let themselves be killed in such large numbers. What strong drinks have been poured out to give them such a wild courage. Drunk from blood, with devilish faces and howling like beasts, they charge again and again, falling over the heaps of dead, trampling down the wounded with their heavy boots. They are mown down by the hundreds but are coming on again. Some of them are able to reach the breast-works where it comes to cruel hand to hand fighting, striking with rifle butts, sticking with bayonets. Skulls are smashed, bodies are torn apart; but all in vain, nowhere are they able to break through. Eleven times in the northerly and easterly sector, fifteen times in the southerly sector, the waves are smashed to death".

Peter Kollwitz was one of the many German soldiers in Vladslo cemetery who died between 16 and 31 October 1914 in those futile attacks on Belgian positions during the Battle of the Yser. The dozens of flat marker stones, each containing a number of names and dates of death, are testament to the tragedy.

At the other end of the cemetery from the entrance lodge stands Käthe Kollwitz's tribute to her dead son, the statues known as 'Die Eltern' (The Parents). This powerful work speaks of the lasting effects of death in war on those at home.



After Peter's death, Käthe Kollwitz said to a friend: 'There is in our lives a wound which will never heal. Nor should it.'

The stone parents are kneeling, facing the cemetery. The father clasps himself tightly while the mother hangs her head in grief. Käthe and her husband, Dr Karl Kollwitz, brought the statues personally to Belgium. Of their last visit to Peter Kollwitz's grave and the statues, she wrote:

We went from the figures to Peter's grave, and everything was alive and wholly felt. I stood before the woman, looked at her – my own face – and I wept and stroked her cheeks. Karl stood close behind me – I did not even realize it. I heard him whisper, 'Yes, yes'. How close we were to one another then!





Käthe Kollwitz is undoubtedly one of Germany's most important artists. Engaging with her art is an enriching experience and helps us to better understand the present day. It is hard to believe that she was born 150 years ago.

On 8 July 2017 we celebrate the anniversary of her birth in both Berlin and in her birthplace, Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia). The special exhibition "Käthe Kollwitz and her friends" will mark the anniversary.