Bereavement was a devastating experience fundamental to the First World War. While there were many similarities in coping strategies across Europe, on a national level there existed specific historical social and cultural patterns of bereavement. In contrast to research on bereavement in other European countries and the history of war invalids, the tale of the bereaved in Germany has scarcely been told.[1] Recent research has focused largely on the “cult of combatants” which occludes the wartime experiences of a broad swath of German society. Unlike in other belligerent nations, mourning and remembrance after the war in the German Reich became characterised by the exclusion of bereaved families from commemoration practises. In order to explain the many
causes of this development, this article will analyse bereavement from a social, judicial and cultural standpoint.

**Everyday Life and Social Welfare Provisions for Bereaved Families**

According to an official German pamphlet from 1920, 525,000 widows, 1,130,000 orphans and 164,000 soldiers’ parents had to be financially supported by the state.\(^2\) The total number of bereaved persons was much higher than these figures suggest, as not all of those in mourning required financial support. Many of the 2 million fallen soldiers, who were mostly between nineteen and twenty-four years old, still had a living parent. Taking into account those who lost two or more children, it can be estimated that at least 1 million parents grieved for their sons.\(^3\) Most of these parents were not registered for welfare provisions because of independent income. We also know very little about the relatives of the approximately 700,000 civilians on the home front who died from hunger, disease or physical and emotional strain.\(^4\)

Though soldiers’ parents formed the largest group of bereaved adult family members, providing for the so-called *Kriegerwitwen* (war widows) and their families presented the greatest social-political challenge. Two-thirds of all widows were younger than thirty years old and around 97.9 percent of them had children, the majority of whom (about 76 percent) were under six years old.\(^5\) Only a good third of these widows married again after the war. In addition to their grief, nearly all widows found it difficult to get by financially.\(^6\) Their pensions were based on the military rank and not the previous income of their husbands. A widow of a rank and file soldier received 33,30 Marks per month which was about one quarter of a skilled worker’s usual income.\(^7\)

Additional provision and care for bereaved persons was first organised temporarily by semi-public organisations such as the “National Endowment for the Bereaved of Fallen Soldiers” (*Nationalstiftung für die Hinterbliebenen der im Krieg Gefallenen*). From 1915 on there were attempts to find a more consistent and uniform solution for this social-political problem. At this time a temporary “Committee for War Widows and Orphans” (*Hauptausschuss der Kriegerwitwen und Waisenfürsorge*) was first established.\(^8\) It worked closely with the *Nationalstiftung* and had a crucial influence on welfare policies for the bereaved at the federal and local level.\(^9\) However, in 1919 welfare policies for the bereaved and war invalids became a combined issue.\(^10\) When the “National Pension Law” (*Reichsversorgungsgesetz*) was passed in 1920, provisions for war victims were newly regulated.\(^11\) The financial improvements brought about by this law were largely hindered by hyperinflation. This meant great hardship for widows, especially those with small children, as they were scarcely able to feed their families with their small pensions.\(^12\)

War orphans were often very young, in most cases under the age of six, and were left with only one parent (often a much overstressed mother). These war orphans, described as a “superfluous
generation,” had their origins in the baby boom of the German Empire. They were too young to have been conscripted yet old enough to experience years of economic crisis and mass unemployment in the 1920s. It was a generation that very easily succumbed to the propaganda of National Socialism. 70 percent of the Hitler Youth’s (Hitlerjugend) leading figures belonged to this generation.

From the beginning of the war welfare authorities had to decide how the huge number of widows would ideally balance work and childcare duties as each statistically had one to two children under the age of six for whom to care. To this end, a plan for the rural settlement of Kriegerwitwen had been intensively discussed during the war. This seemed to be an ideal solution which would combine a healthy family environment with a gainful employment as well as a way to avoid food shortages. This approach, however, proved unfeasible on a mass scale. There was also a boom of newly founded childcare institutions during the war, though this system far from satisfied demand. When children were old enough to attend school, mothers were forced to work for their living. Under these conditions, the mortality rate for children and females rose remarkably.

Recent psychocardiological research has provided substantial evidence that mourning was and still is an important risk factor for morbidity. In addition to statistical evidence, this phenomenon was described in various primary sources such as diaries and letters. For example, the published correspondence of the Pöhlands, a German working-class family, shows clearly how a mixture of overwork, hunger and never-ending worries about the husband’s absence from the home as well as the wellbeing of five children (one of them seriously ill) led to the death of the mother, Anna Pöhland (?-1919). She succumbed to a lung disease a few years after her husband’s death in a military hospital. Statistics from the city of Mainz also show that 20 percent of bereaved war widows were suffering from nervous or abdominal diseases and another 10 percent from heart diseases or anaemia. About 10 percent were permanently disabled. Throughout the war many widows were given some support from charitable institutions. There was, however, often great mistrust between the charities and their dependants: “...these women came to their homes to see whether everything was tidy and clean and whether the working women were living decently. If they were not, all aid was stopped.” Detailed questionnaires about the family situation, talks with priests and neighbours as well as inspections of the family home were all part of the welfare system’s daily routine for dealing with bereaved persons.

On a social-political level “competition” between different groups of victims led to a marginalisation of the bereaved, as Karin Hausen has shown. During the 1920s their individual independent organisations were dissolved one after another and incorporated into larger war victims organisations. The Reichsbund der Kriegbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen was the most important and influential of these organisations in the Weimar Republic. The Reichsbund, which was linked to the Social Democrats, was established in 1917 in order to give war victims a political voice. While it did provide the bereaved with membership in an influential
organisation, the special interests and demands of the bereaved were largely underrepresented compared to those of the war invalids. At the *Reichsbund’s* annual meeting in Würzburg in 1920, scarcely 10 percent of the voting delegates were bereaved women. Speakers openly mentioned the discrimination of the bereaved in social reforms, and the very few articles about bereaved in the organization’s journal indicated that less support was given to their interests. This discrimination must be seen in a broader perspective: discourse about “unfaithful warrior wives” during the war and "lamenting women" as part of the *stab in the back* legend had introduced a negative perception of war widows.

**The Emotional Regimes of Grief**

The German language does not differentiate between “grief” (the emotion) and “mourning” (practises of grief). Both are described by the single word “Trauer.” Yet grief is not a universal emotion which can be analysed irrespective of time and social structures. It is a political issue. It is produced, directed and governed. It is also a physiological process. William M. Reddy, one of the leading historians in the field of the history of emotions, claims that emotional suffering is an important counter-argument to the thesis of emotions solely as social constructs. Accordingly we have to understand mourning as a simultaneous cultural and physiological process.

During the First World War the emotion of grief, the question of its appropriateness as well as its public expression, were all part of a changing process. Grief as an emotion was, in this respect, modelled differently for men and for women. Since the 19th century, female personifications of grief were seen typically at European cemeteries by the graves of affluent families. Bourgeois women were expected to wear mourning garments and to withdraw themselves from the public, whereas men had to return to (professional) normality almost immediately. Therefore grief as a practice and an emotion at the beginning of the First World War was attributed to women. Although letters show us close relationships between fathers and sons, in Germany there were only a few literary or artistic depictions of mourning fathers in the public domain. Many literary examples demonstrated that fathers were expected to “transfer” their own grief to the mother and to control the process of mourning.

Clara Viebig (1860-1952) for example, in her successful novels *Töchter der Hecuba* (*Hecuba’s Daughters*) and *Das rote Meer* (*The Red Sea*), illustrated the waiting and grief of families on the so-called home front from 1917 onwards. She described how the father in the Bertholdi family dealt with the notice of their son’s death: “Powerless, helpless, he was standing next to his wife; he nearly stopped moaning because of his wife’s moaning.” Finally his wife, Hedwig Bertholdi, was overwhelmed by her grief and screamed her son’s name again and again. Her husband tries to stop her: “Do not abuse yourself so. [...] His unsteady voice became firm; his hand was lying heavy on her shoulder. She wanted to jump up, he pushed her down again.” This is a typical literary example, in which the wife’s mourning stands at the centre, but the husband frames the emotional style of mourning.
At the same time there was no consensus if or how (female) grief should be felt or expressed in public. Even a guidebook to comfort and consolation, in which several famous female authors, social reformers and noble women wrote warlike “keep on going” slogans, failed to provide a single answer on how to mourn. While some of these authors emphasised that it was embarrassing to cry over a soldier’s departure, others like Helene Stöcker (1869-1943) used Antigone to create a common narrative. Antigone’s image, in an emotional contrast to the violent world of men, allowed women the feeling and display of loss and grief. This particular narrative was widespread in the female intellectual milieu, especially during the last two years of the war. In some respects it was the counterpart to the topos of the unaffected “brave” Spartan hero's mother. From 1915/16 on, poems, novels and novellas presented female “communities of mourning.” Similar to the idea of male comradeship, female intellectuals imagined their own community of suffering during the war.

Both models of emotional coping, deep mourning and proud morning, have popped up throughout the cultural history of female grief in times of war in all belligerent nations, but in the case of Germany the deep mourning female provided a very strong image. The wearing of black clothes and the display of deep mourning were largely accepted in the German Reich until the end of the war.

The focal point of public bereavement changed after defeat. Due to the occupation of the Ruhr until 1924, gravesides were barely accessible to German families. One of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles had given the responsibility of maintaining cemeteries to the state in which the graves laid regardless of the country of origin of the deceased. For example, France had to maintain 675,000 German soldiers’ graves, 225,000 of whom were buried in collective graves. To undermine these provisions, France for example, which had to pay for the upkeep of many German graves, repatriated its own soldiers. For Germans, the repatriation of bodies was only possible in a very limited number of cases, as for Manfred von Richthofen (1892-1918), due to the expense as well as political and organisational problems.

Even after 1924, when graveside visits were possible, the German War Graves Commission aimed to govern the mourning process strictly. Representatives of the Commission stressed that families’ attempts to decorate graves individually were not welcome. In contrast, bereaved families from Britain could put a private inscription on their soldier’s grave for a certain fee. In Germany, the grave only symbolised soldierly comradeship. The deceased was foremost a soldier and not a son. Travel to and from the gravesites was also costly. Unlike in France where the state paid for travel costs for the relatives of a deceased soldier once a year, the German War Graves Commission helped with the organisation of a trip but the cost itself had to be paid for by the families. Therefore widows with small children often could not afford to visit gravesites.

After the war, the bereaved disappeared from the stages of remembrance in Germany in contrast to other victorious nations. In England bereaved mothers and widows played a crucial role during commemoration ceremonies. In Canada, Australia, the United States and Italy female
associations of the bereaved were founded and mothers received medals such as the golden star or silver cross.[42] Various cultural rituals in different nations publicly underlined the importance and the suffering of the bereaved and tried to – and this is maybe even more significant – create “meaningful” post-war narratives.

In Germany, not only were the social-political demands of the bereaved substantially sub-ordinated to those of war invalids, but bereaved parents and widows were only marginally involved in the commemorations of the veterans’ organisations.[43] Even pacifist discourse instrumentalised grieving mothers for its own political aims and accused them of giving their sons to the war.[44] Ultimately, grief in the Weimar Republic was narrowed down to one-dimensional sculptures of pietas, mostly erected in ecclesiastical domains and which excluded parental grief from the public and political sphere.[45] Due to its exceptional iconography, the sculpture of “the mourning parents” by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) which is located at the German war cemetery in Vladslo (Belgium) has retained its emotional power. However Kollwitz herself tried very hard over the years to overcome the image of silent sacrificial motherhood which was crucial to the cult of the fallen soldier.[46]

The war experiences and suffering of groups other than the soldiers at the front were merely secondary. When Helene Hurwitz-Stranz published her anthology Kriegerwitwen gestalten ihr Schicksal (War Widows shape their Destiny) in 1932, one of the very few publications dealing with the subject of bereaved families, she was criticised by a social democratic reviewer that this presentation of personal stories was unnecessary and against class interests (“Klassenstandpunkt”).[47]

**Conclusion**

Bereavement was a broad social and emotional experience of the First World War. Yet the focus of war victims’ organisations lay solely on an improved welfare provision. The organisational merging of the political aims for war invalids and the bereaved contributed to the further dissolution of independent bereavement associations in the early twenties. Although female mourning and grief were mostly accepted and discussed in the public realm during wartime, these were rarely represented in public practises of remembrance after Germany’s defeat. Altogether this led to the inferior position of the bereaved on a cultural, social and political level and ultimately contributed to the destabilisation of the Weimar Republic. Whether the propaganda of National Socialism and its method of dealing with the bereaved in the thirties (e.g. crosses of honour for surviving dependents, evenings for the parents of fallen combatants of the First World War), capitalised on the bereaved in various ways is another interesting question.

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Notes


3. ↑ Another way to approach the real number of mourning parents is to look at the number of people who applied twelve years after the end of the war for national socialist Ehrenkreuz für Kriegereltern which yields the figure of 373,950 parents. See Winkle, Ralph: Der Dank des Vaterlandes. Eine Symbolgeschichte des Eisernen Kreuzes 1914 bis 1936, Essen 2007, p. 313.


Probleme der Kriegshinterbliebenenfürsorge, p. 98.


Probleme der Kriegshinterbliebenenfürsorge 1917, p. 78.

Hausen, Geschlechtergeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte 2012, p. 355f.

Brey, Henriette: Warum brauchen wir Kriegshinterbliebene einen eigenen Verband und eine eigene Zeitung. In: Die Kriegerwitwe 4 (1920), pp. 1-3. Widows counted for 175,300 members within the Reichsbund in 1920 (compared with 394,900 war invalids). If one adds the number of children, the bereaved were indeed the bigger group.


For example the speech of Dr. Kerschensteiner, in: Bericht des Bundesvorstandes 1920.


Kundrus, Birthe: Kriegerfrauen. Familienpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg, Göttingen 1995, pp. 200ff.; Boak, Helen, Women in Weimar Germany, Manchester 2013, p. 38. During the demobilisation it was even debated whether widows with children should give up their jobs to returning soldiers, see Kuhlman, Of Little Comfort 2012, p. 45.


Kuhlman, Of Little Comfort 2012, pp. 7ff.


33. ↑ This term comes from Winter, Jay: Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History, Cambridge 1995, pp. 29ff.


36. ↑ There was no change in advertising and presenting of mourning dresses between 1914 and 1918 in women’s magazines: see for example one of the most widely read magazines: Das Blatt gehört der Hausfrau 1914-1918. Zeitschrift für die Angelegenheiten des Haushalts sowie für Mode und Handarbeiten.


39. ↑ Kriegsgräberfürsorge 9 (1929); see Brandt, Vom Kriegsschauplatz 2000, pp.152 ff.


Selected Bibliography


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