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Lamszus, Wilhelm

By [Gerd Hankel](#)

Lamszus, *Wilhelm* (Paul Willis)
educator, writer
Born 13 July 1881 in Hamburg, Germany
Died 18 January 1965 in Hamburg, Germany

Wilhelm Lamszus was a progressive educator from Hamburg. He is known beyond the realm of education in particular for his book *The Human Slaughter-House. Scenes from a War That Is Sure to Come* (*Das Menschenschlachthaus. Bilder vom kommenden Krieg*), published in 1912, in which he warns readers about the destructive force of modern, industrialized war.

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Writing in Opposition to Modern War

As a teacher at a primary school in Hamburg, Wilhelm Lamszus (1881-1965) developed a humanist outlook early in life. He collaborated with his colleague [Wilhelm Paulsen \(1875-1943\)](#) to develop a new, progressive approach in education that placed individual pupils at the center of instruction and aimed to foster their skills and build self-confidence.

Lamszus was inspired to write *The Human Slaughter-House. Scenes from a War That Is Sure to Come* from his experience with modern [military technology](#) as a reservist participating in military exercises. He perceived the destructive impact of [modern, technological warfare](#) as a stark contrast

to the mainstream portrayal of war as heroic, especially in contemporary (German) politics. He predicted that a future war would be horrific and that no one would win. According to Lamszus, political leaders had to be aware that the next war would be an organized form of mass suicide.

Lamszus's account of the fate of a young man, the father of two children, is only a bit more than one hundred pages long in the original edition and was written by the author in a few days. The short scenes impress the reader in their dense and multilayered form. The book begins with Germany's mobilization of troops against France, at the time perceived by Germans as their country's "hereditary enemy". Like his comrades, Lamszus's main character goes off to war to marching music and the blessing of the church, but he is not so much enthusiastic as he is resigned to his fate and anxious about the family he is leaving behind. On the way to his first operation, he sees the first dead man, who almost appears to be sleeping, and records astonishment and incredulity at how close life and death are to one another. "But then there came more and more of them. And by this time we have become accustomed to them."^[1] Machine guns and grenades kill from a distance, spark hatred of the enemy; mercy is no longer given. Mine fields fulfill their treacherous function: "[T]he whole regiment is lying mangled on the ground here, a lump of humanity crying to Heaven."^[2] Opposition to the cynical officers begins to emerge ("Murderers! Kill them!"),^[3] and death is omnipresent and inescapable. This realization leads to madness and hallucinations, to which the book's protagonist eventually succumbs. Imagining himself the last survivor of all humankind, he completes mass death by committing suicide.

Success and Moral Uprightness

The book had an enormous impact. Within three months, one hundred thousand copies were sold in Germany and soon an inexpensive "people's edition" was released in German, as well as a number of foreign-language editions, including translations into English, French, Finnish, and Japanese. Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) wrote the preface to the French edition. The reactionary press ranted and the Prussian-German authorities attempted to silence Lamszus. His next book, titled *The Madhouse* (*Das Irrenhaus*), was ready to go to print in 1914 but permission for publication was not given until 1919. In this book, readers reencounter the young man who is the main character in *The Human Slaughter-House*. He is not dead but is rather in a field hospital, where he impatiently awaits his recovery and observes the suffering and death around him. His visions of a future in which peace reigns between the nations are juxtaposed with the brutal reality he experiences. The book ends with the soldier returning to his home in Hamburg, more or less recovered from his injuries, only to learn that his family has died shortly before in a bomb attack on the city.

Lamszus's work in opposing war and violence did not abate throughout his life. After losing his job and banned from teaching by the Nazis in 1933, he nonetheless remained active illegally during the Nazi era. His many publications, written under the pseudonym Paul Willis, testify to his lifelong commitment to promoting peace and pupil-centered activities in education.

Section Editor: [Christoph Jahr](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Lamszus, Wilhelm: **Das Menschenschlachthaus. Visionen vom Krieg.** [Erster und Zweiter Teil, neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Andreas Pehnke], Bremen 2014, p. 30
2. ↑ Ibid., p. 49.
3. ↑ Ibid., p. 52.

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