



PAX 1919: a medal for the vanquished

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Death, conquest, famine and disease, have ever been the monstrous outcomes of armed conflict. But it was the perception that an equal or even greater set of horrors were embedded in the formal conclusions of the Great War - the peace treaties - that moved an elusive Hungarian born artist to highlight the plight of the defeated Central Powers in 1919 via a curiously enigmatic and decorative commemorative medal.

The accepted liberal interpretation, largely based on J M Keynes' *The Economic Consequences of the Peace?*, that an overly repressive and vindictive Versailles Treaty ensured its early failure, has long been subject to a vigorous revisionist scrutiny. A lively debate on the Settlement's essential meaning and its consequences continues[1]. No such uncertainty of understanding existed in 1919 for a contemporary, Hungarian born and Munich based, artist, who saw in the peace treaties nothing less than tragic and unmitigated disaster for Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Erzsbet Esse[2], born in Jnoshza, Vas, Hungary on 28 June 1883, studied in Berlin, Florence and Munich, specialising primarily in the production of small-scale sculptures, medals and plaques. Based in Munich during the First World War, she came much under the influence of the sculptor and medallist Ludwig Gies (1887-1966), notable for his deeply humanitarian responses to the predicament of powerless civilians caught in the maelstrom of war. A number of her medals reflected her particular concerns for the consequences of war on her original homeland Austria-Hungary

Taking the view that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles[3] merely heaped war guilt, national humiliation, occupation and impossible financial compensations on a society already crippled by economic collapse, rebellion, and starvation, Esse was moved to commemorate this perceived injustice by means of a remarkable bronze medal. Her *PAX 1919* eschews the stark and brutal expressionist style favoured by some German medallists in favour of a decorative[4] and unambiguously melancholic commentary of the implications of peace for the vanquished. Inspired by late medieval imagery and armour, she employs the image of a helmeted head of a female warrior whose eyes are closed in grief and disbelief; a face portraying the very essence of dejection. Inconsolable, the defeated warrior is unable to look upon the unbearable present and unwilling to confront the dread uncertainties of the future. The reverse of the piece bears simply the armorial shields of Germany, Hungary and Austria.

No greater contrast in tone and expression might be found than that between the imagery employed on Esse's privately produced German medal and the prolifically distributed British official tributes to victory in the Great War represented by the British War Medal (1914-1920) and Victory Medal (1914-1919) - both authorised in 1919. William McMillan's[5] reverse designs for these two pieces follow the conventional route. On his War Medal the arms of the Central Powers and the scull and cross bones, symbols of death, are trampled under the hooves of a victorious horseman (St George); on the Victory Medal, the winged figure of Victory (Nike)[6]

diffidently withholds a palm branch ' symbolic of triumph complementing the blithely reassuring inscription on the reverse.

It has been estimated that over 6 million War Medals and Victory medals were issued.^[7] The number of examples of *PAX 1919* produced, though unknown, may not have reached a hundred.

References

- *?Behind German Lines?*, Thomas Hockenull, British Museum Magazine, Spring/Summer 2014, pp 32-33.
- *'The Dance of Death. Medallistic Art of the First World War'*, Mark Jones, British Museum Publications, 1979
- *'The Art of the Medal'*, Mark Jones, British Museum Publications, 1979
- <http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/untoldstories/tag/william-mcmillan-1887-1977/>
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[1] 'Keynes and the Cost of Peace?', Margaret Macmillan, New Statesman America, 31 October 2018: see <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/10/keynes-and-cost-peace>

[2] Erzsébet (?Elizabeth?) Esse died in Munich, 17 September 1954. Source (accessed 26-Mar-2019): <https://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/vo/elisabeth-von-esseo-1.html>

In the UK examples of Esse's work are held by the British Museum (Coins and Medals Department) and the Imperial War Museum (Art Department). Her name has been rendered variously in English form including 'Elizabeth von Esse' and, possibly, 'Elizabeth d'Esseo'.

[3] The Allied peace settlement with Germany, the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919 (the fifth anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand). On 10 September 1919 the signing of the Treaty of St Germain formalised peace with the new Austrian republic, and the Treaty of Trianon, dealing with Hungary, was signed on 4 June 1920.

[4] It was on her part a deliberate rejection of expressionist tendencies; see *'The Art of the Medal'*, Mark Jones, British Museum Publications, 1979, p.151

[5] William Mcmillan (1887-1977), Scottish born sculptor and medallist. See: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-31396> (Public library reader's ticket number required for free access)

[6] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nike-Greek-goddess>

[7] *The Medal Yearbook 2010?*, edited by J W Mussell, Token Publishing Limited, pp 170-171

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