In the Second World War the Germans attached the highest importance to the role of art as a vehicle for propaganda. One of the most significant propaganda publications was the lavishly illustrated art magazine *Der Kunst im dritten Reich* (Art in the Third Reich) and *Die Kunst im deutschen Reich* (Art in the German Reich) which was first published in January 1937 by Gauleiter Adolf Wagner. After the first six monthly issues the format was changed and it was published at the direction of Hitler himself, under the supervision of a group of directors that included Professor Dr. Ing. Fritz Todt, Generalbauinspektor, Professor Albert Speer of Berlin, Professor Richard Klein of the Academy of Applied Arts in Munich and Professor Leonard Gall of Studio Troost in Munich. The magazine was large in size, huge in scope and printed on the finest quality paper using the best of available inks, notwithstanding the acute shortage of these materials. Many of the illustrations were never published elsewhere and none published in a larger format. There appeared to be no shortage of German artists willing to contribute to the magazine.

There was no place in this magazine for avant-garde German artists who were branded both enemies of the state and a threat to German culture. During the course of the war these artists became invisible. Max Beckmann fled to Amsterdam, Max Ernst emigrated to America, Ernst Kirchner committed suicide and Paul Klee spent his years in exile in Switzerland but was unable to obtain Swiss citizenship because of his status as a degenerate artist. Other artists remained in internal exile.
Otto Dix retreated to the countryside to paint unpopulated landscapes in a style that would not provoke the authorities. The Reichskulturkammer forbade artists such as Edgar Ende and Emil Nolde from purchasing painting materials. Those who remained in Germany were forbidden to work in universities and were subject to surprise raids by the Gestapo in order to ensure that they were not violating the ban on producing art work. On the night of 27 July 1942 a large amount of ‘degenerate art’ by Picasso, Dali, Ernst, Klee, Leger and Miro was destroyed in a bonfire in the gardens of the Jeu de Paume Museum.

One avant-garde German artist who did not contribute to Die Kunst im deutschen Reich but who did not become entirely invisible was Hermann Gross. Gross was born on February 4th 1904 in Lahr in Baden. During the early part of his career he had served a series of apprenticeships with some of the most eminent European practitioners in their respective fields: Paul Haustein (gold and silversmithing), Waldemar Raemisch (sculpture), Robert Wlérick (sculpture), and Picasso (painting). Gross rarely talked of the time that he had studied and worked in Picasso’s studio along with a number of other art students. He had greatly admired Picasso both for his humanity and for his art. However he did acknowledge that the most important and formative time in his life was when he was in the presence of Picasso. He felt that his inner being was being addressed and many unknown qualities within his being were awakened. His greatest disappointment and pain were experienced when one of his fellow students so upset Picasso that he threw them all out of his studio. However a short time later Picasso did allow Gross to see him again. At this meeting Picasso took a large blank piece of paper and wrote his signature at the bottom. He then told Gross that if he was ever in real despair, he could fill the paper and make use of it in whatever way he thought fit. For Gross this was the greatest present that he had ever received, for it showed Picasso’s trust in his moral character and acknowledged his professionalism. He treasured the paper for the rest of his life but never had cause to use it.

And then came the war. According to an interview given to William Dunbar of the Scottish Sunday Express in October 1963, Gross was conscripted into the Luftwaffe and trained as an air gunner, (Dunbar, 1963). “Fortunately”, according to Gross, “I was medically discharged before I saw any action. You see, I could not have killed anyway. I felt too strongly that man’s mission on earth was to create, not to destroy”. It is clear from existing documentary records that Gross was not discharged from the Luftwaffe but served as a war artist in one of Goering’s Propaganda Companies based in Paris. The question arises as to the reasons for the medical discharge. On his own admission it is clear that Gross would not have
made a very effective air gunner thus putting the lives of the rest of the aircrew at risk. His discharge was most probably on the grounds of psychological unfitness for the task. His selection for a Luftwaffe propaganda unit almost certainly resulted from his specialist knowledge and expertise.

Given his location in Paris in 1940 and his membership of a propaganda unit, it would have been impossible for Gross not to have known of the existence of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) unit and what it was doing. Hermann Goering established this unit in 1940 and it was the official Nazi office charged with confiscating important, mainly Jewish, art collections in the western Nazi-occupied territories. ERR was housed in the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris and operated there from 1940 to 1944. It is believed to have looted more than 21,000 individual objects from over 200 Jewish-owned collections. By 1945 Goering possessed over 2000 individual pieces, including more than 1300 paintings. The fact that Gross was a witness of, and indirectly complicit in, the wholesale plundering of the artistic heritage of the city he loved by his own countrymen must have had a devastating psychological effect upon him. Further, the fact that his own work and that of the artists he most admired—Matisse, Picasso, Braque—were regarded as degenerate by the authorities would have been hard to bear.

Whilst stationed in Paris, Gross went to see Picasso. As he entered the studio, he became aware of the fact that he was wearing his Luftwaffe uniform and he had apologised profusely to Picasso. However, Picasso had very graciously brushed the apology aside and had simply said: “I only see the painter in you.”

Ten photographs of sketches drawn by Gross whilst serving in the propaganda unit were found recently among his personal papers. It remains a mystery how Gross was able to photograph this sensitive material and then keep copies of it. There can be no doubt as to their authenticity as some still have the official Luftwaffe tickets attached. From these tickets, it appears that Gross was an Obergefreiter (Royal Air Force equivalent of Leading Aircraftman) and a member of Luftwaffe Propaganda-Kompanie 3 and engaged as a Pressezeichner (press draughtsman). Propaganda companies usually consisted of reporters, radio commentators, photographers, cameramen and artists, whose duty it was to secure reports of troops in action, for publication by press and radio and to take film for inclusion in newsreels.

All the drawings undertaken by Gross concerned the defences which were being constructed along the French north coast—Hitler’s Atlantic Wall (Kanalküste). From the topography it appears we are looking at the chalk cliffs somewhere along the Normandy coast. Hitler’s Wall was intended to reduce German military weakness in the West and thereby deter or impede an Allied invasion. The work
on the Wall was undertaken from late 1942 to the summer of 1945. The Todt Organization, a semi-independent agency under the Ministry of Armaments, was responsible for the Wall’s construction. By 1943, 250,000 workers had poured up to 800,000 tons of concrete monthly into sophisticated fortifications, some of immense proportions. In the period 1942-1944, the Germans used over 17 million cubic metres of concrete and 1.2 million metric tons of steel for the Atlantic Wall. Whilst Adolph Hitler boasted that he was the greatest fortress builder of all time, he never once visited the Channel fortifications. The intention of the German propaganda machine was to emphasize the impregnability of these fortifications in the months prior to the D-Day landings. In the event, the Wall proved less effective than had been promised.

Are the carefully drawn sketches by Gross simple and straightforward representations of what lay before him, or instead was he trying to communicate a hidden message, which if it had been detected would almost certainly have resulted in harsh punishment—possibly death? If it was the latter what was it that drove Gross to act in this way? It is doubtful if there was any one factor. He would have been angered at the dismissal by the Nazis of most of modern art as ‘degenerate’—particularly the work of those Jewish artists like Chagall, Modigliani and Soutine who he particularly admired. The wholesale pillaging of the art treasures of Paris by the Nazis that he witnessed would have depressed him, as Paris had been his beloved spiritual home.

Presumably the intention in the first sketch is to take the bunker as the principal focal point, yet it is what lies beside the bunker that catches our attention. Is it accidental that in this sketch the discarded planks that lie alongside the bunker have fallen in the shape of a cross? At the top of the central plank there is a circle of barbed wire. Is it too far-fetched to imagine this as the crown of thorns on Christ’s brow? After the war Gross was obsessed with producing an endless series of dark brooding pictures of the crucifixion and resurrection. In studying the planks entangled in the barbed wire, is it also possible to detect a distorted Star of David swathed in barbed wire? Might this be an allusion to the internment of Jews and others in concentration camps?

What else might this sketch be saying? We are presented with a reinforced and sharply angular concrete building, the simplicity, functionality and brutality of which mirror features of Bauhaus architecture. It is ironic that Bauhaus architecture was discredited by the Nazi regime not least because of its association with the Weimar Republic. A feature of the bunker itself is that the observation
platform is empty. We have a skull-like construction that is eyeless and lacking vision.

A curious aspect of this sketch is the haphazard way in which the barbed wire lies alongside the bunker. It seems improbable that any self-respecting German soldier would have tolerated such an inadequate and untidy defensive structure. One is tempted to conclude that Gross used artistic licence here to make a point. Whilst the bunker sketched by Gross gives all the appearance of something solid and permanent, the chalk cliffs behind it, which Gross highlights, remind us that nothing is enduring in the face of the sea. And so it has proved, for most of the 15,000 bunkers and other defensive fortifications built along the Channel coast are in the process of disintegration, having been affected by erosion and rock falls. Was Gross implying that tyrannies, like bunkers, do not last forever?

The meticulously clean, bloodless and aseptic tiled underground operating theatre seen in this sketch is striking for a number of reasons. All the soldiers, including the person who is being operated upon, are accoutred in incongruously shiny jackboots—a symbol later to be applied to cruel and authoritarian behaviour.
or rule. There is a high degree of irony here too in that even jackbooted soldiers are revealed as vulnerable and require dedicated care and attention in order to survive. The operation is conducted adjacent to a cupboard on which there is what one must assume to be a Red Cross—the symbol that is placed on humanitarian and medical vehicles and buildings to protect them from military attack! Whilst there is always a danger of reading too much into a drawing, it is noticeable that the stability of the trolley upon which this delicate operation is being performed is dependent on the cross bracing joining the legs. Without such cross bracing the table would collapse.

Put another way, without the cross (i.e., Christianity), civilization will collapse.

In this third sketch it is tempting to see the three gigantic concrete mixers that are located at the top of a hill as a grotesque representation of Calvary—the site of Christ’s crucifixion. The paradox here is that the three mixers are only kept ‘alive’ through the nonstop efforts of slave labour. We are witnessing a modern day ‘crucifixion’ in which many of those working on these sea defences died. The inference that this sketch may be an allusion to Calvary is strengthened by reference to the succession of sketches that Gross drew of crucifixion scenes after the war.

Was Gross seeking to communicate hidden messages in these sketches? Art in Northern Europe has been rich in hidden symbolism. For example, in the
15th century Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, two masters of Northern Renaissance art, used symbols to communicate messages which would have been viewed as heretical and subversive if spoken or written at that time, (Harbison, 1995). Through their art they were able to allude to the kind of shortcomings in the Catholic Church that Martin Luther later condemned (e.g., van Eyck’s *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin*: 1433 Musée du Louvre, Paris and van der Weyden’s *The Seven Sacraments*: 1445-50 Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp). This was risky because their livelihood depended to a significant degree on church patronage. They were taking a gamble just as Gross was doing; however the stakes for Gross were much higher, as he was commenting critically not only about the brutal character of the Nazi regime but also its antipathy to art and religion.

There are a lot of unknowns here. It is not known how many sketches were drawn by Gross. Nor is it known whether the sketches were simply to be kept as a documentary record or whether they were intended for publication. It is also not known what proportion of his sketches contained possible hidden messages. Did Gross keep copies of these 10 sketches in the hope that at some time in the future an archivist might discover them and realise their significance?

Towards the end of the war, Gross was posted to Poland and then Russia, where he served as a guard for the command headquarters. There he had to endure bitterly cold winters with inadequate clothing and equipment. Whether Gross’ subsequent transfer to the Eastern Front stemmed from official concerns raised by his work as a war artist will never be known. It is more likely that the transfer was part of a major deployment of military personnel from the Western to the Eastern Front which was crumbling in the face of the remorseless Russian advance. It is not known how he managed to return to Germany after the collapse of the Eastern Front and the subsequent rout of the German army. We do know that his studio in Landsbergerstrasse, Berlin, was completely destroyed in an Allied air raid in 1945 and all his tools, materials and work lost. The irony would not have been lost on Gross that air raids on civilian targets had been initiated by the Luftwaffe at the beginning of the war.

In 1948 Gross emigrated to the USA with his artist wife—Hildegard Rath—and settled in New York. Two major exhibitions of his work were held at The Macbeth Gallery in New York in 1948 and 1951: both received widespread critical acclaim from New York art critics. However, Gross never truly settled in the USA and he returned to Germany in 1956. Seven years later and to the bewilderment of his friends Gross decided to leave Germany and go to Scotland where he had been invited to act as artist-in-residence at a small residential school for children with

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learning disabilities which had been set up by Dr Karl Koenig, a distinguished paediatrician who had to flee Nazi-controlled Austria before the outbreak of war. Having experienced the horrors of a hate-fuelled Nazi regime, Koenig was determined to create a community in which compassion and tolerance were present. He realised that the kind of societal renewal he sought could only be achieved by creating a world that was more responsive to the needs of the child.

By coming to Scotland Gross abandoned a career in the ordinary sense of the word, for a large part of an artist's life is taken up trying to find a market for his work. Freed from concerns about remuneration, Gross no longer saw his works as commodities for sale. One of his most productive periods appears to have been when working modestly as an artist-in-residence in this small school in the North East of Scotland remote from the artistic and intellectual heartlands of Paris and Berlin. And it was in this Camphill community that Hermann Gross died on 1st September 1988.

There is perhaps a certain irony in the fact that as a failed air gunner, he was nevertheless able in his sketches to fire at key targets in such a devastatingly accurate manner! This had required a high measure of courage. What Gross succeeded in doing was make what had become increasingly invisible in the Nazi regime—visible.

Notes

References


ROBIN JACKSON was born in England and lives in Scotland. Before graduating from the University of Bristol (BA Hons) and the University of Exeter (PhD), he completed his national service in the Royal Air Force. He has written extensively on a wide and disparate range of fields including: art, disability politics, intentional communities, Scottish history and special education. He is currently Honorary Fellow, Karl Koenig Institute, Aberdeen.