ДОКУМЕНТЫ

IDENTIFICATION OF MUSLIM BURIAL SITES
AT THE ZEHRENSDORF PRISONER OF WAR CEMETERY

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More than 400 mostly Muslim soldiers of the tsarist army who had been taken prisoner by the Germans during the First World War are buried in the Zehrensdorf prisoner of war cemetery south of Berlin. The cemetery is an important testimony to the entangled history of the colonial empires in the First World War and to the European confrontation with Islam in the early 20th century. When the Zehrensdorf cemetery was restored in the early 2000s, it was not possible to identify the positions of all individual graves and to mark them by name due to the scarcity of sources. New research and the synchronization of previously unconnected archives have brought to light sources that now allow a comprehensive reconstruction of the burial sites. The article gives an overview of the historical context of the Zehrensdorf prisoner of war cemetery, its origin and memory history and describes the methodological approach as well as the individual findings of the reconstruction, in the course of which the graves of 409 individuals could be identified and marked.

Keywords: Zehrensdorf Cemetery, World War I, Islam, Colonial History, Critical Heritage Studies

The "Zehrensdorf Cemetery of Honor" is located in a small wooded area near Zossen, 40 kilometers south of Berlin. About a thousand deceased prisoners of war from World War I were originally buried here. Among them were North African and Indian colonial soldiers who fought for the French and British armies in Europe, as well as Georgian, Tatar and Bashkir members of the Russian army. Most of them were Muslims. From the end of 1914, the German military command had deliberately concentrated them in two special

camps near Zossen in order to persuade them to side with the Axis powers; to ignite a "holy war" in the colonies of the German war opponents or join the allied army of the Ottoman Empire. But only a few of the Muslim prisoners in the German special camps actually met this fate. Instead, a thousand of them died in the course of the five years of war under the hard living conditions in the camps and were buried in the sandy Brandenburg soil[1].

The cemetery is divided into 20 alphabetically designated grave fields and 3 national sections. Each grave location was labeled with an individual number. The burial site measures just 60 x 130 meters. However, it lies in the grid of incisive coordinates of the 20th century: During the First World War, Zossen was the main camp of the German Army, in the Second World War it was the headquarters of the Wehrmacht's communications bunker, and during the Cold War the Red Army had set up their central command in the GDR at the same place. For a century, the Zossen area was a global military hub. Dense sediments of warlike world history have thus accumulated in the Zehrensdorf cemetery. And a significant part of the memory of the political mobilization of Islam is embedded in these dense historical layers.

At the outbreak of the First World War, the Orient expert, diplomat and archaeologist Max Freiherr von Oppenheim recommended that the German leadership use all knowledge of the Islamic world for German war aims. Oppenheim suggested heating up the existing tensions between the Muslim ethnic groups in the Middle East, North Africa, India and their British and French administrations, thereby destabilizing the colonial hinterland of the German wartime opponents. Oppenheim's "jihad plan" was not made out of thin air. The Indian Gurkha riflemen, Algerian tirasseurs, but also the Siberian riflemen and the countless Tatar infantrymen who fell into the hands of the Germans in the European theater of war came from all parts of the world where at the turn of the century the seams of empires began to tear. These colonial soldiers knew the contradictions of the imperial world map from their own experience. This is exactly where the German strategy aimed. The German Reich did not have any significant success with this strategy, but brought Islam into play as a political battlefield in exactly the same way in which it still fuels the geopolitical conflicts of the 21st century.

National Markings / Imperial Matrix

From the very beginning, the Zehrensdorf cemetery was the subject of commemorative symbolism. In fact, the deceased prisoners were not thoughtlessly buried by the German military authorities. When it became apparent that the war would not end by Christmas 1914 and that the dying in

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[1] For the history of the Zehrensdorf cemetery, see among other publications: (Höpp Gerhard 1996); (Höpp Gerhard 1997); (Liebau Heike 2014).

the camps would continue, German military order was imposed on the prisoners last resting place. The dead were carefully sorted according to nationality, in some cases even reburied specifically for this purpose, and their respective religious beliefs were demonstratively marked on their gravestones.

The cemetery, like the camps themselves, thus became part of the jihad strategy with which the world public was to be convinced of Germany's unbreakable alliance with Islam. Joint visits to the cemetery by high-ranking representatives of the German and Ottoman military, for example, became a recurring ritual – meticulously staged and documented by the German leadership. And with the proper maintenance of the cemetery, it was credibly demonstrated that German concern for the Muslims was not just a one-off propaganda gesture, but endured after their death.

After the end of the First World War, the victorious powers marked their national claims to commemoration at the Zehrensdorf cemetery. The British War Graves Commission hastened to take responsibility for the graves of the Indian colonial soldiers. In 1921 the British Commission carried out a careful inventory. It mapped the location of "its" graves; had this section of the cemetery extensively landscaped; erected marble tombstones and a memorial. The French government, on the other hand, dealt with its Muslim dead in a different way. It did not leave their memory in the hands of the Germans, but had all the French, including their Arab colonial soldiers, exhumed in 1924 and transferred to the Neuve-Chapelle military cemetery in France. The Russian war party, finally, had ceased to exist with the end of the Tsarist Empire in the February revolution 1917 and no one claimed the four hundred graves of Tatars, Bashkirs and Georgians who died in the service of the tsarist army. When Russian soldiers were again present in the area around Zossen after 1945, they used the cemetery grounds as a tank training ground. After the withdrawal of the Soviet Army in 1994, the cemetery was completely devastated and reclaimed by nature.

Asymmetrical Restoration

In 2002, the German federal government decided to restore the landscape of the Zehrensdorf cemetery in order for it to serve as a memorial site. The responsible Brandenburg authorities commissioned historical image research in preparation.[2] In doing so, one became aware of the precarious document situation. A handful of historical photographs could be located. They showed the cemetery in different phases from its establishment in 1914 (MEK: Otto Stiehl, 1914) to its state in the early 1930s. Most were yellowed

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[2] *Ehrenfriedhof Zehrensdorf* (Dr. Jacobs & Hübinger, Büro für Gartendenkmalpflege und Landschaftsplanung), Garnisionsmuseum Wünsdorf.

and out of focus, individual names on the gravestones could hardly be made out. The plans of the British Commission from the 1920s, on the other hand, had covered the entire site of the cemetery, but had a serious flaw: the British had carefully mapped each of "their" individual graves, but left a large blank area for the rest of the cemetery outside their jurisdiction.

As a result, the Commonwealth Wargrave Commission was able to restore that part of the cemetery to its 1924 condition that is commonly called The Indian cemetery. For the rest of the area, the German authorities concluded that the original order could no longer be reconstructed because it was impossible to identify the individual burial sites beyond doubt. It was therefore decided to display the names of all individuals buried in the Zehrensdorf ground on a central memorial that was placed on a little height near the entrance. As the memorial states, "all the dead of war and unjust regimes" were thus commemorated in a general manner.

Today the asymmetry of the restoration is striking. On the one side the "Indian Cemetery" with its luminous straight lines of the British-Indian tombstones, accurately inscribed in Devanagari and Urdu, the lawn meticulously manicured. On the opposite side of the empty graveyard, in which national affiliations, names, and religions of the dead have blurred into a somewhat "Russian" presence. How can one possibly conjecture up the image that here, four feet apart, in the same straight lines as on the British side of the cemetery, lie the remains of four hundred Muslim soldiers, the majority of whom were Tatars from Kazan and communities around it, such as Samara, Petropavlovsk or Tobolsk?

Praxeological Approach

In 2002, the Brandenburg authorities rejected the option of completely reconstructing the original order of the cemetery due to the scarce documentation (Saupe Jörg 2005). Twenty years later, our revision of the site first raised not only a hypothetical but also a very fundamental question: Did such an original order ever exist at all, or was the arrangement of the graves rather the result of spontaneous, arbitrary decisions made in the turmoil of the war years?

To answer this question, it helps to visualize the cemetery not only as a problem of representation in landscape gardening, but also as a space of practices. In doing so, other questions presented themselves: Who dug the pits in the frozen ground in the coldest year of the war, 1916/17? How was the transport of the dead organized from the camp to the cemetery, which sometimes trickled slowly but increased massively during camp epidemics? Who decided where to start digging the next row of graves? What tools were used to do this? Who recorded the names of the deceased and assigned a

grave number? Who mourned the dead comrades and bunk neighbors? Who carved their names in Arabic letters on oak tablets and anchored them in the ground?

When imaginatively walking along the bare grave fields, measuring the distance from the cemetery to the camps, taking the lines of sight where photographers had set up their cameras in 1915, moving names and numbers on the cemetery map back and forth, one gets a feeling for the dimensions, forces and atmosphere of the place. In doing so one becomes aware, that nothing happened here by chance. Instead, the cemetery begins to show itself as a place of careful planning, regulation, habit, pragmatism, and intuition. To us who were viewing the field, the question presented itself whether from such a praxeological bundle the precise locations of the four hundred Tatar and Georgian graves could be reconstructed.

Revision

In 2022, Dr. Marat Gibatdinov, Dr. Gerdien Jonker and the author of this paper compared archival materials as part of their ongoing research, discovering a number of documents that had not been taken into account during the restoration work 20 years earlier. The author also made areal film shots of the graveyard and captured its details on film. Referencing the photo documentation with the archival materials, the following documents helped to better understand the Zehrensdorf cemetery practices:

The files of the German Foreign Office with the logs of the camp commandant's office (PA: 1914); the Zehrensdorf main grave lists (BL); the inventories of the Commonwealth Wargrave Commission (CWGCA: 1934) and individual photographs from the collection of the Marjani Institute for History under Tatarstan Academy of Sciences (Tatar Materials 2016) and Dr. Iskander Giliazov's private archive (Gilyazov 2014). During this inspection, it was also checked whether there was evidence of a systematic arrangement of the graves in the area of the cemetery with the graves of prisoners of war from World War I and whether the exact positions of the individual graves could be identified. As a result of this review, the following can now be stated:

– In the British section of the cemetery, the positions of the individual graves within the grave fields are numbered consecutively according to a consistent scheme.

– Based on the death dates from the main grave lists, allocation patterns can be assigned to the grave numbering grid, which show comparable logic in all grave fields.

– Grave fields, which were not recorded in detail in the inventory of 1921, can also be based on a continuous numbering of the grave sites.

– Within all grave fields, the numbering grid can be synchronized with comparable allocation patterns.

– Photographs show that the positions of individual graves in several grave fields correspond to the positions determined in the reconstruction.

– Grave fields, the location of which has not been precisely documented up to now, can be identified with a high degree of probability based on the occupancy pattern.

– In individual cases, the reconstruction principle allows for several interpretations.

On the basis of these findings, a provisional reconstruction plan was drawn up (fig. 2). Old photographs of the cemetery were systematically compared and checked on site to find their exact locations. The results of this reconstruction work and the methodology used will be discussed in more detail below (see the figures attached to this contribution).

The plans of the Commonwealth Wargrave Commission

In 1921 the Commonwealth Wargrave Commission carried out the first inventory of Zehrendorf Cemetery, drawing up a site map and recording the exact positions of the British Indian graves ('Zehrensdorf Indian Cemetery'), (fig. 3). This inventory served to prepare the cemetery garden design of the British cemetery section in 1926, with large parts of the complex being redesigned and in the course of which the French graves were also exhumed and moved to France. Before it was realised, the British project went through several planning phases in which the cemetery mapping was repeatedly revised. It was therefore necessary to first compare which planning status corresponds to the current findings and whether significant changes were made to the burial locations that would make it impossible to use the British section as a template for an attempt at reconstruction.

The first version of the plan from November 1921 shows all British Indian grave fields with their field numbers, grave rows and grave numbers. All other burial grounds are only sketched on this plan. A next version of the plan, dated 11/14/1924, makes proposals for the relocation of 21 British graves lying outside the British section. This plan also shows an early suggestion for the positioning of the British memorial stone (Warstone) in the area of field N. However, the memorial was realized in field M. The intended regrouping of the scattered Indian graves was therefore not realised. The restored British stones now stand in their original locations outside the British section, where they were recorded in 1921. The status of the plan from 1921 is therefore decisive for the determination of all other grave locations.

Fig. 1. The Tatar-Memorial Stone at Zehrensdorf Cemetery.
Photo: Markus Schlaffke, 2022.

Schemes

The second step was to check which scheme the British grave locations
are based on and whether this can be transferred to the entire cemetery area.

If you go through the rows of British graves today and try to understand
the dates of death given on the gravestones, it is difficult to identify a uni-
form pattern at first glance (fig. 4 and 5). Graves from late 1915 lie next to
those from July 1916, a row further down are graves from early 1916 etc.
The original wooden name plaques, which were replaced by stones by the
British Commission, still bore the assigned individual grave numbers. These
numbers are clearly legible on the map from 1921. They consistently in-
crease numerically from right to left (east to west) and from the front edge
of the field back to the cemetery boundary (south to north). The rows of
graves therefore have a largely numerical order. If one follows the dates of
death along the consecutive series of numbers, the chronological scheme
according to which the graves were laid out becomes apparent. It turns out
that fields were sometimes laid out from different starting points in different
directions, but always in continuous rows. Either the numbers of the indi-
vidual graves were assigned in advance immediately when a new field was
opened, or the grave numbers were only successively noted in the grave lists
after the grave fields were already occupied, whereby the chronology of the
dates of death was not taken into account, only the arrangement of the
graves consecutive rows. (The larger jumps in the rows of numbers in fields

G and N speak in favor of the latter practice). Precisely those concise patterns of burial dates and sequences of numbers can also be found in all other grave fields.

Photo Match

Where is that great stunted pine near the "Arabian Stone"? Where is that striking tree under whose bent branch the "Tatar Stone" was apparently deliberately placed when it was erected? (fig. 8) Many such questions arise when viewing photographs of the cemetery. These photographs are only suitable as reference points to a limited extent, because the terrain and the landscape surrounding the cemetery have changed significantly over the past 100 years. Although the cemetery was repeatedly photographed during its construction during the war years, there are not enough such images that cover the entire cemetery area in sufficient detail. The few available images, on the other hand, are excellent for checking the experimental reconstruction scheme. There is at least one view of most of the grave fields in which the inscriptions on individual nameplates can be deciphered. If they match the positions in the experimental reconstruction scheme, there is a high probability that the other hypothetical positions of the reconstruction also apply (fig. 6–7, 9–10).

Identification of undocumented burial sites

With the help of the reconstruction scheme, some of the grave fields that were not included in the British inventory (remaining unmarked on the 1921 plan), and also could not be identified during the 2002 restoration, can now be located with a high degree of probability. It concerns four fields with approx. 160 individual graves on the west side of the cemetery called P, Q, S and T. Marking them down and locating the individual graves that were dug out here bases on the chronology of the cemetery expansion and reaches beyond the end the First World War. Camp inmates were being buried here as far as 1921 (fig. 12–13).

Irregularities in Field J/Y

On an undated photo from the Otto Stiehl portfolio, three grave steles in front of the "Tatar Stone" are clearly legible: Chougin Hamed, 27.5.15, no. 310, Ben Ouriach Konider, 13.6.15, Ahmad Akab, 1.6.1915, no. 309.

They are the names of Franco-Arab prisoners. It is irritating to see these name plaques in the burial ground in front of the Tatar memorial, because at the time the "Tatar Stone" was erected, burials were largely separated according to nationality. In another picture of the same place, however, the French/Arabic stones can no longer be seen there. Instead, a Christian cross can be seen at position 309 (Ahmad Akab).
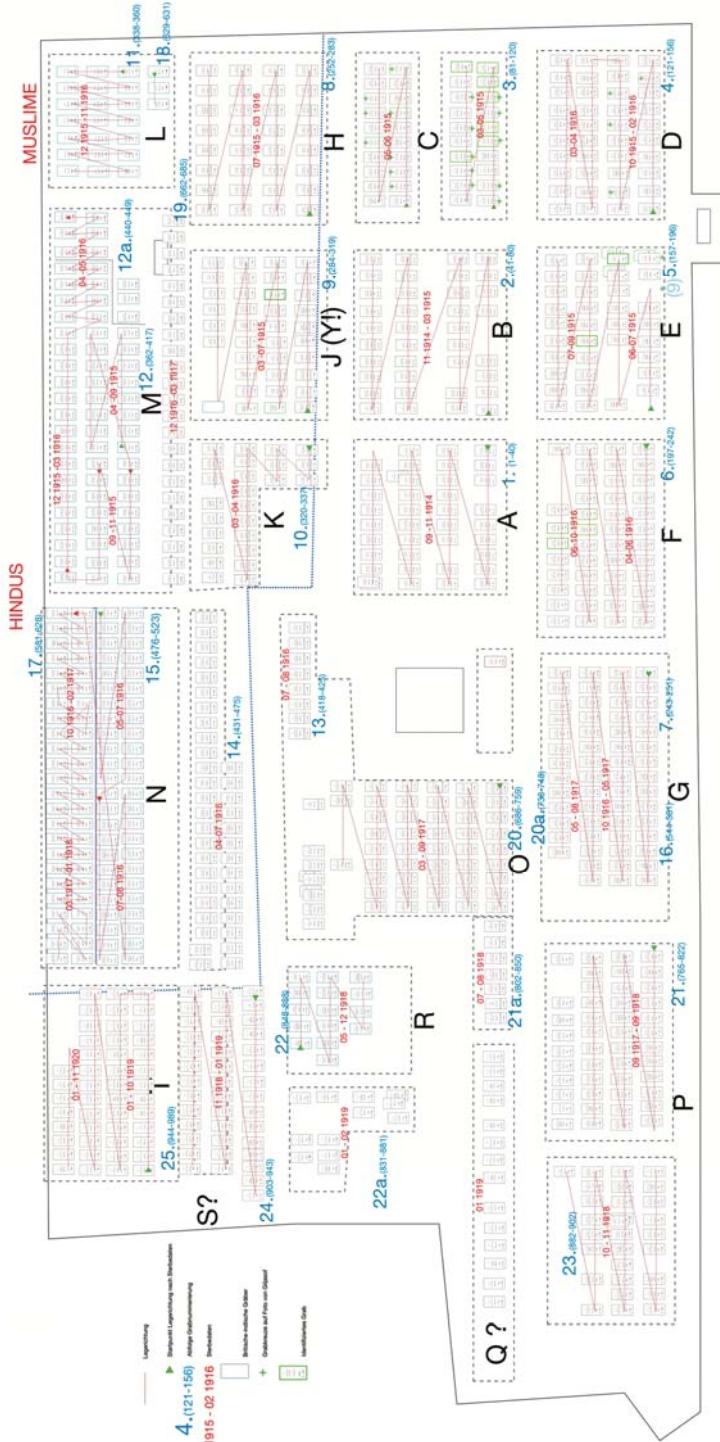
Fig. 2. Zehrensdorf Cemetery, overview plan of the reconstruction as of September 2022.
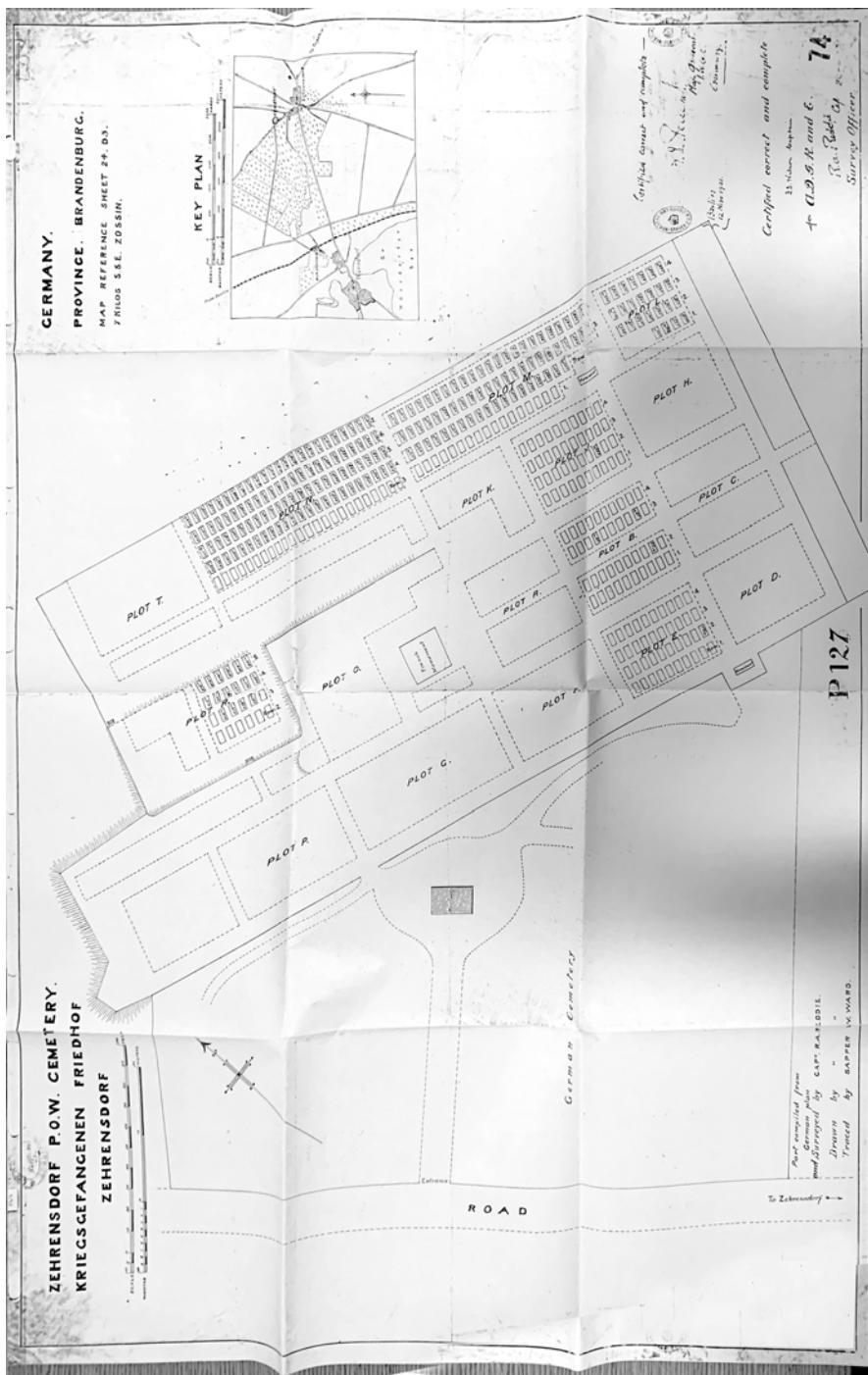
Fig. 3. Inventory of the Commonwealth Wargrave Commission
CWGC Archives, CWGC 7/4/2/19506-1.

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Fig. 4. Row numbering and grave number sequence in field M (CWGC Archives, CWGC 7-4-2-19506-1).
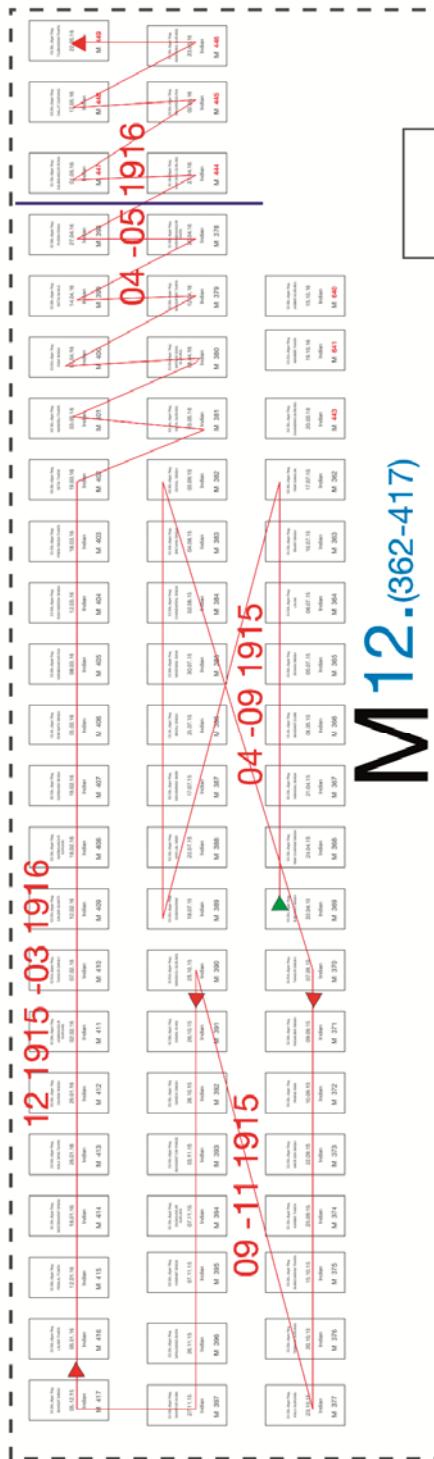
Fig. 5. Direction of laying based on the dates of death in field M.

In field M, the numbering of the fields constantly extends from 362 in rows from right to left. However, the layout (red line) started at 369 in the middle of the bottom row, jumping to the right from there and further into the row behind it.

From there you jumped to the 1st row, etc.

In May 1916, the field was expanded to include a few irregularly arranged graves on the eastern edge.

Fig. 6 and 7. Matches in panel C: graves 88 – 90 and 100.

Fig. 8. Field E (Photo: Iskander Gilyazov, Leila Gataullina: Russian Muslim soldiers
in German captivity during the First World War 1914–1920, 2022).
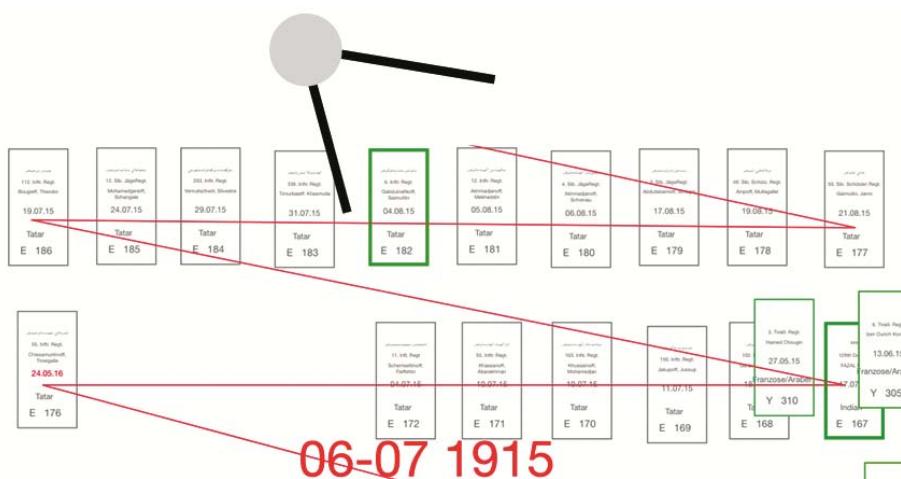
Fig. 9. Reconstruction of field E. The name Saimuttin Gabdulnafikof, grave no. 182,
is clearly legible in the foreground. Behind, a consistent sequence
of grave numbers 171 to 196.

Fig. 10. Field F: The names Waliualla Galliun, Galiaskar Galiastarov, Nurgalei Subschaukuloff and Minalla Kalimulin are clearly legible in the foreground (GarnisionsmuseumWünsdorf Archive).
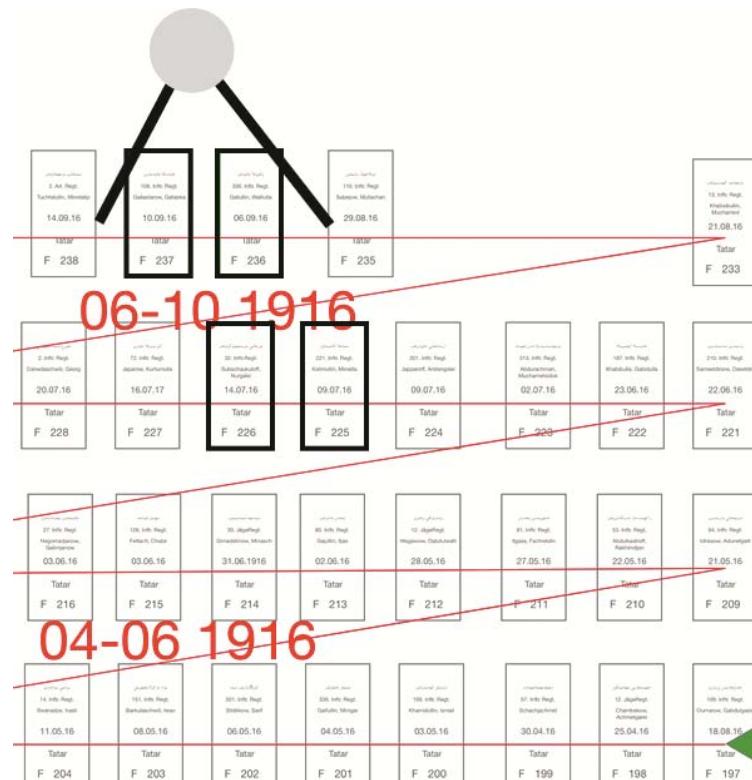
Fig. 11. With a consistent arrangement of the grave numbers in field F, the grave locations in the reconstruction correspond to the photograph.
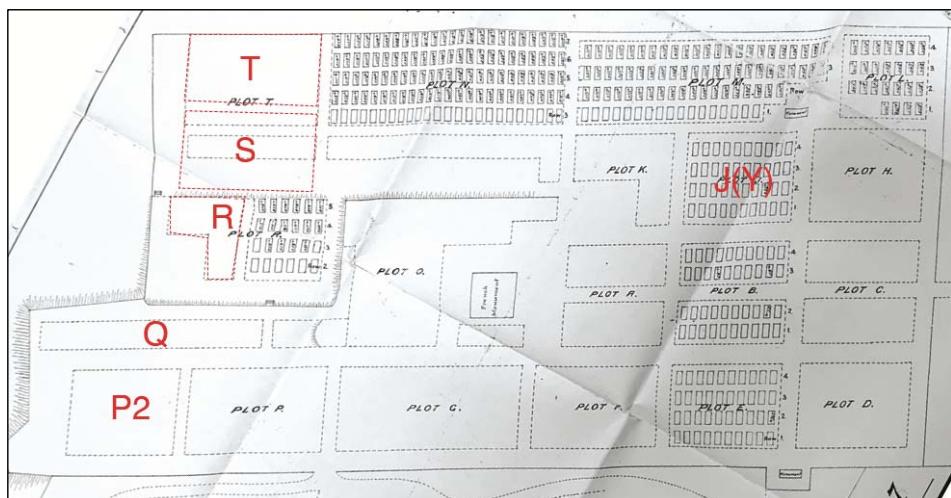
Fig. 12 and 13. Verification of grave locations in fields S and T, September 2022.
Photo: Markus Schlaffke.

There are two explanations for the changing position of the graves in the photographs:

a) The French graves were relocated in the expansion of the fields assigned to the Tatars, namely in field J.

b) However, it is also conceivable that the 3 Arabic steles were only placed in field E for a photo to document the Tatar stone. This is supported by the fact that the graves in the Stiehl photo are not in conclusive positions in relation to one another. The death dates for both fields E and J fall in the same period in June 2015.

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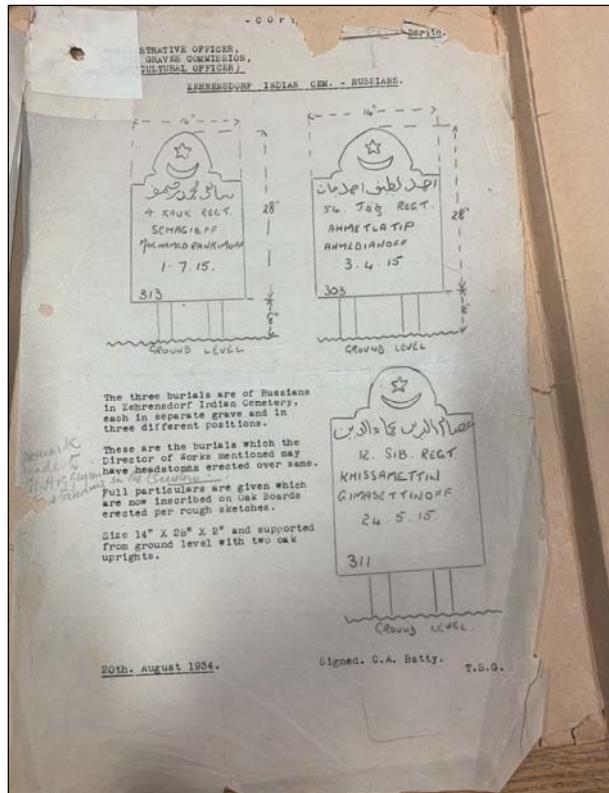

Fig. 14 and 15: Documentation and measurement of 3 Russian tombstones within the British cemetery section during the inventory in August 1934. These 3 graves remained there after the French graves had been cleared. The note indicates that for these graves, which were within British jurisdiction, the intention was to erect tombstones to replace the wooden panels. The oak panels measured 35.5 cm x 71 cm x 5 cm.
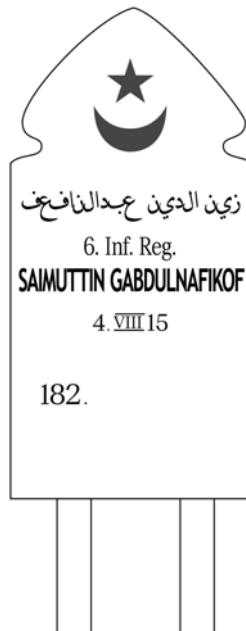
Fig. 16. Placement of a 1:1 scale model in field E, September 2022.
Photo: Markus Schlaffke.

Fig. 17. The author, Dr. Marat Gibatdinov and Dr. Gerdien Jonker during on-site
verification of the reconstruction scheme, September 2022. Photo: Markus Schlaffke.

Fig. 18. Identified location of individual grave. Photo: Markus Schlaffke.

Conclusion: Archeology and Commemoration

In the course of researching the history of the Zehrensdorf Cemetery, the initial aim was to get a better view of the "other side" of the cemetery with its 400 invisible (Tatar) graves. The aim was to understand the cemetery in connection with the structures of the German propaganda camps and to visualize it as a bundle of forces and practices.

In the course of the investigation, a large part of the cemetery structure could be reconstructed. This was made possible primarily through international collaborative research in the linking of archive holdings and the use of digital tools for the visualization and linking of data. In this way, the cemetery became vivid as a tableau of terrain, landscape, weather and distances, but also the object of power practices such as assigning, rearranging, identifying, marking, hiding, which have brought about the order of the cemetery. The reconstruction has brought to light the position of over 400 individual burial sites and in this way provided important material for the ongoing remembrance work at the Zehrensdorf Cemetery Memorial.

Recapitulating the logic of burial grounds, numbers and lists of names – the imaginary backtracking of the camps and its burial bureaucracy finally brings us back to the subjects themselfs – people who had a place of birth, a date of death and a name.

SOURCES AND MATERIALS

BL – Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, 'Hauptgräberliste Friedhof Zehrensdorf'

CWGCA – Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archive, 'Zehrensdorf Indian Cemetery', 1934.

MEK – Museum Europäischer Kulturen Sammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Stiehl, Otto, 'Album "Zossen 1914–17"', 1914.

PA – Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, 'Unternehmungen Und Aufwiegelungen Gegen Unsere Feinde – Tätigkeit in Den Gefangenenlagern Deutschlands', 1914.

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ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИЯ МУСУЛЬМАНСКИХ ЗАХОРОНЕНИЙ
НА КЛАДБИЩЕ ВОЕННОПЛЕННЫХ ЦЕРЕНСДОРФ

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На кладбище для военнопленных Церенсдорф к югу от Берлина похоронено около 1000 военнопленных, в т.ч. более 400 солдат царской армии, в основном мусульман, попавших в плен к немцам во время Первой мировой войны. Кладбище является важным свидетельством запутанной истории колониальных империй периода Первой мировой войны и европейского противостояния с исламом в начале XX века. Когда кладбище Церенсдорф восстанавливали в начале 2000-х годов, определить положение отдельных могил и персональную идентификацию всех захороненных не представлялось возможным из-за нехватки источников. Новые исследования и сопоставление материалов, ранее не связанных между собой архивов, позволили выявить источники, которые позволяют всесторонне реконструировать места захоронений военнопленных. В статье дается обзор исторического контекста кладбища военнопленных Церенсдорф, его происхождения и истории памяти, а также описывается методологический подход и отдельные результаты реконструкции, в ходе которой удалось идентифицировать могилы 409 человек.

Ключевые слова: кладбище Церенсдорф, Первая мировая война, военнопленные, ислам, колониальная история, критическое исследование наследия.

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