

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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Thomas Baumgartner (Munich 1892 - 1962
Kreuth)

Portrait of two Krumen soldiers

Signed and dated (upper left): 'Th. Baumgartner
1916'

Oil on unlined canvas

39 ³/₄ x 32 ¹/₄ in. (101 x 82 cm.)



Provenance

Commissioned from the artist by Adolf Friedrich, Duke of Mecklenburg (1873 – 1969).

Possibly in the artist's possession.

Private collection, Germany.

The present work shows two African soldiers from the so-called Krumen people, an ethnic group living mostly along the coast of Liberia and Ivory Coast. The picture belongs to a series of around twenty-seven portraits of prisoners-of-war commissioned by the German explorer in Africa, Adolf Friedrich, Duke of Mecklenburg (1873–1969) and painted by Thomas Baumgartner between 1916 – 1917, as a result of which the artist was likely spared from being sent to the front line.

The soldiers in our painting and the others from Baumgartner's series were almost certainly painted in either the *Halbmondlager* (known in English as the 'Half-Moon or Crescent Camp' – named after the crescent moon of Islam), a prisoner-of-war camp in Wünsdorf near Berlin, Germany (fig. 1), or the neighbouring Zossen and Weinberger camps. The *Halbmondlager* housed mainly soldiers from the French North African colonies and India. Most of the inmates were Muslims, but also included Sikhs, Hindus and a few Indian Christians from the British and French colonies, all of whom had been drafted into the war by the Allies to fight against Germany. The Weinberger camp held men from Muslim minorities of the Russian army (figs. 4-11). As David Olusoga writes in his book, *The World's War. Forgotten Soldiers of Empire*, London, 2014, 'What took place behind its [the *Halbmondlager*'s] barbed-wire fences, between 1915 and 1917, is one of the most bizarre and least known stories of the First World War' (*op. cit.*, p. 250). Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter in his remarkable book to this little-known episode. In the early

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months of the war captured colonial troops were kept in makeshift camps along with men of other British and French army units, but by early 1905 construction on the *Halbmondlager* and Weinberger camps had started. The *Halbmondlager* was built to demonstrate to both the prisoners and the wider Muslim world that Germany was a friend of Islam; and the intended purpose of the camp was to convince detainees to switch allegiance from Britain and France to Germany. Thus, detainees lived in relative comfort and were given everything they needed to practice their faith, and the camp authorities were provided with detailed reports outlining the religious dietary and cultural requirements of the prisoners. The most dramatic manifestation of this concern for the Muslim prisoners was the construction, in an Ottoman style, of a mosque, the first ever built on German soil (fig. 2). A year into the war, more than one million Allied troops were in custody, amongst them soldiers from Africa and Asia, Aboriginal men from Australia, and troops from South-East Asia, Mongolia, Japan and the Russian minorities.

Musicologists like Robert Lachmann and linguists used the 'favourable conditions' within the *Halbmondlager* to conduct ethnographic research. The Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, including a group of ethnographers, linguistics and musicologists, set out to do a full-scale study of the various languages and musical traditions of the prisoners. The project was undertaken with the personal seal of approval and financial backing from the Kaiser himself. The goal was to record voice and language samples in the shape of stories, poems and songs of over 250 languages with the aim of establishing a museum 'of the voices of all the people'. The recordings were also to be used in the advancement of language teaching and ethnography.

From 1915 until the end of hostilities in 1918, over 2,677 individual recordings were made, documenting some 250 different languages and dialects (fig. 3). Olusoga writes that, 'The expedition teams recorded not just speech samples, but also poems, folk-tales and music, along with the personal words of the prisoners, poems of the prisoners' own composition – and tragic, plaintive pleas made by disorientated, dislocated men, as if their appeals might be answered, rather than merely studied [...] The recordings are unedited and raw. The voices [...] have to fight their way through heavy bass static. But once audible they are haunting and tragic. These voices of the war are unmistakably those of young men, speaking not as veterans...but as men still trapped at the moment of recording in the unfolding conflict, still in its grip, with uncertain futures' (*op. cit.*, p. 266). The remaining recordings on heavy shellac discs are today held at

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the *Lautarchiv* (Sound archive) of the Humboldt University in Berlin (see example via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUaNpNoUjog>).

Just as with Baumgartner's portrait series, the voices that pour forth from those discs are those of men whose final fate is unknown and who – almost always silently going to their graves – are never recorded by history: the poor, the powerless, the cannon fodder of empires. As David Olusoga writes, 'The recordings in the *Lautarchiv* [...] preserve the thoughts and words of men who were born in the last years of the nineteenth century, when empires were being built rather than sliding into decline. Their voices are not just those of colonial soldiers of the First World War – although that in itself is miraculous enough – they are also unheard voices of the poor of rural Africa and rural India in the early twentieth century. It is ironic that in this respect, German science, so often suborned to the military, political and propagandist imperatives of the war effort, should have almost inadvertently left such a moving and unique repository. These words and the haunting voices that speak them are among the most beautiful artefacts left behind by any soldiers of the First World War.' (*op. cit.*, pp.267-8).



Fig. 1: Half Moon camp at Wünsdorf near Berlin, Germany, c. 1916.

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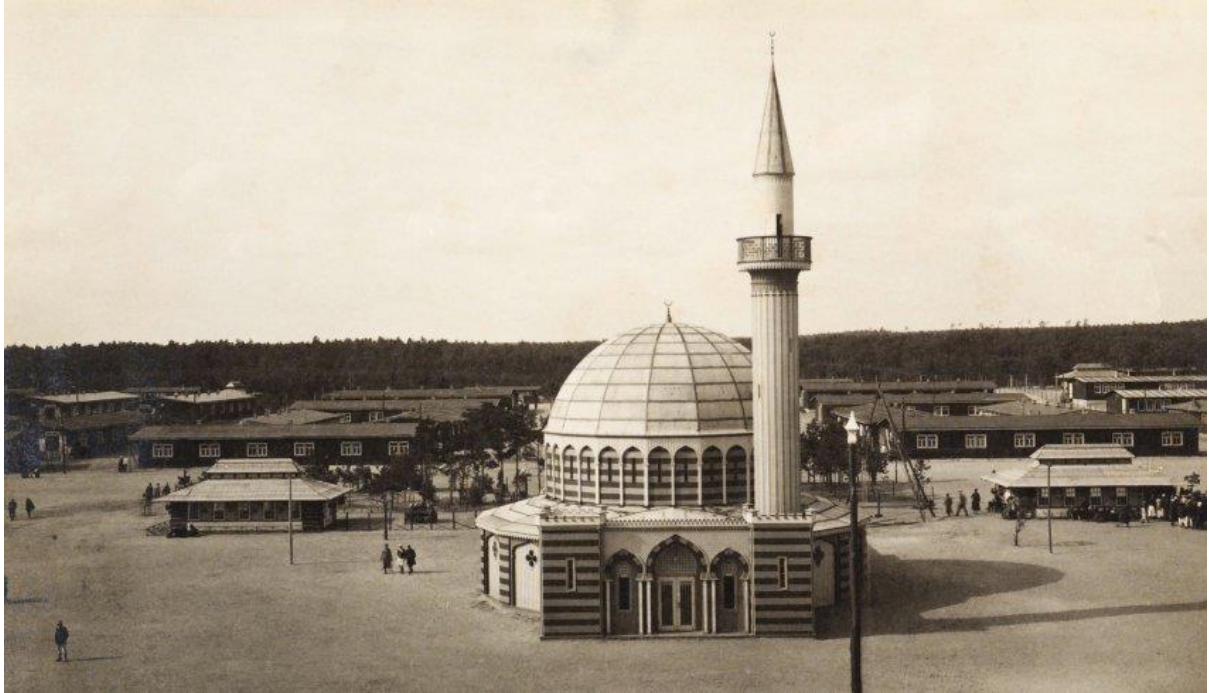


Fig. 2: Half Moon camp at Wünsdorf near Berlin with first Mosque built in Germany, c. 1916.



Fig. 3: Voice recordings carried out by Wilhelm Doegen in the Half Moon Camp, c.1916

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Fig. 4: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of an Afghan soldier*, location unknown.



Fig. 5: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of three Bobo soldiers*, location unknown.

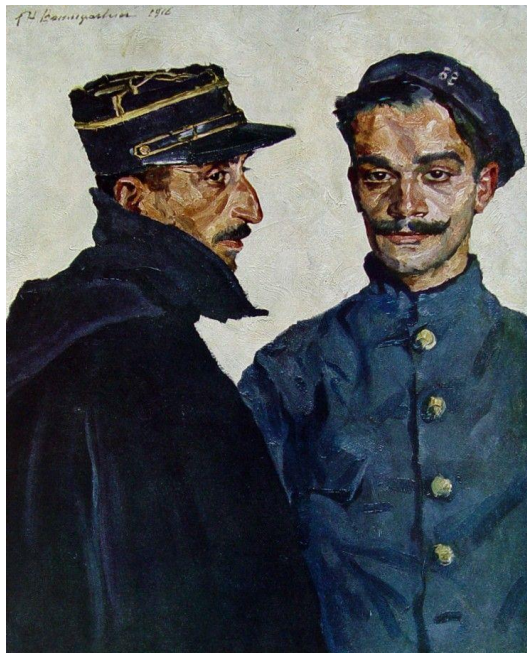


Fig. 6: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of a Corsican and French soldier*, location unknown.



Fig. 7: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of two Sikh soldiers (Punjabi people)*, 1917, Agnew's Gallery.

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Fig. 8: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of Bashkirs, Chuvash and Mari soldiers*, location unknown.



Fig. 9: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of two Gurkha soldiers*, location unknown.



Fig. 10: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of two Belgian soldiers*, location unknown.



Fig. 11: Thomas Baumgartner, *Portrait of three Scottish soldiers*, location unknown.