The Erkennungsmarke: the humanitarian duty to identify fallen German soldiers 1866-1918

Sarah I. Ashbridge and David O'Mara

Department of History, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK; Independent Historian, UK

ABSTRACT
Germany was the first Western nation to formally implement an object designed to assist with the identification of wounded and dead soldiers, introducing the Rekognitionsmarke in 1869 following the trial of an identity disc system in 1866. A new design, the Erkennungsmarke, was introduced in 1878, shaping the systems utilized in later wars. The German experience of wearing identifying objects would later influence the identification systems of other European armies, including France and Britain; ultimately resulting in the addition of new articles within the 1906 Geneva Convention to reflect changing attitudes and expectations towards those who died fighting for their country. The Erkennungsmarke presented the possibility of identification, even where immediate burial was not possible, thus facilitating the development of German military burial cultures. This paper explores the development and use of Erkennungsmarke between 1866–1918, information which can assist with the identification of German soldiers recovered during archaeological works.

Introduction

The development of identity discs used by the German Armies is significant as they represent the first formal system of identification amongst European armies. The newly unified German Army, consisting of the armies of Baden, Bavaria, Württemberg, parts of Hesse-Darmstadt and other states of the North German Confederation, was the first national military organization to introduce an official form of identification designed to assist with the identification or administration of dead or injured soldiers. Caring for the dead was regarded a moral duty of the Kriegsministerium and die Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL), the highest command of the army (Doyle and Schäfer 2015, 247) and the official tag system, first trialled in 1866, underwent numerous adaptions before seeing use for the first time during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. The aftermath of German conflicts of the nineteenth century would contribute to the formation of the 1906 Geneva Convention, and the developments and trials used in these battles would influence the development of systems of identification in France, Belgium, Italy, Austro-
Hungary and Japan before the British and American Armies eventually designed their own identifying tags in 1906.

The German identification system was designed in response to the experience of being unable to identify large numbers of fallen soldiers during conflicts resulting in mass loss. Their formal introduction was proposed as both a moral and medical military necessity, a fact which forces us to reflect upon the shallowness of the British scheme. Though the British had first utilized Army Form B.2067 during the Mahdist War in Sudan (1881–1899), their identity disc was not introduced until after the ratification of the 1906 Geneva Convention which compelled the victor of the field to check both allied and enemy dead for identifying marks (Ashbridge 2020; Ashbridge and Verdegem 2020). This suggests that their disc was introduced as a means of adhering to changing expectations, rather than as a result of reflection upon the experience of loss. German discs continued to develop during the First World War, though historical patterns were also re-issued, which can make the interpretation of the discs confusing at times.

From an archaeological perspective German identity discs, produced from various metals, are more durable than the fibre discs across the British Empire. As a result, archaeologists working on sites situated in former battle zones, particularly on the Western Front, are more likely to uncover metal discs worn by nations such as Germany and France than those of other combatant nations. This justifies the need for a comprehensive investigation into the development and use of these discs. This article will explore German identity discs used between 1864–1917, considering the reasons for development, and how effective implemented changes were in preventing the creation of unknown soldiers.

Following the conclusion of the Second Schleswig War of 1864, a craftsman from Berlin reportedly proposed the issue of an identifying tag to soldiers, which would be known as the ‘Hundemarke’ or dog tag. The name seemingly referred to an existing tag system used to enforce a dog licence fee in Berlin, leading to rumours of outrage from King Wilhelm I who exclaimed, ‘My soldiers are not dogs!’ (O’Mara 2019, 3), but it is possible that Prussian observers of the American Civil War brought the phrase back to Germany. Urban legends aside, the story of the Erkennungsmarke is a complex saga, which tells tales of developing humanitarian values in national military forces and international agreements, resulting from lessons learned during an intense period of fighting and military development.

There is a distinct lack of scholarly engagement with Erkennungsmarken, with the most specific, accurate information provided within out-of-print books which can be expensive to obtain (e.g. Höidal 2005), within specialist magazines (e.g. Mouchet 1993, 11–20, & Ashbridge 2019, 62–65) or within the blog sphere (e.g. Lalisse; O’Mara 2019). Though their role as an identifying object does appear within scholarly literature, there is rarely enough information provided to assist a reader with the identification of a particular model, thus representing a gap within the literature. This article will describe the development of the German identification system during three distinct periods of war between 1866–1918, situating the developments within existing fields of scholarship on the themes of German military history, humanitarian law, and military burial traditions. It will also reflect upon the ways in which Erkennungsmarken facilitated the identification of fallen soldiers in association with burial, providing a brief overview of German military burial traditions,
incorporating evidence from the discipline of archaeology to consider how we might engage with the *Erkennungsmarke* today.

**1866-1877**

In 1866, a small number of Prussian units trialled a voluntary identity tag system, issuing soldiers with a small, rectangular tag produced from iron and marked with unit information. Whilst little is known about the trial, including dates, events, descriptions of the actual tags, or even the complete results of the trial, it is recorded that the trial tags were not well received, with many soldiers discarding the tags which they superstitiously perceived as an omen for death (O’Mara 2019). Despite the negative feelings about the tags, the need for a system to help to identify dead and wounded soldiers would become increasingly apparent during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 – a conflict in which the progressive Prussian Army embraced many new technologies and thinking patterns.

A Prussian review of the 1866 campaign published in 1872 reported 1,935 Prussian soldiers were killed during the Battle of Königgrätz (3 July), with 6959 wounded, and 278 missing. In contrast Austria and her allies incurred 4,861 killed, 13,920 wounded and a colossal 25,419 missing¹ (Great Britain 1872). Statistically, Prussia experienced a slightly higher percentage of casualties during the battle, (21.1% compared with a casualty rate of 20.75% reported by Austria). However, Prussia reported only 3.03% of soldiers as missing, whereas, Austria, reported 57.51% including PoWs. Whilst it is possible that these figures were not immediately available in the weeks and months which followed the Battle of Königgrätz, the events of the Austro-Prussian War demonstrated an immediate operational need to account for the dead and wounded, and to respond to the presence of dead bodies as a moral and sanitary measure.

Even before the publication of this report, Prussia was reflecting upon the lessons learned from the Austro-Prussian War. One lesson which would later influence international humanitarian policy was that of the need to respond to dead and wounded soldiers on the battlefield. Minister-President Otto von Bismarck visited the battlefield of Königgrätz after the battle, an experience which affected him deeply. He lamented that ‘if foreign ministers had always followed their sovereigns to the front, history would have fewer wars to tell of’ (Crankshaw 1981).

Dr Gottfried Friedrich Franz Loeffler, a doctor of the 1st Prussian Army during the war, was another individual affected by his experiences at the front. In 1868, he published his recommendations for reform in a book entitled: *Das Preussische Militär-Sanitätswesen und seine Reform nach der Kriegserfahrung von 1866* (Loeffler and Franz 1868). Subtitled ‘The Voluntary Nursing and Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 and the War Experience of 1866’ (trans.), Loeffler’s work reflected upon the treatment of the dead, acknowledging that the ‘funeral of the dead in sanitary and in other aspects left much to be desired’ (Loeffler and Franz 1868, 63).

Loeffler referred to Article 8 proposed at the 1856 Congress of Paris, which proposed that the victorious army should be obliged to protect those killed on the battlefield from plunder and maltreatment, including the burial of the dead which would also help to maintain the sanitary conditions of the living, proposing to incorporate it into the Geneva Convention (Loeffler and Franz 1868, 63). Warring parties should be required to exchange lists of casualties, which would require measures to ensure that identity could be easily
ascertained. Satisfactory regulation of such a system was ‘certainly not an easy task, especially after big battles’, as revealed in 1864, where efforts were made to identify the dead. Even in the dressing stations and field hospitals, many had died without being able to give their name, or without the presence of a translator to help to confirm their identity. This obstacle, the need to establish identity, especially amongst the dead, could be overcome ‘with more certainty’, if all parties would commit, in the event of war, to equipping each soldier with a ‘similar sign [Zeichen], which shows their name, place of birth and troop number’. In the event of death, the sign should be forwarded to the authorities of the soldier’s nation (Loeffler and Franz 1868, 63).

The inability to confirm the fate of these men had caused increasing uncertainty for the families, whose grief and worry was ‘accompanied by delayed regulation of property and inheritance rights’ (Oppenheim 1866, 229). Heinrich Bernhard Oppenheim, a German scholar of international law, also reflected upon the rights of the dead, insisting in 1866 that ‘the right of war does not abolish the human right, and also that the enemy dead must be treated in a humane way’ and so Loeffler argued that the provision of burial rights must also be extended to enemy war dead (Loeffler and Franz 1868, 64). Loeffler addressed a previous request made to the Berlin Conference (1884–85) to contemplate the question of the dead, to formalize an international commitment on the recovery of dead from the battlefield, expressing a desire to discuss an identifying mark (Erkennungszeichen) to be worn by soldiers.

A second part to Loeffler’s Das Preussische Militär-Sanitätswesen … was published in early 1869, with the subtitle ‘the Medical Service and its organization in the campaign of 1866 and the reform after 1866’. Part II put forward proposals for the care and identification of the dead and dying, and the burial of corpses in accordance with the requirements of piety and hygiene (Loeffler and Franz 1869, 233). Though it had not yet been possible to progress these issues within an international legal framework, Loeffler described that the Prussian Army was proceeding with its plans to introduce an identifying mark, now referred to as a Recognoscirungs-Marke. This tin tag was to be hung from a cord worn around the neck, featuring information about the regiment to which the soldier belonged (Loeffler and Franz 1869, 234).

The Recognoscirung-Marke was formally introduced under the new name of Rekognitionmarke (recognition mark, also found described as the Recognitionmarke between 1869–1877) on 29 April 1869 in §110 of the Prussian Instruktion über das Sanitätswesen der Armee im Felde, which instructed that a tag would be provided to each soldier before leaving for the field ‘in order to positively establish the identity of soldiers killed on the battlefield or found unconscious’ (Burroughs 1994, 161–186). The tag was rectangular, with rounded corners and a raised edge, typically measuring approximately 4 cm by 3 cm and produced from pressed steel. During manufacture the regimental designation (e.g.‘I.R.’) and sub-unit (e.g.‘C’) were embossed into the tag. Regimental and company numeration, and the soldier’s individual number (within the company) were hand stamped to complete the tag. Battalion designation was unnecessary.

This tag was first issued in July 1870 to combatant troops only (Meinlschmidt 1993, 5). The early discs feature the letter ‘C’, used to abbreviate ‘Companie’, as seen in Figure 1, but at some stage, the use of ‘K’ (for ‘Kompanie’) became the predominant marking. Interestingly, the continued use of ‘C’ could still be observed upon tags issued as late as
1915, particularly on the discs issued within southern regiments, perhaps reflecting a slower rate of language evolution within the more provincial German states. Ranked soldiers and non-commissioned officers were issued with identity discs, but officers (including non-combatant officers assigned to forward operational units) were required to provide their own discs produced by civilian manufactures (Anon). 1869 pattern discs were issued with leather cords, though officers wore theirs on silk (Meinlschmidt 1993, 5–6 & 8).

The Rekognitionmarke ensured that if any soldier were killed, a durable item would remain upon his body, allowing for identification at a later point. In History of Clothing and Equipment of the Royal Prussian Army in the years 1806–1878, Mila wrote that the tag enabled the army to ‘better ascertain the identity of those wounded or found unconscious’, demonstrating that the discs were used to identify both the living and the dead in practice as well as theory (Mila 1878). This means that the discs would be used by medical staff in addition to those working to identify or bury the dead. Today, we refer to this model as the 1869 disc, though in practise, the discs were not issued until July 1870 with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. This war ‘saw the emergence of huge armies and the mass mobilisation of reservists’ which required new structures and systems of command and control, as the ‘methods of an earlier era’ were blended with military science (Lorimer 2005, 108). The brutal conflict resulted in the deaths of 44,780 German and over 150,000 French soldiers, producing an unprecedented number of bodies (Login 2012, 180).

Historically, ordinary ranked soldiers had been regarded as little more than criminals, and their corpses were treated with similar regard, but from the Franco-Prussian War, this attitude changed as evidenced by the Treaty of Frankfurt, signed on 10 May 1871 (Login 2012, 180; Mosse 1990). The Treaty created a new precedent in Europe, representing the first time that combatant nations accepted a responsibility for the remains of the fallen (Login 2012, 180). Article 16 of the treaty required both French and German authorities to reciprocally respect and maintain the graves of fallen soldiers. From 1873, twenty-five...
centrally controlled ossuaries were created to house the bones of German soldiers. In addition to the creation of ossuaries, numerous battlefield cemeteries memorials were erected, and it is likely that some of these cemeteries were facilitated by the use of Rekognitionmarke, allowing for the identification of military remains. The war would become the first widely commemorated conflict in Europe, with ordinary soldiers buried in permanent resting places for the first time, followed by the erection of war memorials and the establishment of annual commemorations to honour those who fell. These practices may not have developed to the same extent were it not for the use of the Rekognitionmarke to ensure a high rate of identifications.

Many scholars have acknowledged the significance of the Franco-Prussian War on the development of warfare. The exploitation of machinery through the use of industrial weaponry had an excessive human cost, yet the impact of the war on military burial practices, and practices of remembrance in Europe remains overlooked. Bertrand Taithe reflected in 2001 upon how the Franco-Prussian war has ‘always been considered in relation to the American Civil War’, and the relationship between the American Civil War (1861–1865) and identity discs or military burial traditions in Europe in the late nineteenth century remains understudied (Taithe 2001, 21).

Though the privately purchased and produced ‘dog tags’ or ‘soldier pins’ informally worn by soldiers fighting in the American Civil War would not translate into officially issued identity discs until the approval of General Order no. 204 on 20 December 1906 (Stansbury 1939, 61–63; O’Mara 2019), it is possible that Prussian military observers (e.g. Scheibert 2001) and immigrants working in America fed back intelligence about the discs, inspiring the trial of discs by Prussian Forces in 1866. The findings of this paper provide further context to the German response to rapidly developing styles of war, exploring the operational, logistical, and moral duty to the fallen as part of that response. Importantly, the moral response to the operational need to identify dead soldiers witnessed during and following the Franco-Prussian War laid the foundations for European practices which would develop during the First World War.

As the German Army increased in size, and developed strategies to respond to the impact of increasingly destructive methods of industrial warfare utilized during the Franco-Prussian War, it became clear that the 1869 pattern Rekognitionmarke required further refinement for use in any future war. On 1 July 1871, German regiments were renumbered within a new ‘national’ system, incorporating continent forces into a single numeration scheme, e.g. the regimental information ‘Bad 5 I.R’. had traditionally represented the Baden 5th Infantry Regiment but, under the new numeration system, this regiment, in its most simplified form, became the ‘I.R. 113’. The national/state designation of the soldier was represented through the use of coloured cords from which the tag was suspended. For many soldiers, this could necessitate the reissue of 1869 Rekognitionmarken with the new regimental detail to ensure the soldier could be correctly identified.

On 17 March 1875, the kingdom of Bavaria issued their own identity disc to be produced from steel or zinc alloy. The disc was similar in shape to the 1869 German disc, though with slightly larger dimensions, no rolled edge and only a single cord hole (Figure 2). Not all discs were pre-stamped with regimental detail, but many did still retain this feature. The 1875 Bavarian pattern is often mistaken for the 1878 Erkennungsmarke.
1878-1906

Following the Franco-Prussian War, Germany would reflect upon the lessons learned to improve the military identification system. On 10 January 1878, Article 26 of the *Krieg Sanität Ordnung* (*Krieg* - Wartime Health Service Regulations) introduced a new identity disc, the *Erkennungsmarke* (Ashbridge and Verdegem 2020). The KSO included illustrations for two discs, without providing dimensions (Lalisse). The first disc (Figure 3.) was almost identical in shape and layout to the Bavarian 1875 pattern disc. The second disc was oval, with two suspension holes as seen in Figure 4, though the spacing of the holes can vary on this pattern. Lalisse proposed that the first rectangular disc was intended as the ‘official’ disc, with the oval model used for ‘replenishing’ stocks. O’Mara proposes that...
the rectangular design was a direct copy of the Bavarian 1875 pattern disc, with at least some initial batches utilizing pre-existing Bavarian blank discs as previously described. Though it is difficult to confirm these hypotheses, years of collecting the discs has demonstrated that both patterns were issued until as late as 1915, with considerable variation in both size and the number of position of suspension holes.

The 1878 pattern discs were issued blank, meaning that all details would now all be stamped at regimental level. For each disc, the soldier’s abbreviated regiment, company number and individual number within his company was to be added (Nash 2008, 153). Examples of regimental abbreviations include:

- I. or J. for Infantry.
- R . . . . . for Regiment or Reserve.
- L. or Ldw. for Landwehr.
- E. or Ers. for Ersatz.
- C. or K. for Company.
- B. or Bay. for Bavarian. (Nash 2008, 153)

The discs needed to be produced quickly and in large numbers, so the Ministry of War instructed clothing depots to order the discs from private firms. Manufacturers of metal products and military effects included Michael Hirschmann of Nuremberg, G. Heidenreich of Sonnenburg (Neumecklenburg), Anton Schweyer and Jos. Vierheiligen of Munich and A. Wunderlich Nachfolger in Berlin (Vestiges Militaria 2014). The average order was for around 40–80,000 units, at a cost of around 0.30 Marks per disc per 1,000 pieces (Vestiges Militaria 2014).

Further information was issued on 10 April 1878 in Article 26 of the KSO, instructing that it was necessary for a tag containing personal information to be issued to all soldiers, even in non-combatant units (Lalisse). Such a provision was progressive in general military practice at this time, when there were no internationally agreed laws or ratified
agreements specifically relating to war which would require any military force to provide an identifying mark to individual soldiers on active service, nor to provide the war dead with a marked, or individual grave (Ganschow 2009, 32).

Noticeably, none of the archival texts and military articles discussed so far have included instructions on the removal of an identity tag from a deceased body, or how the tag should move through administrative structures to confirm the death or record the location of the burial, if one had taken place. The lack of specific instruction meant that on the battlefield, there were multiple opportunities for the removal of the tag and/or other identifying personal effects from a corpse before burial, which might leave that individual unidentifiable. E.g. if the tag was removed from an unconscious soldier in a military hospital who later died, he may become unknown if he could not be identified by other means.

In addition to the challenges of increasingly industrial war, in the late nineteenth century European states would also have to consider approaches and responses to colonial warfare as control over Europe and European settler states grew ‘to its full extent’ (Younis 2017, 484). Within this period Britain, France, and Germany each held colonial control of huge swathes of Africa. Each nation had a tradition of recruiting native and indigenous soldiers into their Armies, with varying recruitment methods, which included conscription (though not exclusively) (Moyd and Glasman 2019, 333–360; von Strandmann and Hartmut 2011, 193–214; Jeffrey 1984,3; Fogarty 2008, 15–54). It is within this context that further developments to the German identification systems would occur, building upon existing practice developed following intracontinental conflict, and refining the information featured in response to new military structures and the realities of fighting war at distance. France would also refine her system during this period, whilst Britain would introduce an identity card scheme (Ashbridge and Verdegem 2020). Germany’s first experience of colonial war was the First Samoan Civil War, fought between 1886–1894. During this war, further amendments were made to the Erkennungsmarke system.

Instructions for the removal of the tag from a body were finally described in the Deutsche Wehrordnung of 22 November 1888 (reprinted 1904) which described how ‘immediately before burial, the plates and booklets of the dead are removed and sent to the authorities or units keeping the registers of deceased personnel’ (Anon 1904). It was described that ‘doctors must not remove identity cards and individual booklets from soldiers who died in aid stations or fell on the battlefield’. Instead, tags should remain on the body, and be removed only at the point of burial ‘by the military detachment responsible for digging the graves. The chief collects the identification marks and the individual booklets and forwards them, if possible, to the units concerned or has them forwarded by his own unit’. The instructions continue to describe that where ‘those who have died at the main or during transport to the latter, the medical company’s commander shall ensure that the identification plates and individual booklets are removed, and that the unit concerned is notified thereon.’ These instructions made clear who should and should not be removing the identity discs in a variety of situations, explaining where they should be sent and/or who should be notified.

The German Army had learnt from the experiences of mass loss endured following the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars and had adapted their system in response to these lessons, ensuring that the Erkennungsmarke was well incorporated into military
structures, and these structures were adequately communicated to serving soldiers. Additional, more specific instructions and adaptations were issued for Naval and Colonial troops (including both German and native soldiers), along with colonial police forces at the time (Ashbridge & O’Mara, Forthcoming).

The transformation of war during the nineteenth century resulted in the necessity for the codification of military law to regulate the conduct of future wars. During the 1899 Hague Conference, a desire was expressed for a special conference to be convened for the purpose of the revision of the 1864 Geneva Convention. Attempts to plan the next Geneva Conference began in 1901, led by the Minister of Switzerland, J. B. Pioda, who circulated proposals including Section B ‘Sundry Propositions’ (United States Department of State 1906, 1). This section included proposals for the examination of the dead, the provision of identifying marks, and the exchange of lists of dead, wounded and sick between enemies. For various reasons, the Conference was delayed by a number of years before being hosted in Geneva between 11th June – 6 July 1906.

Internationally, anxieties over the strength of military forces and large numbers of casualties incurred during the nineteenth century wars fuelled the development of shared humanitarian ideals: A confluence of a form of enlightened self-interest from participating governments but also a commitment to civilizing war amongst philanthropic agencies (Gill 2014, 209). Consequently, the Conference featured discussion about the role of Voluntary Aid Societies such as the Red Cross, but also discussion about the operational need for armies in the field to identify and bury the war dead as a moral and sanitary precaution (Costi 2004, 221). The increased effective range of artillery and small arms had led to a widening interval between the lines, often leaving an ‘impassable’ zone littered with wire entanglements, trenches, debris and more, creating new difficulties in responding to the deceased (Sperry 1907, 37). Of course, the only true way of protecting a corpse from plunder, environmental damage or scavenging was to bury the body. Two new articles were incorporated into the convention to respond to this need, the first being article 3 of chapter 1. Article 3 stipulated that:

> After every engagement the belligerent who remains in possession of the field of battle shall take measures to search … and to protect the wounded and dead from robbery and ill treatment … (and) … will see that a careful examination is made of the bodies of the dead prior to their interment or incineration. (Chapt. 1, Art. 3, Geneva Convention 1906)

The article describes that this search must take place prior to interment or incineration, in acknowledgement that some nations would cremate battlefield bodies as a sanitary precaution but does not explicitly require the victor of the battlefield to perform the interment or incineration. Article 4 provided further instructions on the treatment of the dead:

> As soon as possible each belligerent shall forward to the authorities of their country or army the marks or military papers of identification found upon the bodies of the dead, together with a list of names of the sick and wounded taken in charge by him (Chapt. 1, Art. 4, Geneva Convention 1906)

This article also required that identifying marks or military papers be removed from the body of the deceased and returned to their combatant nation – requiring adequate systems for the processing and transportation of personal effects, but not specifically
dictating the requirement for each belligerent to provide their own soldiers with an identifying mark. An important distinction in the codification of military law. At last, Loeffler’s ideas to improve the care and burial of the dead had been incorporated into the Geneva Convention, many years after the issue was first raised in Germany. However, the official adoption of an identifying mark proved a less popular option amongst attendees of the Geneva Conference. The question ‘is it necessary to state in the Convention that every soldier shall carry a mark of identity?’ was negated with a majority of 14 against 7, with Great Britain amongst the 14 nations to vote (Parliament, House of Commons & Lords 1908, 36). Despite this, Great Britain would approve the pattern for an identity disc scheme shortly after the Conference, on 26 August 1906, with the approval of the American identity disc scheme following on 20 December 1906 (Ashbridge and Verdegem 2020; O’Mara 2019).

Discussion of the Geneva Convention allows for reflection upon the particular challenges facing armies at this juncture in time, as wars became increasingly industrialized, and public opinion about deaths incurred in war would increasingly come to shape national, and international policy. International developments in public health and sanitation resulted in the requirement to reform military sanitary structures, to reduce the number of soldiers dying from disease rather than direct causes of war, such as injury. To improve the sanitation of the battlefield, it was necessary to prepare for the sanitary disposal of the dead on the battlefield. At the point of ratification, German soldiers had already become familiar with identity discs, having used them for almost three decades, thus incorporating them into their military culture years before the First World War would begin.

1914-18

In 1914, the German Army was still using the 1878 pattern Erkennungsmarke, which, due to an inaccuracy first encountered in the British translation of the ‘Handbook of the German Army in War, January 1917’ (War Office, Great Britain 1917), is often erroneously referred to as the ‘1914 model’. By this point, the German Armies had been using a form of identification disc for over forty years, with numerous opportunities to use the discs in battle and improve the system based on these experiences. The introduction of the Imperial Constitution of 16 April 1871 meant that every able-bodied man was liable for compulsory military service, meaning that men from all classes of society, and all forms of employment walked through all ranks of service during their military life (Doyle and Schäfer, 31). This is in contrast to the British Army, whose officer class was dominated by middle- and upper-class men. This polarization of class within the British forces created a culture where the bodies of officers were prioritized for recovery and burial over ordinary ranked soldiers. The German Army had a more socialistic approach, with a military culture which demanded respect both for one’s own dead and the dead of one’s enemy as a moral necessity during war.

As a result, by 1914, identity discs, and processes for identifying and burying the dead were well incorporated into German military culture, and more importantly, well incorporated into the military structure. This is not to say that there were not still errors, and unexpected complications encountered during the First World War, however, it is clear that the German Army entered the First World War with a force built upon beliefs that
reflected the beliefs of the wider society, with no distinction as to treatment in death based on rank. It was an army that understood what it was to experience mass loss and to bury huge numbers of unknown soldiers. It had established a strong administrative culture around the provision of ‘loss lists’ to record and report all casualties on a regular basis, and a sanitary structure which acknowledged that the biggest vector for disease in the battlefield was the human corpse.

In early 1914, the German Army consisted of 25 Corps with approximately 700,000 men enlisted for service. Service for conscripts was divided up into four phases, passing from the first phase of active service through to the reserves. This meant that a substantial proportion of the adult male population in Germany had some experience of military life even before 1914, but more importantly for the purpose of this article, experience of wearing or using Erkennungsmarke. Volunteers (Einjährfreiwillige) could partake in a one-year exam in their Gymnasium or Grammar School to shorten their period of active service. They were expected to equip, feed and house themselves for the duration of their volunteer service (Male 1901). The wartime service only equivalent was the Kreisfreiwillige.

In August 1914, the Reserves were called up. It took only twelve days for the size of the Army to increase from approximately 840,000 soldiers to 3.5 million (Doyle and Schäfer, 31). The German Army was now not only one of the largest armies in the world, but one of the most efficient. Each of these soldiers was issued with an Erkennungsmarke following the 1878 pattern, with the oval and ‘new’ rectangular (featuring two holes) variants of the 1878 pattern discs still in use. It has not been possible to positively identify any examples of the original rectangular 1878 pattern still being issued around this time, though that is not to say that they were not also issued where older supplies were still retained. As was the situation historically, discs were produced by a variety of different private manufacturers, resulting in discs in a variety of sizes and shapes. In addition to the oval and rectangular shapes, a round ersatz (‘spare’) tag sometimes used for reserve units was encountered.

Tags from this period can be found in a variety of metals, including zinc alloy, aluminium, tin and cast iron, though zinc alloy appears to have been the predominant material since 1878. Occasionally an historical pattern, such as the 1869 Rekognitionmarke was issued to a soldier enlisting during or after 1914 (Figure 5). An explanation for this could be the use of existing stocks when supplies of the new discs were depleted. The tag was to be hung from cords produced in the national colours, for example black & white for Prussia, blue & white for Bavaria as per Figure 6 (Kraus 1999, 271–273).

Each time a soldier transferred regiment or company, they would be issued with a new blank disc, disposing of the old one. This further increased the demands for the rapid production of identity discs. The discs could be confusing, with older discs containing abbreviations of the regional designation of the soldier’s unit, which could be complex to decipher as it included a number corresponding with the provincial regimental number, followed by a letter related to the provinces initial, two letters which referred to the unit and lastly a number which corresponded to the number of the regiment in the German Army (Vestiges Militaria). An example being 1.SGR 10, which is the abbreviation for the 1st Schesisches Grenadier Regiment Nr 10 (1st Silesian Grenadier Regiment, 10th Prussian Regiment). A more complex example would be 4.RJR 30 for the 4. Rheinisches Infantry-Regiment Nr. 30 (4th Rhineland Infantry Regiment, 30th Prussian Infantry Regiment) which
could easily be mistaken for the *Reserve-Infantry Regiment Nr. 30.*, especially if encountered by an enemy or allied soldier or volunteer who was unfamiliar with the Prussian numeration system. However, partly due to the renumeration system, this system of near complete regimental designation on officially issued 1878 pattern disc appears to have become quite scarce by 1914 though cultural ‘hang-overs’ can occasionally be encountered in private collections which are perhaps indicative of regimental pride or the desire for individuality.²

This was made even more complex in the case of Bavarian discs which did not adopt the Prussian numeration system as previously mentioned, though it was much simplified by the addition of the national designation, e.g. ‘Bay’, ‘Bayr’, etc., before the regimental numeration which followed consecutively (e.g. ‘1’, ‘2’, etc.) following the same structure as the Prussian system. ‘In order to decipher these abbreviations, a handbook or key of abbreviations might be required, if available at all (Gassend and Alberti 2015, 96–122). Of course, even where it was possible to ascertain the identity of a disc wearer, the removal of the disc left the body without identification.

By 1915, as the numbers of unknown dead continued to rise, the issues with the *Erkennungsmarke* were becoming clear. On 14 May 1915, France announced the introduction of a duplicate *plaque d’identité* to ensure that an identifying mark remained upon the body at all times (Ashbridge and Verdegem 2020). Only weeks later, Commander Noel of the *Kriegsministerium* wrote ‘Proposal about the name plates’, published on 12 June 1915, which included proposals to improve the disc markings, including giving more precision to unit abbreviations and disposing of regimental honour titles thereby limiting the potential for confusion – especially if a corpse was recovered by an enemy.

Unlike the new French system of two discs, Germany continued to make use of a single disc. A new tag design was initially proposed on 16 June 1915, with a rectangular design,
Figure 6. Erkennungsmarken cord colour scheme chart produced by David O’Mara.
measuring approximately 7 cm by 5.5 cm, and featuring the same information as the 1878 pattern, but with the inclusion of the soldier’s name. It is not clear to whom this proposal was addressed but it apparently made an impact on the War Office as on 28 July 1915 the Ministry of War issued directive number 594 reference 1085/7.15 B3 ‘Amendment of the provision of identification discs’.

The contents of the order are described in the Army Gazette, published by the Prussian War Office in Berlin on 31 July 1915: in order to establish the identity of the soldiers killed, amendments to the identification tags were required. The new tag must be produced from sheets of zinc, cut in an oval shape measuring approximately 7 cm wide and 5 cm high. Soldiers would receive an identification tag at their depot of the unit where they signed up and would strike the top half of the tag with the following information: first name, last name, last residence (for larger localities with the house number and street name), date of birth, the depot unit in understandable abbreviations, the number of the company (or battery, or squadron etc) and the soldier’s individual number within the company as seen in Figure 7 (Mouchet 1993, 17).

The lower half of the disc was reserved for information relating to the soldier’s transfer in the field. If transferred to another unit, article 3 stipulated that the soldier should cross out the information of his old unit, and replace it with information from his new unit, including the name of the field unit (also in understandable abbreviations), the company number and the soldier’s individual number within the company (Mouchet 1993; “Verfügung des Kriegsministeriums [Nr. 1085/7.15 B 3.] vom 28.07.1915”, 335–337). The filing unit was not to be changed in any case. The text was accompanied by a drawing of the new tag, which features a small line of separation indented into the middle of the tag to separate the information, though in practise not all discs had this feature and examples can be found with text engraved on the back (Lalisse). The annexe of the directive, “The abbreviations of identification discs” (“zu Abkürzungen auf Erkennungsmarken”) includes 82 abbreviations which could be used on the tags. It also specifies that the names of units and provincial designations were now forbidden (Mouchet 1993, 17). Should the soldier undertake many transfers, using up the space on his tag, a new one would be supplied.

![Figure 7. 1915 pattern identity disc of alexander laurenroth olper, australian war memorial REL35943.](image-url)
Regulation 72,822-V-B1 was issued on 13 August 1915, informing soldiers of the release of the new, larger disc in order to further standardize the *Erkennungsmarke* across the German forces. A decree was issued on the 13th September instructing soldiers holding older versions of identification disc should exchange their discs for the new version as soon as possible (Kriegsministerium 1916, 493–494). Both Turkey and Bulgaria would also adopt this design for their own systems of identification.

As with previous designs, the disc was to be worn around the neck (Figures 8), so that the soldier was identifiable if wounded, unconscious or dead. The tag should be removed

*Figure 8.* German soldiers wearing 1915 pattern *Erkennungsmarken*. Provided by Marc Baetsch.

*Figure 9.* 1916 pattern *Erkennungsmarke* (top) and 1915 pattern *Erkennungsmarke* (bottom), provided by Marc Baetsch.
from the body along with all identifying papers. Wocher described that a note with the name of the soldier, and the address of his sergeant should be left upon the soldier’s body (Woche 1988, 406–409). This meant that the enemy had no information on the soldier. However, these notes – when actually left – were easily detached from the body and quick to decompose, rapidly leaving the body without a form of identification.

In order to address the absence of an identifying object on the body of any soldier caused by the removal of an identification disc, a new disc was introduced in Regulation 1727/8 16 B. ‘Nr. 792. Erkennungsmarke’, issued on 16 November 1916. The new disc looked similar to the 1915 model disc, but now featured a perforated ‘snap line’ (Figures 9). A soldier’s information would now be replicated on both the upper and lower halves of the disc. In the event of his death, the disc would be broken in half, leaving the upper half upon the body for burial. The removal of the lower half of the disc allowed for the confirmation of death, but also ensured that the body could be identified at a later date. The disc was described in regulation 792 reference 678/11 16. KM 2. on 18 November 1916: ‘In order to ascertain beyond doubt the identity of a fallen man even after removing the identification tag, and possibly even after the burial’, it had been decided to introduce a perforated ‘snap line’ to the 1915 disc pattern (Kriegsministerium 1916, 493–494). The snap line should include three perforations, measuring 18 mm long and 1 mm tall. The perforations should start 4 mm from the edge and should have 3 mm in between each hole. The new discs should be produced with the line included, and soldiers should stamp their duplicate information on both sides of the tag as per pattern (‘Mußter’).

For soldiers already in possession of the 1915 pattern disc, these perforations should be stamped into them ‘as soon as possible’, with the existing information duplicated on the reverse of the tag in a way that ensured both halves contained the same information (Figure 10). The regulation reiterated the decree issued on 13 September 1915 that soldiers holding earlier patterns of disc should exchange them as soon as possible (Kriegsministerium 1916, 493–494). The Bavarian Army adopted this model of

Figure 10. 1915 pattern Erkennungsmarke struck according to the 1916 pattern, but with the addition of a third cord hole as per the 1917 pattern. Personal collection of David O’Mara.
identification plates, with directives published by the Bavarian Ministry of War on 6 December 1916 (Vestiges Militaria 2014).

The disc was further improved with the issue of directive 903 ref 2377/ 8.17 B 3 on 16 September 1917 (Kriegsministerium 1917, 462–463). Firstly, the measurements for the perforated snap line were slightly adjusted to improve the strength of the tag and prevent accidental breakage. The three perforations should now have a length of 16 mm, starting 5 mm from the edge of the disc and leaving 5 mm between each perforation. The directive also introduced a single cord hole on the lower half of the disc, to be punctured beneath the writing (though other locations exist, as per Figure 11), to allow those tasked with identifying the dead to collect the lower halves on a wire or cord. The tag should be produced from sheets of zinc. Stamping of the identification tag for new recruits should be carried out within their unit by the weapons master or his appointed representative, and letters should be no more than 3 mm high (but stamps of other dimensions should be used if that is all that is available). Discs should not be supplied to garrisoned soldiers or those deployed in the homeland. The regulation noted that a uniform price was not available for the production of identification discs, which might be purchased by the weapons master or his representative, noting that the highest price paid had been 20 Pfennings per tag, though higher amounts had been charged and may continue to be charged. This tag was never officially regulated, though some manufacturers did create discs to the 1917 specification and many examples exist.

The introduction of the new identity tags and the regulated list of regimental abbreviations introduced during the First World War were acts designed to increase rates of identification, simplifying the process to confirm identity; However, in practise this could create a number of confusing scenarios resulting in mis-identification or the failure to identify at all. Older corpses found bearing historical tags which could feature unregulated abbreviations or refer to units which had now been renumbered could prove to be difficult to decipher for those working to record the dead. The challenges of deciphering the tags are compounded by issues related to the modern archiving of documents.

Figure 11. 1917 pattern Erkennungsmarke. In this example the third hole is punctured to the right of the disc rather than the bottom (Marc Baetsch).
Modern scholars researching soldiers born in areas which now lie within other countries such as Poland, Romania, Russia and Denmark, face the difficulty that the Volksbund deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VdK – trans. People’s League for the Care of War Graves) archives list the Germanized names of these towns, not their current names (Gassend and Alberti 2015, 98).

Another item that can help us to understand more about how German soldiers used their identity discs is the Brustbeutel. The Brustbeutel is a small pouch designed to hold the identity disc, which was worn around the neck. These items were privately purchased, and examples can be found in a variety of materials, including leather and canvas. Though these were not officially issued items, there is no evidence that the use of the Brustbeutel was discouraged. Unofficial stories even suggest that the Brustbeutel prevented the zinc identification tag from irritating the soldier’s skin on his chest (Schäfer 2019). Whilst this likely refers to common skin irritations caused by skin contact with the zinc, it is also possible that carrying the disc in a bag protected soldiers who were stationed in particularly extreme climates, preventing the hot or cold metal from causing pain or irritation to the wearer.

It is not uncommon to encounter a Brustbeutel within images of German soldiers who fought during the First World War as seen in Figure 12, however, their use was not exclusive or consistent, indicating that the wearing of a Brustbeutel was perhaps an accepted fashionable trend. Some soldiers were more creative with the use of their Erkennungsmerke, preferring to attach the disc to the braces holding up their trousers. The disc was large, and therefore easily visible in theory. However, those tasked with identifying the dead might have had very little time to search for the disc, limiting the search to a quick feel around the neck. The searches may have also been undertaken in the dark, limiting visibility. In the event that the search was conducted some months after the death, the body may have been in a state of heavy decomposition, leaving the searcher unwilling to rummage around for a misplaced disc. It is not clear if the German Army allowed for the wearing of the Erkennungsmerke in locations other than around the neck, or whether this was prohibited. The Brustbeutel is an example of soldiers creating their own ‘culture de guerre’, as explored in French historiographies, adapting the official practice of wearing identity discs to improve comfort or to create fashionable trends (Smith 2007, 2007; Ross, 61).

Figure 12. Soldiers wearing their Erkennungsmerken within brustbeutel (Provided by Justin Halvorse).
Graves and memorials

Though Germany had experienced mass loss during the Franco-Prussian War, and had refined the Erkenunnungsmarke system as a result, issues with the identification system could severely hinder the ability to identify the unburied dead, potentially resulting in the creation of an unknown soldier. Though much of the literature relating to German war graves relates to the postwar period, it is still possible to reflect upon the visible cultures of burial through the study of photographs and postcards which display war time burials, and to consider the role of the identification system within military burial cultures.

During the First World War, the responsibility of burying the dead belonged to medical units within the Germany Army, e.g. Sanitätskompanien and Feldlazarette (Vancoillie 2017). Vancoillie describes that following an advance, captured land would be searched and any dead recovered would be buried within field graves (Krankenträgerordnung 1907, 52–53; Kriegs-Sanitätsordnung vom. 27 Januar 1907; Vancoillie 2017). The graves would be dug by reserve units, but occasionally nearby civilians were made to complete this task – whilst the majority of these graves were individual, shared or mass graves were also used. The burial of the soldiers within the graves cut would then be overseen by the Sanitätskompanien (Vancoillie 2017). Mass graves were used for the duration of the war, despite the circulation of official orders which stipulated that they should not be used, performing individual burials wherever possible. However individual burials were only possible where there was suitable space, manpower and resources to perform the burial without risking the lives of the living.

Graves lists were maintained to record those buried, however the information recorded was often incomplete or included errors (Dehnen 1966, 12). Some mistakes were a result of human error, but many reflected difficulties with the identification system. If the Erkenunnungsmarke and the Soldbuch (pay book) had been removed from the corpse to confirm a death at a time where immediate burial was not possible, the body became unidentifiable unless other identifying items remained upon the body. If a later design featuring a split-line was wholly removed, the same issue arose again. Even if the disc remained upon the corpse, the coded information became meaningless to those who could not decipher the information presented. Additionally, poor handwriting in any personal papers, or handwriting which had become illegible due to water damage could further hinder the ability to identify a fallen soldier. As though these issues were not problem enough, conflicting eyewitness report from comrades could further confuse the situation. In 1966, Max Dehne described that it was occasionally possible to respond to these loopholes or errors through a study of the missing individual, referring to regimental histories and grave lists where available to determine the most possible situation to describe the death of the individual – though it important to note that even ‘official’ documents can and do contain errors having been produced by fighting soldiers in varying field conditions. It was within these same varying conditions that burials were also performed.

Where possible, German soldiers took every care to bury not only their own dead, but the dead of the enemy in accordance with the Geneva Convention. There was not a single tradition of burial or marking, with a variety of cultures which can be observed throughout the wartime period. Photographs showing marked graves alert us to a range of cultures present within German field burials, perhaps reflecting the cultural diversity of
the now unified Germany and the incorporation of regional burial traditions. This section shall attempt to describe two distinct cultures of burial and grave marking: individual burials and mass graves.

In the first category, individual burials, we see the greatest variation. Where possible, an individual grave cut would be dug, ideally in an organized burial ground located within close proximity to a field hospital, but realistically, burials were performed wherever the circumstances of the day allowed, including within existing civilian cemeteries. This means that not all individual field burials include a formal grave cut in the traditional sense. Existing features in the landscape such as shell holes could be utilized to create a new resting place, with a back fill used to cover the body before the burial was marked. Postcards and letters inform us that German soldiers took a great deal of care to perform grand funerals wherever possible, with a large procession visible in Figure 13. One personal letter from an unknown soldier describes a funeral procession towards the burial place of a German soldier:

Today we have buried my best friend . . . . He was solemnly buried. The service was held by the divisional chaplain in the beautiful village which has lost its spire from English artillery fire. 200 soldiers went to celebrate Holy Communion which we dedicated to our fallen comrade. After a simple soldier’s breakfast we marched to the cemetery. A simple coffin enclosed with flowers enclosed the mortal remains of our good comrade. Now he rests peacefully in the beautiful earth of Flanders. (Letter, 30 October 1914, Unidentified soldier, Westroosebeke, personal collection of Robin Schäfer, who also kindly provided the translation).

Whether performed in on the battlefield or within an established military cemetery, European military burial traditions of the time typically involved the use of a tumulus (mound of earth or stones raised over the grave) as a sanitary measure to increase the distance between the living and the dead. The burial would then be marked with a grave marker where possible. Postcards can also alert us to more unusual burial types, as seen in Figure 16. depicting a grave marker highlighting the burial of a German soldier behind a trench wall. This image is a poignant reminder that the every-day experience of trench life for a soldier could be shaped by the presence of death.

Figure 13. German funeral procession. personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.
Like many field burials, the photograph features a functional wooden grave marker containing information about the deceased. It is evident from photographic images that many soldiers took care to decorate wooden grave markers. Some were decorated with additional information about the soldier, though others took a more artistic flair, incorporating military images such as the iron cross into the final marking of the grave as seen below in Figures 14 and 15.

Wooden crosses were not the only grave markers to be used during the war, with many wartime photographs depicting traditional stone headstones as one might expect within a Christian cemetery as seen in Figures 14, 15 and 17. It appears that these headstones typically belonged to the officer class, and would have been funded by the family, community of regiment of the deceased, however examples of headstones dedicated to enemy soldiers of various classes can be encountered, as seen in Figure 17. Though many German burials were concentrated into German national cemeteries after the war,

![Figure 14](image1.png)

*Figure 14.* (right) Postcard of a wooden marker heading a tumulus bordered with stones. Personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.

![Figure 15](image2.png)

*Figure 15.* Left) Postcard of the graves of soldiers of the reserve infantry regiment 233. Personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.
for example, Langemark Cemetery in Belgium, many of these wartime stone headstones remain and can be visited at popular tourist destinations such as the Passchendaele museum or as a decorative aspect within current VdK Cemeteries including Vlaadslo, Breitenbach, Cernay, Trois Epis and Munster to name but a few.

In addition to the use of grave markers which represented a form of headstone, graves could be decorated in a variety of ways. In some cases, the grave or tumulus would be surrounded with a border of stones, shell cases and even cannon balls (Figure 18), which features an illustration of a German grave, with further decoration added to the mound of the tumulus another common feature. There also appears to have been a strong tradition of decorating graves with large floral wreaths (Figure 19) or planted flowers, reflecting civilian traditions of mourning and commemoration.

The second category of military burial is the mass grave. Here the term mass grave is defined as a deposit containing the remains of three or more individuals, including whole, partial, and comingled remains. Within this context, the authors propose that the term shared graves (or even the German term of kameradengrab) is perhaps a better reflection of the cultural attitude to multiple burials during the First World War and allows the modern mind to detach from modern interpretations of mass graves which most typically are used in relation to instances of genocide, allowing for a more constructive conversation about German military burial traditions during this period.

These burials do not reflect a lack of respect or a lack of will to provide individual burials, but are in themselves a respectful, traditional field burial which often generated pride from those who performed the act, whereby fallen soldiers are buried with their comrades in areas which saw heavy losses, or where there is limited time, space or

Figure 16. (left) grave of a german soldier built into a trench wall. Personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.
manpower to provide individual burials. In 1915, the Kriegsministerium would announce that ‘Those who have been killed for their Fatherland find their most honourable resting place in a soldier’s grave. Where they fought and where they fell, amidst their comrades, whose peace must not be disturbed for the sake of one individual. Comrades have created harmonic places on many burial grounds, which have to be retained for the future’. (Koelnische Zeitung, Proclamation/Kriegsministerium, 30 January 1915. Trans. Robin Schäfer.)

Evidence of these graves can be found not only in the photographic record, but within the archaeological record. Grave lists were kept to record those deposited in the grave where possible, and in many cases it appears that grave markers were made to commemorate those within them. These grave markers build upon the styles used for individual burials, incorporating multiple names into the existing design, or adding plaques to simple crosses to accommodate the names of those buried. Where
Figure 18. French postcard illustrating a German grave decorated with shells and what appear to be cannon balls. Personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.

Figure 19. Grave of Wilhelm Bekemeier in Poland, 1916. Personal collection of Sarah Ashbridge.
identification was not possible, the nationality or regiment of the soldiers or ‘unknown soldiers’ could be recorded.

In keeping with the new articles of the 1906 Geneva Convention, German soldiers also buried allied and enemy dead where possible, using grave markers where possible, even when unidentifiable, as seen in Figure 17 which depicts a German stone headstone dedicated to British soldiers of different ranks (Dehnen 1966, 8–9). In fact, the need to respond to the dead was seen as more than a sanitary duty to German soldiers, and was considered a moral duty of war which many soldiers took pride in. This notion can be found expressed within not only personal letters, but also within regimental histories, presenting a clear cultural distinction from British regimental histories which rarely include details of the burial of the dead, and tend to only describe the burial of enemy dead in reference to the use of POW labour to perform the task. The history of the Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr 236 mentions burial duties as ‘another regular duty’, adding that ‘the final resting places of the fallen heroes no matter if they were Germans, Englishmen, Canadians or Frenchmen, individual or mass graves had to be cared for, cleaned and decorated in a dignified manner’ (Mayer and Götz 1937).

This care is reflected in the markers of shared graves, which expanded upon individual grave marking traditions as seen in Figures 20 and 21. Archaeological excavations which have revealed shared graves performed by German soldiers inform us that soldiers could be deposited within the grave head-to-head, or head-to-toe, and multiple layers of bodies could be deposited.

Following the First World War, the bodies of German soldiers and any graves located were concentrated into German Cemeteries. Germany had begun to establish ‘simple and sober’ cemeteries in 1917 following intensive losses during the Battle of Messines and the Third Battle of Ypres (Vancoillie 2017, 6). The scale of the losses and destruction resulted in a ‘lack of free space on most of the civilian cemeteries behind the German front’, requiring the expansion of military cemeteries featuring simple, standardized grave markers (Vancoillie 2017, 7). Vancoillie describes that many of the cemeteries from 1915–16 were decimated by the end of the war, with a lack of manpower and materials to restore any that had been located. After the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919,
the maintenance of German war graves in Flanders was performed by the Imperial War Graves Commission (now Commonwealth War Graves), by the Services du Sépultures Militaires (Belgian war graves commission) in the rest of Belgium, and by the Service général or Ministère des Pensions (now: Ministère des anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre) in areas where the French had fought (Vancoillie 2017, 7).

In Germany, a range of organizations were founded to care for German war graves both in Germany and abroad, with the most prominent of these organizations being the VdK who shared stories of visits to graves and acted as an intermediary between families, caretakers of German graves and war graves associations. The postwar concentration and movement of German battlefield burials is beyond the scope of this article, but there is a range of scholarship with a focus on this period (e.g. Ulrich et al 2019; Barlow 2013; Lemay 2018, 159–169; Mosse 1979, 1–20; Capdevila and Voldman 2006). Since July 1966, the VdK has also been responsible for the maintenance of German graves from the Franco-Prussian War in France, where they care for the final resting places of 20,096 war dead buried in 841 shared graves and 1,417 individual graves.
Conclusion

Through the study of the Erkennungsmarke, it has been possible to further interrogate Germany’s role in the development of humanitarian practice and law. Loeffler’s proposals for an identification system would influence not only German military culture, but international military culture. The German system of identification would inspire the French identification system, and the ratification of the 1906 Geneva Convention would prompt nations such as Great Britain and USA to develop their own identification systems in the years ahead of the First World War. The intensive losses incurred during the wars and battles of the long nineteenth century had forced Germany to develop a system of identification, and to incorporate a respect for the dead into her military culture. The identification system was regularly refined, reflecting upon the failures or difficulties with the existing system each time. The German system inspired the development of the French plaque d’identité system and would later take influence from the French double identity disc scheme to adapt the Erkennungsmarke further. The ability to identify soldiers allowed for cultures of grave marking and decoration to expand to soldiers of all regiments, traditions which had previously been limited to the officer class. Thus, the Erkennungsmarke system can be considered to have influenced both formal and informal German military cultures in addition to international humanitarian law.

The presented information about the appearance, material structure and marking schemes of the German identification scheme will also benefit conflict archaeologists, or commercial archaeologists working in areas occupied by German soldiers during the late nineteenth century or the First World War, where human remains can occasionally be encountered. The metal discs used by German soldiers during the First World War are reasonably durable (particularly in comparison with the flimsy, rapidly degrading fibre discs used by the British Army from 1914 until long after the Second World War). This means that German identity discs can be occasionally encountered during archaeological excavations today. Though not all recovered discs reported are legible, having suffered the effects of corrosion, X-ray visualization methods may be utilized to investigate the possibility of recovering information (Scholl 2014). The potential for the recovery of Erkennungsmarken (or previous patterns) within close proximity to human remains during archaeological works, and their subsequent role in any investigations to establish identity before final burial, necessitates the availability of clear information about their appearance and marking to improve the potential for the identification of German soldiers who might be recovered in future years.

The German identification system came to influence the subsequent systems introduced by France and Britain, amongst other Western European countries, ultimately shaping the response to the fallen of the First World War; yet little scholarly information is available (particularly within scholarship published in English) to describe their appearance, purpose, or use. This paper has situated the development of the German identification system within the international narratives of responses to industrial war, the Geneva Conventions and the enactment of military law within military practice, and military burial traditions. The Erkennungsmarke facilitated the ways in which soldiers of the First World War engaged with the death and burial of their comrades.
and has ultimately influenced the ways in which German soldiers are commemorated today upon their graves which lie in national cemeteries, particularly where soldiers have been recovered in recent years following location as a result of archaeological works.

Notes

1. Note- this figure also includes 19,800 Prisoners of War or PoWs.
2. In the authors’ experience, the collectors with the most exhaustive collections are those who started collecting before the 2000’s and the revival of public interest in the First World War, when it was possible to purchase discs at a much lower cost than today. Today, most purchases are made through online auction sites such as eBay, at militaria fairs (particularly in France and Belgium) or via specialist military traders. It is possible to obtain discs from familial collections and also discs which appear to have been recovered from the ground, thus presenting ethical concerns.
3. Two shared German graves were located during the Dig Hill 80 Project excavations at Wijtschate, Belgium in 2018. Within one grave, soldiers had been deposited laying head-to-toe, with a second grave having been filled with soldiers laid head-to-head – Site report pending publication via Ruben Willaert BVBA in 2021. See also Loe, L., Barker, C., Brady, K., Cox, M. and Webb, H. (2014), ‘Remember me to all’: the archaeological recovery and identification of soldiers who fought and died in the Battle of Fromelles, 1916, Oxford: Oxford Archaeology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/L503812/1].

Notes on contributor

Sarah Ashbridge recently completed her PhD in the Department of History at the University of Huddersfield on the subject of identity discs used during the First World War. Sarah specializes in British, French and German identity discs and the recovery of fallen First World War soldiers located during archaeological works. Sarah has an MSc in Forensic Archaeology and Crime Scene Investigation, a PGCert in Heritage Research, and a BA (Hons) in Combined Honours of Arts (History and Egyptology). Sarah volunteers with Operation Nightingale and Breaking Ground Heritage and was a participant in the Dig Hill 80 project, having also completed a work placement with Ruben Willaert BVBA.

David O’Mara From Burnley, Lancashire, he originally joined the Western Front Association (WFA) as a junior member back in 1983, and has been an on and off member since then. In 2008 he became the founder and original chairman of the East Lancashire Branch of the WFA, a role held until 2012. In 2010, David was appointed as the official research partner for the WFA’s online ‘Remembered-On This Day’ project supplying details and biographies of servicemen and women who died during the First World War. David has run a Military and Genealogical Research Service specializing in Great War subjects, through which he has been commissioned by authors, students, educational facilities, public and military organizations and the general public. David’s areas of focus are 19th and 20th century military history, particularly the First World War and Franco-German War. His area of special focus is the French
Army between 1870-1940, upon which he has published five books with Pen and Sword Military. He is an active public speaker.

ORCID

Sarah I. Ashbridge [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2811-5075]

References

Anon. 1904. Deutsche Wehrordnung vom 22.november 1888: Neuabdruck unter Berücksichtigung der bis April 1904. Berlin: E.S. Mitler. Accessed online 23 July 2019. available at https://archive.org/details/deutschewehro00germgoog/page/n29

Anonymous, ‘Les Plaques d’identité allemandes 1869-1918’. “blog.” Accessed29.07.2021 http://plaques-identite.eu/main_dossier.php?page=P1

Ashbridge, S. I. 2019. “The Erkennungsmarke.” Iron Cross Magazine 2: 62–65. November 2019.

Ashbridge, S. I. 2020. “Military Identification: Identity Discs and the Identification of British War Dead, 1914-18.” British Journal for Military History 6: 1.

Ashbridge, S. I., and S. Verdegem. 2020. “Identity Discs: The Recovery and Identification of First World War Soldiers Located during Archaeological Works on the Former Western Front.” Forensic Science International 317 (December): 2020. doi:10.1016/j.forsciint.2020.110568.

Barlow, A. 2013. “Mixing Memory and Desire: British and German War Memorials after 1918.” In The Silent Morning: Culture and Memory after the Armistice, edited by T. Trudi and K. Kate. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.309-331.

Bernd, U., C. Fuhrmeister, W. Kruse, and M. Hettling. 2019. Volksbund deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge. Entwicklungslinien und Probleme. Berlin-Brandenburg: be.bra wissenschaft verlag GmbH.

Britain, G., [Prussian General Staff]. Campaign of 1866 in Germany. The War with Austria. Compiled by the Department of Military History of the Prussian Staff. Translated by C. von Wright and H. Captain Henry M. (orig. 1872, rpt. 1994, Nashville). London: HMSO p.606. Accessed 18 September 2020. http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_00000001B83A

Burroughs, P. 1994. “An Unreformed Army? 1815-1868.” In The Oxford History of the British Army, edited by D. Chandler, 161–186. New York: Oxford University Press.

Capdevila, L., and D. Voldman. 2006. War Dead: Western Societies and Casualties of War. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (original work published in French 2002).

Chapter 1: The sick and wounded – art. “3, Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field.” Geneva (1906). 6. July 1906a, accessed 13 March 2021 https://ihldatabases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/180-170004?OpenDocument

Chapter 1: The sick and wounded – art. “4, Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field.” Geneva. (1906). 6. July 1906b. Accessed 13 March 2021 : https://ihldatabases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/180-170005?OpenDocument

Costi, A. 2004. “The Parallax View: A Critical History of the Origins of the Geneva Conventions.” 11 RJP/NZACL Yearbook (2004: 221.

Crankshaw, E. 1981. Bismarck, 1741. Vol. 2011. Reprint, New York: A&C Black.

Dehnen, M. 1966. Die Kriegsgräber in Ostpreußen von 1914/15: Die Zuordnung des auf ostpreußischen Boden befindlichen Kriegsgräber aus den Jahren 1914/15 zu den Gefechtshandlungen, 12. Würzburg: Holzner.

Doyle, P., andSchäfer, R. 2015. Fritz and Tommy: Across the Barbed Wire, 247. Stroud: History Press.

Fogarty, R. S. 2008. Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918, 15–54. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Ganschow, J.P.P. (2009). Identification of the fallen: The supply of “dog tags” to soldiers as a command -ment of the laws of war. New Zealand Armed Forces Law Review, Vol. 9, pp. 22–544
Gassend, J.-L., and L. Alberti. 2015. “Soldiers Mistakenly Reported Killed in Action: Three German World War II Examples Related to Operation Dragoon in August 1944.” Journal of Conflict Archaeology 10 (2): 96–122. doi:10.1179/1574077315Z.00000000049.

Gill, R. 2014. “The Origins of the British Red Cross Society and the Politics and Practices of Relief in War, 1870-1906.” Asclepio 66 (1): 209. doi:10.3989/asclepio.2014.03.

Höldal, J. 2005. Deutsche Erkennungsmarken: Von den Anfängen bis heute; Mit den geheimen Codierungen (MOB-Listen) der Luftwaffe. Norderstedt: Patzwall.

Jeffrey, K. 1984. The British Army and the Crisis of Empire, 1918-22. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.3.

Koelnische Zeitung, Proclamation/ Kriegsministerium. 30th January 1915. With Thanks to Robin Schäfer for the Translation.

Kraus, J. (1999,2009 ed.) The Field Gray Uniform of the German Army 1907-1918. Volume 1. Osnabrück: Verlag-Militaria. 271–273.

Kriegsministerium (1869)Instruktion über das Sanitätswesen der Armee im Felde vom 29 April 1869. 1869. article (9) 110. Berlin: Mittler.

Kriegsministerium ed. 1916 Königlich Preussisches Armee-Verordnungs-Blatt. Vol. 50. Issue No. 52, Berlin: ES Mittler & Sohn. 18 November 1916. 493–494.

Kriegsministerium ed. 1917. Königlich Preussisches Armee-Verordnungs-Blatt. Vol. 51. E. S. Berlin: Mittler & Sohn. 47. 22nd September 1917. 462–463.

Lalisse, S. “LES PLAQUES D’IDENTITES ALLEMANDES DE 1869 À 1918: RETROUVEZ CE DOSSIER ET D’AUTRES INFOS SUR LES PLAQUES D’IDENTITES ALLEMANDES SUR.” blog. Accessed 13 March 2021: https://lalisse.pagesperso-orange.fr/militaria/plaquesID.htm

Lemay, K. C. 2018. “The Construction of Transnational Remembrance in the War Cemeteries of the Twentieth Century.” International Journal of Military History and Historiography 38 (2): 159–169. doi:10.1108/24683302-03802002.

Letter, 30th October 1914. Unidentified Soldier, Westrooosbeke, Personal Collection of Robin Schäfer, Who Kindly Provided the Translation for Use in within This Article.

Loe, L., C. Barker, K. Brady, M. Cox, and H. Webb. 2014. ‘Remember Me to All’: The Archaeological Recovery and Identification of Soldiers Who Fought and Died in the Battle of Fromelles, 1916. Oxford: Oxford Archaeology.

Loeffler, G., and F. Franz. 1868. Das Preussische Militär-Sanitätswesen und seine Reform nach der Kriegserfahrung von 1866. Hinshwald.

Loeffler, G., and F. Franz. 1869. Das Preussische Militär-Sanitätswesen und seine Reform nach der Kriegserfahrung von 1866 (part II). Berlin: Hinshwald.

Login, E. 2012. “War Memorials in Sedan and Metz: The Evolution of War Memorials in Eastern France.” Journal of Conflict Archaeology 7 (3): 177–198. doi:10.1179/1574077312Z.0000000011.

Lorimer, J. G. 2005. “IX. Why Would Modern Military Commanders Study the Franco-Prussian War?” Defence Studies 5 (1): 108. doi:10.1080/14702430500097291.

Male, Arthur. 1901. Scenes through the Battle Smoke. London: Hayman, Christy & Lilly.

Mayer, A., and J. Görtz. 1937. Das Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 236 im Weltkriege. Zeulenroda (Thuringen): Sporn. With thanks to Robin Schäfer for the translation.

Meinschmidt, P. (1993), German WW1 Identity Tags/Disks, Peter Meinschmidt (self-published), p. 5

Mila, A. 1878. Geschichte der Bekleidung und Ausrüstung der Kgl. Preußischen Armee in den Jahren 1806 bis 1878: Zugleich eine Ergänzungsschrift der Uniformierungs- Liste des Deutschen Reichs-Heeres. Berlin: Mittler.

Militaria, V. 2014. “Les Plaques d’identité allemandes.” blog. Accessed 13 March 2021 http://human bonb.free.fr/indexPlaqueid.html

Mosse, G. L. 1979. “National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany.” Journal of Contemporary History 14 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1177/002200947901400101.

Mosse, G. L. 1990. Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Mouchet, Y. 1993. “Les Plaques d’identite des troupes Allemandes sur le front français, 1914.18.” In Militaria Magazine, French. Vol. 97: 11–20.
Moyd, M. R., and J. Glasman. 2019. “Military and Police”. In General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries, edited by S. Bellucci and A. Eckert, 333–360, International Labour Organization: Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer.

Nash, D., trans. 2008. The German Army Handbook of 1918. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books.

Office, W., and G. Britain. 1917. Handbook of the German Army in War, January, 1917. S.N: General Staff, S.L., London: HMSO.

Office, W., and G. Britain. 1918. Handbook of the German Army in War, April, 1918, 356. General Staff, S.S., London: HMSO.

O'Mara, D. (2019), Identifying the Dead: A Short Study of the Identification Tags of 1914-1918, Western Front Association [blog –2009 update]. Accessed 29.07.2021: https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/identifying-the-dead-a-short-study-of-the-identification-tags-of-1914-1918/.

Oppenheim, H. 1866. System des Völkerrechts. 2nd. cited in Ganschow, J. P. P. (2009). Identification of the Fallen: The Supply of “Dog Tags” to Soldiers as a Commandment of the Laws of War/ New Zealand Armed Forces Law Review, 9, pp. 21-54. 229.

Parliament. House of Commons & Lords. 1908. Sick and Wounded in War: Papers Relating to the Geneva Convention 1906 (Cd. 3933), 36. London: Stationery Office.

Schäfer, R. (2019). “Pers. comms.” 29 July 2019.

Scheibert, J. 2001. A Prussian Observes the American Civil War, ed. F. Trautmann. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Scholl, M.-J. 2014. “Caractérisation des plaques d’identification militaires en zinc provenant du site de Carspach (Alsace, Haut-Rhin, F).” CeROArtOnline, EGG 4. 10.4000/ ceroart.4059.

Smith, L. V. 2007. “The ‘Culture De Guerre’ and French Historiography of the Great War of 1914-1918.” History Compass 5 (6): 1972. doi:10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00484.x.

Sperry, C. S. 1907. “The Revision of the Geneva Convention, 1906.” Proceedings of the American Political Science Association. Vol. 3, p.47.

Stansbury, H. F. 1939. “An Identification Disc for the Army, 1862.” The Journal of the American Military Institute 3 (1): 61–63. doi:10.2307/3038678.

Taithe, B. 2001. Citizenship and Wars: France in Turmoil 1870-1871, 21. London/New York: Routledge.

U.S. Department of State. Gesandtschaft. U.S. (1906). Correspondence: [chiefly the Swiss minister] concerning the Geneva Conference to be held in June, 1906. Washington. p.1. Accessed 29.07.2021: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011714816&view=1up&seq=7.

Vancoillie, J. 2017. “From Field Grave to Comrades’ Grave. The German First World War Graves on the Flanders Front.” RIHA Journal 162. June 2017.

“Verfügung des Kriegsministeriums (Nr. 1085/ 7.15B 3.) vom 28.07.1915”, Armee-Verordnungsblatt (1915), Freiburg Militäararchiv, pp.335–337.

von Strandmann, P., and Hartmut. 2011. “The Purpose of German Colonialism, or the Long Shadow of Bismarck’s Colonial Policy.” In German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany, edited by V. M. Langbehn and M. Salama, 193–214. New York: Columbia University press.

Woche, K. 1988. “Erkennungsmarken, T.2.” In Deutsches Soldatenjahrbuch 1988, edited by H. Damerau. 1988, 406–409. München: Shild.

Younis, M. 2017. “‘United by Blood’: Race and Transnationalism during the Belle Époque.” Nations and Nationalism 23 (3): 484. doi:10.1111/nana.12265.