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Abstract: Memory practices in Austrian war cemeteries: the case of "Gruppe 97" in the Viennese central cemetery

The largest war gravesite of World War II in Austria, where 7,300 war dead are buried, is located at the southern corner of the Vienna Central Cemetery. Since 1939, this independent part of the cemetery has been the final resting place of primarily—but not exclusively—soldiers of the German armed forces. My dissertation project consists of examining individual and collective patterns and rituals of commemoration at the military cemetery of the “Gruppe 97” using an interdisciplinary methodological approach.

Since the 1960s, the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. (German War Graves Commission) has been providing material and professional support to the Austrian Black Cross in its work of maintaining the graves of the fallen of the former German Armed Forces in Austria. As part of this cooperation, the war graves of Gruppe 97 were redesigned in the 1960s, introducing a uniform design and also involving the reinterment of numerous war dead. But the fact that the site is still a living memorial site today can be seen clearly from the most recent developments, including, for example, the fact that the last reinterments did not take place until the beginning of 2025.

Although research on places of remembrance in Austria from the Second World War, for example with regard to monuments, is well advanced, war cemeteries have so far been little discussed. And despite the public presence and the lively social discourse on places of commemoration and remembrance in Austria, there are only a few empirical findings on the commemorative practices that take place at these sites. The present time is particularly relevant for this project: in 2025, responsibility for Group 97 was returned to the Republic of Austria.

Spatially based individual and collective memory practices represent an important dimension of the theoretical approach of my dissertation project. Anniversaries and jubilees are highlighted by institutionalized commemorative ceremonies, while the everyday presence of memory practices finds expression in both digital and non-digital forms. These multifaceted dimensions of memory form a complex fabric that clarifies the significance and impact of war cemeteries in the culture(s) of remembrance. In doing so, individual and collective patterns of remembrance also become visible, which encompass various dimensions of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1939). Institutional publications, such as those published by the Austrian Black Cross and the German War Graves Commission, as well as media reports, contribute to the design and dissemination of collective commemorative patterns. At the same time, the “floating gap” in the transition from communicative to cultural memory (Vansina, 1985) can be perceived, for example, through family traditions. The prohibition of certain individual acts of commemoration, in turn, reveals tensions between individual

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and collective patterns and practices of commemoration, making this site a political arena where the construction of national patterns of commemoration is negotiated.

The project employs a transdisciplinary methodological approach. In addition to a diachronic analysis of practices at the site, which includes the creative development of the war cemetery and the development of individual and collective memorial rituals and narratives, social science methods such as ethnographic observation and interviews on how the site is used will be conducted. These include field interviews with randomly encountered users of the space and social-historical interviews with descendants of those buried here. A CIDOC-CRM compatible database, developed in cooperation with the OpenAtlas team at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, will enable an empirical study of the commemorative practices, thus providing a methodological link to digital humanities. The project is embedded in the research project [MELPAUMENE](#).