This paper considers the politics of naming in memorials of the First World War. That such memorials are highly political is shown in the case of the ‘Indian’ memorial at Neuve Chapelle: at the request of Pakistan, who wanted it to be retitled the Indo-Pakistan memorial, the War Graves Commission attempted to erase the word ‘India’ from the memorial’s register, documentation and signage. Comparing this memorial on the Western Front with its counterpart in Mesopotamia reveals that the listing of dead and missing servicemen’s names was a policy specific to Europe. Colonial rank-and-file soldiers, and labourers and porters, were normally not named on memorials elsewhere. In Africa, evidence from the archives of the War Graves Commission demonstrates a sharp differentiation between the treatment of ‘white graves’ and those of ‘natives’. These practices, some formally encoded in a policy ruling, rested on contemporary assumptions about stages of civilization and lives worth commemorating. The paper concludes that the equal treatment in terms of ‘race’ and
'creed', which the War Graves Commission and its historians persistently claim alongside equality irrespective of social class and military rank, was an aspiration rather than a practice.

Introduction

The First World War is currently being reinterpreted in a postcolonial context. The traditional focus on the trench warfare of the Western Front, with perhaps a nod towards the war at sea and the casualties on the Eastern Front, is giving way to a less Eurocentric perspective (Morrow 2004; Strachan 2001). The role played by colonial soldiers, in the British case particularly the Indian Army, is attracting renewed attention (Corrigan 1999; Das 2007). A glance at one of the popular atlases of the war is enough to indicate just how much the war (which was being fought by the imperial powers for imperial motives) involved military action in the colonies themselves, as well as in Europe. In the autumn of 1914 alone, there were battles in Togoland, Cameroon, German East Africa and German Samoa; there were landings in the Solomon, Marshall and Falkland Islands, as well as the beginning of the campaign in Mesopotamia (Livesey 1994). The Imperial War Museum in London was originally to be a ‘National’ museum, but by the time it opened in 1920 the name ‘Imperial’ was used to acknowledge explicitly the contribution of colonial troops to the war effort. It has long been recognized that the wartime experiences of troops from the British ‘Dominions’, such as the Australian and New Zealand forces at Gallipoli, or the Canadians at Vimy Ridge in France, were important catalysts of solidarity and national identity. These military experiences were connected to the development of political autonomy and national independence after the war, and the memorials at these First World War sites reflect their importance in terms of national affect. The political history of commemorations of this complex colonial war is necessarily a complicated one. In Ireland, for instance, the men who fought in the British Army were often regarded as traitors to the cause of Irish independence, the Easter Rising of 1916 taking place shortly before the battle of the Somme. Consequently, the history of the official memorial in Dublin is a vexed one (Jeffery 2000). To mark the 80th anniversary of the Armistice in 1998, the then President of Ireland inaugurated a particularly carefully planned memorial: the ‘Island of Ireland’ park near Messines in Belgium, a place where troops from both sides of the present border had fought side by side in the war of 1914–18.

Commemoration of the part played by British colonial forces in the war has been the responsibility of the Imperial (and since 1960 the Commonwealth)
War Graves Commission. The commission’s public profile relies on a constant reiteration of the then controversial fundamental principles that were established by its founder, Sir Fabian Ware, in 1920. ‘The Commission’s Principles’, as they appear on the ‘Who We Are’ page of their current website (http://www.cwgc.org.uk) are listed as follows:

Each of the dead should be commemorated by name on the grave or memorial.
Headstones and memorials should be permanent.
Headstones should be uniform.
There should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.

The IWGC’s early decisions about commemoration were contentious. They saw themselves as pioneers in creating a new respect for the common soldier – after all, merely a century before, after the battle at Waterloo, men and animals of both sides had been interred in common pits. The IWGC wanted to break down the distinction between officers and men, and let them all be buried where they had fallen. Their decision not to allow the repatriation of bodies to the UK, not to differentiate soldiers by military rank or social class, and not to allow cruciform headstones on graves, all generated significant political debate and highly emotional discussion. Families who could afford it wanted to bring their bodies back for burial at home, and many were appalled that the Christian cross was not to be erected (as the French were doing) on the graves. It can now be seen that the commission’s founding egalitarian resolve has resulted in cemeteries, on the Western Front and elsewhere, that are widely regarded by their many visitors as appropriate, eloquent and dignified. They have permanence, they have consistency and they have equal treatment in terms of rank and class.

The commission also claims, however, that there should be no distinctions made according to ‘race and creed’, a principle that is repeated everywhere in its materials. It is this element of the commission’s principles that I investigate in this paper. I begin with a discussion of the memorial that was erected in France in the late 1920s, marking the deaths on the Western Front of soldiers and labourers from the Indian Corps – the Neuve Chapelle memorial. The corps, dating from before the partition of India in 1947, formed part of the ‘Armies of Undivided India’. Here we see a first, and rather dramatic, erasure of history: in the 1960s the Pakistan government, wanting to retrospectively redesignate Neuve Chapelle as an ‘Indo-Pakistan’ memorial, persuaded the War Graves Commission simply to try to erase the word ‘Indian’ from the memorial registers. Like all such erasures, this one carries the traces of its history. The losses of the Indian Corps on the Western Front were small compared to their losses in Mesopotamia, which are recorded on a memorial in Basra. Comparing the two monuments, using the
CWGC’s archives, produced a distinctive finding: the ‘principle’ that each of the dead should be commemorated by name only held within Europe. The memorial in Basra does not list the individual names of the Indian rank and file, a policy spelt out in internal correspondence. Much has been made, by scholars of commemoration, of what Thomas Laqueur (1994) calls the ‘hyper-nominalism’ – the endless listing of the names of the missing – of the First World War monuments. But it turns out that outside Europe numbers were sufficient. Turning to the files on Africa, the ‘principle’ of equal treatment was flouted consistently in the distinction that was made between what IWGC officials called ‘white graves’ and those of the African ‘natives’. The latter were usually not maintained. This is perhaps not surprising, especially to students of colonial history. But what is surprising is the continued effort that the War Graves Commission, and its historians and journalists, make to insist that ‘equal treatment’ is the watchword. Ignoring the evidence, in their own files, of just how very unequal their treatment of whites and Africans was, they continue to erase the memory of the 200,000 and more Africans who died during the First World War.

‘Commemorative hyper-nominalism’ and the politics of naming

Rudyard Kipling’s inscription for a First World War memorial to troops and carriers in East Africa includes the lines ‘If you fight for your Country, even if you die, your sons will remember your name’. As Kipling knew, the names of these particular dead fathers would not be inscribed on the memorial itself, which collectively and anonymously honours approximately 50,000 Africans who died – fighting for and supporting the British – in the war there. No afterlife of these names is secured by the public memorial. In contrast, the perceived necessity for naming the war dead individually on the Western Front has been emphasized by Thomas Laqueur. Laqueur sees the major monuments in France and Belgium as ‘little more than venues for names’, and discusses the design problems their architects faced in maximizing the wall space to accommodate so many names (1994: 163). Laqueur interprets the necessity of naming every common soldier as a response to the absence of any agreed resonant imagery or ideal. This ‘resort to a sort of commemorative hyper-nominalism’ is evident on the Western Front, at Gallipoli and elsewhere (ibid.: 160).

Thomas Laqueur sites his account in the historical context of the importance of a ‘name’. He points out that, referring to battle casualties, Shakespeare speaks of ‘none else of name’ in Henry V and ‘none of name’ in Much Ado About Nothing. The name does not belong to the individual in the early modern period; rather, it belongs to the lineage. Naming the
individual common soldier is a specifically modern development. In medieval and early modern tombs, representation of a knight could take a doubled form – on top an effigy of the ‘genealogical body’, a body located through heraldry in its kinship systems, and below an anonymous corpse, ‘food for worms’ (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 250). This image illuminates a point that Laqueur makes about the war dead: on the one hand the names of the ‘missing’ were separated from their bodies, on the other an anonymous body (the unknown soldier) stands in for all bodies. As such, the unknown soldier is compelled to be universal, is required to be, in Laqueur’s words, ‘bones that represent any and all bones equally well or badly’ (Laqueur 1994: 158).

This argument has some relevance for interpreting the differential treatment of colonial troops. Daniel Sherman, noting the 70,000 deaths among the French colonial troops, explains the unwillingness to recognize them publicly: ‘too much recognition of colonial troops as a distinct category … risked raising uncomfortable questions about their subordinate status within the French empire; in this respect unitary narratives, such as those incarnated in the unknown soldier, clearly had their advantages’ (Sherman 1999: 101).

In Africa, where it is estimated that upwards of 200,000 people died, the Imperial War Graves Commission developed a policy of conserving what it called the ‘white graves’, while allowing ‘native’ graves to revert to nature. The occupants of the latter were commemorated on memorials rather than given headstones. In an eloquent phrase, employing the commission’s own key difference between an identified grave and a name to be included on a memorial, the natives were described as ‘sent Missing’. A significant distinction was made, early on, between policy in Europe and elsewhere in the world. This can be seen by comparing two of the memorials of the soldiers serving in the Indian Army (as it then was). The memorial at Neuve Chappelle in France identifies approximately 5,000 soldiers of all ranks by individual name. In Basra, where the bulk of the 35,000 Indians who died in Mesopotamia are commemorated, a different policy applied: Lord Arthur Browne, Principal Assistant Secretary of the Imperial War Graves Commission, explained in 1924 that ‘outside Europe’ the memorials would contain the names of the British and Indian officers, but only the total numbers of native non-commissioned officers and men, under the name of their regiment. The same policy applied to men from the Nigeria Regiment and the West African Frontier Force. Their names, we are told, ‘like those of the Indians, will appear only in the Register’, and not on the memorial itself. Before focusing my argument on the Imperial War Graves Commission practices in East and West Africa, I look more generally at the case of the Indian Army, as this enables us to compare practice on the Western Front with what was thought appropriate in Mesopotamia.
The ‘Armies of Undivided India’

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s influential paper ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1988) has given the idea of the subaltern general currency in literary studies, but the word has a very specific history in relation to the British Army, where it denoted an officer below the rank of Captain. In the First World War the subaltern officers were typically Second Lieutenants, in charge of a platoon of twenty men. Many of the well known ‘war poets’ were, or started off as, Second Lieutenants, as this was the standard junior rank: Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas, for example. These men were ‘subalters’ in army speak rather than in Spivak speak: many were from a class background of considerable wealth and power, educated at the major private schools, then at Oxford or Cambridge.

Rather, it is the Indian Army that provides an encounter between Spivakian subalternity as a form of subordination that denies voice and agency and the definition in terms of British officer ranks. The army of pre-partition India, its soldiers were later referred to as ‘the Armies of Undivided India’. At the outbreak of the war in 1914 the various regiments of the Indian Army were organized along ethnic and caste lines, but this structure was overridden by a different hierarchy: all officers were Europeans. Sepoys could not go beyond the role of platoon commander, and commissioned officer status was simply not available. As historians have noted, it was only at the end of the war, and in response to India’s contribution to it, that this changed (Visram 1986: 114). In 1917 it was agreed in principle to grant ‘King’s Commissions’ to Indian officers, but in practice these men lacked the education and social graces required; after the war they were put through the military schools and the ‘Indianization’ of the officer corps made a reality (Ellinwood and Pradhan 1978: 199–200).

In September 1914 the King-Emperor sent a message to the ‘Princes and Peoples of My Indian Empire’. He declared that

nothing has moved Me more than the passionate devotion to My Throne expressed both by My Indian subjects, and by the Feudatory Princes and the Ruling Chiefs of India, and their prodigal offers of their lives and resources in the cause of the Realm. (Lucas 1921: 301–2)

The Indian Corps, a fighting force as well as labour support, arrived in Marseilles in the autumn of 1914 to join the battles on the Western Front. This experience has been documented in various military memoirs and histories, including Willcocks’s With the Indians in France (1920), Merewether and Smith’s The Indian Corps in France (1919), Heathcote’s The Indian Army (1974), and more recently Corrigan’s Sepoys in the Trenches...
(1999). Experiences on the Western Front were powerfully reworked in a literary register in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Across the Black Waters: A Novel* (1940); and fascinating personal material, collected as part of the censor system from letters written home by Indian soldiers, has now been published (Omissi 1999). The tour of duty of the Indian Corps in France lasted for fifteen months, in the course of which they notably recaptured the village of Neuve Chapelle, which the British had lost (Corrigan 1999: 247). On their departure, another word came from the King: of those who had died, he said: ‘Let it be your consolation, as it was their pride, that they gave their lives in a just cause for the honour of their sovereign and the safety of my Empire.’

A memorial at Neuve Chapelle lists the names of over 5,000 Indian soldiers. It was designed in 1923 by Herbert Baker, the co-worker of Edwin Lutyens on the plans for New Delhi. The design of the memorial took place in a conflicted religious context: Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs all wanted separate monuments, but it was decided to have a single memorial to all the Indians who had died in France, with inscriptions appropriate to the three main creeds (Longworth 2003: 37). In 1927 the Neuve Chapelle Indian memorial was inaugurated. This is how it was described:

The memorial is a sanctuary enclosed within a circular wall, the front of which is pierced and carved with Indian symbols, after the manner of the enclosing railings of the early Indian shrines. The centre of this railing is solid and on it stands a monolithic column reminiscent of the famous inscribed columns which the Emperor Asoka erected throughout India. The column is surmounted with a Lotus capital, the Imperial crown and the Star of India. On either side of the column are carved two tigers guarding the temple of the dead. On the lower part of the column is inscribed in English ‘God is One, His is the Victory’ with similar texts in Arabic, Hindi and Gurmukhi. The base of the column bears the inscription ‘India, 1914–1918’. (Rice 1928)

Stanley Rice, in describing the unveiling of the memorial, made an allusion to Rupert Brooke’s famous patriotic sonnet, ‘The Soldier’, when he asked: ‘may we not also look upon this inscription as marking the place where we leave France and enter upon that tiny plot of French ground that is for ever India?’ (ibid.).

The memorial in its final form was the end product of considerable debate. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission archives show that every aspect of the design was fully discussed between the commission and the India Office in London. One thorny issue was the presence of a cross in the design of the imperial crown. Herbert Baker was reported as saying that ‘he is using crowns freely in Delhi and sees no objection to there being a crown on the memorial’. The India Office disagreed, General Cobbe saying from the start, in 1925, that ‘if the Imperial Crown designed to top the Memorial
must have a Maltese cross on the top of it, I agree that it had better be left out of the design altogether’. The inscriptions for the column were to say ‘God is One, His is the Victory’, but in what languages? ‘Is it necessary to have anything more than English, and one Indian language?’ asked the IWGC. General Cobbe of the India Office thought on balance that ‘if it was convenient to include a native language, it should be Urdu’. Herbert Baker as architect was insistent on the four languages of English, Hindi, Urdu and Gurmukhi. In the end they consulted Sir Frederick Kenyon, Director of the British Museum, who had resolved earlier conflicts for the commission about such inscriptions. In 1926 he cautiously replied:

I am not Orientalist enough to form an opinion. Surely it is a case for inviting native opinion … [W]e ought not to put up anything which may offend the sentiments of any large section of the population of India without being able to say that we took the best native opinion open to us.

In 1927 the King had hoped that the memorial would
be the means of bringing to their kin in India – most of whom can never visit the far distant scene of battle – vivid realization of the loving care and profound homage with which all parts of my Empire have combined to perpetuate the memory of the Indian fallen.

The visitors’ book at the memorial, however, now shows that cheaper international travel and the desire to settle imperial accounts have motivated many residents of India to make the trip to northern France.

The title page of the official register at the site has the word ‘Indian’ deleted by several dark-blue biro lines. Erasure of the word ‘Indian’ is reiterated, in black felt-tip pen, on every single page of the register. These changes look almost like graffiti, but they are official. An amendment to the register, in 1966, announced:

It has been decided that the 1914/18 Memorial at Neuve Chapelle, formerly known as ‘The Neuve Chapelle Indian Memorial’ upon which are commemorated fallen members of the armies of Undivided India, will in future be known only as the Neuve Chapelle Memorial.

We have here the ambiguous erasure of the word ‘Indian’ from the paperwork at a memorial which has the word ‘India’ carved in huge letters into the stone of its plinth. In December 2001 the Commonwealth War Graves Commission answered my enquiry about the decision to erase the word ‘Indian’ from the register:

In November 1966 the commission’s Director of External Relations and Records decided after discussions with the representative of Pakistan to change the title of the memorial formerly known as ‘The Neuve Chapelle Indian Memorial’ upon which are commemorated fallen members of the armies of undivided India to the Neuve Chapelle Memorial.

‘For ever India’ had lasted for forty years. There was an enormous amount of consultation about the details of the Indian memorial in France in the 1920s; the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has files of papers on the topic in its storerooms, including drawings, artwork for the inscriptions, and so on. The cultural politics concerning religion and ethnicity were seen, then, as sensitive and important. In 1966 the word ‘Indian’ was dropped over lunch. The two men lunching were Wynne Mason, the Director of External Relations of the CWGC, and Commodore M. M. Hussain, the Head of the Military Mission at the High Commission for Pakistan in London. On 28 June Commodore Hussain wrote to Wynne Mason and mentioned that

[w]e would ... be grateful if you could be good enough to consider changing the name of Neuve Chapelle Indian War Memorial to ‘Neuve Chapelle Indo-Pakistan War Memorial’. We feel that this distinction should be made as the sub-continent is
now divided into independent states of Pakistan and India. This distinction will bring out the services rendered by people who came from the areas now constituting Pakistan.

Wynne Mason replied: ‘I should be delighted if you would accept an invitation to lunch with me, when we could have ample time to talk over all aspects of the matter.’ This they did, in late September. Mason then wrote to ‘My dear Hussain’, saying how much he had enjoyed ‘chatting together over lunch’. He continued that

with regard to the 1914–1918 Memorial at Neuve Chapelle, we shall ensure that in future correspondence this is referred to as The Neuve Chapelle Memorial and that the new roadside direction signs which are to be erected will be similarly inscribed.

Of this decision there is no account to be found in the copious archives of the CWGC; it does not appear to have been discussed or minuted at commission meetings. There is merely one note, item 5 in an account of a senior staff meeting on 20 October 20:

**Figure 2**
Neuve Chapelle Indian Memorial DER [i.e., Mason] said that following discussions with the representative of Pakistan it had become necessary to change the title of the above Memorial, which would now be known simply as the Neuve Chapelle Memorial. DG [Director General] said it would be as well to circularize Heads of Divisions about this.

The CWGC would never have agreed to ‘Indo-Pakistan’; they did not believe in retrospective redesignations of that kind. Nor was the motive obviously financial. Following the partition of India, in 1947, the contribution to the maintenance of CWGC operations was split 2:1 between India and Pakistan. The sum involved had also been substantially reduced in recognition of the fact that so many men of the Indian Army were recorded as names on memorials rather than as graves requiring expensive maintenance. Pakistan left the CWGC when it left the Commonwealth, in the 1970s, but was on good terms at this point. It seems most likely, according to current information staff at the commission, that Mason accepted the force of Hussain’s political argument. No request was made to change the names of other Indian cemeteries and memorials, which retain the word ‘Indian’ to this day. Neuve Chapelle was different in that it was not only a monument to the missing but a national ‘Indian’ battle exploit memorial, and as such the key site for renegotiation. Recognition of Pakistan was most easily done, it
seems, by attempting to erase the word ‘Indian’ from the memorial – a gesture laden with some irony in the context of commemorative ‘nominalism’. The erasure has had limited success, both at the site itself and on paper. The CWGC files contain a number of testy memos, years afterwards, ticking off staff for continuing to refer to the ‘Indian’ memorial.

The politics of naming ‘Indians’

However complex the subsequent political history of the ‘Indian’ memorial at Neuve Chapelle, it certainly followed the general practice of the IWGC in recording the missing by name. From the Indian Army on the Western Front, 176 officers died, as did more than 5,000 ‘other ranks’ and more than 2,000 ‘followers’ or labourers. The Indian Army was also deployed in Egypt, in East Africa and at Gallipoli, but the bulk of the Indian casualties of the entire war were in Mesopotamia, where 364 officers, more than 35,000 other ranks and 17,000 followers died. The recent and ongoing war in Iraq has focused attention on the area that, during the First World War, was Mesopotamia. What was at stake then? According to Charles Chevenix
Trench, author of *The Indian Army and the King’s Enemies*, ‘the object was simple and sensible: to safeguard the Anglo-Persian Oil Company’s installations at Mohammerah and on Abadan Island, without which the British Empire could not have continued the war for a week’. The robust Trench continued: ‘twenty miles above Abadan, was the fly-blown, pestilential port of Basra, modest in its facilities but the only one in Mesopotamia’ (1988: 75). This is where the Indian Corps was sent. In addition to Trench’s pertinent point about securing oil supplies, the campaign in Mesopotamia specifically sought to ‘balance the loss in prestige of failure in Gallipoli’ (ibid.: 76). An official account, edited for the Royal Colonial Institute and published soon after the war, describes the impetus for taking risks, in Mesopotamia in the autumn of 1915, in the following terms:

the Home Government were impressed with the great political and military advantages of an occupation of Baghdad. Prospects in Gallipoli were uncertain, and it seemed likely that the Germans would break through to Constantinople. Government had need therefore of a great and striking success in the East. (Lucas 1926: 288)

The Indian Army was largely responsible for the campaign in Mesopotamia, and took heavy casualties there – in excess of 50,000 deaths. In all, over 74,000 men from the Indian Army were killed in the war, a figure that exceeds the deaths of Canadians or Australians. The contrast with these (white) Dominions is instructive in another way: put very roughly, around twice as many Canadians and Australians have identified graves as are recorded on memorials to the missing. In the case of the Indian Army, less than ten percent have identified burial places. Is this, as can plausibly be argued, the effect of Hindu and Sikh religious customs, or is there another factor in play – a lesser value attached to the lives of Indian soldiers and labourers?

This question can be explored further by comparing Neuve Chapelle with the equivalent monument in Mesopotamia. In March 1929 the ‘Memorial to the Missing of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force’ was unveiled in Basra by the British High Commissioner to Iraq, Sir Gilbert Clayton. The ceremony itself, possibly even outdoing the opening of Neuve Chapelle in 1927, had all the imperial trappings, including a nineteen-gun salute from HMS *Lupin*, moored nearby. All the same, Sir Gilbert had anxieties about protocol and ‘native opinion’. He went to the trouble of having a telegraph from Baghdad put into code form when he asked the commission for advice: ‘Basra war memorial to missing will be unveiled by me on 27th March. As the missing includes Christians Moslems and Hindus I am doubting whether the prayers by British Chaplain would be appropriate. Can you quote precedent?’ Indeed they could: ‘At Unveiling Indian Memorial France on
which names of British officers and Indian all ranks engraved no religious ceremonial took place. Suggest same at Basra.’ Similarly to Neuve Chapelle, the Basra memorial had been the subject of much comment in terms of the design; there was the need to represent the three main faiths of India, but they were worried about the danger of communal conflict. The India Office ruled that a closed building was not suitable as ‘[a] Mahomedan for instance entering such a building might very easily do something to offend the religious susceptibilities of a Hindu, and vice-versa’. Early efforts by the architect had been rejected for this reason, and an open design, based around a colonnade and an obelisk, had been favoured.

Despite the force of precedent, there is, however, one startling difference between these two memorials. At Neuve Chapelle every individual is recorded by name; in Basra they are not. The policy was explained in 1924 by Arthur Browne of the IWGC:

bearing in mind that the memorials themselves will in all probability not be seen by any of the relatives of the rank and file, the memorials in question outside Europe will contain only the names of the regiments concerned, followed in each case by the names of the British officers (and non-commissioned officers if any), the names of the Indian officers and the number of the native non-commissioned officers and men.

On the other hand, ‘[i]n Europe, where the memorials will be seen by many visitors, and where the numbers of Indian names concerned are not so great, the British and Indian officers and the Indian rank and file will be commemorated by name’. Following this decision, on IWGC memorials outside Europe the Indian troops would generally be recorded not by individual name, but as a number from a particular regiment.

‘Race and creed’ politics

When it came to refining the details of the Basra memorial in May 1926, we see that differentiation by the race/rank nexus was not directed exclusively at Indians. Returning the Nominal Roll, the Director of Records pointed out that ‘these men of the Native African Units should be commemorated numerically like the Indians, but if they were to find any Native officers among them they should be commemorated by name’. The campaign in Mesopotamia provides a rich quarry of information about attitudes within the military and more generally at this time. Let me take one small example, from a description of the unsuccessful advance towards Baghdad in the autumn of 1915. This is a Major Dawson, crossing the River Tigris at the Shumran Bend with the 82nd Punjabis. The attack was
the most magnificent thing I have ever seen. We went through three belts [of machine gun fire]. Whole platoons dropped, but we went on steadily. I am awfully proud of my company . . . My greatcoat changed hands four times. My orderly was carrying it first. He was hit and threw it to another man and so on. My Mahommedans made it a point of honour that my greatcoat must get in. (Trench 1988: 85)

What is the value of the lives of ‘his Mahommedans’ to this Major Dawson? Judith Butler has asked, in the context of contemporary global violence: ‘who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? (2004: 20). In particular, she asks how Islamic lives, and Arab lives, are dehumanized. ‘To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the “human” as it has been naturalised in its “Western” mold by the contemporary workings of humanism?’ (ibid.: 32). The contemporary question has a classical pedigree, as Butler’s references back to Creon and Antigone usefully indicate (ibid.: 36; Butler 2000). In Mesopotamia, however, colonial power is the salient issue, rather than philosophical humanism. Plainly, the lives and deaths of the ‘native troops’ in the First World War were not regarded as of the same value as the lives of the British. In Butler’s terms, these people were outside the ‘exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human’: they did not count as having ‘a livable life and a grievable death’ (2004: xv). The advance on Baghdad failed, which resulted in a retreat to the garrison at Kut-el-Amara. The spring of 1916 saw the disastrous siege of Kut, which finally surrendered in April – though not before many Indian soldiers had starved when the garrison was put onto horse and mule meat, refusing to subordinate caste eating rules to the advice of their military commanders.

The subalternity in play was that of the Indian Army hierarchy, with its long tradition of a restricted cadre of white British officers, but the subsequent decisions of the IWGC also enact the erasures and silencings identified so eloquently in Spivak’s account of the colonial subaltern (Spivak 1988, 1999). The official briefing notes prepared by the Imperial War Graves Commission for Sir Gilbert’s unveiling ceremony at Basra stated very clearly something that was factually wrong (as Indian officers were recorded by name there) but which tells us everything about the underlying meaning of the policy:

The white officers and men are recorded by name on the Memorial, but the names of the Indian soldiers do not appear on it and will be contained only in the Register which will be published later. In addition there are certain men of the Nigeria Regiment and the West African Frontier Force who served in the Inland Water Transport and whose names, like those of the Indians, will appear only in the Register.
The Imperial War Graves Commission in Africa

This slip of a reference to ‘white’ officers and men opens up a vocabulary that comes fully into play in the IWGC’s work in Africa, where the distinction between ‘white’ and ‘native’ had far-reaching consequences. The commission’s archives provide a detailed account of their work on the graves that resulted from campaigns all around the world during the 1914–18 war. The files reveal departures – particularly in Africa – from egalitarian principles which have been ignored by the various historians of the commission, most importantly Philip Longworth, whose The Unending Vigil has recently been reprinted (2003). One statement of policy in West Africa was seen to be sufficiently important as a guide to practice to be copied and filed in the slim file of general policy ‘Rulings’. Here is to be found a formal statement of Arthur Browne’s policy. This document is a memo from Browne to the Director of Records at the IWGC, dated 24 November 1925 and headed ‘Cemetery Memorial Registers for Natives’. It starts by stating that ‘it has always been the view of the Vice-Chairman [Fabian Ware] that identical treatment should be accorded to British and native troops so far as circumstances permit’. ‘Therefore’, says Browne, ‘registers should be compiled to include the names of all native soldiers who died in the war and also of native followers’. Browne then notes that ‘if a native soldier’s or follower’s name is on a headstone it will of course appear in the cemetery register’. Browne next takes the category of natives who have a registered grave or are known to be buried in the cemetery, but do not have individual memorials (i.e., headstones). These names, he says, should not appear on the cemetery register. They should be put in the registers of the appropriate memorial. The reason for this is that ‘if we were to include all the names of the latter class in the cemetery register I think we should be unnecessarily drawing attention to the fact that we have neglected to commemorate by a headstone’.

This indicates that Browne, at least, was well aware that a departure from the commission’s principles was occurring in Africa, and was at pains to distract attention from it. In practice, no expense of time or money was spared when tracking down the individual European or ‘white graves’ in East and West Africa, while the known and identified graves of many Africans were abandoned and the names reclassified as ‘missing’. Hew Strachan suggests, following Melvin Page, that ‘somewhere over 2 million Africans served in the First World War as soldiers or labourers, and upwards of 200,000 of them died or were killed in action’ (Strachan 2001: 497; Page 1987: 14). The death rate among the carriers was much higher than it was for soldiers. Geoffrey Hodges puts it at over twenty per cent for Nigerian carriers, which can be compared with an average death rate among the military of seven per cent (Hodges 1987: 143).
East Africa: distinctions of race and creed

The Imperial War Graves Commission developed a general strategy on the commemoration of African natives in their work in East Africa. In the course of 1918 there was some correspondence between the Graves Registration staff and the army, which included a cable from Lieutenant Colonel Stobart to the Commanding Officer of the East Africa Expeditionary Force stating that permanent memorials would have to wait until after the war and requesting the military authorities to ‘make the best local arrangements possible for ensuring the identification of these graves in the meantime’. Major George Evans was the officer in charge of the registration of graves. His report estimated that there were 4,000 soldiers and 50,000 labourers to record the deaths of in East Africa, and he considered that the erection of individual headstones would be ‘a waste of public money’. Evans proposed that native soldiers who had been buried in the bush, and the porters (including those elsewhere referred to as labourers and followers), be commemorated on public statues in the principal towns of the region.

Arthur Browne echoed many of these points in his recommendations for East Africa. Fabian Ware himself, in February 1920, said that he regarded monuments to natives as a ‘political question’ on which the IWGC would have to consult the Colonial and Foreign Office and their local representatives. The IWGC kept records of such consultations, including a meeting with the Governor of Tanganyika Territory in Dar es Salaam in December 1922. The Governor ‘considered that the vast Carrier Corps Cemeteries at Dar es Salaam and elsewhere should be allowed to revert to nature as speedily as possible & did not care to contemplate the statistics of the native African lives lost’.

An area of general controversy, in East Africa as elsewhere, was the policy of ‘concentration’: this involved the exhumation of bodies and their reburial in centralized cemeteries. In the process of concentration, distinctions of race and creed appear to have been thought extremely significant. In 1922–3 a member of the IWGC’s UK staff, H. Milner, Clerk of Works, was working in Kenya Colony attempting to identify the remains of men killed at Salaita Hill. His report includes the following observations:

Amongst these remains were one skull with top set of false teeth, one skull with gold stoppings in 3 back teeth of lower jaw, and two skulls had each one gold tooth in the front of the upper jaws, 6 skulls had very low foreheads, apparently of a different race from the remainder but quite unlike African Native skulls. I feel sure that at least 14 of these remains are those of European soldiers.

Milner presumed that the other six were Indians, and had the twenty reburied in a common grave in Taveta Cemetery. The need to distinguish
between these different, raced remains was not, or certainly not only, so that they could be disposed of in ways that were culturally appropriate; it was so that distinctions of relative importance, and therefore entitlements to commemoration, could be established in the disposition.

One account shows this clearly operating in relation not to distinctions of ‘race’ but to those of what the IWGC usually referred to as ‘creed’ – namely, religious belief. Also in Kenya Colony the year before, the Deputy Director of Works surveyed how many headstones would be needed for the cemetery at Voi. He reported that there were ninety-nine graves requiring headstones. However he then added that

only 9 of the Native graves are specifically mentioned as being Christians but as these men have been buried in the Christian Cemetery and accorded special consideration compared with the numerous other natives who died in the vicinity, the inference I draw is, that they may be regarded as Christians and worthy of commemoration by the standard type of Headstone.

He was quite clear that their Christianity could overrule their African ‘native’ status and make them ‘worthy’ of a headstone, which would mean that they would be entered on the cemetery register.

**West Africa and the civilization argument**

When it came to its work in West Africa, the IWGC was able to articulate what had already happened in East Africa as the precedent to be followed. On 12 April 1923 Browne wrote to the Governor of Nigeria setting out the situation and asking for his opinion:

According to our records there are in Nigeria some 37 graves of European and 292 of native soldiers. It is proposed that the graves of European officers and men should be treated on the usual lines as far as local conditions permit. As regards natives, conditions are somewhat different. In Kenya Tanganyikaland etc. African natives are not being individually commemorated by headstones on their graves, chiefly owing to the fact that no proper records were kept of their places of burial but also because it was realized that the stage of civilization reached by most of the East African tribes was not such as would enable them to appreciate commemoration in this manner. It has therefore been decided to commemorate the native troops and followers in East Africa by central memorials of a general kind with suitable inscriptions.

Browne pointed out that in the case of Nigeria, ‘the individual graves appear to be known in every case’, and that the alternative to individual headstones would be ‘to abandon the native graves’ with no identifying memorial on
them. The reply came back that memorials were being created for the Nigeria Regiment, which would name those who had died, and ‘for this reason and for those set out in paragraph 3 of your letter [the civilization argument] the erection of individual memorials to African soldiers is unnecessary’.

Earlier in 1923 Browne had had a similar conversation with the Governor of the Gold Coast territories (now Ghana) at a meeting in London. The record of the meeting shows that the IWGC’s principles, compromised as they undoubtedly were by what they were doing in Africa, were nonetheless on the liberal side compared with the views of the colonial administrators. Sir Frederick Guggisberg thought that ‘the average native of the Gold Coast would not understand or appreciate a headstone’ and that a central statue was a ‘more reasonable’ idea. Lord Arthur put a sophisticated point in response:

I mentioned that in perhaps two or three hundred years’ time, when the native population had reached a higher stage of civilization, they might then be glad to see that headstones had been erected on the native graves and that the native soldiers had received precisely the same treatment as their white comrades.

In practice, the native graves were largely abandoned and the names of their occupants included on memorials to the missing.

In late 1928 Browne prepared a summary of the West African colonies for the IWGC. There were approximately 4,500 casualties to commemorate. In Sierra Leone the West African Regiment was in 1927 commanded by an officer with a different attitude. He wanted a memorial with native names individually inscribed. Browne’s response was: ‘I do not see the necessity for it myself.’ Major Chettle, the Director of Records, gave a grudging tribute: ‘I suppose we had better try to have the native names engraved. These men were definitely soldiers of a rather high quality and with a military organization apparently as good as our own.’ The difference in practice between the ‘white graves’ and the ‘native’ graves is shown up very clearly in the vexed history of the Cameroons. There were sixty-three ‘white graves’ and the policy was to concentrate them in the cemetery in Duala. In 1933 the British Vice-Consul sent a report describing how, after four sets of remains had been exhumed and transported to Duala, they were ceremonially reburied ‘with full military honours’. The native graves were another matter. In this instance there were 401 of them, of which only eleven were unidentified. These 390 known and named graves were given the now usual treatment, and ‘with the concurrence of the West African governments, it is not proposed to maintain the native graves’.

In May 1929, Major Chettle was asked about the position of the native graves in West Africa generally, and ‘if the Commission have decided to maintain the cemeteries concerned or abandon them’. Captain Miskin, the
Registrar, noted that ‘for the Natives I should imagine that most of them are already commemorated on memorials, and apart from exceptional cases that will be considered adequate’. Chettle added that for Native burials, ‘permanent marking of the graves will be carried out only exceptionally if at all’. Miskin concluded that, as had also been ruled in similar cases in Palestine and Iraq, ‘burials relating to Cemeteries for which it is unlikely that a Cemetery Register will be published shall be sent “Missing”’.

**Interpretation**

The treatment of the colonial troops, in the official commemorative activities of the IWGC, raises awkward questions, since the commission has, contrary to its own principles, made many distinctions on the basis of ‘race or creed’ outside Europe. An obvious interpretation of this is the question of cost. A typical IWGC grave with headstone cost £10 and would incur maintenance costs in perpetuity. Sending the natives ‘missing’ had a material advantage – the far cheaper option of putting a name on a memorial. Chettle noted in 1932, considering the funding of a memorial in Accra as well as the one at Kumasi, that ‘we have, in fact, disposed of our liabilities in the Gold Coast at an extremely cheap rate, and the expenditure of £75 on a memorial at Accra would still leave our average expenditure very low’. Chasing up the sixty-three white graves in Cameroon was, on the other hand, worth considerable expenditure. At one point Browne even proposed sending an official from London specifically to oversee their fate, even though this would have raised the cost per grave from the budgeted £10 to an exorbitant £30. (This option was rejected and eventually these graves were marked with the smaller Gallipoli-style stone.) In Sierra Leone Browne drew the line at naming the carriers on a memorial, writing to Fabian Ware (from whom came the pressure for equal treatment) that ‘I am not including the names of the Carriers, as I do not know how far they are sufficiently civilized to justify the inclusion of their names’, and adding that ‘it would greatly increase the cost of the Memorial to include their names’. This was true – there were a lot of them: 795, as against fifty-nine dead soldiers. In the event, the names of the soldiers were recorded while the men of the Carrier Corps were ‘honoured’ collectively.

What stances did the men working at the IWGC take on these issues? Fabian Ware (Vice Chairman) was pushing for equal treatment where possible, but was actually presiding over some striking inequalities. Browne, the Principal Assistant Secretary, was a key figure, in practice laying down policy and freely airing his views – which were typical for this period. Captain Miskin, the Registrar, was a Brownite in temperament. Major Chettle, the Director of Records, was more cautious, tending to ask for
rulings on obviously sensitive issues. It is surprising, however, that the
official historians of the IWGC and CWGC have so completely ‘white-
washed’ the issue of differential treatment by both race and creed in the
practice of the organization. Fabian Ware’s The Immortal Heritage (1937)
can perhaps most readily be forgiven by the modern reader. His take on the
issue of ‘race’ was to argue that the cemetery gardeners should be British
rather than Belgian (Ware 1937: 56). Philip Longworth’s The Unending
Vigil, first published to mark fifty years’ work of the commission in 1967,
revised in 1985 and reprinted in 2003, is more of a challenge. He examines
the archives, presumably taking in the general ‘Rulings’ file, yet he simply
slides over the many ways in which the commission did not practise the very
principles he lays out in the discussion of ‘the forging of principles’ earlier in
his book. In his discussion of ‘the global task’, Longworth notes that there
were ‘departures from the standards of the Western Front’, particularly in
Palestine, but that these were ‘dictated by necessity, not by disagreement
with the Commission’s principles’ (2003: 117). Across the world, he insists,
some countries had thousands of graves, others only one: ‘But the single
grave isolated in a wilderness was counted as important as any in a cemetery
with ten thousand graves. There was no withdrawal from responsibility’
(ibid.: 123). This same egalitarian rhetoric recurs in a recent book of
photographs published to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the commission:
it includes a picture of an isolated grave in Canada, which is ‘as reverently
cared for as any other Commission grave’ (Summers 2007: 157). There is no
mention of the decision not to maintain the graves of Africans. Photographs
of the African native memorials exist, but they are rarely seen in CWGC
materials. In Longworth’s recent history of the commission there is a
photograph of the native memorial in Lagos, Nigeria, showing its sculptures
of a Nigerian soldier and a carrier. No one seems to have noticed that it has
been positioned and printed so as to cut off the top of the head of one of the
two men.

Edwin Gibson and G. Kingsley Ward, in Courage Remembered, piously
enjoin their readers to be instructed by the commission’s principles of
uniformity of sacrifice (1989: 71). They provide, unintentionally, an
interesting example of unequal treatment in their reference to an exception
that was made to the rule that a cemetery needed to have forty graves in it to
merit the installation of a Cross of Sacrifice. One such cross was shipped out
to the Falkland Islands between the wars, to honour the twenty-one graves in
San Carlos cemetery (ibid.: 53). These are graves to which British imperial
sentiment attaches. After the defeat of the British squadron at Coronel in
1914, two ‘Dreadnought’ battle cruisers were sent out from the UK to the
Falklands and the Germans were routed by massively superior speed and
firepower, causing Admiral Graf von Spee and his crews to perish there
(Corbett 1997; Irving 1927). These battles were the last display of gallant
and honourable naval warfare in the outer seas, before the era of the perfidious submarine. Winston Churchill cabled from the Admiralty that rescued German officers were entitled to the honours of war and would be permitted to retain their swords (Churchill 1923: 434). The Falkland Islands cemetery is thus a marker of a significant point in the imperial naval narrative, and a marker of heightened imperial affect. No wonder the rule was broken for its commemoration. The contrast between the cemetery there and the graves of Africans, long since reverted to nature, is the ‘instructive’ one.

Why then does the CWGC so persistently claim that equality of treatment is a principle that is applied to race and creed? A possible answer to that question would focus on the key debate in the House of Commons in 1920. The commission’s principles were under real threat and its work was in danger of being seriously disrupted if repatriation and private memorials on the battlefields were allowed and the principle of equality defeated. The commission’s principles of equal treatment had been framed by Fabian Ware in terms of social class and military rank, and were indeed extremely progressive. As they were approved in 1918, they did not, according to Ware’s account in 1937, emphasize the race and creed dimension. Ware refers to ‘three general principles’: permanence, uniformity and no distinction of ‘military or civil rank’ (Ware 1937: 30). Similarly, the Kenyon Report of 1918, also a founding document of the commission, discusses equality of treatment in terms of ‘military rank and position in civil life’ (Kenyon 1918: 6). There had obviously always been, by definition, an imperial dimension to the IWGC, and this was written into its Royal Charter in terms of a desire to ‘strengthen the bonds of union between all classes and races in Our Dominions’ and to ‘promote a feeling of common citizenship and loyalty to Us and to the Empire of which they are subjects’ (Longworth 2003: 28). In the battle in parliament to defend the principle of equality of treatment, Westminster MP William Burdett-Coutts and Winston Churchill cast the issue in terms of the empire rather than the nation. They were building memorials to commemorate the sacrifice of an empire’s soldiers, they said, and Burdett-Coutts referred to the war as having ‘fused and welded into one, without distinction of race, colour or creed, men from all over the Empire’ (Longworth 2003: 52). This claim won the debate for the IWGC and secured their position; they even published the speech as a pamphlet (CWGC Add 1/1/10). But unity across the empire was scarcely likely to imply equality of treatment. This meant that the line between a principle guiding practice, and an ideal to be strived for, was blurred from the beginning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, subaltern colonial troops were not commemorated equally, but the history of these decisions has not been fully acknowledged. In this way, a further silencing of the subaltern takes place: not only are these lives not commemorated, the acts of exclusion are themselves erased.
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