



Article

Exploring hidden narratives: Conscript graffiti at the former military base of Kummersdorf

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural significance and interpretative potential of graffiti left by Soviet conscripts at Kummersdorf, a former military base in the German federal state of Brandenburg. The graffiti is framed as war art and its typology, distribution and content is studied in detail. In this way opportunities for further research are highlighted, as well as the potential for the graffiti to contribute to interpretative and conservation strategies. We demonstrate how the graffiti embodies multi-level interpretative narratives which can help to reveal hidden aspects of Soviet conscript life and cultural practices whilst alluding to global events and Soviet and Russian military policy. More generally, the article aims to promote the potential of graffiti and other forms of what is traditionally considered vandalism to contribute to the cultural significance and interpretation of heritage sites.

Keywords

cultural significance, dedovshchina, heritage interpretation, Kummersdorf, Soviet graffiti

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Introduction

This article focuses on the graffiti of Soviet conscripts at a former military site called Kummersdorf. The site is located 30 kilometres south of Berlin in the German federal state of Brandenburg. Kummersdorf has recently gained more attention due to the probable transfer of custodianship and the regional objective to expand the site's museum provision and to fulfil its wider heritage and tourism potential. The main historical and interpretative focus of discussions surrounding these efforts has been the period between 1875 and 1945, during which the site grew to become Germany's largest weapon and military equipment testing and research facility. Less attention has been paid to the site's Soviet and post-Soviet period between 1945 and 1994. This article argues that, while some might consider this 39-year period less significant because of its recent date and the shadow cast by the technological advances and historical events associated with earlier periods, it still presents an important part of the site's history which should be adequately investigated and disseminated.

The graffiti of the Soviet conscripts who inhabited the site during this time provides a means to study this period. This is an untapped research source and interpretation device, which, if harnessed correctly, can complement predominant site meta-narratives with the micro-narratives associated with the authors' daily lives. To demonstrate this, the article outlines the site's history before considering the relevant theoretical perspectives offered by archaeology and heritage studies. The findings of initial site surveys are then discussed in relation to the graffiti's typology, distribution and content. Precursory interpretations are then drawn and their value to the site's overall cultural significance and conservation is illustrated.

Site history

Kummersdorf is located in the district of Teltow-Fläming in the state of Brandenburg, which surrounds Berlin. Its location was originally chosen for being isolated and uninhabited, both important qualities for a weapons testing site with its associated risk of accidents (Fleischer, 1995: 11). On its founding in 1875, a barracks area was built and an artillery range established. Although it was initially planned that the site would only function as an artillery shooting range, it soon became a site for the development and testing of a wide range of military technologies (Fleischer, 1995). Here between 1875 and 1945 the successive German regimes of the German Empire (1871–1918), the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and the Third Reich (1933–1945) tested and developed military technology, including munitions, motorised vehicles, telecommunications, air armament, train transport and nuclear energy. During this time, hundreds of structures were built, including bunkers, rocket test stands, reinforced concrete targets, climate halls, research facilities and the so-called *Maushalle* where the 'Maus' super tank was assembled.

Although the site was in almost constant use during this time, the intensity of work fluctuated in relation to German and international politics. For example,

before both world wars, site activity increased sharply and, despite restrictions, the permanent population and number of tests grew steadily during the interwar period. By 1945, Kummersdorf covered 3500 ha (Teltow-Fläming, 2008), becoming Germany's largest weapons and military equipment testing site (Figure 1). Some of the best-known developments associated with the site were those related to the rocket programme to which Wernher von Braun contributed. Von Braun went on to become one of the most important rocket scientists of the twentieth century and was instrumental to NASA's post-war space technology successes following his recruitment at the end of the Second World War. The rocket programme at Kummersdorf was established in 1930/1931, expanded from 1932 (Fleischer, 1995: 52–53), and was then relocated in 1937 to Peenemünde, on the island of

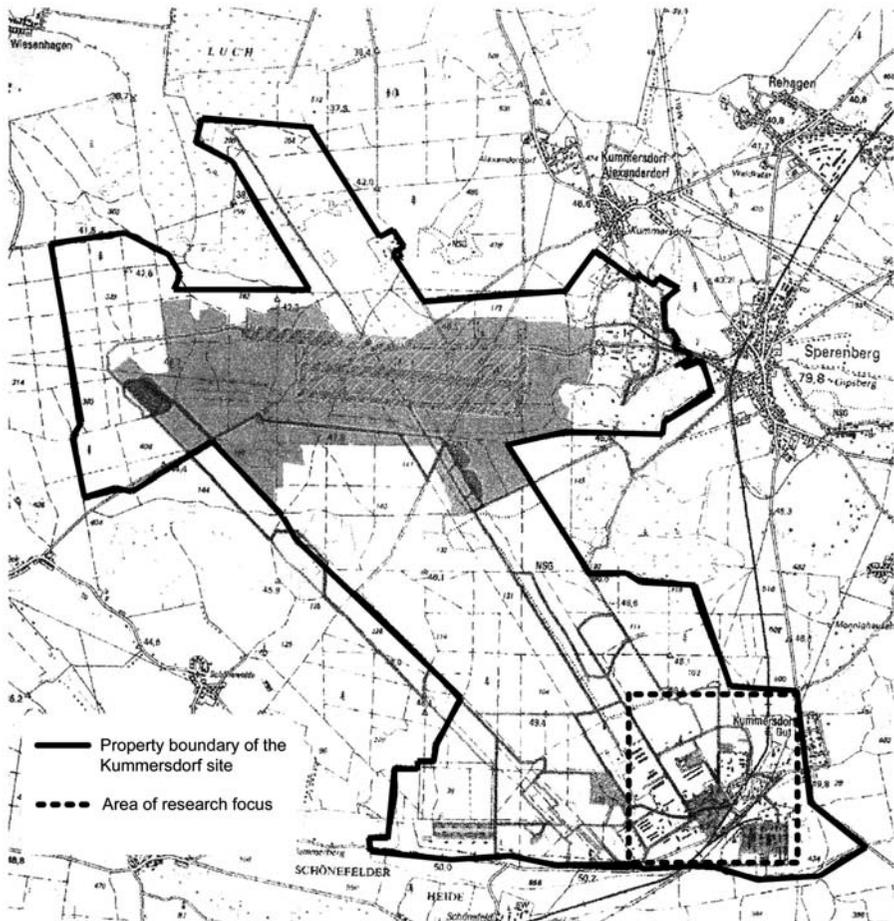


Figure 1. Map of Kummersdorf.

Usedom on the German Baltic Coast (1995: 57). It was there that the first man-made object to enter space was developed, namely the V2 rocket. As such, many of the interpretation strategies proposed for the site emphasise Kummersdorf's precursory role in the development of space technology and the significance of Von Braun.

In 1945, the war turned full circle to a site which contributed to its conception and planning. The Red Army invaded Kummersdorf on 1 April. On 29 and 30 April more fighting took place at the site when the German 9th Army tried to move westwards, out of its enclosed position near the town of Halbe. The fighting resulted in the death in the Kummersdorf area of more than 2000 people who were temporarily buried in a mass grave dug in the site's sports ground (Fleischer, 1995: 178–186). After the end of the Second World War, Soviet Forces occupied the site and ended weapons testing. Most of the technical equipment was dismantled and taken to the Soviet Union as part of war reparations. Peripheral structures were either destroyed or simply left to deteriorate. The barracks area was taken over by the Soviet forces of the 64th Automobile Brigade and used as its headquarters. New buildings were added until the late 1980s and others were adapted for new use. Like all Soviet military sites in the then German Democratic Republic, Kummersdorf became a foreign body in the landscape, closed to the civilian public, 'a cultural and ideological oasis' (Thurley, 2010) with its own cultures and laws. In this period, a cinema, kindergarten, swimming pool and many more facilities required for daily life and military purposes were added.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, troops were withdrawn from the site in 1994 when it was transferred from the Russian Federation to the Federal Republic of Germany and left to stand derelict. For a short time certain buildings were actively dismantled as part of a jobs creation programme and then, in 2006, 2088 ha of the site was listed as a conservation area with a combined archaeological, technical and architectural status making it the largest listed site in Brandenburg. Yet the listing only explicitly refers to structures dating to between 1875 and 1945 (Teltow-Fläming, 2010). In addition, 696 ha of the site is also listed as a European Union Nature Conservation Area. Ownership of the site will soon transfer to the federal state of Brandenburg, which has raised fears amongst local stakeholders regarding the site's uncertain future.

In 2009, the Versuchsstelle Kummersdorf Verein (Kummersdorf Test Site Society) (KTSS), which manages a small museum and organises guided tours of the site, requested the help of Museumsverband des Landes Brandenburg (Brandenburg Museum Association) and formed a project group with the intention of promoting and developing Kummersdorf as a heritage site. The group consists of heritage professionals, public authorities, politicians, stakeholders, military historians and members of the KTSS. Its aim is to develop a museum, which deals with war, its preparation and its consequences (DFK, 2011). The project group also approached the Lehrstuhl Denkmalpflege (Conservation Department) of Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus (Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus) for advice on cultural significance assessment, management

planning and sensitive architectural reuse and design. It was during these varied projects and strategies conducted by staff, graduate and undergraduate students that the value of the war art, in particular the graffiti at the site, became apparent to the authors.

War art: Theory and definitions

The archaeological and historic value of graffiti has long been demonstrated. Graffiti preserved in Pompeii throws light on the lives of its common residents, while commemorative graffiti on the left leg of the colossus of Memnon attests to a state visit by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in AD 130 (Daly and Petry, 1998: 15). In ancient Mesopotamia, an etched Royal Game of Ur board on the base of a Neo-Assyrian winged bull statue from Khorsabad reveals the true extent of the game's popularity (Collon, 1995: 139). In European prehistory, evidence of Pleistocene vandalism highlights distinctions in human occupations at the Cosquer Cave located in the Calanques, near Marseilles in France (Guthrie, 2005: 198).

These examples demonstrate that, in some ways, graffiti can be recognised to bridge divides of processualist and post-processualist archaeology by representing a universal norm whilst simultaneously highlighting the role of the individual within any given single society. Added to this, graffiti's political, social and aesthetic values have recently started to be recognised by heritage professionals as potential layers of a site's overall cultural significance. Similarly, in a few limited examples, recent graffiti itself has become the centre of debates concerning its potential legitimacy as a subject for heritage listing and conservation (see Graves-Brown and Schofield, 2011; Webster, 2011).

In general, however, the treatment of recent graffiti at heritage places often stands in juxtaposition to the sites' other layers of significance and reveals that heritage management, unlike archaeology, is yet to fully accept its own biases. Adopting a pre-emptive post-processualist stance (Merrill, 2011: 71) and prescribing to the holistic notions of cultural significance enshrined in the *Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance* (1999, The Burra Charter) and in Tilden's fifth interpretive principle, 'to present a whole rather than a part' (1977: 9), could all help to remedy these shortcomings. In the specific case of Kummersdorf, the biases of heritage conservation are demonstrated by the selective chronology used to justify heritage listing, which omits the post-1945 period. This not only emphasises the continued need to foster holistic heritage management and interpretation strategies but also problematises attempts to achieve these strategies, as it reinforces notions that histories and narratives outside the officially recognised periods of site significance are less worthy of conservation and research efforts.

The main exceptions to this negative trend tend to be sites of the recent past that are increasingly being exposed to heritage practices, including most notably prisons and, of particular relevance to this discussion, military sites. The value of graffiti in prison heritage sites is frequently recognised and although offensive graffiti is often removed many examples are retained, even if sometimes kept from public view

(Wilson, 2008: 67–68). In other cases, graffiti features prominently and its value is appreciated in terms of a ‘resonant textual layer’ which illustrates a ‘suppressed subtext’ of the collective memory (Palmer, 1997: 105). In military sites, graffiti is also increasingly recognised as ‘part of the site’s narrative’ (Schofield, 2005: 76), which can communicate a wealth of knowledge about ‘messages of protests [. . .], cultures at bases, functions of spaces within them, individuality and . . . reuse’ (Cocroft et al., 2006a). This increasing recognition is reflected by a series of publications dealing with the subject, including English Heritage’s *Military Wall Art: Guidelines on its Significance, Conservation and Management* (Cocroft, 2004) and the Council of British Archaeology’s research report entitled *War Art: Murals and Graffiti – Military Life, Power and Subversion* (Cocroft et al., 2006b). Both of these sources helped shape theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches to Kummersdorf and provided useful definitions and typologies of war art.

Cocroft et al. define war art as, ‘any deliberate expression that has been applied onto, or is integral to understanding, any built structure, site or area in the context of its military occupation or use’ (2006b: 6). This definition, intentionally broad, includes ‘all images and representations of power and subversion that relate directly to the militarised landscape’ (Cocroft et al., 2006b: 6) and as such includes any sanctioned or unsanctioned artistic expression applied to any artificial or natural surfaces within or in the vicinity of military buildings. War art can include: wall paintings, murals, notices, instructions, decoration, camouflage, photographs, bas-reliefs, carvings, scribbles, scratches, drawings, paintings, stencilling, rubbed brick work and graffiti (Cocroft et al., 2006b: 6). Within a survey of all forms of war art at the site, the graffiti became a key focus of investigation. Traditional definitions of graffiti centre on its illicit nature. Keats defines graffiti as the ‘unauthorised act of painting, writing, scratching and etching onto or into public or private property’ (2008: 24). The graffiti that is the main subject of interest here is, in most instances, composed of simple texts executed quickly and crudely in various media.

The Soviet graffiti at Kummersdorf

Numerous field surveys of the site were conducted between March 2009 and April 2011 in order to identify concentrations of Soviet graffiti. These surveys took place alongside a wider range of research activities related to a broad range of heritage assessment, management and architectural projects. These activities included the collection of oral histories via informal discussion with members of the KTSS, of whom many had grown up in the area when Kummersdorf was still in use and have since remained local residents.

The vast majority of graffiti displayed at Kummersdorf can be dated to the Soviet period due to the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, the dates provided by their authors and their association with structures built during that phase. As yet, no examples of graffiti predating 1945 have been identified. The earliest and latest examples from the Soviet/Russian period so far date to 1955 and 1994. There is some more recent graffiti at the site associated with the post-1994 period. While this

later graffiti is indicative of the site's recent period of dereliction and contributes to the full history of Kammersdorf and its continued decay, it is not characteristic of the site as a whole during this later period. As such, and given its sporadic nature and the main chronological focus of this article, the most recent graffiti at the site has not been actively researched at this stage. Overall, it is fair to state that the vast majority of graffiti at the site comes from the period between 1945 and 1994.

During the surveys, graffiti was photographed and its location documented and mapped. The examples were then translated and their information compiled into a simple database containing categories such as location, date, technique and content. This made it possible to organise the collected information under different categories, which helped to understand different contexts and the relationships between these. To date, the surveys have concentrated on the barracks area and its immediate surroundings, which are the areas that have the highest concentration of graffiti (Figure 2). Although there are further concentrations of Soviet graffiti at the site, limited accessibility, time and resources did not allow for these to be considered.

Emerging patterns in the typology, distribution and content of the graffiti have enabled some tentative interpretations, which have provided narratives that have contributed to the recent development of Kammersdorf as a heritage site.

Typology

During the site survey, a working typology was established, based on the graffiti's mode and material of execution. Types included scratching, tar, pencil graphite, paint, spray paint and lighter burning. Initial surveys suggest some uniformity in the colour of paint used during various periods, a fact that may reflect standard army-issued resources. Correlations between modes of graffiti and time periods were identified. For example, aerosol spray paint first appears towards the end of the Soviet period. This may reflect the spread of new technologies with militaristic lineages, with the aerosol can, for example, having been originally developed by the US Army during the Second World War as a means of dispensing insect repellent (Iveson, 2010: 128). The mode and material of graffiti execution can also be linked to the individual sites and the material of the canvas. It might be argued that scratched graffiti is more spontaneous, given that it requires less premeditation, if only insofar as in order to paint graffiti, a conscript must first gain access to paint. There is of course the potential for opportunistic painted graffiti, but this is less probable as conscripts were unlikely to have access to paint at all times, unlike, for example, scratching implements, pencils or lighters. Acknowledging this distinction can help develop hypotheses for further consideration in relation to the distribution of the graffiti.

Distribution

Although graffiti can be found sporadically at many sites around the barracks area, the surveys have revealed that some structures have a considerably higher density

of graffiti. These are the three sets of barrack buildings located throughout the survey area (seven barrack buildings in total), the rocket test stands located in the north of the survey area, a water tower at the centre of the site and the *Maushalle* (Mouse hall) and the *Klimahalle* (Climate hall) in the south (Figure 2). High-density areas of graffiti are thus distributed amongst structures associated with weapon testing, site infrastructure and conscript accommodation.

The seven barrack buildings were built during the Soviet period and display various types of graffiti mostly in their cellars and attic spaces, though it should be noted that most other areas of the buildings have been stripped back to the wall. The other sites of high graffiti density all predate this period. The Prussian water tower (1913) displays scratched graffiti at its summit across its water tank, whereas the stripped eastern rocket test stand of the 1930s and the never completed National Socialist *Maushalle* display various types of graffiti on their exposed skeletons. Finally, the National Socialist *Klimahalle* that was partially re-used in the Soviet period displays scratched and painted graffiti in an isolated area of its interior.

Content

The content of the graffiti includes infrequent expressions of love and other individual messages. Besides these, there is also pictorial and graphical graffiti in the

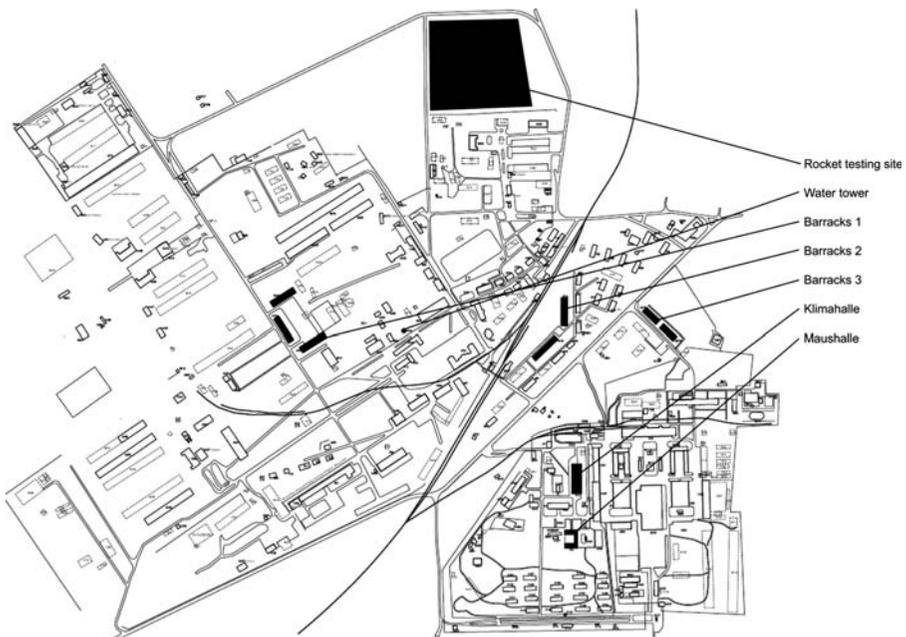


Figure 2. Areas of high graffiti density within the survey area.

cellars of the barracks, which sometimes references the popular culture of the West. This graffiti, which is most often burnt using a lighter or painted, is contemporaneous with the period of upheaval and opening to the West experienced in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its content includes references to western heavy metal bands such as *Helloween* (debut album, 1985), *Iron Maiden* (debut album, 1980), *The Cure* (debut album, 1979) and *ACDC* (debut album, 1975). In these contexts, English words such as ‘sex’, ‘love’ and ‘rock’ also appear besides symbols including lightening bolts and skulls and crossbones.

Most graffiti at Kummersdorf, however, conforms to what Keats considers a primary objective of graffiti – to allow the author to ‘confirm his or her own existence here on earth’ (2008: 24). In other words, they exemplify what Daniell terms the single most important category of both calligraphs (past writings or drawings roughly predating the 1960s, which do not carry the modern overtones of the term graffiti) and modern graffiti – namely, the ‘human imprint’ related to the desire to record a person’s ‘presences at a particular place at a moment in time’ through an act of consciousness or boredom (2011: 465–466). At Kummersdorf, this is achieved in some cases simply by stating the person’s name, but more frequently it is demonstrated by various combinations of: a place name, in all likelihood, referring to the author’s place of origin; a date or dates when the graffiti writer had served; the Cyrillic letters ДМБ, which refer to a soldier’s end of military service as an abbreviation of demobilisation (Figure 3); and later often a seasonal reference to either spring or autumn. Despite their simplicity, the graffiti can reveal important information about their authors and the historical context of their creation. Furthermore, they can act as tangible historic traces around which site interpretation can be designed, involving narratives of multiple layers of inference



Figure 3. Painted graffiti, ‘DMB-86 Minsk’, in cellar of a barracks.
Source: Authors, 21 May 2010.

from the individual conscript's life in Kummersdorf to national changes in military policy and international events of global significance.

Interpretative narratives

Boundaries and spaces

The spatial context of the graffiti highlights patterns of use, distinctions between private and more public spaces and potentially the changing degrees of tolerance afforded to the act of mark-making. It also arguably conforms to established norms of contemporary graffiti subcultures related to the re-appropriation, capture and ownership of space.

In areas that were derelict during the Soviet period, such as the rocket test stands and the *Maushalle*, examples of graffiti tend to be larger and of a higher density and are mostly focused on the author's term of service. These sites may have been selected due to their derelict state, the fact that they were built or used by the defeated National Socialists or because of their remoteness. Repeated references to a soldier's end of military service also suggest that these areas may have served as sites of tradition where successive intakes of conscripts celebrated and stated the end of their term of service. Given the extent of the graffiti at these sites and the prevalence of the painted graffiti that may have required greater planning, it seems plausible to suggest that the graffiti here was tolerated somewhat by those with authority. In contrast, the rocket test stands located further away display a greater number of scratched graffiti, suggesting its more spontaneous nature. There is also evidence of an interim period of cleaning that took place on one of the rocket test stands where graffiti and scratching have been painted over with grey paint (Figure 4). One might speculate that this was either an early attempt to prevent graffiti or a recuperative measure to maintain the appearance of the site, or both.

The period of recuperation might also reflect the response of the Soviet Military Command (SMC) to planned events or visits involving external personnel. Elsewhere, the SMC pursued a policy of establishing Potemkin Villages (show military settlements) and of cleaning up units before visits by external groups such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM) (Elkner, 2006). While stratigraphic analysis discounts a correlation between the CSM visits which took place in the late 1980s and the recuperative period in Kummersdorf, it does imply that such cleaning is likely to have come in response to similar phenomena. The distribution of graffiti relating to military terms of service also suggests the degree of access on site afforded to conscripts, who were seemingly able to visit disused testing installations in the vicinity of the barracks area although it is extremely unlikely that they could leave the site proper. In Kummersdorf it is likely that regulations were similar to other military installations such as the barracks at nearby Wünsdorf, where only officers were allowed to leave the site and mix with the civilian population (Kaiser and Herrmann, 2007: 143). Oral historical accounts from some of those who grew up in the nearby settlement of

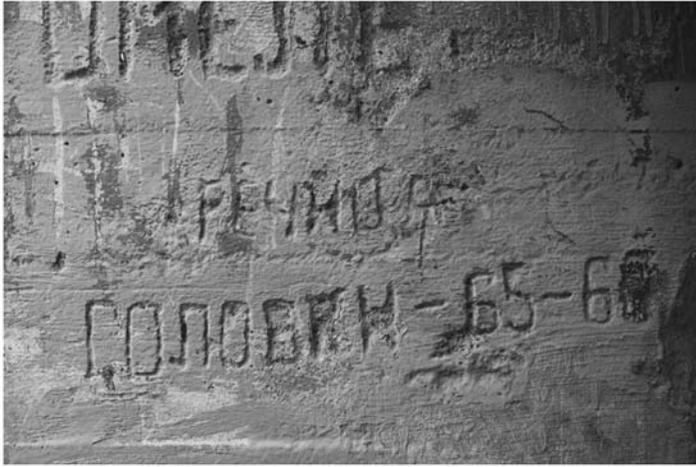


Figure 4. Scratched and painted over graffiti at a rocket test stand.
Source: Authors, 6 August 2010.

Kummersdorf Gut and are now members of the KTSS confirm this and also revealed that disputes often occurred between Soviet officers and residents at the local pub. The Soviet graffiti therefore might also prove useful in highlighting the boundaries not only of conscript movement and freedom but also potentially the opposite, the areas accessible (officially or otherwise) to German civilians, especially when the outer reaches of the site are considered.

Boundaries and distinctions can also be discerned on more localised levels. In private barrack areas, for example, the graffiti is more personalised and less formulaic although references to periods of service still remain. Here, the majority of the graffiti is restricted to attic and cellar spaces. The reference to conscripted periods of service is interesting as oral accounts and the spatial layout of the building suggest these barracks housed officers and not conscripts. One explanation might be that conscripts had access to storage areas within the officers' living quarters. If so, it seems plausible that the sites were again chosen due to their isolated and hidden nature. Whilst it seems personal decoration was tolerated in the living and communal areas of these barracks, it seems unlikely that the more rebellious graffiti with references to western popular culture found in the cellars would have been actively tolerated.

Conscript origins and terms of service

The acknowledgment that a key motivation behind graffiti is to confirm the existence of the writer encourages the interpretation of the place names as the conscripts' places of origin. The scale of these place names varies, usually cities, towns and regions are mentioned but, occasionally, more vague locations such as rivers or wider areas such as Eastern Siberia appear. The reference to a wide variety of

locations at the site illustrates the extent of the Soviet Union and the diversity of nationalities present on the military site. For example, references have been found to locations throughout the Soviet Union, from Estonia in the north to Azerbaijan in the south, from Belarus in the west to Siberia in the east. The majority of the references relate to western Russia and the Ukraine, which were the most populated regions of the Soviet Union. A greater number of references to place names located in the south of the Soviet Union such as Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan can be noticed after 1977, corresponding to the increase of Central Asian and Muslim conscripts during the 1980s noted by Spivak and Pridemore (2004: 35). The increase in diversity that this caused contributed to ethnic and national divisions and created conflict amongst young conscripts (Spivak and Pridemore, 2004: 35).

The dates are likely to refer to the author's time of service. This is supported by the fact that they often show a two-year time span reflecting the compulsory period of Soviet Union military service from 1967 onwards. Likewise, recurrent references to the seasons of spring or autumn reflect the two annual drafts when new recruits would start their service. The law of 12 October 1967 reduced the compulsory period of military service from three years to two years and replaced an annual draft with a bi-annual draft (Spivak and Pridemore, 2004: 33). This legal change might be attributed to the threat of a nuclear war in which great human losses were to be expected. The law ensured that the turnover of citizens that could serve as trained reserves was increased (Odom cited in Spivak and Pridemore, 2004: 34). In many ways, a conscript's term of service may have been similar to a prison sentence, especially given that conscripts were in general not allowed to leave the military base and could only receive up to 10 days holiday during this period as a rare special award (Kowalczyk and Wolle, 2001: 137). Working hours ran from 6:00 to 22:00, seven days a week, leaving no private time (Kowalczyk and Wolle, 2001: 138–39). In addition, the living space envisioned by the army for a conscript was 2m² (Satjukow, 2008). Escape attempts and suicides were no rarity. In the 1980s alone, 400–500 soldiers tried to escape each year from Soviet military sites in the German Democratic Republic (Kowalczyk and Wolle, 2001: 138–139).

The hardships that conscripts had to undergo are also hinted at by the recurrent appearance of the letters ДМБ, abbreviations for 'demobilisation', the term denoting the end of a conscript's military service. However, these letters may also have been used in connection to *dedovshchina* (the rule of the grandfathers), 'the widespread systems of informal power hierarchies that operated in Soviet barracks and the associated violence in which senior conscripts bullied and victimized new recruits' (Elkner, 2006: 122). Similar to 'beasting' in the British armed forces or 'hazing' in the American armed forces, *dedovshchina* relies on informal hierarchies related to the stage at which a conscript is during his two-year military service as divided into four six-month periods. During each of these periods, a conscript is referred to by different ranks and subjected to various menial tasks and symbolic and/or physical acts of violence which form initiation rites marking passage from one rank to the next (Oleynik, 2006: 86).

A soldier who just starts his military service (during first six months) is called 'spirit' (dukh), or 'young' (molodoi). The reference to a ghost is not accidental: the beginners have the minimal rights in a military city; they must simply obey to all others. The hardest and the least pleasant work (like cleaning public toilets) is in reserve for them. An initiation rite marks the passage from the lowest rank to the next, the status of 'pheasant' (fasan, sekach). It usually consists in an act of symbolic and/or physical violence (like beating the rear as much times as the number of months that the soldier has spent in the army). Like the 'spirits', the 'pheasants' hardly have any rights, however they must fulfill many obligations. The principal one concerns learning obedience. The next informal rank, that of 'salabon', or 'scoop' (cherpak), for the first time gives an opportunity to direct youngest soldiers. The terminal rank, the status of 'old' (starik), or 'grandfather' (ded) allows the soldier to enjoy full rights in the military city. All others are compelled to respect and even serve them. The 'olds' have disproportionately more rights than obligations. They are free to do virtually everything what they want. (Oleynik, 2006: 86–87)

These systems of informal grades and their associated initiation rites have been recognised to change between regions and forces (Oleynik, 2006: 88; Spivak and Pridemore, 2004: 35). In Georgia this hierarchy has been described in terms of four categories: bosses, servants, brave and honest men (Sesiasvili, 2006). The brave men category includes 'dembels', conscripts who have served more than a year and are soon to be released from military service (Sesiasvili, 2006: 195–196). The rank of 'dembel' is similar to that of 'old' (starik) or 'grandfather' (ded) and has etymological roots in the Russian word for 'demobilisation' (Sesiasvili, 2006: 195). Given the inseparability of the period of conscription with this power hierarchy and its all-encompassing nature, the Soviet graffiti at Kammersdorf presents an avenue for interpretation strategies that might aim to reveal the true nature of life as a conscript, as well as dealing with subjects that still have relevance today given the continued prevalence of dedovshchina and its foreign equivalents amongst military units across the world. One example of graffiti from the *Klimahalle* seems to refer to this hierarchy directly and appears also to be contemporaneous to the 1967 law. Its location in the National Socialist-built *Klimahalle*, which was later converted into a leisure space for the Soviet conscripts complete with a basketball court, is also pertinent (Figure 5). Translations suggest that the words refer to individual surnames under the heading of dembel, while one is illegible (second from bottom) the others translated from the top read: Dongak, Kuftin, Kudash, Kaimaz, Loshkin and Goga.

Kuftin and Loshkin are common Russian family names while Kudash, Dongak and Kaimaz are Islamic names potentially originating from the north Caucasus or Central Asian republics. Finally, Goga, a common first name or nickname, might be the Georgian diminutive for Georgii. This might be a list of those graduating in 1967, the last intake of conscripts to experience the three-year draft without being accompanied by those of the shorter two-year draft. Here the term 'dembel' may refer more to the process of demobilisation and graduation as opposed to dedovshchina. Whilst cruelty by older conscripts towards younger conscripts probably



Figure 5. A list of conscripts headed by the title dembel located in the *Klimahalle*. Source: Authors, 21 July 2010.

always took place, soldiers who served before 1967 interviewed by Odom (1998) do not recall it as a pervasive aspect of their lives as conscripts (cited in Spivak and Pridemore, 2004: 3). The appearance of systematic *dedovshchina* is often attributed to the 1967 law as it effectively determined the four-tiered structure of *dedovshchina* based on the four different age cohorts of conscripts (Herspring, 2005: 610). In addition, the increasing lack of professional NCOs (non-commissioned officers) (Spivak and Pridemore, 2004) and the lack of time provided for new recruits to develop a speciality and serve with a variety of individuals (Herspring, 2005) can also be recognised to have contributed towards the emergence of *dedovshchina*. From November 1967 until further reductions in conscription periods in 2007 and 2008 (*The Times*, 2007) there would be four separate cohorts serving at any one time in the Soviet/Russian armed services, with the exception of the periods between November 1966 and May 1968 and May 1969 and November 1969 when presumably there were three and five cohorts serving with each other respectively (Figure 6).

The graffiti in Kummersdorf supports the significance of the 1967 law in bringing about the structure of *dedovshchina*. Firstly, reference to demobilisation and ДМБ has so far only been identified from 1967 onwards. Before then, graffiti often

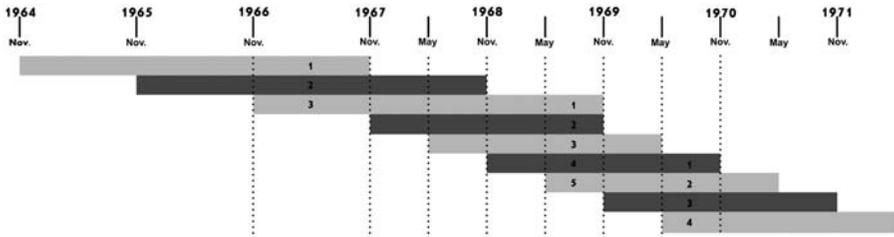


Figure 6. Overlapping intakes of conscripts between 1964 and 1971.

displays only solitary dates with one example explicitly making reference to ‘time of service’. Evidence of the significance of the bi-annual draft is demonstrated by repeated reference after 1967 to either the spring or autumn draft to which the conscript belonged.

Dedovshchina and the efforts of groups like CSM to expose and eradicate its endemic violence led to an erosion of the Soviet military’s authority and a weakened public opinion of military service from 1988 onwards (Elkner, 2006: 123). The impact of perestroika, glasnost, the events leading to the reunification of Germany between November 1989 and October 1990 and the eventual demise of the Soviet Union all contributed further to a general loss of military control and, in some cases, a shortage of basic resources on foreign Soviet military bases. Some have hypothesised that political and economic liberalisation in the early 1990s ‘reinforced tensions amongst soldiers, with the result that today, dedovshchina is all the more nurtured’ (Dauce and Sieca-Kozłowski, 2006: 17–18). This entrenchment of dedovshchina can be traced in the graffiti of Kammersdorf, where during the 1990s there seems to be a greater amount of demobilisation graffiti on a larger scale.

Conservation strategies

Cultural significance

With these interpretations and narratives in mind it can be argued that the Soviet graffiti of Kammersdorf contributes to the cultural significance of the site in many ways consistent with the guidelines provided by the Burra Charter, which emphasises historic, scientific, social and aesthetic values.

It encompasses a historic value, which reflects global events and Soviet and Russian military policy while alluding to the conditions experienced by conscripts on the site and the likely occurrence of the ‘cultural practice of dedovshchina’ with its constituent language, symbols and rites (Dauce and Sieca-Kozłowski, 2006: 20). Its scientific and research value and its potential ability to highlight or complement existing or new understandings of the Soviet period should also not be underestimated. Its continuing social value is more problematic, as, for many of those who served at Kammersdorf during the Soviet period, the terms of service may have

been traumatic and something they would rather not see explicitly conserved or interpreted. Though this may be the case, the potential benefit of interpreting heritage sites which encompass negative social values has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years (e.g. Logan and Reeves, 2009). Furthermore, it is important to note that the continuing social value associated with the site is likely to differ between various groups who served at Kummersdorf, perhaps most obviously between conscripts and officers. One example of more recent graffiti at the site testifies to this. Part written in Russian and part in German, pencil graphite graffiti in the second barracks area states 'Hello from Odessa' followed by a surname, a contracted male first name and a contracted male second name. Accompanying this name and separated by the Russian for 'and' is a female full name which translates as 'Love' and a name which could either be a contracted female middle name or a male name. Although not conclusive, it seems probable that this is a married couple sharing the same surname, with the woman's middle name being represented by the contracted form of her father's name. Below this, there is a possible reference ('gewohnt 1973–1978') to the time that one or both of the individuals lived in this apartment. Given the length of service and the possible presence of his wife, it seems likely that this returning serviceman was an officer or NCO, as they were allowed to be accompanied by their family when serving abroad. The date of his or their return is indicated by the last line of text, '15.06.2007'. For these individuals, at least, Kummersdorf was worth returning to. In terms of aesthetic value, the Soviet graffiti can be seen to contribute to the notion of 'evocative decay' – a concept advocated by Schmidt as a founding policy on which the further conservation and management of the Kummersdorf site as a whole should be based, with the objective to 'provoke contemplation of the transience of the works of man' (2008: 105).

Evocative decay

While an extensive discussion of the increasing academic interest in ruination, decay and obsolescence is beyond the scope of the article at hand, it is worth positioning the graffiti at Kummersdorf more generally within these debates in order to appreciate how its interpretation and its possible preservation will contribute to the wider strategy to conserve and manage Kummersdorf as a heritage site which embodies evocative decay.

Academic interest in contemporary ruins or ruins of modernity (Hell and Schönle, 2010) might be considered one expression of what Picon terms our re-enchantment with the world as brought about by an increasing exposure to the anxious landscapes embodied by derelict industrial and arguably military complexes (Picon and Bates, 2000). In ways reminiscent of the renaissance cult of ruins, this re-enchantment has questioned the dichotomy of culture and nature and served to provide an aesthetic that enables the reconciliation of traditional artistic landscape conventions with an ever-expanding urban environment. Besides renewed academic interest and new artistic conventions (Gandy, 2011), other trends have arisen which include the

prevalence of new artistic methods, such as ruin photography, new experiential engagement with such spaces (manifested most prominently in urban exploration) and paradigm shifts in conservation strategies from those that aim to inhibit or manage change to those that tolerate it (Aroaz, 2009).

Each of these trends share a desire for an engagement with a past that is more temporally unstable, more authentic and resists the rational, static and codified nature of those sites traditionally associated with the heritage industry (Edensor, 2005). Kummersdorf presents an opportunity to achieve this desire through heritage approaches that come close to DeSilvey's 'observed decay' (2006) or González-Ruibal's decaying past (2005) achieved via his archaeology of oblivion (2005) or of 'the vanishing present' (2006: 122). Within such frameworks, the Soviet graffiti contributes some of the multiple narratives that Kummersdorf as a ruin can offer overall (Edensor, 2005) and specifically embodies the situation whereby 'bits of stories suggest themselves through halting speech, which trails away into silence' (2005: 846).

The graffiti represents an anthropogenic form of the decay, which functions as the conceptual anchor of many of the proposed conservation strategies being discussed for Kummersdorf. The graffiti is not alone in this respect as traces of the site's human dismantling and continued looting are also present. Decay, however, is primarily expressed through the processes by which the forces of nature are reclaiming the site and, therefore, emphasising these alone runs the risk of promulgating traditional oppositional dichotomies of nature and culture. The application of an archaeological, holistic and ongoing approach to the site's conservation supports the conservation of the Soviet graffiti in ways potentially similar to those pursued by Sir Norman Foster in his archaeological reconstruction of the Reichstag (Baker, 2002; Barnstone, 2005; Merrill, 2011). However, this approach might arguably tend towards the 'overcoded heritage and ceremonial space' that Edensor recognises ruins to counteract and hence be self-defeating (2005: 845). Yet, in contrast, DeSilvey's observed decay is, as she has noted, 'difficult to implement in most recognised historic sites' (2006: 335).

A further step in the evolution of conservation paradigms, namely from managing and tolerating change to the tolerance of loss, seems likely to be one step too far. Yet in Kummersdorf, given its size and the repetition of building forms, there is the opportunity to enact a multi-faceted conservation strategy, which selectively uses reconstruction, arrested decay and tolerated change or observed decay. Within such a strategy, parts of the site might be returned to their form at various points in their history, others would have their state of decay arrested in testimony to the point at which Kummersdorf became a heritage site and, finally, other sections could be allowed to continue to decay and be observed as such. In using this strategy, the Soviet graffiti would remain and give voice to the conscripts who lived at the site between 1945 and 1994 in selective places, and in other places it would either be removed or in Edensor's terms would slowly trail into silence whilst no doubt being accompanied or drowned out by the graffiti and voices of future inhabitants of the site.

Conclusions

It is apparent that the Soviet graffiti at Kummersdorf has the potential to contribute to narratives related to the site's last period of occupation, which render visible the hidden voices of less represented demographics, namely Soviet conscripts, whilst simultaneously representing an anthropogenic form of decay that contributes to a conservation strategy which fosters an aesthetic of evocative decay through a multifarious and selective approach. While some of the research conducted at this site has already been partly integrated into new interpretation devices at the site's museum, substantial work is required in order to realise the graffiti's potential. The interpretations that this article offers can help direct future research. This should involve the complete survey and documentation of the site's graffiti, the conservation and prioritisation of certain examples, where possible the application of scientific techniques such as historic paint analysis and further investigation into the social conditions on site during the period. It is also hoped that future phases of research will complement existing interpretations through the pursuit of oral testimonies from both local residents and former conscripts. In this way, Kummersdorf might come to represent an example of a heritage site that uses the traces of graffiti and vandalism in an innovative interpretative way as opposed to merely considering them as erosive to the cultural significance of other aspects of the site's historic or built fabric. It is hoped that this article will help to further promote the need for such research at Kummersdorf and beyond and raise awareness of the potential of graffiti and other forms of what is traditionally considered vandalism to contribute to the cultural significance of sites and to act as potential vehicles for heritage interpretation.

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