

# “Muslim POWs Celebrating Ramadan Bayram” (1916)

## Abstract

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This film footage shot inside two camps for Muslim prisoners of war dates from 1916. It was commissioned by the *Militärische Film- und Fotostelle* [Military Office for Film and Photography], which oversaw the production of propaganda films. The footage was shot at the *Halbmondlager* [Crescent Camp] and the Weinbergslager, both of which were located near the town of Zossen in Brandenburg. These camps were established during the early days of the First World War to hold Muslim prisoners of war who had fought in the British or French armies. Most of the prisoners came from colonial territories in Africa and India. Hindus and Sikhs from India were also held in the camps. In general, throughout the war German officials and civilians alike loudly decried the Entente’s deployment of colonial troops from French West Africa or Morocco on the Western Front in Europe, expressing outrage that “savages” would be deployed in battle against “civilized” Germans. German illustrated newspapers and photographic books, portraying prisoners of war from the colonial forces as savages, often sought to emphasize these soldiers’ racial “otherness.”

The situation of the Muslim captured soldiers seen in this film, however, was quite different. In 1914, the Caliph Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany, had called on Muslim soldiers from the British and French colonies to desert and fight alongside the Ottoman Empire in a jihad (holy war) against the colonial powers. Germany set up special camps for Muslims at the suggestion of its Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient [Intelligence Agency for the Orient], an institution established by the General Staff and the Foreign Office that carried out propaganda and intelligence work in the Orient and British India. Germany hoped that these dedicated camps would help persuade the Muslim POWs interned there to switch sides. To this end, a propaganda newspaper titled *El Dschihad* was distributed in the camps and Turkish speakers gave anti-imperialist lectures. A wooden mosque (seen in the film) had been constructed for the prisoners at the *Halbmondlager* in 1915. Muslim holidays were observed, and prisoners were fed according to their religious dietary requirements. (We see animals being slaughtered using halal methods, for instance.) The original title of the film is misleading since “bayram” is the general Turkish term for major holidays. The footage probably shows either the Festival of Breaking the Fast (*Eid al-Fitr*) or the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*). There is no evidence that Germany’s efforts to recruit Muslim POWs for a jihad against the Entente were successful, however. Meanwhile, the camp attracted the interest of German ethnologists, linguists, musicologists, and artists, who made sound recordings and drawings of numerous camp inmates. The sound recordings are now held in the sound archive of Humboldt University.

## Source

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Source: Bayramfest im Mohamedaner-Gefangenenlager Halbmond und Weinbergslager zu Wünsdorf bei Zossen (original title), Reichsfilmstelle, 1916. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv  
<https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/215/674448>

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