

Document publication

DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2026-2-545-563

For citation

Nazemtseva, E. N. (2026). Diary of a German prisoner of war, Captain Max Greft, 1916, Herald of an Archivist, no. 2, pp. 545-563. DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2026-2-545-563

Nazemtseva, E. N.

Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

Diary of a German prisoner of war, Captain Max Gref, 1916

Abstract

This publication contains previously unknown documents about the escape of the First World War prisoners of war from the Far Eastern and Siberian regions of the Russian Empire to China. These include the diary of Captain Max Gref, a captain in the German service, and a report from a Russian diplomatic agent in Mongolia addressed to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire. The materials illustrate the situation of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war in the Russian Empire, the Russian authorities' policies toward them, the prisoners' emotional state, their living conditions, and their attitude toward foreign cultures. Of particular importance are the reasons and methods for escaping from prisoner-of-war camps, their routes to China, as well as the Chinese authorities' policies toward them and their interactions with Russian representatives on this issue. The circumstances of captivity in Russia were more difficult for the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish soldiers and officers who found themselves there than in other countries. This was due to specific geographic conditions (large territory, harsh climate, etc.), the limited capacity of Russian authorities to organize prisoner-of-war detention, the number of prisoners of war exceeding what was feasible for Russia, the complex domestic political situation in Russia during the First World War, the length of captivity, etc. These factors forced prisoners to escape. For those captured in Siberia, the Central Asian regions, and the Far East, the only possible destination was China, which, until 1917, maintained strict neutrality in the Great War. China's actions were consistent with international law, according to which Chinese authorities were obligated to intern prisoners of war but had the right not to extradite them to the country from which they had escaped, and they inspired the fugitives with hope of rescue and return to their homeland. The published documents made it possible to establish the reasons for the escape, the organization of assistance to the fugitives on both Russian and Chinese territory, the sympathetic attitude of the Chinese authorities toward the prisoners of war, despite their neutrality, and the facts of their assistance to them. At the same time, the documents describe the Russian authorities' actions regarding escaped prisoners of war, specifically their efforts to combat escapes. Furthermore, the documents provide a more objective picture of the complex Russian-Chinese relations of this period. Both sides were addressing their primary concerns and striving to

achieve their goals: Russia was seeking to prevent a disruption to the relative stability along the entire Russian-Chinese border and in Mongolian territories, while China was hoping to restore previously lost positions in Manchuria and Mongolia.

Keywords

First World War of 1914–1918, prisoners of war, Russian Empire, Republic of China, Outer Mongolia, Russian-Chinese relations.

Download the article: [nazemtseva_doi](#)

References

Belova, I. B. (2014). Forced Migrants, Refugees and Prisoners of War of the First World War in Russia, 1914–1925, Moscow, AIRO-XXI, 431 p.

Bondarenko, E. Yu. (2015). Management of Foreign Prisoners of War in the Russian Far East during the First World War, *Power and Administration in the East of Russia*, no. 1 (70), pp. 84–91.

Gergileva, A. I. (2007). Prisoners of War of the First World War in Siberia, Krasnoyarsk, Siberian State Technological University, 123 p.

Ikonnikova, T. Ya. (2004). Prisoners of War of the First World War in the Russian Far East, Khabarovsk, Khabarovsk State Pedagogical University, 177 p.

Ikonnikova, T. Ya. (1999). Prisoners of War of the First World War in the Russian Far East (1914–1918), *Russia and the Pacific*, no. 1 (23), pp. 90–94.

Kotyukova, T. V. (2017). Turkestan Captivity, German and Austro-Hungarian Prisoners of War in Russian Turkestan During the First World War, *Russia and the Contemporary World*, no. 3 (96), pp. 47–64.

Lannoy, M. (2022). Russian Colossus on the Road to Berlin, The Odyssey of Russian Prisoners of War of the First World War, Yekaterinburg, Institute of Educational Strategies, 291 p.

Nagornaya, O. S. (2010). Another Military Experience, Russian Prisoners of War in Germany During the First World War (1914–1922). Moscow, Novy Khronograf, 440 p.

Nachtigal, R. (2014) Prisoners of War in Russia during the First World War, *Quaestio Rossica*, no. 1, pp. 142–156.

Oskin, M. V. (2014). Unknown Tragedies of the First World War: Prisoners, Deserters, Refugees, Moscow, Veche, 444 p.

Poznakhirev, V. V. (2014). Turkish Prisoners of War and Civilian Prisoners of War in Russia in 1914–1924, Documents, Facts, Research, St. Petersburg, Nestor-Istoriya, 292 p.

(2020). Russia in the System of International Relations on the Eve of and During the First World War, Vol. 2, Ed. by A. O. Chubaryan, Moscow, International Relations, 608 p.

Samoilov, N. A. (2009). Kyakhta and Maimaicheng: Geocultural Space of Interaction between Russia and China in the 18th–19th Centuries, Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University, Language and Literature, Iss. 4, pp. 190–197.

Sizova, A. A. (2015). The Consular Service of Russia in Mongolia, 1861–1917, Moscow, Nauka, Vostochnaya Literatura, 295 p.

Sinichenko, V. V., Klimov, A. Yu. (2022). The Role of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in Changing the Legal Status and Labor Organization of Prisoners of War during the First World War, Proceedings of Management Academy of the Ministry of the Interior of Russia, no. 4. pp. 138–146.

Sinichenko, V. V. (2023). Legal Norms of the Russian Empire and Pay for Prisoners of War During the First World War, Based on Eastern Siberia, The Art of Law, no. 3 (7), pp. 11–17.

Sokolenko, A. V. (2016). Interaction between Departments and Agencies of the Russian Empire in Protecting, Preventing Escapes, and Searching for Escaped Prisoners of War in the Far East During the First World War, August 1914 – the Revolution of 1917, Almanac of Modern Science and Education, no. 7 (109), pp. 95–100.

Surzhikova, N. V. (2014). Military Captivity in the Russian Provinces, 1914–1922, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 422 p.

Tertitsky, K. M. (2018). "Chinese Kyakhta", Lomonosov Oriental Studies Journal, no. 4, pp. 56–69.

Zhao Yonghua, (2017). Russian Press in China, 1898–1956. Moscow, Shans, 399 p.

Shcherov, I. P. (2000). Centroplenbezh v Rossii, A History of its Creation and Activities in 1918–1922, Smolensk, SGPU, 95 p.

Bürgisser, T. (2010). «Unerwünschte Gäste», russische Soldaten in der Schweiz, 1915–1920, Zürich, Pano, 238 s.

Egger, M. (2010). "Die Hilfsmaßnahmen der österreichisch-ungarischen bzw. der österreichischen Regierung für die österreichisch-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen in Russland und Italien 1914–22, Ein Forschungsbericht", Militärische und zivile Kriegserfahrungen 1914–1918, Hrsg. von G. Barth-Scalmani, Innsbruck, Universitätsverlag Wagner, ss. 79–112.

Hinz, U. (2006). Gefangen im Großen Krieg, Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland 1914–1921, Essen, Klartext Verlag, 392 s.

Jones, H. (2011). Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War, Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 451 p.

(2006). Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs, Hrsg. von J. Oltmer, Paderborn, Schöningh, 308 s.

Nachtigal, R. (2003). Russland und seine österreichisch-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen 1914–1918, Remshalden, Greiner, 391 s.

Wilkinson, Ol. (2017). British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany, Cambridge University Press, 315 p.

Wurzer, G. (2005). Die Kriegsgefangenen der Mittelm?chte in Russland im Ersten Weltkrieg, G?ttingen, V & R unipress, 626 s.

About authors

Nazemtseva Elena Nikolaevna, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, China Department, leading scientific researcher, Moscow, Russia, +7-985-297-15-54, nazemtseva_elena1005@mail.ru

The article was received in the editorial office on 06.03.2025, recommended for publication on 20.03.2026

You can read completely article in the russian historic-archival magazine “The Herald of an Archivist”. Read more about terms of subscription [here](#) .

Полностью материал публикуется в российском историко-архивоведческом журнале ВЕСТНИК АРХИВИСТА. Ознакомьтесь с условиями подписки [здесь](#) .