

From Field Grave to Comrades' Grave. The German First World War Graves on the Flanders Front

Jan Vancoillie

Abstract

In the beginning of World War I, most of the fallen soldiers were buried in field graves, but as it became clear that maintaining those would not be possible, larger war cemeteries were created. During the war, the field graves were concentrated into new cemeteries which were more and more standardized. The fighting in 1917-1918 destroyed many cemeteries. After the Armistice, the maintenance of German cemeteries was minimal, even if Belgium had to take care of them according to the Treaty of Versailles. In 1926 Germany took over the care for their graves after an agreement with Belgium, and until 1940 graves were concentrated in redesigned concentration cemeteries. After the Second World War, the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* was given the task of maintaining the cemeteries. The number of World War I cemeteries was reduced further to four remaining cemeteries in West Flanders.

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Introduction

[1] When the First World War ended, some 130,000 German graves existed in Belgium. These graves were found in approximately 700 locations (field graves, war cemeteries or on communal cemeteries). The history of the German war graves in Flanders and Belgium was surrounded by a myriad of myths and half-truths for a long time. Thorough research based on primary sources has been

almost non-existent until a few years ago. Recently, some new publications put certain facts straight. This paper is largely based on personal research in the archives of the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (VDK) in Kassel, military archives in the different German state archives and the archives of the Royal Military Museum in Brussels. Apart from these, various publications were used.¹ A lot of archival material relating to the subject of this study was destroyed during the Second World War, making it difficult to get a complete overview of the period before 1945.

[2] This article on German war graves in Flanders condenses the author's book on the German war cemetery *Menen Wald* and other publications of the author on German war cemeteries.² It describes the evolution of the care for the German war graves on the Flanders front. Being a military historian, the focus of this article is on the military and general history of the war graves in Flanders and not as much on the cultural and art history. It must also be noted that the German war graves question in Belgium is a very specific one and different from other countries where German First World War graves exist.

The beginning 1914-1915

[3] The war arrived in Flanders in the second half of October 1914, when the new German 4th Army and the right flank of the German 6th Army met the French and British troops around Ypres. As the majority of the German troops were hastily-trained war volunteers or older reservists without any recent training, led by largely retired officers, casualties mounted fast. Most of the dead remained where they fell in no man's land. Those who had died in or on the way to dressing stations or larger hospitals were buried nearby, either on civilian cemeteries or on newly created war cemeteries. Burying the dead was the responsibility of the medical units (*Sanitätskompanien* – bearer companies, *Feldlazarette* – field hospitals, etc.). When the frontline advanced, the captured ground was searched and the dead were usually buried on the spot in solitary field graves.³ This task

¹ Some of the recent publications include Dirk Verhelst, *Het Duits militair kerkhof 1914-1918 in Hooglede*, Kortrijk 1996, and Horst Howe, Robert Missinne and Roger Verbeke, *De Duitse begraafplaats in Langemark*, Brugge 2011, and Anette Freytag and Thomas Van Driessche, "Die Deutschen Soldatenfriedhöfe des Ersten Weltkriegs in Flandern" in: *Relicta. Archeologie, Monumenten- en Landschapsonderzoek in Vlaanderen* 7 (2011), 163-238, <http://oar.onroerendergoed.be/publicaties/RELT/7/RELT007-008.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2015) and Jan Vancoillie, "De Duitse begraafplaatsen in Zonnebeke en zijn deelgemeenten" in: *Het Zonneheem* 31 (2002), Nr. 2, 6-40.

² Jan Vancoillie, *De Duitse militaire begraafplaats Menen Wald. Geschiedenis van de Duitse militaire graven in Zuid-West-Vlaanderen*, Wevelgem 2013, and Jan Vancoillie, *De Duitse militaire begraafplaatsen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Moorslede*, Wevelgem 2015, and Jan Vancoillie, "Ehrenfriedhof Nr. 1914 Saint-Symphorien-Spiennes" in: *Shrapnel* 100 (2014), Nr. 2, 192-197. More publications by Jan Vancoillie on the topic of war graves can be found on <http://www.aok4.be> (accessed 15 July 2015).

³ *Krankenträgerordnung (Kt.O.) vom 15. Mai 1907 (= D.V.E. Nr. 100)*, Berlin 1907, 52-53, and *Kriegs-Sanitätsordnung (K.S.O.) vom 27. Januar 1907 (= D.V.E. Nr. 21)*, Berlin 1907, 117-118.

was overseen by the *Sanitätskompanien*, but the actual searching and digging of the graves was done by units in reserve or civilians from nearby villages who were picked by the Germans and taken to the former battlefield under supervision of *Feldgendarme* (Field Police). Most of the graves were single graves, although some joint or mass graves were made.⁴

[4] German units were dissuaded in official orders from using mass graves in late 1914, as the German military received demands by relatives to repatriate some of the war dead. These demands could only be met if certain conditions were in place. One of the conditions was that the casualty was buried in a single grave so that other graves did not have to be disturbed.⁵

Creating concentration cemeteries 1915

[5] After the German gas attack and the ensuing offensive in April-May 1915, the German frontline advanced considerably East and Northeast of Ypres. Search parties were organized to clear the battlefield of the numerous war dead. The bodies were gathered and new concentration cemeteries were built. Also, the solitary field graves were concentrated into these new cemeteries as the Germans realized that this was the only possibility to save the graves from a slow decay. The search parties were overseen by the *Sanitätskompanien* and supported by labour of Belgian civilians, Russian prisoners of war and unarmed German *Armierungstruppen* (labour battalions). The labourers had to dig until the corpse was encountered. The actual exhuming of a body was only allowed to be performed by the personnel of the *Sanitätskompanien* under supervision of a medical doctor. These reburial works lasted from spring and summer of 1915 until spring of 1917, at which point most of the solitary field graves were concentrated into one of the many concentration cemeteries.⁶

⁴ Dirk Decuypere, *Het malheur van de keizer. Geluwe 1914-1918*, Geluwe 1998, 90 and Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11358-184. *Generalkommando XXVII. Reservekorps. Besondere Anordnungen*, lb 06.11.1914 and August Herkenrath, *Das Württembergische Reserve-Inf.-Regiment Nr. 247 im Weltkrieg 1914-1918 (= Die württembergischen Regimenter im Weltkrieg 1914-1918 30)*, Stuttgart 1923, 21-22.

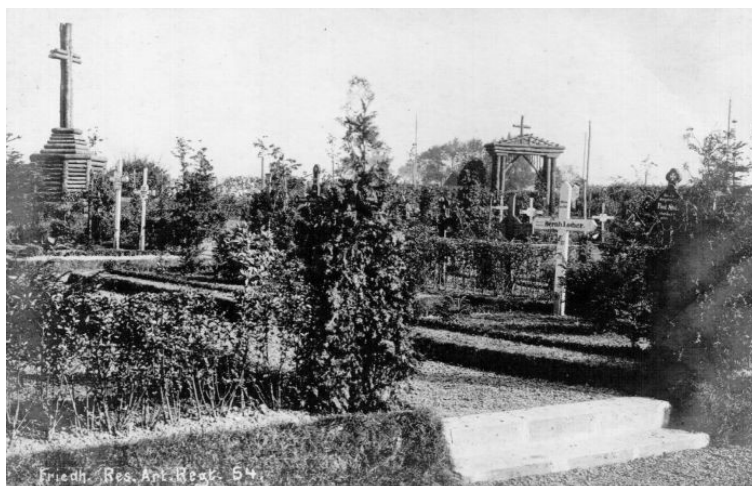
⁵ *Merkblatt zu den Anträgen auf Rückführung der Leichen von gefallenen Kriegsteilnehmern in die Heimat*. No place, no year.

⁶ Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, M40. 204. *Infanterie-Division*, IIIb 564 Anweisungen für das Gräberwesen im Ypernbogen Süd 03.01.1917.



1 A group of solitary graves near Geluveld on the Ypres front in 1915. It was soon clear that these graves would get lost unless they were moved to a concentration cemetery. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

[6] Another typical German custom was the creation of regimental cemeteries (or even cemeteries for one specific battalion or company). The first unit cemeteries were already created as early as late 1914. A lot of effort was put into these graveyards. Sometimes units went as far as exhuming bodies from other (hospital or concentration) cemeteries to bury their fallen comrades in their own regimental cemeteries. Soldiers from the unit who had been architects or landscape architects in civilian life provided the architectural design of these cemeteries. Gardeners and gravediggers were detached to maintain the graveyards and the plants were usually donated by the garrison town in Germany. Carpenters, painters and stone masons made the grave markers. Usually funds were gathered for the building of a monument, designed by one of the regiments' artist-soldiers. This of course led to a multitude of designs, crosses and monuments. The costs to create and maintain all of this were often extravagant. Sometimes the artistic value was under debate as well. One of the most famous examples was the cemetery of the *Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment 215* in the Houthulst Forest, where no two single grave markers were the same, which contradicted the prevailing German *Friedhofsreform* movement.



2 The cemetery for the *Reserve-Feldartillerie-Regiment 54* at Molenhoek (Beselare). (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

Standardization 1915-1917

[7] In June 1915, one of the army corps in the 4th Army created a commission to control all these initiatives and to strive for standardization and austerity. This *Friedhofskommission des XXVII. Reservekorps*, as it was called, consisted of one senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) from the logistical units, two field policemen (to oversee the work force), six stretcher bearers (for the actual exhuming and reburial) as well as two NCO's and 24 soldiers from the logistical units (these 26 men were the actual work force). The commission was supervised by a medical doctor from the corps, in the beginning this was *Stabsarzt* (medical Captain) Hänsel. Even after the *XXVII. Reservekorps* was taken out of the Ypres frontline, the commission stayed in place.⁷

[8] In 1916, the German Army created an official *Gräberverwaltung* (administration of graves) at Army level. In the 4th Army, a function was created under the *Etappen-Inspektion* (Lines of Command). This function was responsible for all matters relating to burials, reburials and repatriations of the fallen, not only in the *Etappengebiet* (rear area), but also in the *Operationsgebiet* (front zone). Major z. D. Hain was appointed to this function for the 4th Army. He disposed of a small staff in Gent (the *Etappen-Hauptort*, Lines of Command main location), to which some *künstlerische Beiräte* (artistic counsellors) as e. g. Scholer and May (first names unknown) belonged. The counsellors drew the plans for cemeteries, monuments, grave markers and also the garden design. Big names in German architecture such as Wilhelm Kreis often created monuments or cemeteries as well. The final responsibility lay with Major Hain, who had to approve all plans. During 1917, a few standard wooden grave crosses with accompanying standard steles for the fallen Jewish soldiers were designed and made available in large numbers. The names were to be punched or burned into the ready-made markers.⁸

⁷ Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11358-48. *Generalkommando XXVII. Reservekorps. Korpstagesbefehle*, Ib 15273 27.06.1915 and Ib 18833 13.08.1915.



3 A cemetery built according to the guidelines from 1917. Uniformity and simplicity are the key words. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

[9] In the first months of 1917, a permanent *Gräberoffizier* (grave officer) was appointed to every corps sector (*Gruppe*) in the Army. He had a staff of a few clerks, as his main task was to take care of all administrative matters relating to the burials. The main task was to make sure that all grave lists were permanently up-to-date. Not only did the Germans keep track of all the graves on the cemeteries, but also of solitary graves and of soldiers whose graves were for one reason or another buried in the frontline or not exactly known. These detailed lists were accompanied by maps to allow a precise search for the fallen after the war.⁹

New cemeteries in the rear areas while the frontline cemeteries are destroyed 1917-1918

[10] At the same time, several orders were issued to create simple and sober cemeteries. An important reason for this was that Germany had to save on materials. The spring and summer of 1917 saw the creation of new war cemeteries in Flanders: the Battle of Messines and the start of the Third Battle of Ypres caused a steep rise in the number of casualties. This quickly led to a lack of free space on most of the civilian cemeteries behind the German front, which were still being used. Because resistance and espionage activities during the First World War consisted mainly of intelligence gathered by civilians, German graves on civilian cemeteries were a risk. The Germans started making new cemeteries beyond the village centres. As most civilians were not allowed to leave their village centre, these new cemeteries were basically hidden. They were designed

⁸ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *C.5.FA-115/1. Fotoalben 14/18. Fotoalbum eines Mitarbeiters der Gräberverwaltung Gent. 1916-1918* and *C.5.FA-115/2. Fotoalben 14/18. Fotoalbum eines Mitarbeiters der Gräberverwaltung Gent. 1916-1918*.

⁹ Rudolf Schumacher, "Fürsorge für die Gefallenen und die Kriegergräber" in: *Der Weltkrieg um Ehre und Recht*, ed. Max Schwarte, Leipzig 1919-1933, Vol. 8, 328-334.

according to the new instructions: simple, sober and making use of the new standard grave markers.¹⁰

[11] The continuous artillery fire on and closely behind the frontline destroyed most of the cemeteries from 1915-1916. Sometimes, trenches were dug through the cemeteries as some of them were situated right on the frontline. The German Spring Offensive of 1918 recaptured all of the lost ground from the 1917 campaigns. In the summer of 1918, the officials from the *Gräberverwaltung* visited the recaptured area to check the state of the frontline cemeteries.¹¹ However, due to the lack of manpower and materials and because the war was coming to an end, the cemeteries were not put back in a decent shape any more.



4 Aerial photograph of the German cemetery at Reutelhoek (Beselare), showing plenty of shell-holes and even some trenches running through the cemetery. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

The Treaty of Versailles and the war graves 1918-1926

[12] Two articles in the Treaty of Versailles concern war graves (articles 225 and 226). The care of the German war graves in Belgium was handed over to an Allied or Associated war graves commission. In the first stage, the German war graves in Flanders were taken over by the *Imperial War Graves Commission* in areas where the British and Commonwealth troops had fought (in most of the Ypres Salient), by the French war graves commission in areas where the French had fought (e. g. Kemmel area and the Lys-Scheldt area) and by the *Services des Sépultures Militaires* (Belgian war graves commission) in the rest of the country.

¹⁰ Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, M233/6. Sanitäts-Kompanie 536. Friedhofs-Angelegenheiten, Anordnungen über Gräberlisten, Personalien, Merkblatt Gräberverwaltung.

¹¹ A pictorial report of some of the visits in the 4th Army area can be found in the archives of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, C.5.FA-115/1. Fotoalben 14/18. Fotoalbum eines Mitarbeiters der Gräberverwaltung Gent. 1916-1918 and C.5.FA-115/2. Fotoalben 14/18. Fotoalbum eines Mitarbeiters der Gräberverwaltung Gent. 1916-1918.

The *Waffenstillstandskommission* (the German Armistice Commission) handed over copies of the grave lists and cemetery plans to the commissions so that they could take care of the German graves. Some of the paperwork of the *Gräberverwaltung* was already in Belgian hands as the Germans had to leave Belgium in a hurry and some train loads of military papers were left behind near Antwerp.¹²

[13] In the meantime, the Allied and Belgian war graves services started clearing the battlefields and searched for their fallen. For this work, they also used Chinese workers and German prisoners of war. Their main concern was their own and their allies' fallen. While the former were thoroughly investigated to enable identification, German bodies were quickly exhumed and reburied on mostly newly-created, huge graveyards. Identification was not a concern. At Broodseinde near Zonnebeke, for instance, the British built a new German cemetery after the war, called *Broodseinde Extension*, next to the existing German war-time cemetery. Here, they gathered some 5,000 German bodies, of which only 10-20% were identified, whereas the rest was buried under a simple cross with a small zinc plaque saying "an unknown German soldier".

[14] The German graves were handed over to the Belgian war graves commission, who appointed caretakers to them. A large part of these caretakers were Belgian war veterans or war invalids who were usually paid a yearly fee of 1.50 to 2 Belgian Francs per grave.¹³ For this money they had to keep the graveyards "free of weeds", which in practice meant that they were kept free of any growth at all. A lot of the war-time monuments and grave markers (either gravestones or wooden crosses) were badly damaged because of the war and a lot of the stone monuments and grave markers were taken away and used as foundations for roads etc. The wooden grave crosses slowly decayed due to lack of care. The Belgian war graves commission issued cheap and simple wooden crosses with zinc name plates to replace the missing war-time grave markers.

[15] In Germany several organizations were founded to strive for a better care for the German war graves, both at home and abroad. One of these organizations was the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (VDK), which absorbed most of the other associations. The *Volksbund* published a monthly magazine, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge. Mitteilungen und Berichte vom Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V.*, in which German visitors to the German war cemeteries abroad described their travels and the situation of the graves. The

¹² Unfortunately, only a small part of the archives of this *Service des Sépultures Militaires* has survived. During the 1980's a pile of old documents was discovered on the attic of a Belgian barrack that was not longer to be used by the army. Luckily, the people who had found the papers did not throw them away but contacted the *Royal Military Museum* in Brussels. Among the papers was a small part of the archive of the *Service des Sépultures Militaires* about the German war graves until the 1930's. An inventory of the archive has been drawn up as *Fonds 58* in the archive of the *Royal Military Museum*.

¹³ *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, R.1-31 Akten aus dem Politischen Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes. Deutsche Kriegergräber und -denkmäler in Belgien. Januar-Oktober 1925, 804 Kriegsgräberliste.*

Volksbund also tried to act as an intermediary among the families, the caretakers and war graves associations in order to get pictures from the graves or to make sure that flowers were put on certain graves on the family's request (and on their costs). They also made sure that there were wreaths laid on certain dates (mainly the *Volkstrauertag* – Remembrance Day). The Belgian caretakers were allowed to take extra care for certain graves when the family requested this and paid for it.¹⁴

[16] Unlike France, where the French government made sure that the many German war graves were concentrated into a limited number of concentration cemeteries for which the ground was expropriated, the Belgian government left the existing German cemeteries untouched. Only very few (small) cemeteries, graveyards and solitary graves were relocated to existing concentration cemeteries in Belgium. The ground of these concentration cemeteries was neither expropriated nor was a compensation paid to the owners for the loss of their ground. This led to several scandals, where German cemeteries, sometimes with Allied graves, were used as meadows for goats, cows or pigs. Some cemeteries were even partially overbuilt with new buildings. Even though some cases were taken to court, the perpetrators were not significantly punished.¹⁵ It was clear that the situation had become untenable. In Germany there was growing public concern about the war graves, e. g. the German ambassador was not even allowed to officially visit any German war grave in Belgium to make an official report.¹⁶

Back under German control 1926-1940

[17] Official talks between the Belgian and German governments started in 1925, and Belgium seemed to 'play it hard' in the beginning, threatening that they would get rid of all German graves as Belgium only granted the minimum grave concession of 5 years. Eventually an agreement was found, which was signed in March 1926. This agreement was confidential, as it basically contradicted the Treaty of Versailles. The agreement stipulated that the German war graves would be granted the same rights as the other (Allied) war graves: eternal concession and expropriation of the ground by the Belgian state (Belgium owns the plots on which all of the war cemeteries are, but lets the war graves commissions use the ground freely as long as they are used as war cemeteries). Belgium even paid the costs for exhuming and transferring the German bodies to concentration cemeteries, as this would free up land plots, for which no rent had to be paid any

¹⁴ Dirk Verhelst, *Het Duits militair kerkhof in Hoogede*, Kortrijk 1996, 72.

¹⁵ Plenty of examples could be given here, e. g. Jan Vancoillie, *De Duitse militaire begraafplaats Menen Wald*, Wevelgem 2013, 203 and 207 (examples of graves being lost due to buildings built over them). Also Jan Vancoillie, "De Duitse begraafplaatsen in Zonnebeke en zijn deelgemeenten", in: *Het Zonneheem* 31 (2002), Nr. 2, 16 (a piece of ground including a German cemetery was put up for sale in 1928 as the owners had not seen any rent paid for the cemetery since the end of the war).

¹⁶ *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, R.1-30 Akten aus dem Politischen Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes. Deutsche Kriegergräber und -denkmäler in Belgien. April 1923-Dezember 1924*, 1114, 1276, 1541 and 1841.

more. Germany had to take over the care of all German cemeteries between 1926 and 1934 and promised to pay for the upkeep of the reduced number of cemeteries. It was also in Germany's interest not to make this agreement public, as they were economically unable to pay for the maintenance of all of their war cemeteries worldwide. The number of German war cemeteries was thus reduced to around 170 by 1934.¹⁷



5 German cemetery "Kriegerfriedhof Nr. 50 am Bahnhof Passendale-Moorslede" in 1930. The cemetery had been drawn up according to the views of architect Ritzen. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

[18] The Germans created the *Amtliche Deutsche Gräberdienst* (official German graves commission), which was dependent on the German Foreign Ministry via their embassy in Brussels. The ambassador was the official head of the commission, although its leading architect was in charge. The first appointed architect was Jos Ritzen (1896-1961), a modernistic architect of Dutch nationality, but working in Antwerp. He used a lot of paths, shrubs and foreign plants in his cemetery plans. His architectural style was immediately highly contested. Especially the use of concrete, a modern font and the iron cross as a motive for grave crosses and on monuments and other ornaments were disliked and Ritzen was forced to get prior approval of an art commission before executing his plans. This *Kunstausschuss für Kriegsgräberfragen* (Art Commission for Questions of Military Graves) consisted of famous German architects like Erich Richter, Fritz Höger, Robert Tischler, Franz Seeck, Friedrich Hirsch and Gotthold Nestler. Some of them visited Belgium to study the cemeteries and talk to Ritzen. As soon as the contract allowed it, Ritzen was relieved from his duties. He was succeeded by Fritz Schult in 1930.

[19] Fritz Schult developed a new style. He got rid of most of Ritzen's monuments and fonts and designed the cemeteries as simple grass lawns. From now on, the graves were marked by simple wooden crosses with the names punched into them. These crosses were dark because of the use of carboline to preserve them.

¹⁷ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *A.100-1024 Kriegsgräberstätten 14/18. Belgien 14/18*, Soldatenfriedhöfe Belgien.

The entrances were also simplified and even the cemeteries that had been designed by Ritzen were redesigned according to the new guidelines. This helped to keep the maintenance costs under control in difficult economic times.



6 German cemetery at Zwaanhoek (Beselare) in the 1930's, drawn up according to the views of Fritz Schult: a lawn with simple wooden crosses. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

[20] The *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* and German war veterans' associations also stepped in and raised funds to redesign one or more cemeteries that had a special meaning. These associations collected money to be used on the refurbishment of the cemetery, which allowed them to have a say in the architectural outcome. The *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* had the cemetery *Langemark Nord* redesigned by 1932 under their main architect Robert Tischler. This cemetery is preserved until today and has been renovated to have the same design as in 1932.

[21] Fritz Schult also came up with the idea to build a large mass grave where newly found remains, which were usually unidentifiable, could be gathered. He had seen the use of mass graves for unidentified remains in France, where the French created a mass grave on every war cemetery (both French and German), where unidentified remains were buried together. The idea behind this was that it would give a central place for remembrance to all Germans whose fallen relatives had no known grave. This idea was only realized in the 1950's with the creation of the *Kameradengrab* in Langemark.

[22] From 1934 on, the *Amtliche Deutsche Gräberdienst* had a difficult time. Several lawsuits were started over allegations of fraud and personal enrichment. In Germany, the Nazis had taken over the government and put their own man, *Regierungsrat* Bickel, in charge in Belgium. He had to run the service in a constant atmosphere of financial constraints because of the Nazi's economic policies. Even though all German war cemeteries were now under control of the *Amtliche Deutsche Gräberdienst*, several of them remained under construction until 1940. In order to cut spending, some German cemeteries in Belgium, where

the number of British graves was substantial, were handed over to the *Imperial War Graves Commission*. The *IWGC* took over the redesign and promised to maintain the German graves on these cemeteries as well. In Flanders this was the case for *Zeebrugge Churchyard*, but the most famous examples are *St. Symphorien* near Mons and *Hautrage*.¹⁸

The Second World War 1940-1944

[23] After the occupation of Belgium, the German cemeteries were transferred to the care of the *Wehrmacht*, although the staff mostly remained. The Belgian communes, where the cemeteries were located, were also forced to take part in the maintenance of both German and allied war cemeteries. Disrespectful behaviour towards the war dead of either side was severely punished under German occupation.

Some of the cemeteries were used for propaganda goals. Adolf Hitler made a battlefield tour in Flanders and Northern France in June 1940, visiting some war memorials and cemeteries. One of the most famous visits was the one to the German cemetery of Langemark.

After the liberation of Belgium in late 1944, the German cemeteries fell under the responsibility of the Belgian state again. Understandably, the respect for anything German, even for the war graves, was almost non-existing. During the very cold winter of 1944-1945, many of the trees on the German cemeteries were cut and used for heating. Even large numbers of the wooden grave crosses were stolen and used as firewood.

Back in Belgian control 1944-1953

[24] In late 1944, the Belgian patriotic association *Nos Tombes* was appointed to take care of some of the German First World War cemeteries, the remaining cemeteries were given to another Belgian patriotic association called *Souvenir Belge* in early 1945. The idea was that putting two competing associations in charge would reduce costs and would raise the standard of care. Because of financial irregularities and neglect, *Souvenir Belge* was soon relieved from its duties and its cemeteries were transferred to the Belgian Red Cross. After the peace treaty between Belgium and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1951, negotiations were started to seek a solution for the German First World War cemeteries (the German Second World War graves had been concentrated into two cemeteries in Lommel and Recogne under Belgian responsibility shortly after the end of the war). The talks were held with the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* and not the German state. In 1953, an agreement was reached in which this association was granted far-going tax advantages, comparable to diplomatic and non-governmental organizations. The main Belgian demand was a serious reduction of the number of German First World War cemeteries.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jan Vancoillie, "Ehrenfriedhof Nr. 1914 Saint-Symphorien-Spiennes", in: *Shrapnel* 100 (2014), Nr. 2, 192-197.

Under control of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge 1954-today

[25] The VDK was given the huge task to reduce the number of German First World War cemeteries to just four in West Flanders. Some German graveyards on civilian cemeteries in Belgium were allowed to stay as well as some in Southern Belgium, which were protected under a special Franco-German agreement. Minutes from the VDK board discussions from that period show that they wanted to rebury some symbolic earth from the many cemeteries to the remaining ones, thinking that interest in a war that had taken place 40 years ago would be minimal. However, this was legally impossible.²⁰

[26] Some 100,000 to 130,000 bodies had to be exhumed and reburied in one of the new concentration cemeteries from 1955 to 1957. The German war cemetery of Hooglede had remained unchanged since the 1930's. The identified German war graves from the North of West Flanders and from the other provinces of Belgium were concentrated to Vladslo, whereas the identified German war graves from Southern and Central West Flanders were gathered in Menen. A few identified German war graves from close to Langemark were taken to Langemark, where a new plot B was put in use. In principle, all individually not-identifiable bodies were gathered into a newly created mass grave at Langemark (although some unidentified German graves can still be found on the other cemeteries). The digging work was done quite meticulously by Belgian workers, especially contracted for this and working under supervision of German officials. These officials took over as soon as the actual bodies were reached. A recent archaeological excavation in Beselare shows that the work was done rather thoroughly, considering the very limited amount of time available for the work.²¹ The remains were only bones, so they could be gathered in gunny bags and buried in trench graves, in which every single burial had a space of 35 on 50 centimetres.²²

[27] The main architect for the redesign of the German war cemeteries was Robert Tischler (1885-1959). Tischler had been the chief architect of the VDK since 1926. He was known for his strong interest in traditional craftsmanship and usually worked with Munich-based artists (like Franz Grau, Fritz Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth or Willy Guglhör) who created ornaments and sculptures.

Because of the density of the burials, it was not possible to put crosses on the graves (not even when placing four names on one cross). In the beginning a

¹⁹ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *A.100-1024 Kriegsgräberstätten 14/18. Belgien 14/18*, Darstellung der Verhältnisse der deutschen Gräber in Belgien.

²⁰ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *A.100-1024 Kriegsgräberstätten 14/18. Belgien 14/18*, Gs/M/Wdl-Di 19.04.1952.

²¹ Marc Dewilde, Sofie Vanhoutte and Franky Wyffels, *Preventief archeologisch onderzoek in de "Leege Platse" Beselare - 2011-13 (Beselare, Prov. West-Vlaanderen) (= Onderzoeksrapporten Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed 23)*, Brussel 2015.

²² Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, *Planarchiv*, Meenen-Wald Belegungsplan 24.03.1955.

small wooden stake was placed between two graves on which a small brass plate was attached with the names of the two burials. As soon as the grass grew a bit higher, these small stakes 'disappeared', causing visitors a lot of difficulties to search for a particular grave. Only around 1970 a solution was found in the form of big tiles from *petit Granit* in which up to 20 names could be engraved. Improved engraving techniques enabled even better readable tiles, which were placed on the cemeteries around 1990.



7 German cemetery Méné in 2015: the graves are marked by tiles where up to 20 names are engraved. (Photograph: collection Jan Vancoillie)

[28] In the early 1980's, a series of name lists was placed near the *Kameradengrab* in Langemark. On these lists the names of soldiers whose graves were lost, but who are believed to have died in Belgium, were placed. These names were for a large part identified by browsing Bavarian personnel lists, as the Bavarian military archives have survived unlike the Prussian military archives which were largely destroyed in the bombings of Berlin at the end of the Second World War. As such, the lists are a pendant to the British Memorials to the Missing like the *Menin Gate Memorial* in Ypres.

Recent developments

[29] The fall of the Iron Curtain opened Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*. Accordingly, the VDK has put a lot of effort into trying to locate Second World War graves in the East. In combination with a decrease in public financial support for its work, this led to a diminished level of care for the First World War cemeteries in the West. However, the increasing interest in First World War heritage incited the Flemish government to recognize, among other sites, the four German war cemeteries in West Flanders as protected monuments. This enabled government funding for their maintenance and conservation. Flanders is nowadays one of the very few governments outside of Germany that also (partially) contributes to the care for

the German war graves. In 2015, the Flemish government listed some First World War sites intended to be added to UNESCO's World Heritage List. The German First World War cemeteries of Langemark and Vladslo are included on this list. At this point, it remains to be seen whether both sites will be recognized and what the effects of such recognition will be.²³

[30] The recent revival of interest in the First World War due to the centenary has brought a growing number of mainly non-German visitors to some of the German cemeteries. Approximately 300,000 people visited the German cemetery in Langemark in 2015, out of which only a small minority were Germans. German visitors to Flanders come either alone or as a family, to remember their fallen ancestors, while some German visitors visit the graves in groups as a form of peace education. The VDK propagates the cemeteries under its care as calls for peace and reconciliation. This message strongly contrasts with the views of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the British and Commonwealth counterpart of the VDK, which emphasises the military character of the graves and the death as a result of their duty towards the British Empire/Commonwealth. Most British visitors come to see the graves of the fallen to honour them and as a pilgrimage.

Conclusion

[31] It is clear that since the first German war graves were created in Flanders in the fall of 1914, a lot has changed. These changes were for a large part due to who was in charge: the German army (1914-1918), the Belgian and Allied war graves commissions (1919-1926), the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1926-1940), the German army (1940-1944), Belgian patriotic associations and the Belgian Red Cross (1944-1953) and finally the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* since 1953. Each authority had its own particular view on how these graves should be built and maintained, sometimes with or without exterior pressure from states or the public. The situation has been stable since the Flemish government recognized the German war cemeteries as protected monuments (practically paying for a large part of the maintenance and renovation of the war graves of its former enemies), despite the financial difficulties of the VDK which restrain the level of care. It remains to be seen what the future will bring, especially what will happen if two of the remaining four German war cemeteries in West Flanders will be put on the UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Guest Editors of Special Issue

Christian Fuhrmeister and Kai Kappel, eds., *War Graves, War Cemeteries, and Memorial Shrines as a Building Task, 1914-1989. Die Bauaufgabe Soldatenfriedhof/Kriegsgräberstätte zwischen 1914 und 1989*, in: *RIHA Journal* 0150-0176

²³ Petra Broeders, "Preselectie WO I-sites voor erkenning als UNESCO-Werelderfgoed bekend", <https://www.onroerenderfgoed.be/nl/actueel/nieuws/nominatie-erfgoed-eerste-wereldoorlog-als-unesco-werelderfgoed/> (accessed 14 July 2015).

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