

Belgium

Volksbund Deutsche
Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V.



Reconciliation above the graves
Work for peace

German Military Cemeteries



Recogne-Bastogne

Belgium

In the 20th century both World Wars were fought on Belgian soil. From this period alone, 204,000 war dead from all countries of the British Commonwealth, 180,000 German war dead, 16,000 Belgian soldiers, 13,500 Americans, not to mention Poles, Russians and the war dead of many other nations, all have been given their final resting place on Belgian soil. Add to this, too, the victims of persecution during the years of the German occupation from 1940 to 1944.

For the German war dead, the German War Graves Commission has, on behalf of the Federal Government, taken on the role of building, designing and maintaining the war cemeteries located on Belgian soil. Examples include Menin (First World War) with 47,911 war dead and Lommel (Second World War) with 38,552 war dead.

First World War

The war dead were first placed in field graves during the fighting. In 1916/1917, German rearguard forces began to



place the dead together and build the cemeteries, with the involvement of renowned architects and artists. The result saw people such as Rhine-based architect Ludwig Paffendorf help in the design of the military cemeteries in the Ardennes.

During the initial phase of the war, the obvious thing to do was to bury friend and foe alike, together in a final resting place and to add a natural stone cross to their grave later on, provided their names could be identified. Here, too, for the first time general burial areas were laid out, with uniform landscaping, instead of the individual mounds normally used hitherto.

Between the wars, following the conclusion of a War Graves Agreement between Germany and Belgium in 1925, the „Amtliche Deutsche Kriegsgräberdienst“ (Official German War Graves Service) attended to these cemeteries. After the Second World War, the German War Graves Association, or „Volksbund“ as it was known, was commissioned by the Federal Republic of Germany to see to their maintenance and upkeep. In the 1950s, at the request of the Belgian government, a number of smaller cemeteries set in remote spots were closed. The dead were transferred to larger sites.



Today, in the southern provinces of Belgium the following German war cemeteries devoted to the First World War still exist:

Anloy-Heide

Approx. one mile from Anloy on the road to Framont;
1,384 German and 592 French war dead.

Bellefontaine

Situated just over a mile east of the town, about two miles south of Tintigny; 502 German and 521 French war dead.

Bertrix-Heide

About 2.5 miles north of Bertrix on the road to Ochamps;
254 German and 264 French war dead.



Maissin-National

Lies approx. 150 metres north-west of the centre of the town; 513 German and 283 French war dead. At the entrance to the cemetery there is a centuries-old, elaborate granite cross known as a „Calvaire“, such as can be found in Brittany, the home of the French dead to be found here. The survivors of the battle funded the cross and erected it on the 28th anniversary of the fighting.

Mousson-Baranzy

Approx. 10 miles east of Virton on the N 88; 511 German and 431 French war dead.

Neufchateau-Malonne

Approx. 1 mile south-west of Neufchateau on the N 85 towards Florenville; 340 German and 289 French war dead.

Halanzy

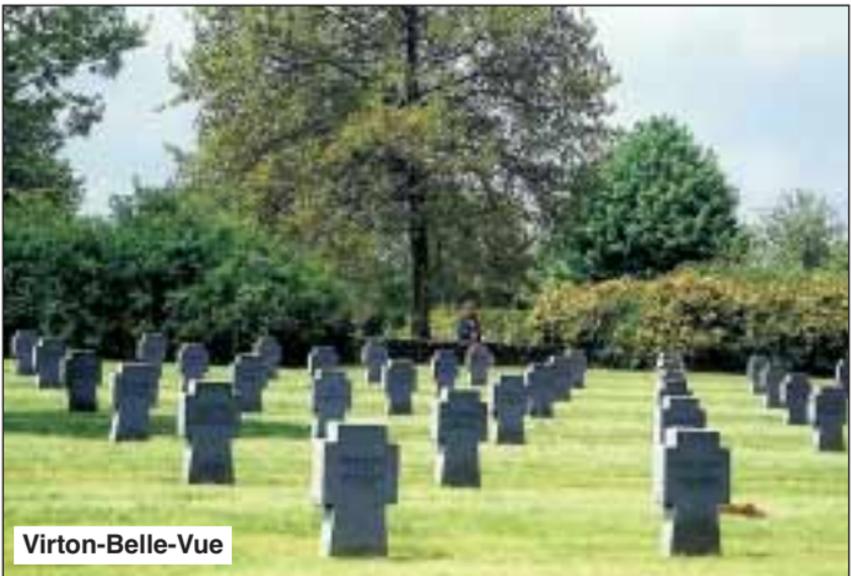
Lies on the north-eastern edge of the town at the local municipal cemetery; 38 German and 22 French war dead.

Virton-Belle-Vue

Lies on the Virton-Bastogne road, approx. half a mile from Virton (Av. de la Grange au Bois CN 875) ; 1,288 German and 288 French war dead, as well as 28 Austrians, 29 Italians and 17 Russians.

Tarcienne

Lies to the south of Charleroi, west of the N 5 towards Rocroi, approx. 2 miles west of Tarcienne; 178 German and 312 French war dead.



Virton-Belle-Vue

Virton-Belle-Vue

These cemeteries are jointly maintained today by the Volksbund and the French Government. Both burial services have subcontracted the upkeep of the cemetery, but jointly oversee the work done by the landscapers. A few hundred German war dead lie at a total of 87 British military cemeteries. The larger sites are Hautrage (537 war dead), Marcinelle (283 war dead), Poperinghe-Lyssenthoek (224 war dead), Zeebrugge (175 war dead) and St. Symphorien (285 war dead).

St. Symphorien

This is part of the Hainaut/Hennegau province, lying approx. two miles east of Mons and around 300 metres south of St. Symphorien; 285 German and 229 British war dead are here. It is one of the first military cemeteries laid out for the German troops of the First World War.

The first (22.8.1914) and the last (11.11.1918) British soldiers killed in the fighting are buried here. Even during the war, the graves of the German soldiers who fell were, depending on which regiment they belonged to, given variously designed natural stone crosses. Since 1919, these cemeteries have been kept in perfect condition, first by the Imperial War Graves Commission, and today by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

German burial fields were also laid out at five municipal cemeteries:

Brussels-Evere	1,147 war dead
Eupen	177 war dead
Herstal	95 war dead
Lüttich-Robermont	795 war dead
St. Vith	74 war dead



Brussels-Evere

War cemeteries in Flanders

When the war ended in November 1918, more than 670 German and countless allied burial sites containing war dead were recorded in the province of West Flanders alone. Between the two wars, the „Official German War Graves Service“ – the government body associated with the Foreign Office – took on the work to maintain the sites after a campaign to merge the 128 German cemeteries that remained. The Volksbund laid out the military cemetery in Langemark at the end of the 1920s, at the time containing 11,000 war dead and therefore one of the biggest, as well as the cemetery at Roeselare. In 1954, a new war graves agreement dissolved the previous agreement of 1925 that had been signed between Germany and Belgium.

The Volksbund, on behalf of the German government, now took on the task of rebuilding and maintaining the cemeteries that remained in West Flanders, after more than 120 sites were dissolved between 1956 and 1958 and the dead (those who were known by name) were taken to the cemeteries at Langemark, Menin and Vladslo. They were buried in individual graves. The unknown dead were given their final resting place in a communal grave at the cemetery in Langemark. Because they were placed so closely together, the individual graves were marked by plaques in the ground, on which the names and dates of up to 20 dead are engraved. The final structural work carried out by the Volksbund was completed between 1970 and 1972, according to the plans of the then chief architect, Robert Tischler, who had already previously drawn up the blueprints for the cemeteries in Langemark and Roeselare.

Hooglede

About 4 miles north west of Roeselare, on the eastern road going out of the town where the road joins with the Roeselare-Ostende road, lies the Hooglede German military cemetery with 8,241 war dead. Through a narrow gate with wroughtiron grating, visitors from the road reach a small forecourt area from where it is possible to see the burial sites, planted with heather. Groups of small trees on both sides of the burial plots lead visitors to a commemorative hall decorated with a colourful mosaic and which is open on the side facing towards the cemetery by means of nine high, round arches. It had been laid out by the official German war graves service even before the Second World War. The stone material that was used for this came from the German pavilion built in 1937 for the World Exhibition in Paris and then broken up. An elaborate wrought-iron gate marks the boundary to the commemorative room, situated at the left-hand end of the hall. In the middle of the room there is a piece of diabas rock and an elaborate shrine that contains the books of the names of the war dead. On each grave plaque the names of two war dead are inscribed.

Thanks to financial support from the Flemish government, the cultural heritage authorities and the town of Hooglede, the Commission was able to carry out a complete renovation of the German military cemetery. The renovation work was largely completed in late autumn 2011. A ceremony to mark the reopening of the cemetery was held on 5 May 2012.

Hooglede, along with Langemark, Menen and Vladslo, is one of the four main German military cemeteries in West Flanders, all of which are classified as historic monuments and recognised as part of the cultural heritage of Flanders.



Langemark

On the northern exit road – on the road to Houthulst-Diksmuide – lies the German military cemetery of Langemark, with 44,324 war dead.

Visitors enter the cemetery through an entrance building made of red sandstone. Inside, there are two memorial rooms. The left-hand room contains a map of Belgium carved in wood, showing the location of former and current cemeteries. Visitors can also see the books of names here. The room on the right contains – carved in oak panels – the names of the known war dead, who lay at this cemetery even before the major reburial efforts from 1956 to 1958.



Upon leaving the entrance building, visitors walk into a small court. It was restored during the renovation works in 2015 according to the cemetery's original layout from the 1930s. The mortal remains of more than 25,000 unknown German soldiers are buried in the large communal grave. The Volksbund has since been able to work out the names of some 17,000 or so. These have been cast on bronze plaques, which – secured on heavy stone cuboids – are positioned around three sides of the cemetery. Overlooking the communal grave stands a group of four soldiers in mourning, cast in bronze – a work by sculptor Prof. Emil Krieger. The burial field itself has been planted with oaks and is surrounded by a stone wall, with a ditch in front of it. In the northern section lies part of the former frontline, marked by three restored bunkers and a series of granite blocks. The stone blocks bear the names of the troop regiments that took part in the fighting and of student organisations who donated to supported the construction works on the cemetery in the years 1930-1932. An Information Centre was built in 2006 next to the cemetery to provide information both as to the fighting in and around Langemark during World War I and the creation of Germanmilitary cemeteries. Complete restoration work was carried out in 2015.

Menin



Not far from the Belgian-French border on the north-eastern edge of the town lies the largest German military cemetery in the West. 47,911 war dead have their final resting place here. Visitors enter the cemetery from the main road via a small entrance building where there is a room containing the books of names. Visitors then proceed via a paved walkway to the eight-cornered chapel of remembrance in the middle of the lawned burial fields, shaded by a number of tall trees. The inside of the chapel consists of a room, supported by a column in the middle. Some of the walls have mosaics on them, reflecting biblical images.

Two elaborately designed shrines contain books bearing the names of the war dead lying here, written in parchment.



Vladslö

From the Diksmuide-Beerst-Torhout road, turning left approx. three miles east of Beerst (it is signposted), after a few hundred metres visitors will reach the German military cemetery, home to 25,645 war dead.

From the entrance building, which contains a room with the books of names inside, you can look down the entire length of the cemetery onto an impressive group of figurines entitled „Parents in Mourning“ by Käthe Kollwitz.

The artist created these statues, which bear the facial characteristics of her husband and herself, to commemorate her son, Peter. He fell in October 1914 in Flanders and was given his final resting place here.

In 1932, the statues – made from Belgian granite – were erected in the presence of Käthe Kollwitz and her husband right in front of her son’s grave at the German Military Cemetery of Esen near Dixmuide. In 1957 the dead from Esen as well as the statues were transferred to Vladslö.

In Koekelare, about three miles west of the cemetery, there lies the Käthe-Kollwitz museum, housed in a listed building. As well as drawings, lithographs and wood carvings, exhibits on show also include personal letters. One area is devoted to the „Parents in Mourning“ statues.

Complete restoration work was carried out in 2015/2016.



Second World War

With the German advance on 10th May 1940, Belgium – until then still neutral – was once more thrown into a global war. Once again, German cemeteries had to be laid out on Belgian soil. The cemeteries were first home to members of the occupying forces who were killed until, in the summer of 1944 – after the Allies had landed in Normandy – Belgium once more became a theatre of war.

The fighting in the winter of 1944/45, and with it the level of German losses, reached their climax during the German Ardennes offensive. The dead – German and Americans – were buried by the American burial service and placed in temporary cemeteries.

In 1946/47, the American war dead were reburied into two cemeteries at Neuville-en-Condrez in Liege and Henri-Chapelle, west of Aachen. The German dead, on the other hand, were taken to Lommel in the Belgian province of Limburg and placed near the Heidegebiet. At the same time, the Belgian burial service began to close down all other German war grave locations for the Second World War throughout the country and started to transfer the dead to Lommel and – to a lesser extent – to a site at Bastogne in the Belgian province of Luxemburg in the south.

In 1952, a war-graves agreement was signed between Belgium and Germany. The Volksbund was commissioned on behalf of the German government to develop and maintain the two German war cemeteries that were home to the war dead of the Second World War.

Lommel

The German military cemetery lies on the road leading from Lommel to Leopoldsburg (N 746). It is here that 38,552 war dead from the Second World War and 542 dead from the First World War lie, having been at the Belgian military cemetery in Leopoldsburg until transferred to Lommel.

After reburial work had been completed in 1947, the Belgian authorities had a massive concrete cross erected for every two dead. The names – in so far as identifiable – were attached to the crosses on small enamel signs.

In 1953, the Volksbund – after the completion of the planning and approval process – was able to start its redevelopment work at the cemetery. For the first time, youth camps provided major help in this work, the helpers having been called up by the CVJM and Kolpingwerk.

Whilst even in 1953, 100 young people – mainly from Germany – came to help, the numbers grew in 1954 to almost 400, with helpers coming from 16 nations. They symbolised the watchwords of what they did, namely „reconciliation across the graves“ – a motto still valid today and to which was later added the statement „Working for Peace“.

This campaign started in Lommel, and soon spread to all countries in Europe where German military cemeteries were located. In 1955, the work by these young people reached its end. The work had, among other things, included the building of a wall – complete with graves – more than 1,100 metres in length, as well as the construction of the access road and the car park. Young people from Schleswig-Holstein in Germany also helped. Today, there are still youth camps in Lommel.

To provide a central point at the large site, the building management of the Volksbund had a crypt built in the entrance area, inside of which lay a stone figure, raised from the ground, symbolising the dead in the wars. The work – set on solid blocks of basalt lava – supports an impressive crucifixion scene, also made of basalt lava. The crucifix is almost six metres high, and the two figures on either side each measure 3.30 metres. The entire piece weighs around 39 tonnes.

The cemetery was inaugurated on 6th September 1959. Since then, of the original 13,000 unknown war dead, the Volksbund has been able to identify more than 7,500 of them, and to inform their relatives. Lommel is recognised as a part of the cultural heritage of Flanders, too.

In the cemetery building a youth meeting place was built in 1993, which was extended in 2001 to create sleeping accommodation and the necessary seminar rooms and leisure areas. School classes and youth groups from Germany and Belgium discuss war history here. They also learn, by working on the war graves, how important it is to work and live together in peace.



Recogne-Bastogne

About three miles north of Bastogne on the Bastogne-Houffalize-Liege, road lies the war cemetery of Recogne-Bastogne near the small village of Noville. At this German war cemetery, 6,807 dead lie in peace.

The name Bastogne, the small town that became known throughout the world as a result of the Ardennes offensive in December 1944, leads one to suppose that the cemetery is only dedicated to those dead who fell during the hopeless struggle in the last stage of the Second World War. But this is only part of the story. German war dead who fell during fighting on German soil also lie here.

On 4th February 1945, the Americans began to create a joint cemetery. It took 2,700 US soldiers and more than 3,000 German war dead and combined them at two separate burial sites on an area left of the Bastogne-Noville road. These temporary burial sites were given the name of the village, Foy.

In 1946/47, the American dead were removed and transferred to Henri-Chapelle, a small place between Liege and Aachen where the Americans had also set up a temporary combined cemetery. In Bastogne the German remained.

Meanwhile, the Official Belgian Burial service resumed its work. It started to close the German burial fields, individual graves at municipal cemeteries and smaller sites. Around 3,300 dead were transferred to Bastogne, the rest to Lommel.



The Volksbund began in 1954 to identify the countless unknown war dead. This work was completed in the spring of 1956. Along the road, on the north side of the cemetery, a low wall was built from red Eifel, springing up bastion-like in the north-western corner. A chapel complete with clock tower rises from the brickwork. The inside of the chapel forms a vaulted holy room, the walls of which have been decorated by two reliefs – St. Michael and the Archangel Gabriel.

In order to build the wall, protectively surrounding the burial plots on three sides, and to cultivate the land, young people from six nations volunteered their services. With the help of the Kolpingwerk and the CVJM an international youth camp was set up in Noville in the summer of 1956. The concrete crosses that were originally used were later replaced by crosses made of natural stone.

To cover the costs of the work, not only the Volksbund and the Federal government helped by making considerable donations, but so too did the workforce at the Volkswagen plant.

On 25th September 1960, the cemetery was inaugurated, many relatives joining in attendance.



The German War Graves Commission ...

- ... cares for the German war graves here and nearly 100 countries all over the world.
- ... helps the next of kin in finding out about their relatives' fate and searches for their graves.
- ... works in the Eastern European countries since 1990 when the borders were opened.
- ... finds the war dead and brings them to central cemeteries.
- ... advocates through its work understanding and reconciliation with former enemies.
- ... leads young people to war graves in order to make them understand the terrible consequences of war, thus recognizing how important it is to work for peace.
- ... finances its work almost exclusively with contributions of its members and donors and would be very grateful for YOUR help.

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