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SCHOOL VISIT TO THE GERMAN MILITARY CEMETERY AT LANGEMARK

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

School visit to the German Military Cemetery at Langemark: Manual

Introduction

Visitors to the Westhoek region (Flanders Fields) might get the wrong impression that only allied troops fought during the First World War. The British cemeteries and monuments are omnipresent and there are also a few French and Belgian military cemeteries and monuments as well. However, the German presence is less visible as there are no monuments (those who lose a war do not get to erect monuments that glorify their dead) and in the city of Ypres there are no longer any German cemeteries to be found. Since 1958, there are only four German military cemeteries in West Flanders. They are at Vladslo, Hooglede, Menin and Langemark. The latter is closest to the city of Ypres and is therefore the easiest to visit on a tour of the battlefields.

History

Already, by the end of 1914, a small collection of graves could be found at Langemark and during most of the war this place was on the front lines, but also sometimes behind it, so the number of graves always increased. Everywhere in the front region German cemeteries with monuments were built. In 1919, this cemetery was called Langemark-Nord. It was then one of 17 German cemeteries in Langemark. There were 859 graves (627 German graves, the others were of French, British and Belgian soldiers). Between 1924 and 1932 many smaller cemeteries were 'cleaned up' by the German Burial Service and the remains were relocated to this cemetery. The mass grave was called 'Studentenfriedhof' because among the thousands of soldiers killed in 1914 approximately 3,000 of them were students who had volunteered to fight.
In 1932, the cemetery had over 10,000 graves with wooden crosses. The cemetery is surrounded by a wall and has an entrance gate.

From 1955 to 1958, the number of German military cemeteries in West Flanders was reduced from 68 to 4 and the Studentenfriedhof was enlarged to accommodate more bodies. Besides the existing 10,000 graves, a new plot was made with 9,000 graves (with numbered stones and copper plaques) and a mass grave containing almost 25,000 casualties. A couple of groups of five crosses in basalt and a group of four bronze statues were also placed in the cemetery. In 1971, the cemetery was renovated and received vertical headstones.





Description

1. The entrance gate looks like a bunker and is made of German red sandstone. On the left side of the building visitors can find a map marking the German cemeteries. There is also a table with the registers. The room on the right has plaques with the names of 6,313 identified casualties buried in the oldest part of the cemetery. A lavatory can be found on the far left of the entrance gate. On the entrance gate wall, facing the cemetery there is a quote by worker/poet Heinrich Lersch (1889-1936), 'Deutschland muss leben und wenn wir starben mussen' (Germany must live, even if we must die). Lersch was a boilermaker who travelled around Western Europe. His sense of attachment to nature and with his homeland got stronger during his experiences as a soldier during the war. He served in Reserve Infantry Regiment 236, which was stationed near Langemark in 1914. He became well known for his song called "Soldatenabschied" (The Soldiers' Farewell). After the war he initially worked in a factory in the Ruhr valley but in 1925, he became a full-time professional writer. He expected much from the emerging Nazism. The quote in the Langemark cemetery typifies the mentality of young war volunteers in 1914. It is found on many war memorials in Germany.
2. The low, thick wall around the cemetery matches with the Flemish landscape: pollard willows in the front, a ditch on the right and a double beech hedge.
3. In front of the entrance gate there is the mass grave – the 'Kameradengrab'. There is a wreath of oak leaves and eight escutcheons which represent the Belgian regions: West and East Flanders are however regarded as one region, the same for Brabant, which wasn't split up into a Flemish and Walloon part at that time. 68 bronze name plaques with almost 17,000 names surround the cemetery.
4. In fact, the cemetery is a wide lawn without flowers. The back wall is covered with rhododendrons. The oldest part of the cemetery has large European oaks that always cover the ground in shadow, and therefore there is always a sombre atmosphere. On the latter part of the cemetery (on the higher right side) the headstones are closer to one another.
5. The grey vertical headstones are graves of 4, 6, 8 or more casualties. The headstones show little data, only first name and name, soldier type or rank and date of death. Headstone N.1 is in the far left corner.
6. There are 12 groups of three crosses made of basalt, a dark and hard volcanic rock. Their presence is purely decorative and they do not mark the location of any graves. Originally there were five crosses.
7. The bronze group of statues was made by professor Emil Krieger in Munich in 1958. The group represents four grieving soldiers. Emil Krieger was born in Kaiserslautern in 1902. In 1936, he won the Belgian Prix de Rome award. He mostly worked in Munich where some of his sculptures can still be found adorning the streets.
8. The cemetery holds three German concrete shelters built in 1916-1917. They were part of the German defensive lines. This is why their door openings are at the back (now closed). Note also the thick roof.
9. A row of 49 memorial stones consisting of a concrete base with a granite block was made for and by military units and students' associations.
10. In the front right corner there is a large stone cross, made of one piece of basalt.



Number of Dead
The cemetery is largely composed of three parts:

The oldest part (under the oak trees, grave numbers 1-8938) with officially 10,143 casualties, of which 6,313 are identified. Their names are also written on the oak tables in the entrance gate. Amongst them, are approximately 3,000 students who volunteered to go to war.

The latter part (on the right) with officially 9,257 identified casualties on a smaller surface before and after the row of memorial stones. There are many names on the headstones that are close to one another.

The *Kameradengrab* is a mass grave with officially 24,917 unidentified casualties. Yet, the bronze name plaques mention 16,940 names. Still today, human remains are found and buried in the cemetery. The human remains that were buried here with the enlargement in 1955-1956 came from 18 German military cemeteries in Langemark, Poelkapelle, Staden, Westrozebeke, Moorslede, Passendale, Zonnebeke and Zillebeke. Over 44,000 soldiers are buried in this cemetery! In comparison, the largest British military cemetery Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele has 'only' 11,952 graves.

Some Information about Langemark and the Cemetery
On 21st October 1914 and the three following days, the Germans attacked the British near Langemark. Many of the German soldiers were young students from Heidelberg and Munich who went to war side by side singing their songs. Again and again their officers sent them into the British guns and thousands of them were killed. Many of them had volunteered for the war and had only received six weeks' training before going to the front.

Only after the first successful gas attack in history, on 22nd April 1915, was Langemark occupied by German troops. The German gas cylinders were buried a little north of where the cemetery is today. The French first line, on the contrary, was 100 m to the south of the cemetery so, during 1914, this area was No Man's Land. After the gas attack, the front moved a few kilometres in the direction of Ypres. A German gas pioneer describes the battlefield after that first gas attack as follows:

"After it [the gas] had cleared up, we walked past the empty gas bottles. What we saw was nothing but death. Nothing was alive. All the animals had come out of their holes to die. We saw dead rabbits, moles, rats and mice everywhere. The odour of the gas was still in the air. Present on the few shrubs that were left. When we approached the French lines, they were empty but half a mile further the bodies of the French soldiers were everywhere. It was unbelievable. Then we saw there were also English soldiers. We could see that the men had grabbed their faces and throats in an attempt to get some fresh air. Some of them had shot themselves. The horses, still in their stables, the cows, the chickens, everything was dead. Everything, even the insects, were dead'.

From April 1916 to August 1917, the cemetery lay relatively far behind the German front line and it was then the shelters, which are now part of the Soldatenfriedhof, were built. The British finally conquered this defensive line on 9th October 1917, during the Third Battle of Ypres. One of the bunkers seemed to be an unbeatable obstacle for the British and it appeared impossible to stop the withering machine gun fire that came from inside the bunker. In the regimental history of the 4th Battalion of The Worcester Regiment the following is written:

'One of the German bunkers in front of our line had not been touched by the grenades and its machine gun constantly killed hard-working men of our troops. Our gun firing against the thick concrete walls was useless. Therefore we sent messages to the hinterland to ask for trench mortars that could destroy the bunker. But suddenly the machine gun stopped firing. A minute later everyone stood up and cheered. Through the mud a small group of German soldiers approached the British line, with their hands up as a sign of surrender, and behind them was one lonely British soldier, struggling to hold the heavy weight of the machine gun – the German machine gun. The cheering was even louder when the British soldier was recognised: "Dancox", the troops shouted, "good old Dancox". Private Frederick Dancox had worked his way round through the barrage without being noticed. He entered the bunker and all by himself he managed to capture the entire German unit and silence the machine gun'.

During the German Spring Offensive, in early April 1918, the Germans again occupied Langemark, but on 28th September 1918, during the Last Offensive, it was finally conquered by the allied troops.
In the Inter war period the Langemark myth was created in Germany. It stated that on 11th November 1914 young German students advanced on the enemy whilst singing "Deutschland, Deutschland Uber Alles". With the Nazis the Langemark myth grew stronger as an example of the sacrifice of German youngsters. Germany inaugurated many Langemark Streets and Langemark Squares, and there was also a national Langemark Day. On 8th June 1940, shortly after the German occupation of Belgium, Adolf Hitler visited the military cemetery. The Flemish SS division, created later in the Second World War, would be named 'Langemark'.

After the Second World War, the Langemark myth vanished for obvious reasons. However, Langemark still has a great symbolic value in Germany but now it is more a symbol of the absurdity of war, rather than a symbol of heroism and sacrifice.

Some remarkable graves

The plaques near the *Kameradengrab* (mass grave) include the name of Albert Carlill, a British soldier of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. He died on 4th November 1918 aged just 18. Carlill is the only British soldier amongst the thousands of German casualties. Oddly enough he is also remembered on a memorial stone in the nearby Cement House Cemetery in Langemark. According to the British Burial Service, he was first buried in the municipal cemetery of Louvain (Belgium) where his grave went missing.

The plaques also mention Lieutenant Wolfgang Kühne, who died on 6th August 1915. In fact, Lieutenant Kühne isn't buried here. His grave is still in the civil cemetery at Wervik, near Ypres. With the excavation works in the 1950s his grave was probably forgotten because it didn't look military and therefore it didn't stand out amongst all the civil graves.

The *Kameradengrab* does not only hold the remains of German soldiers and 1 British man. Also people of other nationalities were given their final resting place here. Danes serving the German army (Northern Sleswig, now part of Denmark, belonged to Prussia at the time), Polish (who were also German citizens), a Belgian citizen, Russian and Italian prisoners of war that were put to work behind the front and Austrians that belonged to a unit attached to German units. Not only men are buried here, also several nurses (Hilferinnen) were also given a final resting place in this mass grave.

Worksheet
Visit to the German military cemetery at Langemark

1 How would you describe the atmosphere in this German cemetery? Choose adjectives from the list below. Add words if you want to.

Pleasant – colourful – proud – cheerful – attractive – serene – oppressive – sad – depressing – touching – inspiring – threatening – cheerless – dark – scary

2 How many people are buried here?
Compare this with the largest British military cemetery, (the Tyne Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele), which has 11,952 graves.

3 The gate building, on the cemetery's side, has a quote by Heinrich Lersch (1889-1936):
"Deutschland muss leben und wenn wir starben mussen" (Germany must live, even if we must die).
This quote can be found on many war monuments in Germany. What do you think is the message behind the quote?

4 When you walked through the gate building and neighbouring access route, you would have seen in the middle of the cemetery a higher located stretch of grass, surrounded by engraved stones. However, this is not just a stretch of grass, what is it?

5 Stand in front of a grave and copy down all information on the headstone.
What strikes you about these graves as being different?

6 On the other side of the entrance wall there are bronze statues created by Emil Krieger. What do you think this group of statues represents?