VREDESSTAD IEPER

E



EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE

SCHOOL VISIT TO THE FRENCH CEMETERY SAINT-CHARLES-DE-POTYZE

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

School visit to the French Cemetery Saint-Charles-de-Potyze: Manual

In General

Saint-Charles-de-Potyze is the principal French military cemetery in Belgium. It is named after a first-aid station near the Potyze neighbourhood that was located in the nearby Sint-Karel school during the First Battle of Ypres (October – November 1914). The battle resulted in many casualties and they were all buried in this cemetery. In 1915, the French troops started to move away from the Ypres/Zonnebeke sector and a little later the cemetery found itself in the middle of the firing line. One by one the graves disappeared, so by the end of 1917 there was almost no trace of the cemetery left. From 1919, the cemetery was restored and many isolated graves that were found in the surrounding area were relocated to it. On 31st July 1920, the right to restitution came into force, so bodies could be transferred (this law was also adopted in Belgium in 1921). After 1924, the cemetery was further enlarged with the burial of non-resituated bodies – as a perpetual remembrance to the French presence near Ypres.

Note: During the war the French had a different way of dealing with their dead than the British. From 29th December 1915, a law on 'the individual and perpetual grave' entered into force. Before that date, the dead were buried in mass graves (fosse commune), common graves for a maximum of 100 people. Only officers were given individual graves. The bodies were buried weeks or even months after battles. This practice originated in the 1870 war. During the First World War, soldiers started digging and decorating individual graves themselves. Small cemeteries were often built near first-aid stations (as is this cemetery), which was rather close to the front. In these places an increasingly higher number of individual graves can be found, because soldiers arrived in these stations alone and often died there.



Most headstones are simple crosses made of white synthetic material, but Muslims and Jews have their own headstone type. At present, 4,209 Frenchmen are buried in Saint-Charles-de-Potyze, of whom 762 couldn't be identified. The mass grave holds 616 unknown soldiers, which is seven more than specified on the commemoration plaques. Most of the soldiers died in the winter of 1914 and their graves were regrouped in Potyze after the war. The modern Calvary at the entrance gate was made by Jean Freour, a French artist, and it refers to the many Bretons who fell in the Ypres region.

The cemetery is subdivided into 4 plots and there are 26 rows of headstones. Most of the first graves on the left and the right of the central lane are of officers. The perfect symmetry and the straight lines are remarkable, as if it were soldiers standing in a row. Contrary to the British cemeteries, there is little foliage, simply some rose bushes and hardly any other plants at all. The cemetery also has 69 Islamic and 2 Jewish graves.

The headstones have a plaque with the following information: name and first name(s), rank and unit, the text 'mort pour la France' (died for France) and the date of death.

Islamic Graves

There are 69 Muslim graves incorporating Algerian, Moroccan, Senegalese and Tunisian soldiers. Their headstones have the shape of a pointed horseshoe on which the arch has a crescent, a 5-pointed star and Arabic text. The crescent represents Islam. The 5-pointed start symbolises the 5 pillars of Islam: declaration of faith, the duty to pray 5 times a day, giving zakat, the annual charity, fasting in the month of Ramadan and performance of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The text is composed of two lines of engraved characters that are written and read from right to left. An Islamic teacher indicated the separate words: one in the first line, second in the second. In phonetics he wrote, 'Hataa Qabroe Almarchoem', which translates as 'This is the grave of the dead'. Traditionally, Muslims are buried in a parallel line with Mecca, but here the Muslim graves are just in rows, oriented towards the south-east.

Obviously, the French wanted to deploy in full their extended overseas colonial empire in the conflict and so 176,000 Algerian and 50,000 Tunisian soldiers were sent to the war. On the Western Front these overseas troops lost 36,000 men. On Belgian territory over 5,000 Africans fighting for France were killed. Also the Pieds-Noirs (Black-Feet), white French former colonists in Algeria, belonged to the overseas troops.

The Muslim graves in the cemetery have the following abbreviations:

RZ	Régiment de Zouaves (Regiment of Black-Feet)
RTA	Régiment de Tirailleurs Algériens (Regiment of Algerian tirailleurs or skirmishers)
RTT	Régiment de Tirailleurs Tunésiens (Regiment of Tunisian tirailleurs or skirmishers
RTS	Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Regiment of Senegalese tirailleurs or skirmishers)
RMZT	Régiment Mixte de Zouaves et Tirailleurs (Mixed regiment of Black-Feet and tirailleurs)
RMTA	Régiment de Marche de Tirailleurs Algériens (March regiment of Algerian tirailleurs)
RMTT	Régiment de Marche de Tirailleurs Tunésiens (March regiment of Tunisian tirailleurs)
RTI	Régiment de Tirailleurs indigènes (Regiment of Moroccan goumiers (= Indigènes) (later: Regiment of Moroccan tirailleurs)
RIMCM	Régiment d'Infanterie de Marche Coloniale du Maroc (Colonial march regiment of Moroccan infantry)





Dates
The dates on which the colonial soldiers died also matter.
In Saint-Charles-de-Potyze the dates can largely be divided in two main groups:

Casualties during October – November 1914
The First Battle of Ypres. The war started three months earlier and the front was stuck fast in the Ypres region. This was the origin of the Ypres Salient and it occurred when the armies began digging trenches. After one month of heavy fighting to occupy Ypres the front stabilised. During this period the trenches were poorly constructed and considered as 'very provisional'.

Casualties in April – May 1915
The Second Battle of Ypres. The battle started on 22nd April 1915 with the first gas attack in history. The German troops in the north of Ypres used gas to attack, amongst others, the French colonial troops. Soldiers that died on 22nd or 23rd April 1915 are very likely victims of that gas attack. In the following days the allied troops (Belgian, French, Northern African, Asian, British and Canadian armies) executed various counterattacks. After April 1915, the French armies (and their colonial troops) left the Ypres region. There are some Muslim graves from September 1914

Winter of 1914-1915. The French troops occupied the main part of the allied trenches in the Ypres Salient. It was a harsh winter with a great deal of rain and snow. There were not enough winter uniforms and supplies to go around and It must have been hell for the European soldiers, but even worse for the North African troops who were used to a warmer climate.

September 1915 and February - March 1916. In this period almost no French troops were stationed near Ypres.

One Muslim grave dates from May 1919, so post-war. This man possibly succumbed to his wounds, died because of the Spanish Influenza epidemic in 1918-1919, or in an explosion whilst cleaning up ammunition.

Three remarkable headstones
The cemetery has two flag posts. When entering from the main gate visitors discover the grave of Ali Ben Mohamed Ben Said - just past the left flag post, first grave. Ali Ben Mohamed Ben Said was a lieutenant in the 4th RTT (Regiment of Tunisian Tirailleurs) and died on 27th April 1915. The grave of the Tunisian lieutenant is in the central lane. It is remarkable that the officers in this cemetery were buried in the middle lane leading to the mass grave.

27th April 1915 was shortly after the first German gas attack on 22nd April 1915. That day, many soldiers from the French colonial troops were killed. On 27th April, Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian, French, Asian, Canadian and British troops executed an allied counterattack about 2 km (1.2 miles) north of the Saint-Charles-de-Potyze cemetery. During this attack the German armies opened their gas bottles for a second time and the French overseas troops were seriously affected.

The right plot, against the mass grave, has the Jewish headstone of Léon Félix Lévy, captain in the St Colonial March Regiment of Moroccan Infantry. Being an Algerian Jew he was commanding officer of a Moroccan unit in which most of the men were obviously Muslims. He also died during the Second Battle of Ypres, 30th April 1915.

Again, in the right plot, the last grave in a row is the grave of François Metzinger (grave number 2562 bis). This soldier belonged to the 3rd Black Feet of the Army of Africa and was only buried here on 5th October 1999. On 2nd July 1998, amateur archaeologists working near Boezinge found his remains, along with those of three other French soldiers. François Metzinger died there at some point between 28th April and 24th May 1915. For his date of death the cross indicates 21st May 1915, but the reason why this date was chosen is unknown. It is extremely rare that human remains can be identified after so many years. Thanks to the identification plate found on his body, it was known that the soldier Metzinger belonged to class 1900 and was stationed in Constantine, in the north of Algeria.

Worksheet
Visit to the French military cemetery of St-Charles-de-Potyze

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

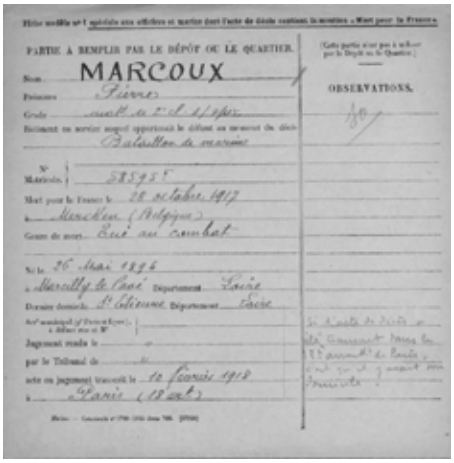
Pleasant – colourful – proud – cheerful – attractive – serene – oppressive – sad – depressing – touching – inspiring – threatening – cheerless – dark – scary

2 Compared to a British cemetery there are some obvious differences.
What are they?

3 How many people are buried here?

4 The pictures show the index card and original grave of Pierre Marcoux. After the war, his body was transferred to this cemetery. Use the cemetery register to find the actual grave of Pierre Marcoux and copy down all the information written on his headstone.





5 *"Later, when it will be all over, Belgian and French women will come to pray at the flowered graves of their fallen men and sons; but who will ever kneel down at the abandoned grave of Mohammed or Ibrahim in this Flemish burial ground?"*

(Free translation from: Van een verloren zomer (1917) Cyriel Buysse)

69 Muslims were buried in this cemetery.
How can you recognize their graves?

Stand in front of a Muslim grave and copy down all the information on the headstone.

Besides Muslims, the cemetery also contains men with other religious beliefs. Can you tell which religions are represented?

6 In France, It was on 29 December 1915 that a law on individual and perpetual graves first came into force. Before that, men were mostly buried in mass graves. What consequences did this law imply for the surviving relatives?