

From Battlegrounds to Burial Grounds – The Cemetery Landscapes of the German Army during the Second World War

Nina Janz

Introduction

What is left after 70 years after the end of the Second World War? Traces are barely visible in Europe. Cities have been rebuilt, former battlefields reconstructed or reclaimed by nature. The burial grounds symbolize the last witnesses of the war in Central Europe and show the senseless mass death and the violence of the Second World War.

This chapter highlights the complex interplay between geography, war and the interpretation for national memory and propaganda. The example of a burial ground for German fallen soldiers in France demonstrates the use and abuse, of geography for ideological purposes, the commemoration of the German military dead at burial grounds during the Second World War.

Burial Grounds

But first of all, it must be clarified what a burial ground, or a cemetery means: A burial ground fulfills two functions: mourning and remembrance. But what about a resting place of a soldier? The burial rituals and places as well as the treatment of the fallen soldiers in society and nations can tell a lot about the war's intention and justifications. Were the burial grounds taken

care of, have they been prepared or destroyed and desecrated? The graves and cemeteries of soldiers show the national collective memory and therefore give a pattern for the identity and justifications of the war and death.

To bury soldiers is a phenomenon of the 19th century. In the Middle Ages and early modern times it was common after a battle to bury the dead anonymously in mass graves or simply to leave the corpses on the battlefield.¹ Due to the progress in hygiene² and the ideas of Humanism, and from the French Revolution ideas of individuality and equality, the common soldier “deserved” a single grave.³ The soldier by his effort to fight and to die for example for the king, for the Fatherland, for freedom etc., “earned” the respect, the recognition and the glory in society and politics. The soldier became “worthy to be remembered”.⁴ An individual soldier was a part of the official commemoration, and he deserved an individual grave and resting place. During the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), the first military cemeteries in the USA were constructed.⁵ However, in Europe the First World War made a reaction to the mass death necessary. Commissions and military experts worked on plans for systematic burial grounds and cemeteries for the millions of fallen soldiers.⁶ In addition, the experiences of the Great War could be used in the next war, the Second World War.

Besides the necessity of constructing military cemeteries, resting places for soldiers were also defined in international treaties and conventions. The preservation of every single grave was fixed in

¹Reiner Sörries, ed., *Großes Lexikon der Bestattungs- und Friedhofskultur: Wörterbuch zur Sepulchralkultur*:

Volkskundlich-kulturgeschichtlicher, Teil: Abdankung bis Zweitbestattung (Braunschweig: Thalacker-Medien, 2002), 107.

²George Mosse, *Soldatenfriedhöfe und nationale Wiedergeburt: Der Gefallenenkult in Deutschland* in *Kriegserlebnis: Der Erste Weltkrieg in der literarischen Gestaltung und symbolischen Deutung der Nationen*, ed. Klaus Vondung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980), 249.

³George Mosse, *Gefallen für das Vaterland: Nationales Heldentum und namenloses Sterben* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993), 48.

⁴Insa Eschbach, *Öffentliches Gedenken: Deutsche Erinnerungskulturen seit der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005), 29.

⁵Mosse, “Soldatenfriedhöfe“, 284.

⁶Mosse, “Gefallen für das Vaterland“, 13.

the Versailles Treaty in 1919⁷ and the Geneva Conventions of 1929⁸. The burial grounds were recognized as worthy places. This special protection is still valid for the burial grounds for those who were killed in action.

The deep respect for the soldier graves promised that the death at the front would not be an anonymous mass death. On the contrary, the soldiers' death on the burial ground creates a sense of meaning and a place of memory.

Military War Graves Commission and Practice

The Wehrmacht organized after the attack on Poland its own office for the missing and fallen soldiers.⁹ Every unit and command nominated an officer who was responsible for the care of the dead and the forwarding of the notification about the dead soldier. Beside these grave officers, the High Command of the Wehrmacht (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) established War Grave Office respectively Commission with professional War Grave officers (Wehrmachtgräberoffiziere). These Officers worked in the Department of the Losses of the Wehrmacht (Abteilung Wehrmachtverlustwesen) at the General Wehrmacht Department (Allgemeines Wehrmachtamt). They advised the generals and the commands concerning burial and grave questions. Every unit and command nominated an officer who was responsible for the care of the dead and for forwarding a

⁷Article. VI, sect. II Versailles Treaty, by 16 July 1919, Reichsgesetzblatt (RGBl.) 1919, 637.

⁸The Hague Conventions by 1899 and 1907 consisted of rules to establish offices for the missing and fallen soldiers, first of all for the POW's (see Hague Convention, 18 October 1907). The Geneva Convention negotiated the treatment and the identification of the dead and the wounded (see Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 27 July 1929). Every war party obliged to take care of the wounded, to register and bury the dead. They had to establish a Grave Office Commission. After the end of a war the parties exchanged the records of the dead and the POW's.

⁹“Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle für Kriegerverluste und Kriegsgefangene (WASSt)” (Art. 7 Geneva Convention of 1929), see RGBl. II 1934, 207, an office for the graves records was included, see Report WASSt, 7 October 1939, German Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv Freiburg (henceforth BArch MArch) RW 48/8 and the Department of the Losses at the General Office of the High Command.

note of the dead soldier to the higher unit and the families of the soldiers.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-217-0498-26
Foto: Dieck 1. August 1942

A burial ritual for a fallen German officer, close to Stalingrad/Russia, August 1943. This proper burial (with a pastor – the soldier with a cross round his neck, a coffin and a delegation) could not be provided for every soldier. German Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BArchK) Bild 101I-217-0498-26

Military Burial Rituals of the Wehrmacht

To understand the meaning and importance of the geographical sites for the Wehrmacht hero cult, it is necessary to take a look at the burial practice of the German troops during the war. In emergency cases, for example if the troops had to move on quickly, graves in fields could possibly be found, next to roads, or even at city entrances. But there were none to be found in shell holes, ditches, or in the middle of forests, riversides and swamps. The grave had to be 1 to 2 meters deep and the dead should be put to rest in coffins, if possible. However, in any case, they were supposed to be buried in a single grave, not in mass graves.¹⁰

¹⁰Guidelines for the Troops for Burial and Graves, (BArch MArch) RW 6/522.

Snow graves had to be avoided as well as memorial graves, for example for missed soldiers or if the corpses could not be recovered (crews of submarines, crashed airplanes or burned bodies).

The grave signs had to contain a permanent label with first and last name, the military rank, birth date and the date of death, the military postal code or the number of the unit. The lettering of the unit or the military postal code were forbidden later, because if the enemy would progress in the field, he would notice which units had been there already or which troop had lost many men.¹¹ If a soldier could not be identified, his grave was signed with “unknown German soldier”. Nevertheless, a grave had to be marked in some way. If a cross was not possible to make, a wooden peg should be used with the soldier’s steel helmet on top. The soldiers who buried their fallen comrades or the official grave officer had to take a picture of the burial ground and send it to the dead’s family.¹² It was not possible to have the same burial rituals in the field as during times of peace at home. Nevertheless, the Wehrmacht’s soldiers were always buried with the “last military honor”.¹³

In periods of peace a musical corps, a bearer of the orders/medals pad, the coffin and the wreath were stable parts of the “mourning parade” (Trauerparade). The coffin was covered with the war flag of the Third Reich and a delegation of the fallen soldier’s unit escorted the coffin. When it arrived, the soldiers saluted, the drummers of the music corps played a Marche while the musicians played a choral, the soldiers saluted again and a triple gun salute was fired.¹⁴ These festive burial rituals had been overridden during the war.¹⁵

¹¹General Army Notifications, no. 182, 22 March 1943, (BArch MArch) RH 13/17.

¹²Regulations for the Military Grave Service, (BArch MArch) RW 6/182.

¹³Army Service Regulation (HDv 131).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Army Notifications (HM 1940, No. 8.).

During war, only the bearers for the coffin, the orders pad and the wreath had to be provided. But if a coffin was not possible to obtain, the body had to be at least covered in a sleeping bag.¹⁶

The “last military honor” within the salutation and the gun salves was essential during burial rituals of the Wehrmacht.¹⁷

Before the burial, the second part of the identification tag – the one every soldier wore around his neck at all times - had to be broken up. The bottom part was taken by the soldier, who was burying the dead, the second half of the tag stayed with the remains to identify the fallen later at exhumations or re-burying at greater cemeteries. If the tag was missing, the personal information, including an ID for example had to be copied. If an ID was also lost, the characteristics of the teeth had to be copied as well.¹⁸

The burying of the German soldiers was a duty to every other soldier in the Wehrmacht.¹⁹ The officials of the Wehrmacht complained about the lack of volunteers of the German soldiers, to bury their comrades or to recover the bodies out of battle fields or mined areas.²⁰ They even used civilian women and children, prisoners of war and forced laborers, at the risk of their lives, to bury soldiers and to dig graves.

Prisoners of War

Concerning the Geneva Conventions, the burials of captured enemy soldiers had to be taken care of as well. For the prisoners of war in German captivity, a distinction had been made by race and nation: soldiers from western countries, such as Great Britain, France and the U.S., were buried according to a

¹⁶General Army Notifications (Copy), 8 February 1943, (BArch MArch) RW 6/522.

¹⁷Army Notifications (HM 1940, No. 8.).

¹⁸Guidelines for the Troops for Burial and Graves, (BArch MArch) RW 6/522.

¹⁹The Wehrmacht called it “the duty of honor”, to bury the comrades was like an implicitness, see Instructions for the Military Grave Service, 30 March 1942, (BArch MArch) RW 6/182, fol. 47.

²⁰Report of a war grave officer from an operation in the East, (BArch MArch) RW 6/519, fol. 14.

Christian ritual, with a pastor and a military delegation (in prisons of war camps the captured comrades from the same country). They were provided with a grave, a grave sign and a wreath.

However, the Wehrmacht ordered to treat soldiers from Poland and especially from the Soviet Union differently because of their nationality: a burial for these kinds of enemy soldiers had to exclude a pastor, a wreath and there were no military honors or salutations at all.²¹ The discrimination of the prisoners of war, especially of these from the Soviet Union, continued by the Wehrmacht even in the treatment of the dead.

The Wehrmacht Burial grounds as “Groves of Honor”

Germany’s fallen soldiers were buried immediately in the lands where they fell, close to the battlefields.²² A transfer of the body home to Germany was due to logistical and sanitary aspects not possible.²³ In principle, deceased soldiers were to rest in German military cemeteries, separate from those of allied nations and especially from the enemies, but at least be buried in Christian cemeteries, close to churches, etc., and in individual graves, not mass graves.

According to the vision of Hitler and his generals, the dead were to rest, in the words of the Wehrmacht, in “Kriegerfriedhöfe” (warrior-cemeteries) and “Ehrenhaine” (groves of honor). These cemeteries were supposed to be simple and dignified.²⁴

²¹Order of the Garrison in Saarburg, 11 November 1943, (BArch MArch) RH 55/69.

²²The eternal resting right for graves was established in Europe after the First World War according to the Versailles Treaty (see Art. VI, Sect. II Versailles Treaty by 16 July 1919, Reichsgesetzblatt (RGBl.) 1919, 637). This rule regulated the warranty of an eternal grave for war casualties, such as soldiers and civilians (died as combatants). After the German-French War 1870/71 a similar agreement was made: every site had to respect the enemies’ graves (Sörries, “Bestattungs- und Friedhofskultur”, 107).

²³ Regulations concerning the transfer of the remains OKW/AWA to WVW, 13 November, (BArch MArch) RW 6/182, fol. 6.

²⁴Original in German: “Schlicht“ and “Würde“, OKW to (architect) Generalbaurat Kreis, 10 September 1941, (BArch MArch) RH 13/21.

Construction and design guidelines drawn up by the Military War Graves Commission for these “Kriegerfriedhöfe” reached every unit in all parts of Europe and North Africa. The military devoted enormous resources to the planning and construction of these memorials. Soldiers invested time, materials and labor to transform the local geography into *sacred sites of German heroism*. After battle, units built gigantic cemeteries for fallen comrades. These cemeteries were supposed to be “scenically beautiful”,²⁵ located close to important battlefields, on top of the hills or in groves. They were intended to remind visitors of the “battle for Greater Germany” and serve as national holy places. The units could send plans to the Military War Graves Commission. Every proposed resting place had a profile (including a sort of check-list) with information about soil texture, infrastructure, possibilities for accommodation for future visitors and the location’s war-historical significance.²⁶ Every design was to be submitted to Hitler directly, as he had to make the final decision about layout and geographical position.²⁷ Not only the burial grounds, but also the surroundings, the landscapes were an important part of the “heroic” landscapes. The topography was repurposed,²⁸ and put into a “scenery” for the dead.²⁹ Starting with the grave designs, here the German Eagle or the Iron Cross, until guidelines for special plants.³⁰ The

²⁵Instructions for the Military War Grave Service, OKW, AWA/W Allg IV a, 2 September 1940, (BArch MArch) RH 13/16.

²⁶Commander of the 6th Army to OKH, Heereswesen-Abt b Gen zbV b OKH, 27 May 1943, Profile (Stammrolle) for the “Ehrenfriedhof” in Tripolje, Kanew and Bila-Cerkwa, (BArch MArch) RH 13/35.

²⁷OKW, AWA to OKH, Abt. General zbV concerning planning of the cemeteries, 13 December 1940, (BArch MArch) RH 13/20.

²⁸Gunnar Brands, From World War I Cemeteries to the Nazi “Fortresses of the Dead”: Architecture, Heroic Landscape, and the Quest for National Identity in Germany”, in *Places of Commemoration: Search for Identity and Landscape Design* (Washington, D.C.: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 245.

²⁹Gunnar Brands, Bekenntnisse eines Angepassten: Der Architekt Wilhelm Kreis als Generalbaurat für die Gestaltung der deutschen Kriegerfriedhöfe, in *Architektur und Ingenieurwesen zur Zeit der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft, 1933-1945*, ed. Ulrich Kuder, (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 1997), 134.

³⁰For example Merkblatt über die Wehrmacht-Gräberfürsorge, OKW, AWA/W Allg IV a, 2 September 1940, (BArch MArch) RH 13/16.

architects used for examples oaks, which are considered to be an Germanic symbol.³¹ With the planting of trees the responsible repeated the idea of the “groves”.³² The oak was taken to represent supposed old German virtues, like “courage” and “loyalty”.³³ The burial grounds had to look “German”. Every non soldierly aspect should be erased.³⁴ The most of these monuments lied in foreign countries and even the homeland was so far, these cemeteries had to look “German”, even in the south Russian steppe and the North African desert, to symbolized a piece of the homeland. The burial grounds with German symbols and designs, such as the oak tree, built a bridge to the homeland³⁵ and represented a domestic home soil. The Landscape was a part of the identity.³⁶ The cemeteries were not intended to give the appearance of normal cemeteries, where dead bodies were buried. The dead occupied the land, where they lay³⁷ and symbolically fortified the front line.³⁸ The nationalists and conservatives and also the Nazis saw the nature as an inspiration.³⁹ They were inspired by the geographical space concept and the Blood and Soil theory or the Lebensraum concept (ideology of ethnicity and race).⁴⁰ These ideas were not created for the first time during the Second Word War but have been around for more than 20 years in constructing soldier cemeteries of the First World War. The architecture emphasized

³¹Meinhold Lurz, “... ein Stück Heimat in Fremder Erde“: Heldenhaine und Totenburgen des Volksbunds Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, in *ARCH+ 71: Architekten für den Frieden – Architekturen für den Krieg?* (1983), 66.

³²The term “Groves of honor” was already used for soldier cemeteries during the First World War. The Wehrmacht followed the tradition of the heroic memorials and adapted the term for the burial grounds of the Second World War. More about the cemeteries of the First World War, see Meinhold Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland*, vol. 3 *Erster Weltkrieg* (Heidelberg: Esprint-Verlag, 1995).

³³Lurz, “Heldenhaine und Totenburgen,” 66.

³⁴Brands, “Architekt Wilhelm Kreis“, 131.

³⁵Monika Kuberek, *Langemark: Ein Soldatenfriedhof des VdK*, (M.A. thesis, University of Marburg, 1987).

³⁶Christian Fuhrmeister, *Beton, Klinker, Granit: Die politische Bedeutung des Materials von Denkmälern in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Verlag Bauwesen, 2001), 120.

³⁷*Ibid*, 130.

³⁸*Ibid*, 20.

³⁹*Ibid*, 89.

⁴⁰Christian Fuhrmeister, “Die unsterbliche Landschaft, der Raum des Reiches und die Toten der Nation: Die Totenburgen Bitoli (1936) und Quero (1939) als strategische Memorialarchitektur“, in *kritische berichte* 2 (2001), 63.

heroism and German nationalism in spite of the German defeat.⁴¹

The constructed so called “castles” or “fortresses of the dead” should reflect the power and strength of Germany,⁴² according to the visions of the architects and the War Grave Commission⁴³ The burial grounds for the fallen of the First World War symbolized the upraising cult of the fallen soldier,⁴⁴ in which the national socialists used propaganda for their own purposes and to create the need and the justification of the following war, the Second World War.



In rank and file – the cemetery of the 16th Army in Loknja/Russia, 1943 with 700 graves and space for 6000-8000 graves.

BArch MArch RH 13/35

⁴¹David Livingstone, *Remembering on Foreign Soil: The Activities of the German War Graves Commission*, in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. Bill Niven (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 69.

⁴²Fuhrmeister, “Klatschmohn”, 132.

⁴³The Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. (German War Grave Commission) was established in 1919. The Volksbund supported during the 1920ies and 1930ies conservative and right-wing groups. The organization shared the opinion of a revanchist myth concerning the dead German soldiers.

⁴⁴Livingstone, “Remembering on Foreign Soil”, 69.

The burial grounds were intended to present a military image, to show the virtues of order, simplicity, and comradeship. The graves were ordered in lines, to symbolize soldiers on parade. The army's guidelines prescribed a strict system for the construction of graves and burial markers, which in most cases consisted of a simple wooden cross. Every grave and every cross was supposed to look the same. The exemplary grave sign showed the German Iron Cross and the Swastika in the middle. This sign "marked" the soldiers as a member of Hitler's national socialist Army. The crosses for each of the soldiers were to have exactly the same height, and the Wehrmacht even designed special grave markers for Muslims and Buddhists. It even respected their religious traditions: Muslims were buried with their head towards East. And even cremations were considered for Indian prisoners of war (fighting for the British).⁴⁵ These cemeteries were constructed as special separate military areas, but they were not designed like *groves*. Groves were associated with old Germanic holy places and the Nazis connected them to legends and the mythical glorious past of the old German Reich. Soldiers who committed suicide or were executed also received single graves; however, they were deliberately buried on the margins of the cemetery. Prisoners of war received graves on special cemeteries for prisoners, which were kept separate from the German resting places. The desecration and destruction of these places by anyone was, according to the Wehrmacht, punishable by death.⁴⁶

The Soldier's Castle and the Hill of the Death

⁴⁵Instructions concerning Burial of Prisoners of War, 5 November 1944, (BArch MArch) RW 6/182.

⁴⁶Leaflet regarding grave registration, no date, (BArch MArch) RW 6/522.

To design these ideas Hitler nominated a special architect, Wilhelm Kreis, to develop “groves of honor” and “warrior cemeteries.”⁴⁷ He oriented his designs on the Castel del Monte in Italy and the Acropolis in Athens.⁴⁸

Kreis named his biggest draft “Soldier’s Castle”, close to Warsaw and the memorial of “honor” in Russia, at the river Dnjepr, from 1943. The Soldier’s Castle looks like a Fortress from the Middle Ages and the memorial at the river Dnjepr shows similarities with the Germanic traditional “Hill of the Dead”. This hill should be 130 m high.⁴⁹ His intention was to create an iconography of war and fighting instead of sad mourning sites which showed the pain and violence soldiers endured.⁵⁰ The connection between the supposed glorious Germanic past and Hitler’s fallen soldiers put them into the same line like the legend warriors of the Walhalla.

Birches instead of Oaks - War and Reality

As the number of dead increased, the grave officers were unable to bury every soldier “with dignity” in a single grave, note the location and send a letter to the family as regulations called for. The units encountered great difficulties as they attempted to give the fallen proper burials. They often did not have enough time during battles to recover the corpses, and environmental conditions, especially the harsh Russian winters, often made it impossible to dig graves in the first place. Consequently, not every fallen soldier could be bed into heroic grove of honor, like Hitler and his architect wished for. Many grave registration documents were lost due to battles; graves were destroyed both by nature and enemy combatants. Due to the fierce fighting,

⁴⁷Letter from OKW, AWA/WVW II a to OKH, 13 May 1941, (BArch MArch) RH 13/28.

⁴⁸Brands, “Architekt Wilhelm Kreis“, 139.

⁴⁹Meinhold Lurz, Kriegerdenkmalsentwürfe von Wilhelm Kreis, in *Dekoration der Gewalt*, ed. Berthold Hinz (Gießen: Anabas, 1979), 192.

⁵⁰Brands, “Architekt Wilhelm Kreis“, 142

existing cemeteries had to be expanded and new, larger ones added.⁵¹ In anticipation of difficult forthcoming battles with many losses, the units reacted by digging new graves even before the fighting began.⁵² Some burial grounds got also lost, if the graves were dug too flat and rain floods washed them away or animals tried to eat it.⁵³

The dead were buried in their uniform, boots included. But at the end of war due to the deficit of warm clothes and good quality of uniforms and especially boots, the order appeared, that as if the dead bodies had to be freed of their boots and useful uniforms to send the uniform pieces back to the troops.⁵⁴ Due to the lack of time the mandatory picture of the grave could not be taken. Some family members wrote directly to the commander of the unit or the grave officer and asked for it.⁵⁵

From 1942 onwards, the Military War Graves Commission concentrated more on the Eastern Front, which was the site of the vast majority of German casualties.⁵⁶ Scholars do not know for certain how many cemeteries the Wehrmacht and the grave officers built over the six years of war, but it is estimated that the number exceeds 10.000.

Kreis had to adjust his designs to the war reality and the increasing losses of the Wehrmacht.⁵⁷ During the war the drafts and plans for burial grounds became more appropriate: the troops used simple wooden crosses, and birches, the native tree in Russia, instead of the "German" oak. Wilhelm Kreis were never realized the Soldier's Castle. The most of the graves laid spreaded somewhere on the battlefield in whole Europe.

⁵¹As per § 10, 25 Reichsleistungsgesetz of 1 September 1939, see RGBL. I 1939, 1645.

⁵²Rules no. 21 by Military War Graves Commission, 22 September 1942, (BArch MArch) RW 6/517, fol. 219.

⁵³War Diary of the grave officer of the 6th Mountain-Division, 6 October 1944, (BArch MArch) RH 28-6/69.

⁵⁴General Army Notifications, 8 February 1943, (BArch MArch) RW 6/522.,

⁵⁵General Report of the grave officer, (BArch MArch) RH 26-15/101.

⁵⁶Letter sent to every grave officer, 25 April 1942, (BArch MArch) RW 6/517, fol. 184.

⁵⁷Brands, „Architekt Wilhelm Kreis“, 140.



Grave of a German Soldier in Russia, summer 1941

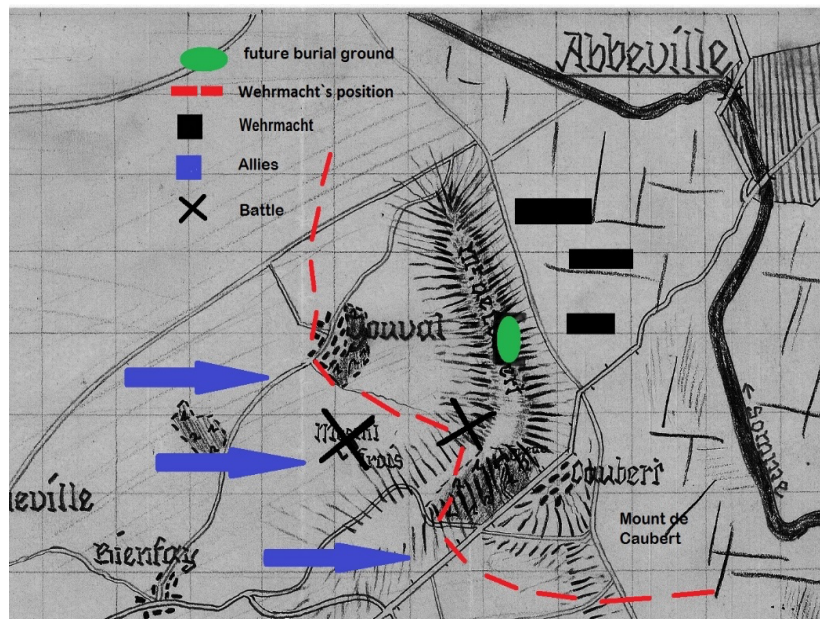
This simple grave out of the native birches in Russia does not correspond to the visions of Hitler and his architects of an “eternal grove of honor”. These kind of graves were the most common for the fallen German soldiers (BArchK) Bild 101I-535-0084-11

From a Battleground to a Burial Ground – the Cemetery of “Honor” in Abbeville, France

An example shows the Wehrmacht's intention in the construction and planning of eternal resting places and the transformation of a battlefield to a burial ground.

The Second World War offered many different fields and regions of fighting. Let's have a look to France: The German French campaign in 1940 took place mainly on French territory. The fighting happened in the northern parts at the beginning of the invasion. The battles in the Somme region took also place in the little town of Abbeville, at the river Somme. From 28th May to 4th June 1940, a battle between the French (supported by the British) and the German took place. Also, an Infantry-Division took place close to the French town between forests, the river

and the hill of Caubert.⁵⁸ The German aim was to defend the bridge of the river Somme. At the beginning, the allies were able to protect the bridge, but then the Wehrmacht troops were able to push forward through the French lines. Nearly two weeks later France surrendered, on 22nd June 1940.⁵⁹



The Battle of Abbeville

This map shows the movements of the allies, the position of the Wehrmacht and the battles close to Mount of Caubert, the forests and the river Somme. (BArch MArch) RH 13/30, map of the 57th Infantry division (original map for the location of the planned burial ground), with additions by Nina Janz (based on: Karl-Horst Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005))

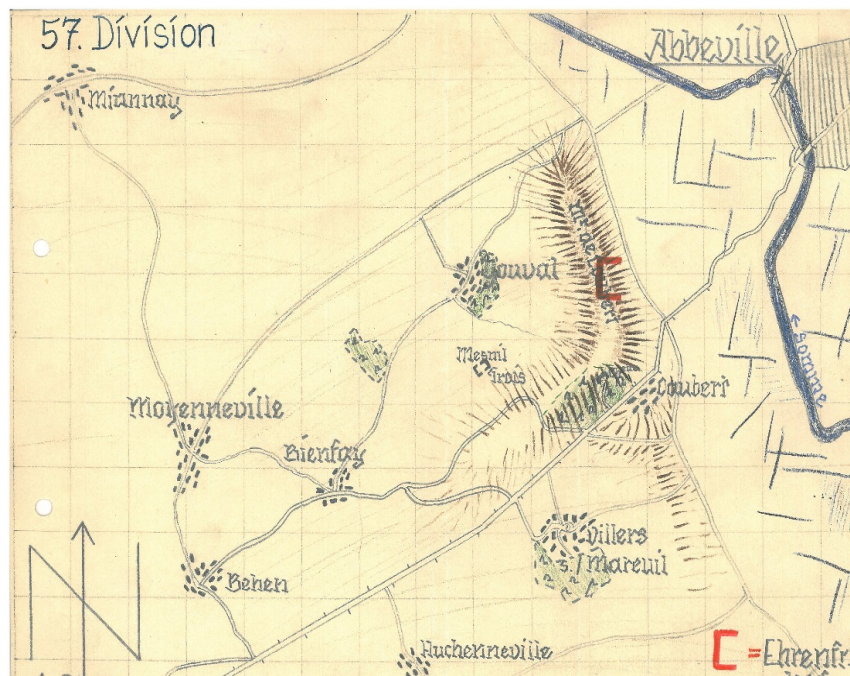
This battle was not a crucial fight in the invasion in France. The German Army found other ways to get over the Somme, (see Battle of Amiens) but in the end of this battle which took place over the course of eight days, the allies lost 200 men and the German 57th Infantry division lost around 1.200 soldiers.⁶⁰ After

⁵⁸Karl-Horst Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 274.

⁵⁹See Hermann Böhme, *Der deutsch-französische Waffenstillstand im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Entstehung und Grundlagen des Waffenstillstandes von 1940* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1966).

⁶⁰Check list of the proposal, (BArch MArch) RH 13/30.

the signing of the Armistice of Compiegne, the establishment of an occupation system, the German infantry division planned the cemetery for those killed in action close to the town of Abbeville. Just 7 months after the Battle of Abbeville, the superordinate unit of the 57th Infantry division, the XXVIIIth Army Corps sent the cemetery proposal for the 1.200 dead German soldiers to the 4th Army Command. The planned resting place of honor was supposed to be built on the top of the hill Caubert, in the south of the city Abbeville.



The Cemetery of "Honor" of the 57th Infantry division.

The marked (red) point is the planned burial ground for about 1200 men.

(BArch MArch) RH 13/30, map of the 57th Infantry division

The army found that Mount de Caubert would offer a view of the battlefield and the fighting area into the Somme valley. This cemetery was supposed to be the final resting place, not only for the 57th Infantry division,⁶¹ but also for the German soldiers who

⁶¹ Also for the dead of IInd and XVth Army Corps, concerning the constructing of cemeteries of honor, General Command of XXVIIIth Army Corps to Army High Command 4, 1 November 1940, (BArch MArch) RH 13/30.

had fallen in war in this region. The proposal of the 57th Infantry division described the reason why this burial ground should be built exactly in this place: This Mont de Caubert was the hotspot of the defense and the main starting point for the attack of the 5th of June 1940. The battle over the bridge head of Abbeville emphasized the breakthrough of the “Weygand line” at the 5th of June and shows the military policy of the war situation. This paper further described the importance for the next generations: The place of this victorious battle of the Wehrmacht should become an educational site for the youth and the junior soldiers of the Wehrmacht in future, so that they can remember the fallen “warriors” of Abbeville.⁶² The number of fallen soldiers does not play a role when deciding whether to build a bigger cemetery or not; but rather the importance of a battle field, as justified in the proposal.⁶³ Further the proposal of the 57th Infantry division contained a check list concerning the technical details, such as accessibility (for family members, tourist groups etc.) and accommodation. A memorial should be built then at the cemetery.⁶⁴ The military importance of the battlefield of Abbeville was emphasized in the words of the Wehrmacht commander: The achievement of the city of Abbeville “crowned” the first part of the campaign in the West and the breakthrough to the English Channel. The name Abbeville would already go down in history. This significance of this battle which took place over a period of twelve days, justified the constructing of a burial ground “of honor”, from the perspective of the Wehrmacht.⁶⁵ The High Command of the Army (OKH) authorized the proposal provisory with the permission of Hitler on 12th of June 1942.⁶⁶

⁶²57th Infantry division to General Command of IInd Army Corps, Proposal for the cemetery Abbeville, 25 November 1940, (BArch MArch) RH 13/30.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Check list of the proposal, (BArch MArch) RH 13/30.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶OKH, Army Department of General zbV to Army High Command 4, 12 June 1942, (BArch MArch) RH 13/30.

The description of the soldier cemetery at the Mount of Caubert incorporates the ideas of an “eternal resting places” for Hitler’s warriors. The embedding of the cemetery in the landscapes, between the forest and the river, symbolized perfectly the heroic topography during the Second World War. The groves and the proximity to the river Somme symbolize the ideal, untouched and unspoiled nature for the *glorious* fighter for the ideals of national socialism. The natural landscape should create a bridge to Germanic cult and the *heroic* ancestors. The location on top of the Mount de Caubert offers a view over the valley, the river and the city of Abbeville. This view for the living, for examples visitors, and the dead also shows the achievement of the fighting and a meaning for their death. Not only the living should see their efforts of their fulfilled duty for *Greater Germany*, but also they themselves should see it. Even in their death, they should be proud of their contribution. Besides this, the location on top of the hill should also show the victory of German’s Wehrmacht over France, especially for the French local population to see. The cemetery on the Mount de Caubert towered above Abbeville and the French, to remind the locals of Germany’s power and lordship in this country. The geographical point was turned from a bloody earth, where men were killed, endured pain and fear, into an ideological point to symbolize heroism, nationalism and domination.

The battlefield of Abbeville became a burial ground for the German dead “warriors”. The cemetery was probably built and finished during the war. After 1945, the German fallen soldiers were reburied from the smaller cemeteries of the Wehrmacht to bigger collecting resting places. The dead of Abbeville found their last resting place at the war cemetery in Bourdon, ca. 25 km southerly of the town.⁶⁷

⁶⁷Profile of the war grave cemetery in Bourdon/France, <http://www.volksbund.de/kriegsgraeberstaette/bourdon.html> (Last access, 17 October 2015).

From Heroic Symbols to Places of Mourning – The Burial Grounds of the Wehrmacht in the After War Period

After the war the Wehrmacht was defeated, the German soldiers captured and disarmed and the graves of the dead scattered in whole of Europe. The so called “war graves” (means graves of soldiers, and also of women and children, killed for example by bombing raids), were still protected by the eternal resting law, like the Geneva Convention.⁶⁸ The signed states in Europe were obliged to take care of the graves at their territory, even the enemies’ graves. Germany concluded a special agreement concerning the preserving and protection of the German graves abroad.⁶⁹

At the burial grounds the swastika disappeared. After the war, Hitler’s interpretation for the fallen soldiers as heroes and warriors did not exist anymore. The German soldiers did not die for a holy reason, how it was propagandized propagated during the war. Rather, Germany was defeated and confronted with the crimes and guilt. The defeated Germany could not celebrated their soldiers as heroes, they mourned about their fate, their lives and their losses. The warriors became to victims of the senselessness of the war.⁷⁰

No memorials, propaganda or victory parades were possible any more. In addition, the cemeteries turned into places of mourning, instead of heroism. The design and the architecture resembled more the image of the victims. Symbols of glory were denied, and grey and simple gravestones were used instead. The image of the victim dominated the burial grounds: the grief and pain of the German people turned into the main focus. Golden altar and

⁶⁸See footnote 8.

⁶⁹ The first agreement was signed with France in 1954, with Russia in 1992. See Will Kammerer, *Dienst am Menschen, Dienst am Frieden* (Gütersloh: Mohndruck, 1994), 90.

⁷⁰ Gilad Margalit, *Guilt, suffering, and memory: Germany remembers its dead of World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.), 53.

obelisk, like the soviet war cemeteries, were not wanted. The graveyards were created much simpler, contain Christian symbols and chapels.

During the centuries after the war, the soldiers' resting place remained a place of grief. Parents, children and spouses came to their graves to mourn and say good bye. The burial grounds performed its original function: a place of personal mourning. This message became a symbol for millions of burial grounds of the Second World War.

Conclusion

Geographical sites could be interpreted in different ways – depending on which meaning was needed. The burial ground in Abbeville is a symbol of Germany's cult for the fallen soldiers and their trying to create a connection to the Germanic legends and the past. It also stands for their trying to find a higher purpose, a God willing reason for the death of millions of soldiers in the Second World War. The introduced ideas and influences of the national socialists and architects such as Wilhelm Kreis, were used to create a memory of the fallen soldiers and a justification for their death in the ideology of state, party and army.

The cemetery "of honor" was superimposed by nature and the former battlefield was seen as an probably mythic Germanic place for Hitler's *heroes*.

Additionally, a sign was constructed for the French city of Abbeville, which was visible from a great distance: A sign and simultaneously a symbol for the German domination for Germans ruling over the French. The burial ground on top of the hill reflected not only a nice view for the visitors or Sunday walkers, but also resembled means the seizure of the French

territory by the Germans. Thus, the visible cemetery should symbolize Germany's power and strength.

The cemetery, with its guidelines, symbols and design should also be a form of comforting measure for the other soldiers. This way, they experienced how their comrades were taken care of, that they got a dignified grave, the honor and a place in the national commemoration of the German people and the Wehrmacht. They knew, if they would die, they would also *deserve* a soldier grave under oak trees or a burial ground in groves. The efforts in constructing the cemeteries convinced the soldiers to believe in being a member of a *holy* and special community, the Wehrmacht. The killed partisans, civilians and Jews did not receive a grave in a *grove of honor*, as the German soldiers did. This practice and the feeling to be *special* gave the soldiers, a feeling of stability and comfort in spite of the deathly fear and suffering at the front.

The cemeteries also fulfilled psychological aspects in the inside of the Wehrmacht. The Iron Cross and the Swastika as grave signs marked the soldiers as eternal members of the national socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*, the community of people.

The national socialists used the geography as symbols of their ideology, their sign for domination and power and to create an eternal memorial for themselves and their *warriors*, who fought for a *Greater Germany*.

The burial grounds of the fallen soldiers from the First World War and the recent heroes of the Second World War symbolized *sacred German soil* and a place of pilgrimage to honor the dead. They were intended to remind visitors of the *battle for Greater Germany* and serve as national holy places.

Soldiers invested time, material resources and labor to transform the local geography into *sacred sites of German heroism*. The Wehrmacht used geographical sites to connect heroic Nazi history with battlefield landscapes and give provide a concrete

form to their ideology, furthering the myth of sacrifice for the Fatherland. The Wehrmacht also used grave designs and cemeteries to actualize the racist-nationalist values of the Nazi regime: every German soldier was supposed to have a single grave surrounded by monuments and the beauty of nature and in contrast, the POW's, especially the soviet prisoners were buried, if they received a grave at all, very simply without any decorations or flowers.

Throughout the war, the Wehrmacht insisted on a dignified grave for every single soldier, evidence of his sacrifice and the memory of his fighting and his heroism. The fate envisioned for Germany's fallen warriors stands in stark contrast to the crematoria in the concentration camps and the anonymous resting places of the millions of victims murdered by the Wehrmacht and the SS.