

Finding executed Ostarbeiter in the Dutch-German border region

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Historical context

The Westwall (or Siegfried Line) was a defence line built in 1936 - 1940 along the western border of Germany, between Basel and Cleves. After the Allied landings in Normandy on June 6th 1944, Adolf Hitler ordered the expansion of the western defence lines on the 24th of August 1944. In the Dutch-German border region near Roermond four additional defence lines were planned. Work began in September 1944.

The delivery and the accommodation of the workforce for the construction of these lines was the responsibility of the NSDAP, in particular the local *Gauleiter* (governor of the *Gau*) in his function as National Defence Commissioner. The so-called *Ostarbeiter*, who primarily came from the Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Poland, were forced to work in the German manufacturing industry and agriculture. From September 1944 onwards, about 7.000 *Ostarbeiter*, primarily women, were deployed to work on the defensive systems in the Dutch-German border region near Roermond.

The forced-labourers were deployed in the most terrible conditions, where adequate food and clothing were often lacking. In the border region multiple cases of maltreatment and execution of forced-labourers during the construction of the defence lines are known. Some of the executed slave-labourers were eventually transferred to the *Russian Field of Honour* in Leusden. However, most *Ostarbeiter* who were shot or died were buried in unmarked graves and are never exhumed.

Tracking down unmarked Ostarbeiter grave sites

Tracking down these unmarked grave sites is very difficult, in some cases even impossible. Some cases however can be mapped based on scarce eyewitness reports and historical records. One such case can be found in the village of Herkenbosch. Here, four male *Ostarbeiter*, who were accused of stealing canned fruit, were heavily abused and eventually shot by the *Sicherheitsdienst*. Based on three eyewitnesses, who were tasked with moving the bodies, and in combination with post-war police reports the general location of the grave site could be tracked. In early 2018 a survey using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) will be conducted.

Another problem encountered during tracking down the grave sites is the lack of materials carried by the *Ostarbeiter*. As they were deprived of decent clothing and personal items, these graves rarely contain (metal) objects. This complicates the searches significantly, because conventional survey techniques, such as metal detectors, magnetometers and GPR, often depend on the presence of (metal) objects for a correct interpretation of the resulting survey data. Another problem with finding grave sites is the lack of historical records regarding these incidents, as security forces such as the *Sicherheitsdienst* destroyed their records as the German forces retreated across the Rhine, or no records were kept at all. As stated before, a trail using GPR will be conducted in early 2018 to explore the possibilities of using GPR in finding unmarked grave sites which are deprived of significant (metal) objects. If this particular grave site appears to be found, the Dutch Military Exhumation and Identification Service (*Bergings- en Identificatiedienst Koninklijke Landmacht*, BIDKL) will conduct the exhumation. When human remains are encountered, they will be examined and, if possible, identified by the BIDKL and reburied at the *Russian Field of Honour* in Leusden.