
Gent & the Great War

by Agelandkaai



The Great War was one with 10 million dead, more than 20 million wounded and 65 million soldiers. In Gent as well, boys were called up to fight and many died among the soldiers.

Yet it must be said that the war caused little damage to Gent. On September 8, the mayor of Gent, Emile Braun, negotiated with the German army command after the heavy fighting at Kwatrecht and Melle, two villages a little further south of Gent and located on higher strategic points. The Germans agreed on the condition of complete disarmament of the civil guard and a temporary suspension of 150 tons of oats, 100,000 cigars, 100 bicycles and numerous other goods. From then on, Gent became the capital of 'Etappengebiet IV' under the authority of the 4th German Army Corps. Gent became a hub for the German army: soldiers were shipped in and out, and injured soldiers were also taken care of in temporary hospitals. The presence of St. Pieter's Station, a port and the various airfields around Gent (Sint-Denijs-Westrem, Mariakerke, Oostakker) were therefore assets in the hands of the Germans.

The war in Belgium began when on August 2 the Germans demanded free passage through our country to attack France in the north along its least secure border. The Belgian government refused and on August 4, 1914, the Germans invaded neutral Belgium. France and Great Britain subsequently declared war on Germany. The fierce resistance of the Belgian army slowed the German advance. At the end of October 1914, the Belgians succeeded in flooding the area around the Ijzer by opening the floodgates of the Ijzer at high tide. The extreme southwest of our country was never occupied but was the battleground for hundreds of thousands of soldiers who came from all corners of the world to fight this war. The many cemeteries in West Flanders are the silent witnesses of this suffering.

The Great War was one with 10 million dead, more than 20 million wounded and 65 million soldiers. In Gent as well, boys were called up to fight and many died among the soldiers.

Yet it must be said that the war caused little damage to Gent. On September 8, the mayor of Gent, Emile Braun, negotiated with the German army command after the heavy fighting at Kwatrecht and Melle, two villages a little further south of Gent and located on higher strategic points. The Germans agreed on the condition of complete disarmament of the civil guard and a temporary suspension of 150 tons of oats, 100,000 cigars, 100 bicycles and numerous other goods.

From then on, Gent became the capital of 'Etappengebiet IV' under the authority of the 4th German Army Corps. Gent became a hub for the German army: soldiers were shipped in and out, and injured soldiers were also taken care of in temporary hospitals. The presence of St. Peter's Station, a port and the various airfields around Gent (Sint-Denijs-Westrem, Mariakerke, Oostakker) were therefore assets in the hands of the Germans.

The war in Belgium began when on August 2 the Germans demanded free passage through our country to attack France in the north along its least secure border. The Belgian government refused and on August 4, 1914, the Germans invaded neutral Belgium. France and Great Britain subsequently declared war on Germany. The fierce resistance of the Belgian army slowed the German advance. At the end of October 1914, the Belgians succeeded in flooding the area around the Ijzer by opening the floodgates of the Ijzer at high tide. The extreme southwest of our country was never occupied but was the battleground for hundreds of thousands of soldiers who came from all corners of the world to fight this war. The many cemeteries in West Flanders are the silent witnesses of this suffering.

[Hagelandkaai & Bastionstraat](#)

When standing on the quay quite close to the [bridge](#) we already have a first memory of the war. In the morning of October 12, an anxious shout went through the town from here, "The Germans are there!" Ten lightly armed scouts, six on horseback and four by bicycle arrived here at 9:30 in the morning and marched into the city, towards the town hall.

Look east (towards the train station) at the fine spire of the church of the Great Beguinage. On the night of June 7, 1915, an enormous drama played out in the skies of Gent. The English fighter pilot Reginald Warneford and the German Zeppelin LZ 37 were engaged in a terrible duel to the death. The burning wreckage of with its falling debris injured in the [beguinage](#) a nine-year-old girl Odile Maes who was visiting her aunt beguine. The LZ37 crashed into the convent of the Sisters of Our Lady Visitation in Sint-Amandsberg. This killed one nun, and two others were seriously injured. Reginald survived the incident. He died 10 days after a test flight with an American journalist over Veurne. The American was instantly dead, Reginald perished on the way to the hospital. The man has now been given his street in Sint-Amandsberg.



Let's now go to the [Bastionstraat](#) to look at a memorial plaque on the corner of this street and the Dampoortstraat. Here and there in the city similar memorial stones can be found. The number of victims among the soldiers in Gent was very large indeed.



[Walk to the Sint Annaplein](#)

We return to the Hagelandkaai and turn right into the street to take the [bridge](#) one hundred meters further which brings us to Schoolkaai. Now it's a bit of a walk to the next stop. We walk along the water to the Voorhoutkaai and then take the Slachthuis bridge on the right. We walk along the Koepoortkaai and the Filips van Arteveldestraat to the [Sint-Annaplein](#).

Take the crosswalk to the green park. Watch out for the cars. Between the trees and greenery you will discover a statue of the Sacred Heart in the middle of the park.

This statue was erected in 1926 in honor of the war victims in Gent. Christ looking towards the center - he is carried by the archangels - blesses the city of Gent. Very peculiar is the Dutch-language text "Gent to Christ King" which disappeared in the course of time... Also Dutch-language inscriptions at the war graves in West Flanders were "chiseled away" and replaced by "Mort pour la patrie" by the Belgian government. Is this the explanation? Linguistic disputes that go back to the front lines of the 'Great War'?



When we take a look around, we cannot get around the imposing church that stands there. St. Anne's Church is from the mid-19th century. This eclectic building combines the Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine architectural styles. This church has been the subject of much discussion among the people of Gent since it was decided to turn it into a market hall. In the future you might be able to buy your toilet paper there. And if things go well, we can drink a glass of wine in the wine bar, if it really comes to that.



[Continue to the Zuid & de Vooruit](#)

We walk further to the Lange Violettestraat and then take a left into the Tweebruggenstraat and walk under the arch to the Graaf van Vlaanderenplein. walk towards the park. It can be difficult to get there because there are renovations going on. The intention is to get to the statue of Albert I.



Albert I was our king at the time of the war, we speak of king-knight sometimes, and that's beautiful to see in the equestrian statue. The king still exudes power. Kings today only have influence at best. This man convinced the socialists to go full on for the war by promising them universal suffrage after the war. In France, socialists had called for people not to fight for big money, here they remained rather silent because of this proposal.



At the end of the park, we see a semi-circular monument on the [Achtmei Square](#). This is the memorial of the victims of the First and Second World Wars. The names of the people have been left out so that no one can be forgotten. The columns were recovered from the former south train station. In 1926, this station was dismantled here, the park is now completely arranged on the bed of the tracks.



Now walk through the park or along Franklin Roosevelt Avenue to [Woodrow Wilson Square](#). The name of the square is from the American president who was in the White House at the time of World War I. He came up with 14 points for peace after the war and especially an international peace: no secret negotiations, no espionage, disarmament and above all no blind revenge on Germany.

His plans were not really heard by the Allies at the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Germans would pay with money and land. The Belgians got Rwanda, Burundi, the East Cantons and reparations, the hoped-for Palestine and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen we did not get from the international community.



Where the shopping center Gent Zuid is now, there used to be the Colisseum, among other things. Boxing and field hockey matches were held there. During WWI it was renamed 'Wintergarten' and used by the German military government as a casino/cinema: Militär Lichtspielhaus. This building of the late 19th century was rebuilt in 1911 in art nouveau style. The entire block and old buildings were demolished to make way for the new Urbis complex, which was built here from 1991 to 1994. Many Gentenaars find this a hideous building.

Let's now continue to Lammerstraat and then take Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat on the left. The [Vooruit](#), the main building with cinema, theater, party hall of the socialist movement in Gent, was claimed as a 'Soldatenheim' during the World War. This was a relaxation area where soldiers could eat and drink in a German-friendly setting.



Those who wish can explore the streets around here: [Brabantdam](#), [Vlaanderenstraat](#), [Henegouwenstraat](#). Many buildings were built during the Belle Époque, the period before World War I, culminating for our country in the 1913 World Fair in Gent. This neighborhood was the place to be for shopping and strolling. In this neighborhood, visitors arrived via the Zuidstation, and were led through these wide streets to the historic center of the city, one of the "eye catchers" during the WTO 1913. Whether it was really a good time is questionable. Only for people who could dress nicely and eat good food. Most of the workers ate junk, were still largely on their own in our country without social legislation, the average life expectancy was around 50 years, those who lost their jobs ended up in pure misery. The slums of this city were certainly not visited by the visitors to the Expo.



[On to the Kouter](#)

We now walk further to the [Walpoortstraat](#), the [Kortedagsteeg](#) and then take the street with the name [Vogelmarkt](#) on the left and continue our journey to the Kouter, the large square with trees and kiosk.

Here on this square there was a lot of German activity during the occupation. The dark orange-colored large rococo building (no. 172) was the 'Kommandatur'. Each 'Ettapegebiet' was headed by such a Commandatur, so here the Etappecommandant sat with his extensive staff. Right opposite here you have the Handelsbeurs and Brasserie Ha, but in the past this was the 'Work Office'. Unemployed people were claimed here by the Germans.



Where the Standard Bookstore is now, there used to be the Hotel La Concorde. That's where the richest came to stay, carriages drove to and fro.

But during the First World War this was the location of the 'Pass Centrale'. This is where the residents of Ghent had to be to pick up their identity documents.

Now walk further down [Schouwburgstraat](#). The opera opened under the name 'Truppen Theater' with, of course, only German performances.



[Voldersstraat](#)

We continue our tour to the right to walk down Veldstraat. There, halfway down the street, we take the Volderstraat on the right. A few hundred meters further we see the Aula of the University of Ghent. On the eve of the war, the University of Ghent was still a French-speaking educational institution. After all, Belgium was a French-speaking country at its inception, all official matters were French-speaking. The struggle to Dutchify Flanders has been a process of prolonged struggle. During World War I, the university reopened in 1916 but in Dutch. The Germans played on the discontent among the Flemings and thus wanted to meet those Flemish demands. So part of the Flemish movement collaborated with the Germans for the sake of more independence for Flanders. After the war the university will open its doors again to French-speaking education. Only in 1930 did UGent become Dutch-speaking.



[The Belfry and City Hall](#)

We walk further down the street to the Mageleinstraat. We walk through it and arrive at the Belfry. On top of the Belfry the occupying forces installed an observation post for airplanes. And under the building a Council cellar was installed.



The City Hall became an important center of German administration. From October 12, 1914, the German flag flew here.

In the many restaurants in and around this square, the German soldiers came to feast on our Belgian dishes. Many soldiers came into contact with oysters and mussels here for the first time. The eateries here advertised mussel dishes of all kinds: natural, in white wine, with fries or bread and, of course, à volonté.

We continue our walk to the [Korenmarkt](#). The building next to the Sint-Michiels bridge that now houses the Albert Heijn, a hotel (delicious cocktails by the way!) and Sissy Boy... used to be the Feldpoststation 4. From here, communication with the rest of the German empire was done.

[Graslei](#)

In 1917, the people of Ghent saw a very important guest pass through. Kaiser Wilhelm II stopped here for a visit to our city. He arrived at St. Pieter's Station and eventually went by motor caravan to the Castle of the Counts, St. Bavo's Cathedral, the ruins of St. Bavo's Abbey and to Graslei.

You can watch a [video](#) from his visit to Gent here.

Here we end the tour. Still, there are a few buildings worth visiting:

[The Flemish Academy of Language and Literature](#): it housed the judicial services of the Germans. Koningstraat 18. It is a rococo building from the 18th century, a real gem of the Ghent rococo style.

[The Vlerick Business School](#) (Reep 1): a German army barracks was installed there. The building used to be a seminary for the priesthood, now it is a prestigious school for managers.