



Together with approximately 200 guests, the German War Graves Commission commemorated those who died in the First World War. More than 30,000 fallen soldiers are buried here at Maissemy alone, making it the second-largest German military cemetery from the 1914–1918 war in France.

Photo: © Uwe Zucchi

Commemorating the Somme: “Here, the War Never Falls Completely Silent”

Young People Take Center Stage at the Volksbund’s International Commemoration in Maissemy

July 2, 2026

The choreography spoke for itself. The young participants first rehearsed their presentation among the French grave crosses at Rancourt, then, only a stone's throw away, at the British military cemetery. Finally, at the German military cemetery in Maissemy, 24 young people gave the German War Graves Commission's international commemoration a distinctive and deeply meaningful character.

For the first time, the three war graves organizations—the German War Graves Commission (Volksbund), the French National Office for Veterans and Victims of War (ONACVG), and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)—jointly invited young people to spend a week exploring one of the largest and most devastating battles of the First World War: the Battle of the Somme, fought from July 1 to November 18, 1916.

Not Heirs, but Active Participants

The toll was staggering, approximately one million dead and wounded—an “unimaginable mass loss of life on all sides,” as Dirk Backen, Secretary General of the German War Graves Commission, emphasized. Passing the torch to the next generation, he said, was one of the ceremony's central goals. It was therefore only fitting that the first speakers, following the welcome, were the 15- to 17-year-old participants from France, Great Britain, and Germany.

“They are not merely heirs to history—they are its active participants,” said Prefect Fanny Anor. “By engaging with one another and commemorating together, they demonstrate that reconciliation is not an empty word. It is a living reality, sustained by those who refuse to repeat the mistakes of the past.”





At the podium: Ulrike (left) and Amelia; in the back row, from left, Darja, Nadine, Jack, Elliot, Max, George, Marius, and Rose.

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Remembrance Unites Rather Than Divides

Together, the group prepared a speech reflecting on their experience: “What impressed us most was how differently our three countries commemorate the past. Each nation remembers those who fell and the consequences of war in its own way.” Despite language barriers, they said mutual understanding was achieved time and again through openness and respect.

The most important lesson they took away was that remembrance unites rather than divides. “Standing at the graves and memorial sites made us realize how precious peace is and how great our responsibility is today. The experiences we shared and the friendships we formed will stay with us for a long time, reminding us how essential understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence are in Europe,” they declared—in all three languages.

“Hatred Is Never Inevitable”



“Here, the war never falls completely silent,” said Marie-Christine Verdier-Jouclas, Director of ONACVG. Twenty-eight national cemeteries and more than one hundred military cemeteries containing the dead of many nations in the Chemin des Dames region alone still bear witness today to the immense sacrifices made during the war.

Franco-German reconciliation, she said, is “one of the greatest political, human, and moral achievements of our continent.” It reminds us that hatred is never inevitable—and that “peoples once divided by war can, through steadfast diplomacy, dialogue, culture, and the passing on of memory, build an unshakable friendship.”

Thinkers, Scholars, and Artists

Dirk Backen introduced three men: the British poet William Noel Hodgson, the French literary scholar Pierre-Maurice Masson, and the German playwright and Expressionist Reinhard Johannes Sorge.

“They represented the intellectual and academic future of our nations—not only of our respective countries, but also of Europe and the world as they existed at that time,” the Secretary General said. Their deaths during the summer of 1916 also serve as a reminder of the loss of an entire generation of thinkers, scholars, and artists on the battlefields of Europe.



The young participants presented the floral tributes and wreaths. Here, Peter Hudson, Deputy Chair of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), receives the Commission's wreath. At center is Alexandre de Bordelius, the German War Graves Commission's Country Representative for France.

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Dirk Backen, Secretary General of the German War Graves Commission, stands beside the cross at the small memorial hall, where eleven wreaths and floral tributes were laid.

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Not an uncommon sight in this region: among the French **porte-drapeaux** (standard-bearers) is a remarkably young face. © *Photo: Uwe Zucchi*



Rolf Müller traveled from Berlin to attend the ceremony, moved in part by concern over today's wars. His great-uncle, Johann Nickolai, was killed exactly 110 years ago to the day, just one day after his 21st birthday. The grief of his grandparents endured for decades.

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A Place of Dialogue

“This cemetery is a place of dialogue. It speaks quietly, yet powerfully, across the generations. It asks us what we have learned—and what we intend to do with that knowledge,” said Peter Hudson, Deputy Chair of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).

His appeal was clear: “Let us leave this place committed to responsibility: to choosing dialogue over division, cooperation over conflict, and humanity over hatred. May this shared act of remembrance strengthen our resolve to build a better, more peaceful world—a world worthy of those who never had the chance to live in it.”



The wind carried the song “The Green Fields of France” across the thousands of graves as the British duo Patricia Hammond and Matt Redman performed with a 1915 harp guitar.

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Frédéric Mannessier, a trumpeter with the French Armed Forces, sounded the French and British military calls for the fallen. © *Photo: Uwe Zucchi*



The German Navy Band from Wilhelmshaven performed, among other selections, the national anthems of the three participating countries. © *Photo: Uwe Zucchi*



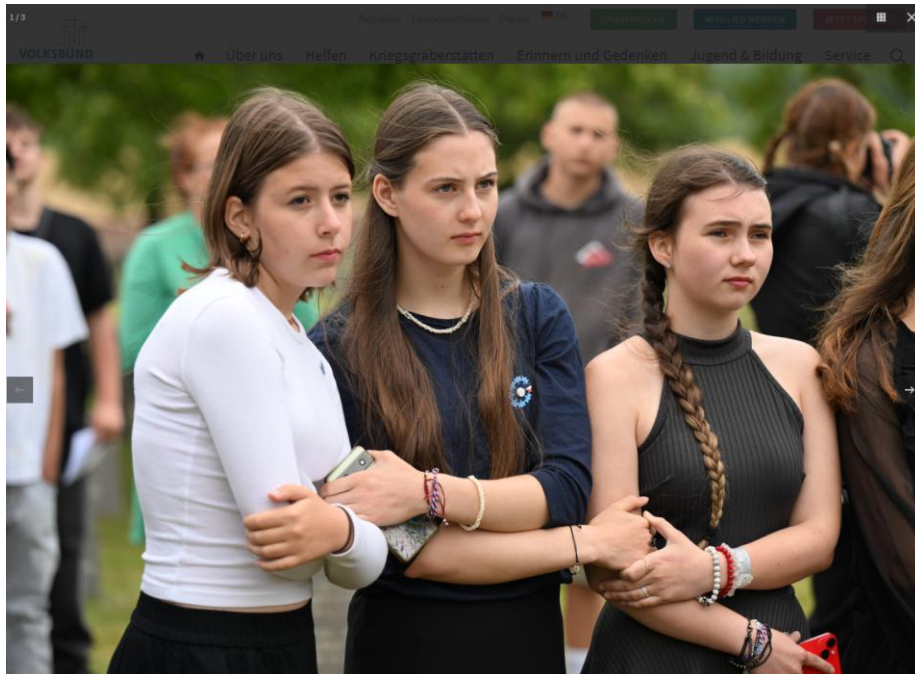
Andrew Shulman delivered a prayer. A Jewish chaplain to international military forces, the American serves with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium.

They Understood

The seeds had fallen on fertile ground—the youth exchange was an undeniable success. The program was packed: cemeteries, museums, memorial sites, and former battlefields filled the week. Yet, at the end, Cedric reflected, “It could easily have lasted longer.”

The participants repeatedly worked together in trinational teams of three. They learned together, watched football together, and enjoyed one another's company. “The more we got to know each other, the more we understood that this must never happen again,” Cedric said. “It's unimaginable,” Darja added, “that a new war could force us—now that we've become friends—to stand on opposite sides.”

“The more we got to know one another, the more we came to understand that this must never happen again.”— Cedric



It wasn't only Ulrike, Amelia, and Darja (from left) whom this week brought together and forged into lasting friends.

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Created by the participants themselves, the youth group's wreath was adorned with symbolic flowers: forget-me-nots, poppies, and cornflowers.

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Words of Encouragement Before the Ceremony

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Cities of the Ruhr Region Become Cemetery Patrons

The First World War—the “a singular catastrophe of the twentieth century”—left behind an unprecedented number of dead, many of whom could no longer be identified. During the war, countless small cemeteries were established near the battlefields, but after 1918, the French authorities sought to consolidate them as quickly as possible. Central military cemeteries were created, among them Maissemy in 1924. More than 30,000 German war dead were reinterred there from over 120 smaller burial sites.

In 1926, the German War Graves Commission introduced the concept of **patron cemeteries** to help finance the creation and maintenance of these burial grounds. At the initiative of the city of Recklinghausen, Maissemy—the second-largest German military cemetery in France—became a model project. Twenty-six cities and two counties from

Germany's Ruhr region contributed a total of 100,000 Reichsmarks, as many of the soldiers buried there had come from the Ruhr.



Originally, 20 memorial tombstones bearing the names and coats of arms of the sponsoring cities stood at the cemetery. Today, they lie along the central pathway leading to the memorial hall. Participating in today's commemoration with floral tributes were the cities of Gelsenkirchen, Dortmund, Hamm, Herne, Recklinghausen (pictured), Ennepetal, Schwelm, Duisburg, and the District of Wesel (formerly the District of Dinslaken).

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The names of the Ruhr region's cities, inscribed on two sides of the memorial hall, still commemorate their commitment during the 1920s and 1930s. The hall was dedicated in 1935, and the memorial tombstones were installed in 1937.

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Honor Cross Awarded to Thomas Trede

At the reception following the ceremony, Dirk Backen presented the **German War Graves Commission Silver Honor Cross** to Lieutenant Colonel (General Staff) Thomas Trede. The Deputy Defense Attaché at the German Embassy in Paris was recognized for his outstanding contributions to the Commission's work of remembrance in France.

Earlier that morning, Backen, together with Maissemy Mayor Hubert Delalieu and Thomas Trede, had laid wreaths at the **Monument aux Morts** (War Memorial).



Secretary General Dirk Backen and Carole Novy, head of the German War Graves Commission's office in France, congratulate Thomas Trede (center), Deputy Defense Attaché at the German Embassy in Paris.

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Start of David Tombstones for Jewish Soldiers

In the afternoon, **Operation Levi** took center stage. Together with representatives of the U.S.-based organization **Operation Benjamin**, the German War Graves Commission dedicated additional memorial steles bearing the Star of David at the graves of Jewish soldiers where Christian crosses had previously stood in error. *(A separate report will follow.)*

Among the international guests attending the morning ceremony were representatives from government, public administration, civil society, and partner organizations of the German War Graves Commission. All were welcomed by Maissemy Mayor Hubert Delalieu.



This new tombstone bearing the Star of David was formally dedicated that afternoon.

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Just five days before the ceremony, a devastating thunderstorm caused extensive damage at Maissemy Military Cemetery. Bastien Ledieu, head of the German War Graves Commission's maintenance district in France, and his team received warm applause for their remarkable efforts. Nearly 30 staff members had cleared all traces of the storm from the front section of the cemetery in time for the commemoration. © *Photo: Bastien Ledieu*



At the **Monument aux Morts** in Maissemy that morning.

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Read More

For additional historical background, see these articles from the **#VolksbundHistory** series:

- **July 1, 1916: Gommecourt and the Illusion of an Easy Victory**
- **From Verdun to the Brusilov Offensive: 1916 – A World in Flames**

The many forms of annual remembrance on July 1 are explored in:

- **Hand in Hand: 110 Years After the Battle of the Somme**

About the German War Graves Commission

The **German War Graves Commission (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge)** is a nonprofit organization commissioned by the German Federal Government to locate, recover, and provide dignified burials for German war dead abroad. More than 5,500 fallen soldiers were recovered last year alone.

The Commission maintains war cemeteries in 45 countries and supports the families of the fallen. Through its youth exchanges and educational programs, it reaches nearly 50,000 people each year. Its work depends heavily on membership contributions and charitable donations.