

TITLE

History of Brittany - 14 Two World Wars

In August 1914, bells rang to signify the mobilisation of troops for the Great War, a conflict that dragged on and on, with much loss of Breton life on far away fronts. The dangers came even closer when the submarine war began around the coast of Brittany in 1916. The war certainly brought many other foreigners into the region as refugees, patients and prisoners of war, opening Brittany up to the outside world. But Ankou's harvest at that time was great, as one Morlaisien woman later put it. An elaborate memorial to the fallen of WWI can be seen today at the religious complex of Ste-Anne d-Auray.

When WWII finally came, allied troops were hastily evacuated. Many died in Rennes when the station, packed with departing soldiers and munitions, was bombed. The Germans swiftly took over the region with three army corps in June, 1940. A priority for the invaders was to secure the ports of Lorient and Brest, which were both to become major submarine bases for Atlantic manoeuvres.

Resistance in Brittany was strong, although mostly operated in separate networks working in tandem with the Allies. The Réseau Shelburne on the Côte de Goëlo near Plouha was responsible for evacuating 135 allied airmen in dead of night in Operation Bonaparte. In Carantec, boat-builder Ernest Sibiril used his business as cover to get almost 200 people away across the channel. Sabotage and disruption were rife, although sometimes leading to terrible reprisals. In Morlaix an attack on a German officers' mess led to 60 men being rounded up at random and taken away to the dread Buchenwald camp.

In June 1944 a running battle was fought at St-Marcel near Malestroit between German soldiers and a unit of the FFI who had set up a large camp of more than 800 hectares to provide safe territory for allied parachutists to land. The Resistance museum there today offers an unforgettable perspective of the German occupation.

The naval bases of Brest and Lorient with their deadly submarine stations were heavily bombed by the allies. St-Malo suffered the same fate: the magnificent walled city today is a painstaking reconstruction.

Prolific 'Atlantic Wall' German fortifications can still be seen along Brittany's western coast, especially protecting the Rade de Brest. The Fort

du Dellec is today a public park and the extensive German developments of earlier defensive buildings are apparent. Many pebbles from the sea defence barriers were lost along the vast Baie d'Audierne as the Germans ground them up to provide concrete for all these construction projects. Remains of the factory where this took place can be seen near the beach at Croaz an Dour.

The Musée de la Bataille de l'Atlantique near Camaret is devoted to the vital struggle at sea that enabled supply lines between America and England to be kept open. Nearby on the Pointe de Penhir is a massive memorial to the Breton resistance forces.

Liberation came from July 1944, although Brest and St-Nazaire put up staunch opposition right up until the German surrender. A few places like Quimper managed to drive the Germans out themselves, with someone climbing the cathedral to fly the French flag even before a final battle was fought on the outskirts of the city.

But war's bitter legacy of struggle, death, destruction, and seriously depleted resources left Brittany in urgent need of regeneration.