

Challenging the Atlantic Wall. Towards a sustainable future for a conflicted landscape

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From 1940 onwards, a defensive system was constructed to protect the coast-line of Nazi-occupied Western Europe against Allied attacks. This system evolved into what was called the *Atlantikwall*. Stretching from Norway's North Cape down to the Bay of Biscay, it consisted of beach blockades, trenches and concrete fortifications, especially bunkers along the sea front, air defense work, and inland defensive works such as tank barriers, ultimately forming a land front. These works were interrelated and made optimal use of the of the natural characteristics of the landscape. Inundations could also be part of the inland defensive concept. As all grand defense systems along a fixed line, like the Chinese Great Wall, and the *Limites* and Hadrian's wall from the Roman period, the Atlantic Wall boasted invincibility and imperial power. However, challenged in 1944, the Normandy part cracked under the Allied invasion of June 6, after which the *Atlantikwall*, which remained defended, had lost its prime objective.

The post-war period was primarily a time of rebuilding the areas damaged by war, and the Atlantic Wall was treated along practical lines. Visibility, or rather, invisibility, was the main principle. Along the coast, hundreds of thousands of buildings close to the sea had been demolished for the Atlantic Wall. Rebuilding also meant clearing bunkers and other fortifications. Most villages were popular holiday destinations, with many German tourists, and the administration preferred to keep the relics of the war out of sight. As bunkers were often deeply embedded in the dunes, the Dutch natural barrier against the sea, removal was often difficult. Sometimes bunkers were buried under the sand. Others, in abandoned dune valleys, became private holiday homes. Many bunkers and other elements are situated in nature conservation areas, providing a habitat for bats and other endangered species.

Today, after 80 years, the Atlantic Wall is moving cautiously through a process that other violence-associated sites such as forts and castles have experienced before. After publications in the 1980s for a limited group of interested readers on the German bunker systems, a new step was taken around 2000 towards a wider audience interested in history. A striking example is the Atlantikwall Museum Noordwijk foundation, founded in 2001. Anno 2024, it manages a vast complex of bunkers, originally part of an artillery complex, connected by underground corridors, dug free by volunteers. In 2023, the museum received 10,000 visitors, including many children.

The changing relationship with the remains of World War II also poses a heritage question. Or rather, it is a challenge for the Atlantic Wall. Which remains are still recognizably present in the landscape and which ensembles still have sufficient historical power to express their original significance? This is not just about public history. What is left and what is valuable can also contribute to future insights into history, architecture and conflict archaeology.

The Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency has launched the *Atlas of the Atlantikwall* project, in which many inventories are combined to show the development of the defensive concepts, the military hardware and the underlying organization. The Dutch Atlantic Wall will be analysed not only on the national scale for the first time, but also from a European perspective. This will result in a book and a set of digital datasets and maps, which will be accompanied by a vision document concerning the future of the remains of the Atlantic Wall, involving a great

many government bodies and private organisations. In this presentation, we will show the preliminary results of the Dutch *Atlantikwall* project.

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Harald Bodenschatz en Max Welch Guerra (red.), *The Power of Past Greatness. Urban Renewal of Historic Centres in European Dictatorships*, Berlijn 2021.

J. Bremmers, M. Machielse en H. Sakkers, *De commandobunker van Hilversum. Hoofdkwartier van de Atlantikwall in Nederland*, Nieuw Weerdinge 1998.

Dieter Ose, *Entscheidung im Westen. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion*, Stuttgart 1982.

Rudi Rolf, *Het Duitse Fortificatie-ontwerp 1935-1945*, Beetsterzwaag 1985.

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