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Langemarckstraße

9th November 2022

Dear Lord Mayor,

The Municipality of Langemark-Poelkapelle, the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper (Belgium), and the Centre for the History of War, Media and Society at the University of Kent (United Kingdom) are writing with regard to naming of Langemarckstraße in your town. Our initiative is inspired by new research into the history and memory of “Langemarck”, published inter alia in the *Journal of Modern History* (vol. 94, March 2022).

The name “Langemarck” refers to the great battle fought near Ieper/Ypern in autumn 1914. The creation of the majority of Langemarck streets in Germany dates back to a nationwide propaganda campaign during the Third Reich. Considerable political pressure was put on German municipalities to name or rename a street after “Langemarck”. The campaign’s ostensible aim was to forge a collective memory of the battle of 1914, but its true purpose was the mental preparation for another war.

During the Second World War, Langemarck became implicated in the racist war on the Eastern Front through the actions of SS-Sturmbrigade “Langemarck” and SS-Grenadier-Division “Langemarck”. War crimes were committed in the name of “Langemarck”. For that reason, most Langemarck streets were renamed after the war. However, Allied Control Council Directive No. 30, concerning the liquidation of German military and Nazi memorials, was interpreted and implemented differently in different places. This explains why there is a Langemarckstraße in your city to this day.

Bremen's Langemarckstraße, created in November 1937, is special case. While other German cities decided to name small residential roads after Langemarck, Mayor Böhmcker selected one of the main arteries into the city. A controversy about the street name erupted in 1983, when students of the polytechnic took down the street signs, re-baptising the street "Willy-Brandt-Straße". In 2005, the Beirat Neustadt discussed a potential renaming of Langemarckstraße. Another eight years passed until a "Geschichtspfad" was installed in 2011/12, with boards providing background information about the battle and the myth as well as the recent conflict over the street name and the nearby war memorial. This was a laudable project. However, the "Geschichtspfad" along this major road is restricted to a small area around the polytechnic. Moreover, the project website now seems defunct.

We, the signatories to this letter, urge you to address the legacy of the abuse of the name of "Langemarck" in your city, and we offer you our assistance in this endeavour. A renaming of Langemarckstraße is, in our view, neither necessary nor desirable. Rather, we would encourage you to erect next to the street signs small plaques with a QR code. While a plaque can state the essential facts (for instance, "Langemarck: destroyed in the First World War, now dedicated to peace"), it cannot convey the complexity of the history and memory of the battle. Therefore, we suggest to include a QR code, creating a link to our project website (<https://www.langemark-poelkapelle.be/langemarkstrasse>). We consider this an opportunity to increase public awareness of the battle of Langemarck, the politics of memory during the Third Reich, and also the post-war history of our municipality and region, which today are devoted to the furthering of peace.

We aim to start a dialogue about the legacy of "Langemarck" in German towns, and we hope you will support us in our initiative. We consider this not only an important historical and political issue, but also a chance to further Belgian-German friendship.

For enquiries about our initiative, please contact the co-ordinator of World War I commemorations at Langemark, Mr Jo Lottegier (jo.lottegier@langemark-poelkapelle.be).

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Laurent Hoornaert
Aldermen of Langemark-Poelkapelle

Dimitry Soenen
Chairman, In Flanders Fields Museum

Stefan Goebel
Stefan Goebel, PhD
Director, Centre for the History of War, Media and Society, University of Kent