



# Underwater Cultural Heritage of the Great War

*Potential for  
peace education  
& heritage awareness*



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**UNESCO@vlaanderen**

UNESCO Platform Vlaanderen vzw



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## Content

Centenary of World War I ~ **4**

UNESCO ~ **4**

Flanders ~ **4**

Underwater Cultural Heritage ~ **5**

The Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage ~ **5**

Underwater Cultural Heritage of World War I ~ **6**

A Threatened Heritage ~ **7**

Scientific Conference ~ **8**

Recommendations on Underwater Cultural Heritage ~ **9**

Peace Education and Heritage ~ **10**

Peace Education Initiative ~ **11**

More information ~ **12**



## Centenary of World War I

World War I was a global conflict of unprecedented scale and consequences. Of the more than 70 million soldiers that took part in the conflict, an estimated 9 million perished along with millions of civilians. World War I paved the way for tremendous political changes and led to the creation of the first permanent international organization with the mission to maintain world peace: the League of Nations, predecessor of the United Nations system.

The centenary of this devastating conflict provides a unique opportunity to remind all peoples of the importance of peace and to enhance our understanding of history through the research and preservation of that heritage left by the war.

## UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created in 1945 in the wake of the two world wars, which generated awareness of the urgent need to preserve lasting peace in an increasingly interconnected world.

UNESCO's Constitution states that

*Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.*

The international community created UNESCO for the purpose of advancing international peace and the common welfare of humankind through education, science and culture. Among the ways UNESCO achieves this noble objective are promoting and disseminating knowledge and overseeing the protection of the world's common heritage.

## Flanders

Flanders and UNESCO signed a cooperation agreement in 1998. This cooperation agreement aims at a real partnership between both parties. UNESCO can count on Flemish expertise, financial resources, networks and ideas, whereas the Flemish authorities can call on UNESCO's advice and know-how.

To implement the agreement and enhance the sustainable nature of the cooperation, two trust funds were created. In 1999 the Flemish Trust Fund to UNESCO in the field of Science (FUST) was created. Two years later, the Flemish Government approved the creation of the general Flemish Trust Fund to UNESCO (FUT) to enhance the cooperation with UNESCO in its other fields of competence such as education, culture and communication.

Within the framework of the general Flemish Trust Fund to UNESCO the Flemish Government supports the initiative by UNESCO to raise the public awareness and protection of the underwater cultural heritage of World War I. Flanders supports an international **scientific conference** in Bruges, the preparation and launch of an international **educational project** and a **research project** and **(virtual) exhibition** on the involvement of colonies and protectorates in the naval history of the First World War.

## Underwater Cultural Heritage

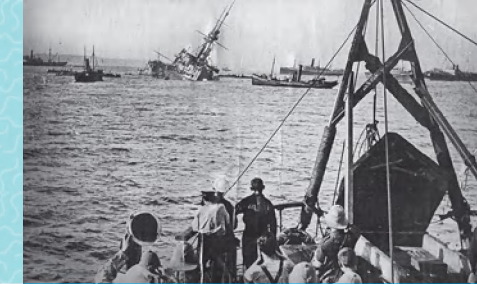
People associate the First World War with trenches and military grave sites. The submerged heritage that resulted from the war is far less on people's mind. Rather little is known about this heritage and there is a lack of research on underwater cultural heritage.

The written history of the naval component of World War I is usually limited to the description of naval battles, the strategy and the technology that were used, the struggle for power, etc. However, the shipwrecks of the First World War reveal a different story. Many shipwrecks are also grave sites. The reports of sinking ships or the recovery of the dead speak of immense suffering and grief. These remains serve to remind us that wars spring from power struggles, and result in destruction, the separation of families, the suffering of innocent victims, the premature deaths of young people and lost hopes. Indeed, these remains constitute a call for peace.

## The Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage

The UNESCO General Conference adopted the **Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage** in 2001. It was a response to the destruction of submerged archaeological sites by commercial treasure hunters, and certain industrial activities. The Convention also reflects the growing recognition of the need to ensure the same protection to underwater cultural heritage as that already accorded to land-based heritage.

Underwater cultural heritage, as defined by the Convention, refers to all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character that have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years. This includes millions of shipwrecks, sunken cities, traces of human existence on submerged landscapes, as well as underwater sacrificial offerings and religious sites in lakes and rivers.



*The centenary of World War I marks the beginning of the protection of submerged remains from the First World War by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.*



# Underwater Cultural Heritage of World War I

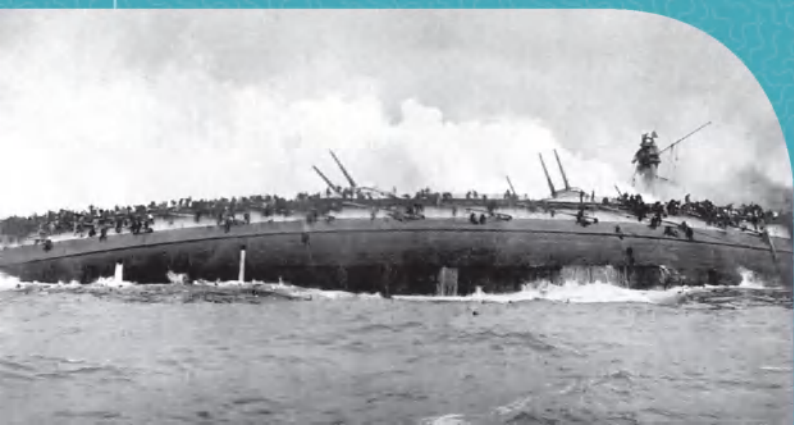
The battles of the First World War were largely land-based, however what happened at sea was significant as well. This is exemplified by the 'course à la mer' on the western front at the beginning of the war, the increase of fleets, the flooding of the Yser plain in the Westhoek, and the British raids coming from the sea on Zeebrugge and Oostende, an attempt to block both submarine ports. Other parts of the world saw maritime military actions as well, such as the Battles of Coronel and the Falkland Islands at the end of 1914 aimed at keeping the connection with the Black Sea open, the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915, the battle of Jutland in 1916, etc.

But most important was certainly the impact of the unrestricted submarine warfare in the Channel between the British and the German Empires and the worldwide chasing of ships by submarines, such as in the waters off Australia. The sinking of ships – both military and civilian – to block harbours resulted in famine and illness because of the shortage of food and medicine.

Some of these shipwrecks are well-preserved while others are damaged by non-scientific salvage attempts or because divers (private enthusiasts as well as divers employed by commercial companies) brought up valuable relics or materials. Other wrecks have been recovered to clear ship routes.

Before the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage was adopted by UNESCO's General Conference, there was little awareness about what we can learn from submerged heritage. The underwater cultural heritage of the First World War is of great historical significance. Up to 10 000 thousand important and often yet unexplored or even undiscovered wrecks are estimated to remain preserved under water. These World War I wrecks are sources of invaluable historical information. They contain tools and machinery that teach us about early twentieth-century technology and naval warfare. They also allow understanding of the course of events in World War I. But most importantly these wrecks preserve human remains and the personal belongings, such as books, clothes, and shoes of those who perished. They are grave sites which deserve commemoration and respect. Their research can foster reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The protection of World War I's underwater cultural heritage is essential so that humanity never forgets the horror of war and its human consequences. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage will protect all World War I underwater heritage from 2014 onwards for all countries that have ratified this international legal instrument. Belgium ratified the Convention in 2013.



## A Threatened Heritage

The underwater cultural heritage of World War I is a major historical source, however it is subject to many preservation risks. The implementation of the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage will help alleviate some of the pressure.

### What endangers the Underwater Cultural Heritage of the First World War?

The wrecks are threatened by **the passage of time**. Their metal carcasses are subjected to a corrosion process that occurs through the accumulation of rust formations similar to stalactites caused by a bacterium.

Another threat is the **dismemberment** of the wrecks. To retrieve metal, some companies do not hesitate to shred underwater archaeological sites. As such, in 2011, Dutch ships dismantled the remains of three British cruisers, *HMS Aboukir*, *HMS Hogue*, and *HMS Cressy*, sunk off the Dutch coast in 1914 with nearly 1 500 sailors on board, in order to extract copper and bronze. Despite the protest that this raised, the destruction could not be stopped.

Other wrecks are at risk of being **exploited** by companies interested in the value of the ships' cargo. This was the case of the *SS Mantola*, a steamship that carried passengers and belonged to the British East India Company and was sunk by a German submarine in 1917. It supposedly transported money in addition to its human cargo. As the site is not protected, the company that discovered the wreck tried



to commercially exploit it. Such wrecks are at risk to be destroyed, whether or not they contain a treasure.

**Deliberate destruction** and **looting** damage also affected the wreck of the luxury liner *RMS Lusitania*, a British liner torpedoed in 1915 by a German submarine. Damage was also caused by the recovery of three out of the four propellers in 1982. Moreover, in 1982, various objects of the mythical cargo of the wreck were recovered and brought back to the United Kingdom, triggering a legal battle on the issue of the protection of the wreck.

Added to this damage caused to the wrecks by commercial exploitation and looting, is the deterioration caused by eager divers bringing back a souvenir from submerged ships.



## Scientific Conference



UNESCO held a scientific conference on the underwater cultural heritage of World War I from 26 to 27 June 2014 in Bruges (Belgium). It brought together expert scientists, academics and relevant NGOs from all over the world to discuss the naval history of World War I, the current state of World War I underwater heritage, and the many dangers threatening it.

The scientific conference touched upon the different aspects of World War I underwater heritage: historical and archaeological research, legal protection and new methodologies for the preservation of large-scale metal underwater cultural heritage sites. Thus the organizers wanted to make a substantial contribution to the coordination and defragmentation of research efforts and to strengthening scientific networking.

The first day of the conference focused on the historical value of the wreck sites and on their possible contributions to the historical research on World War I and its underwater cultural heritage. On the second day, efforts were made to find new solutions and possible measures that can help to better preserve and protect World War I underwater cultural heritage.

*The participants of the scientific conference formulated a series of recommendations to raise awareness about the importance of the underwater cultural heritage of the First World War and to improve its protection.*

*Following are the key points of the recommendations stemming from the international conference in Bruges.*

## Recommendations on the protection of underwater cultural heritage

- Convince as many countries as possible to **ratify** the Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.
- Encourage countries that have not (yet) signed the Convention to apply its **principles**.
- Establish **national legal frameworks** for the protection of underwater cultural heritage.
- **Further elaborate** the guidelines for the implementation of the Convention and assess the extent to which other cultural conventions of UNESCO can contribute to the protection of underwater cultural heritage.
- Strengthen cooperation between national authorities, in particular between customs services, police and navy to **control the import** of artifacts from the sea.
- **Mapping and monitoring** of underwater cultural heritage to facilitate research and protection and to evaluate the environmental impact on submerged heritage.
- Step up cooperation between scientists to draw up an **inventory** of the submerged heritage of the First World War and develop an international **database** on World War I underwater cultural heritage that allows to monitor the state of conservation and assess the technical feasibility of its protection.
- Set up cooperation among **divers and scientists** to assess and monitor all human and natural impacts on underwater cultural heritage in order to evaluate and anticipate the degradation of this heritage.
- Allow the public **responsible access** to the submerged heritage from World War I, be it in situ, on line or in museums, with the use of innovative technologies.
- Expand the application of concepts such as **Marine Protected Areas** and **Maritime Landscapes** and create **dive trails** or other access possibilities.
- Create **cultural routes** connecting inland, coastal and underwater cultural heritage.
- Increase **public awareness** of the underwater cultural heritage.
- Focus on the **human stories** behind the underwater cultural heritage of the First World War.
- Encourage a **common resolve and ethos** in projects on underwater cultural heritage of World War I, to focus on the peace and reconciliation value of this submerged heritage.
- Encourage countries to donate to the **Fund** of the Convention for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage and experts to use **existing funding** for heritage projects, for instance at the European level, to work on underwater cultural heritage on a global scale.
- Further develop **multidisciplinary research** in order to tap new funding.
- **Bring together** scientists and donors and draw up an overview of **best practices** on underwater cultural heritage projects that involve donors and the general public alike.



# Peace Education and Heritage

Our history and our heritage are a part of who we are. It is the remembrance of our past that gives us council for our future. History and heritage pass on knowledge between generations. We can learn a lot from what is written in history books, but tangible heritage sites and artefacts are proof of what history tells us. Heritage is an unbiased witness. History books tend to forget voices of people not in a superior or ruling position. They focus on the political discourse and less on the everyday reality of women, workers and minorities. They also tend to forget the stories of daily life, of suffering, of loss or anxiety.

*The heritage of World War I tells a missing part of the story – the story as it was experienced by common citizens. Heritage allows to feel and to understand. It brings the emotions of the victims of a battle or a conflict back to us in a tangible and touching way.*

Underwater cultural heritage from World War I is a special witness to this story. It has as yet been little visible, little researched and little understood. That it is submerged and therefore kept from view, is part of the explanation.

The written naval history of the First World War tells about battles, strategies, technologies and power. But the wreck sites filled with the remains of those who fell in the battles tell us a tragically different tale. Many of the wrecks are grave sites. The reports of the sinking ships or of the recovery of the dead speak of an immense suffering and of grief. They are a call for peace and reconciliation and every single story is a reminder of the human suffering that always stems from war.

History and heritage are shared between nations. They allow stepping away from one nation's victory and another nation's defeat towards a common past of humanity. After the horrors of war, heritage and the understanding of the human stories it tells can build peace and foster reconciliation. The relics of the wars belong to all of humanity. It is humanity's common responsibility to protect them to allow for a more peaceful, sharing and aware society. The common heritage of World War I allows the nations that took part in it to embrace a shared part of their identity. Tolerance and understanding of cultures different from ours and of the history as felt by all sides, including those of the former enemies', build peace through respect and compassion.



## Peace Education Initiative

For the occasion of the Centenary of the World War I, UNESCO will launch an educational project on the underwater cultural heritage of 2014-2018 and peace education & heritage preservation in September 2014.

UNESCO will publish a **teachers manual** which will provide tools to work on underwater cultural heritage and use is as a starting point for peace education and raising awareness for the importance of heritage conservation. The manual provides background on the underwater cultural heritage of World War I, contains practical tips on the dos and don'ts of peace education, and offers good practices and lesson plans that can inspire teachers.

As part of the preparation process of the educational project, ten Flemish primary and secondary schools developed and implemented projects on several aspects of underwater cultural heritage to raise students' awareness about the importance of the preservation of heritage and about the horrors of war. Their experiences are included in the teacher manual and will serve as an example for teacher worldwide.

Several partners collaborated on this initiative which was coordinated by the United Nations Association Flanders Belgium (VVN). The partners include UNESCO Platform Vlaanderen, peace education services of the provinces West-Flanders and Antwerp, the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ), the Flemish heritage agency, etc.

On the occasion of the launch of the teacher manual, UNESCO will make a worldwide appeal to schools to remember the peace message that is contained in the underwater cultural heritage of World War I on **21 September** during the four years of the centenary of the First World War. This date was chosen because it is the International Day of Peace.



***More information on:***

**The Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage**

[www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage)

**The protection of the underwater cultural heritage of World War I**

[www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/world-war-i](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/world-war-i)

**The centenary of World War I in Flanders**

[www.2014-18.be](http://www.2014-18.be)

[www.wegwijzerwoi.be](http://www.wegwijzerwoi.be)

**The Flemish Trust Funds to UNESCO**

[www.vlaanderen.be/int/en/flanders-unesco-trustfund](http://www.vlaanderen.be/int/en/flanders-unesco-trustfund)

**The UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet)**

[www.unesco.org/new/en/education/networks/global-networks/aspnet](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/networks/global-networks/aspnet)

[www.unescoscholen.be](http://www.unescoscholen.be)

**The UNESCO actors and partners in Flanders**

[www.unesco.be](http://www.unesco.be)

**The Flemish Commission for UNESCO**

[www.unesco.be/vuc](http://www.unesco.be/vuc)

**The United Nations Association Flanders Belgium (VVN)**

[www.vvn.be](http://www.vvn.be)

**The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**

[www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)

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