

# The accessibility and the role of the beach during WWI

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Access to the sea was crucially important throughout the First World War. Beaches were therefore of the utmost strategic importance, even though they had many other functions as well. Furthermore, the Belgian coastline was divided in a German-occupied zone east of the Yser estuary and an area west of the river Yser that was controlled by the Allies in October 1914. This article discusses the “beach life” between 1914 and 1918, and how this sandy strip of Belgium got through those four difficult years.

## The coast occupied

After the capture of Antwerp on 10 October 1914, the German army could march on the Belgian coast without hindrance. On 12 October they occupied Ghent and two days later, on 14 October, troops commanded by Hans von Beseler entered Bruges. The coastal towns of Zeebrugge, Blankenberge and Ostend followed the next day, so that an important objective of the modified German attack plan was achieved. Although the occupation of the Flemish coast had not been considered nor prepared before the war (see De Meyer, in this issue), the German navy now virtually controlled the southern North Sea. The deployment of submarines and torpedo boats from Ostend, Zeebrugge and Bruges greatly increased the Flemish coast's strategic importance.

In the first few days of the occupation, the Germans consolidated their positions by entrenching their artillery, e.g. on the Ostend esplanade. They also emplaced guns on strategic locations such as high dune tops in the conquered coastal towns. The German military authorities took over command of the city of Ostend and announced the new rules to the population by means of *Bekanntmachungen* (proclamations) and *Befehlen* (orders).

The first article of the Proclamation of 21 October by commandant Tägert in Ostend read as follows: “*Entering the esplanade and the beach is prohibited within the city limits of Ostend. Persons living on the esplanade have to carry a pass.*” The next day, 22 October, a supplement to this measure was announced: “*The inhabitants of Ostend are*



■ As one of the first measures taken after the occupation of Ostend, commandant Tägert banned going for a walk on the esplanade. The slopes leading to the esplanade were blocked by means of beach cabins attached with barbed wire. This is Vlaanderenstraat in the direction of the esplanade (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

*forbidden to leave lights on in places overlooking the sea. Windows overlooking the sea have to be covered with roll-down shutters or curtains at night.*” This set the trend: the beach and the promenade became an exclusively German military zone where civilians were only exceptionally allowed or tolerated ...

The first clash between Allied and German forces in Ostend took place on 23 October 1914. Around noon, two British torpedo boats fired a few volleys at the city, whereupon the Germans responded with artillery fire. Officers and soldiers took cover in a panic while civilians, who were less familiar with the danger, looked on. Despite the German response, the British hit a target after a couple of minutes. A shell landed on the dining room of the Majestic Hotel and wreaked havoc. The shelling of 23 October resulted in the measures of 21 and 22 October being tightened and extended. On 28 October, Admiral von Schröder issued the

following order ‘as to the movement of the inhabitants of the Belgian coastal area’:

1° Full freedom of movement is abolished.  
2° Local traffic in the streets is subject to the following stipulations:

- *Entering the beach and the streets behind the beach is prohibited.*
- *The houses on the streets behind the beach as well as the adjacent houses on the sidestreets have to be evacuated.*

To enforce this order, the Germans blocked the streets leading to the beach and the esplanade with confiscated beach cabins, if this was not already the case. On the seaward side, a row of benches was placed in front of the cabins and all this was firmly attached with barbed wire (see picture)!



■ The beach of Ostend, deserted and without bathing machines, was provided with a bathing service for the military in the spring of 1915 (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

### **Verspätete Kurgäste** (delayed seaside visitors)

However, Ostend had much more to offer than just strategic interests. Ostend's fame as a seaside resort had not escaped the notice of the Germans. Fashionable Ostend, an important meeting place for the upper middle class in the Belle Époque period, received a horde of uninvited guests during the occupation. Nevertheless, the German officers and soldiers considered themselves seaside visitors and soon postcards were printed that illustrated this attitude.

In addition, a bathing service for the military appeared on the Ostend beach between the Casino Kursaal and the Palace Hotel in the spring of 1915 (see picture p.77). There were changes for the civilian population as well. On 7 May 1915, Mayor Liebaert informed the population that the Imperial German *Kommandantur* permitted entrance to the esplanade along and in the gallery from 8 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. This authorisation took effect on 8 May and applied to the part of the promenade located between Koninginnelaan and the entrance of the racecourse. The notice was slightly modified on 13 May: traffic on the esplanade along the gallery was allowed up to 8.30 p.m. The modification took effect the very same day.

The beach was now divided in zones fenced off with barbed wire. The zone for officers stretched from the slope near the



■ Prior to the First World War, Ostend had been an important meeting place for the upper middle class. German soldiers, unaccustomed to the sophisticated pre-war life in Ostend, considered themselves seaside visitors now. Here we see three soldiers on a bench on the promenade. They are represented as *Verspätete Kurgäste* (delayed seaside visitors) in Ostend (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

Kursaal to Wenenstraat (currently Kemmelbergstraat). Civilians were allowed to enter the beach between Wenenstraat and the continuation of Koninginnelaan. Non-commissioned officers had the area from Koninginnelaan to the steps in front of the gallery to themselves. Soldiers had to make do with the remaining zone in front of the gallery up to the large slope in front of the entrance of the Palace Hotel. A different zone

was allocated to each rank and the equipment made available also differed a great deal. To change clothes, the officers could make use of the luxurious cabins lined up on the beach in front of the promenade (see pictures p.77).

Next to the empty beach put at the disposal of the civilians (see picture), the non-commissioned officers had to change clothes in ordinary beach cabins. Finally,



soldiers had to use the gallery to change, but the men preferred to take off their clothes on the beach or on the nearby breakwater. They had never heard of swimming trunks... The Ostend civilian population, who was allowed to go for a walk in and along the gallery, often complained to the Mayor and the Chief of Police about all this indecency. Without success...

### Ostend as *Läusebad* (delousing bath)

Soldiers who had served at the front for a few months would be given leave to rest and recover for a while. Regiments that had showed 'exemplary' conduct were rewarded with a short stay at the coast. The units were transported by train to the 'health resort' of Ostend. For many German soldiers the visit to this city was the first time they saw the sea. Among those who came from the interior of Germany, only the well-to-do could afford the long journey to the North Sea or Baltic Sea and the sojourn there in peacetime.

Soldiers on furlough in Ostend had to pay a 'mandatory' visit to the Palace Hotel. The German navy had equipped this luxury hotel on the promenade as a *Desinfektionsbad* (disinfection bath) to enable soldiers to get rid of the bugs that thrived the trenches. Lice (and other pests) were a real nuisance to soldiers and were impossible to exterminate in the unhygienic conditions of the frontline. The Germans, however, were convinced that the lice infestation was the result of contact with lice-infested nations! After their clothes had been thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected, the men were rid of their unwelcome guests for a while. Many soldiers expressed their joy by writing verses on the walls of the sanitary facilities of the Palace Hotel. The following rhyme about Ostend was popular at the time: "*Ist es auch kein Weltbad heute – Macht's als Läusebad uns Freude*" (Although it's not a topnotch resort, it makes a fine delousing bath).

### Bathing according to rank and the rules

#### Bathing regulations

Germans who wanted to go for a swim had to observe the regulations. Initially (in the summer of 1915) these consisted of 9 stipulations, and they were extended to 11 articles in 1916. For instance, military staff were urged not to go into the water further than chest deep on account of the strong currents (art. 1) and to swim only at neap tide and rising tide (art. 2). Bathing was only and exclusively allowed in the designated area (art. 3). At each zone, signs warned swimmers for possible strong currents. The recreational beach was divided in four zones (see *Verspätete Kurgäste*) and stretched from the Kursaal to the entrance of the Palace Hotel. Soldiers were provided with fresh

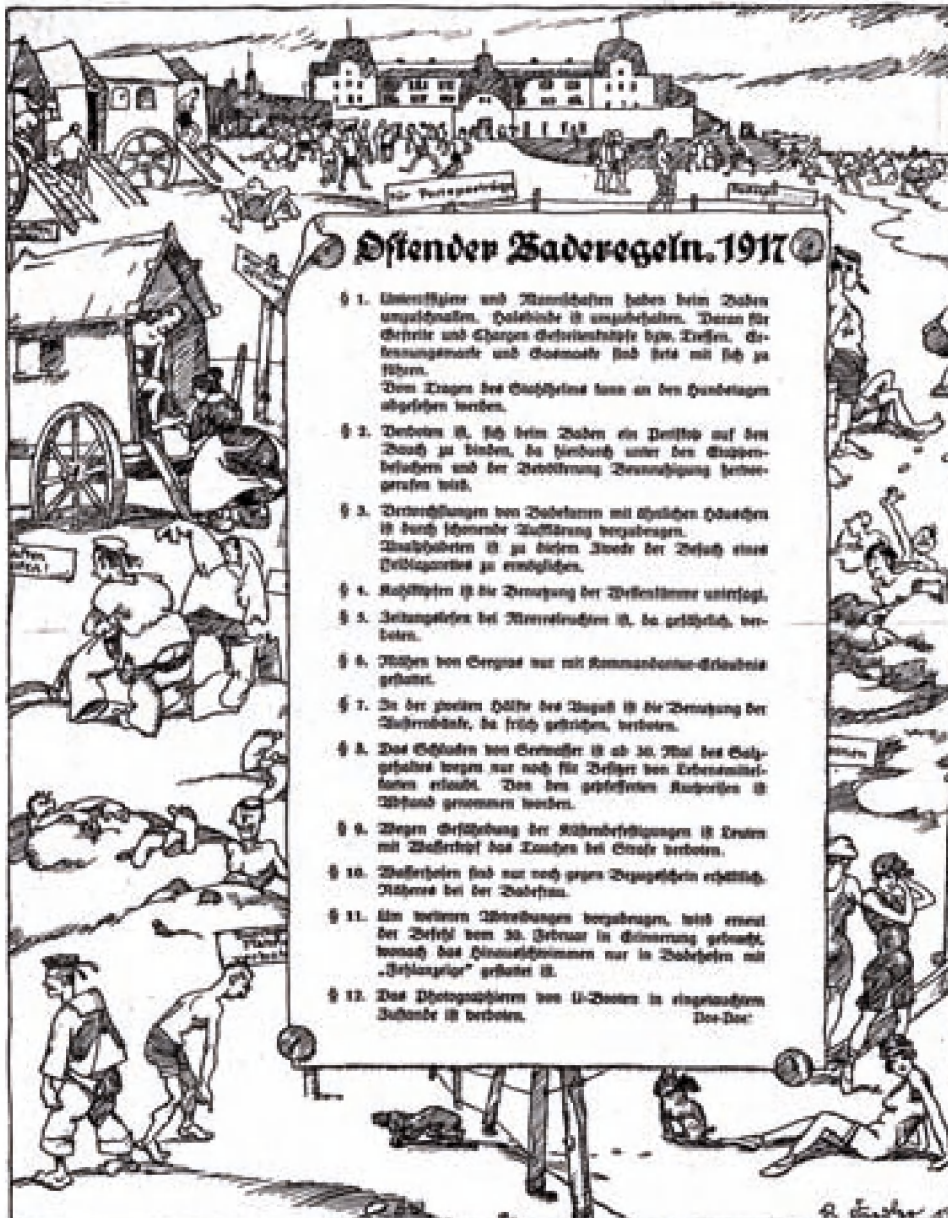


■ The contrast between the officer's area and the beach for civilians. A sign at the entrance of the bathing zone fenced off with barbed wire read: "Nur für Offiziere" (For officers only). Against the slope of the seawall there was a row of bathing machines where the officers could change clothes before they went for a swim. Civilians had to be content with being tolerated on the beach, since they did not have any bathing machines (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)



■ This picture was taken by F. Gerlach from Berlin and was entitled: "Am Strande von Ostende" (On the beach at Ostend). Once the men were on the beach, they got undressed on the spot and took a dip in the brine. For many soldiers who came from the interior of Germany this was the first time they saw the sea (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)





■ "Ostender Baderegeln 1917" (1917 Ostend bathing regulations) appeared in "An Flanderns Küste" on 15 August 1917. These regulations are a parody of the many rules as well as the officer's arrogant and haughty attitude. They claim the best stretch of the beach and do not allow private soldiers to come close. The drawing is clear: four half-hidden signs indicate that the area in the front left is for officers only. In the foreground, an officer calls his dog, who has just visited a bitch (the dog with the bow tie). The look of the recumbent lady is directed to us and speaks volumes (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

linen and swimming trunks for a small fee (art. 4). The beach reserved for civilians was off limits for all military staff who were off duty (art. 5). Buoys marked the swimming area and the men were supervised by an officer (art. 6). Bathing without swimming trunks and changing clothes on the beach were forbidden (art. 7). Troops who went to the beach with their rifles had to leave them at the racecourse during bathing (art. 8). In case of an air raid, the beach had to be abandoned immediately (art. 9). Alarms and the threat of bombings were made known by means of a siren (art. 10); in such cases, the supervising non-commissioned officer was given additional instructions (art. 11).

The men usually observed these regulations faithfully – except for changing clothes on the beach and swimming naked. The men felt no qualms about nudity; once a platoon had arrived on the beach, changing clothes (i.e. undressing) was done quickly. Trousers, tunic and the rest of the uniform were taken off on the spot and together they went into the sea in the nude (see picture p.77).

### Comical situations

A parody of the bathing regulations appeared in "An Flanderns Küste", the magazine of *Marinekorps Flandern*, in 1917. In "Ostender Baderegeln 1917" (1917 Ostend bathing regulations), the magazine mocked both the rules and the bathers (see below). The text was laid out like a poster on top of a scene from the Ostend beach life of the time. The drawing was made by Richard Fiedler and the text is signed with the pseudonym Poe-Poe.

In his parody, Poe-Poe first pokes fun at the officers. "During bathing (when only swimming trunks are worn) they have to gird on their belts and sabres and carry their facings and other badges with them. Periscopes may not be used during bathing so as not to cause panic. Bathing machines must not be confused with outhouses. Baldheads may not use the crest of the waves, and reading the paper by means of the phosphorescence of the sea is prohibited on account of being too dangerous. Seagrass may only be mown with prior permission by the Kommandantur, and the oyster beds must not be used in the second half of August because they have just been made. As from 30 May, swallowing seawater is only permitted to holders of a ration card on account of its salt content. However, spicy stories are exempted. People with water on the brain may not dive so as not to damage the coastal defences. Swimming trunks are only available in exchange for a receipt. To prevent drifting off, the order of 30 February is called to mind: swimming outside the zone is only allowed in swimming trunks without an identifying mark. Taking pictures of submerged U-boats is forbidden."

Some of the jokes in the parody by Poe-Poe may not be very edifying, but the drawing by Richard Fiedler is much more subtle (see illustration).

It is obvious for whom the rules on the poster were intended: a sign above the text reads "Für Portepeeträger" (for sword bearers), a derisory nickname for officers. To the right of the poster, in view of the officers, there are a few ladies... At the bottom of the drawing we see an officer who calls his dog to order after a visit to a bitch (the dog with the bow tie). A lady lying on the beach gives us a seductive look. And the men? Far away, near the Palace Hotel, they undress on the beach near the high-water mark and take a dip in the brine...



## A visit to the beach as propaganda

### A group photograph

In the *“Kriegs-Album des Marinekorps Flandern 1914-1917”*, the Marine Corps is represented as the protector of the threatened Flemish coast. The French and especially the British, who bombard the area and cause a great deal of damage, are depicted as the aggressors. A masterly example of pure propaganda. The *“Kriegs-Album”* includes a few pictures that show the ‘military’ beach life in Ostend. One picture shows the beach with hundreds of military bathing in the water. Two other images show soldiers in swimsuit in the sea. The caption to these photographs reads as follows: *“Ostend. Military beach life. Many thousands of German soldiers, including from units stationed far inland, who had probably never seen the sea before, were invigorated and refreshed by the cool waves in summertime.”* In other words, the soldiers had no reason to complain. In any case, propaganda wanted people to believe they had a grand time by the sea. Large-sized pictures of soldiers provided with an ‘appropriate caption’ (see below), as published by Paul Hoffmann & Co in Berlin-Schöneberg, had to spread the same message.

Officers and persons in authority preferably presented themselves as important and respected seaside visitors. They did not just claim the most exclusive part of the Ostend bathing area, they also wished to change clothes in luxurious cabins. And as was fitting for men of distinction, they had their picture taken in full dress uniform as a souvenir to take home. For the men, the Navy made a lifeboat with (inexperienced) German lifeguards available.



■ The caption to this picture of hundreds of elated soldiers on the Ostend beach reads: *“Beginn der Bade-Saison in Ostende”* (Beginning of the bathing season in Ostend). The German soldiers appear to have the time to start the new bathing season and paddle a bit! (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)



■ A postcard which troops often sent home is this one of a group of soldiers who had climbed on a bathing machine on the beach of Ostend. They are dressed in swimming trunks but still have their cap on. Such postcards reassured and soothed the home front so that the war efforts could continue (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)



■ An unused lifeboat used as decoration with the Royal Chalet in the background. German soldiers in swimsuit with their caps on (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)





■ Three officers, photographed in their bathing zone, try not to look stiff. Sitting casually in a wicker chair with a bucket inscribed "Oostende" between the legs and accompanied by a young local boy, they want to create the impression of being honoured and welcome guests (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

The city of Ostend was responsible for the parts of the beach reserved for the officers and non-commissioned officers. The (experienced) Ostend lifeguards now had to look after a new type of tourists: German officers in swimming trunks... The difference in experience between the German and Belgian lifeguards resulted in the drowning of 11 soldiers on 6 September 1915. We do not know how often the lifeboat was used to rescue people from drowning, but it was one of the most popular pieces of decoration (with the Royal Chalet in the background) in pictures taken on the beach (see photo).

The "*Kriegs-Album des Marinekorps Flandern 1914-1917*" demonstrated that the Marine Corps presented itself as the protector of the threatened Flemish coast. But the officers also liked to behave as honoured and well-liked guests. The civilian population – and in particular the children – were sometimes involved to add lustre to the picture.



■ Flemish beach fishermen pose for an (obligatory) photograph. A soldier from the *Marineabteilung* looks at the catch. The awkwardly posing fishermen with one dragnet and three push nets meet the photographer's requirements, but they do not seem to have set one foot in the water (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)





■ The “electric fence” on the Belgian-Dutch border. This photo of the beach in Knokke shows that it ran all the way to the water line. The fence was raised and extended over the course of the war. Initially it was about 1.50 m tall, and later on it was raised to about 2.50 m. Approx 500 people were killed by touching the fence (Collection of Erwin Mahieu)

### German soldiers and beach fishing

The military occupation of the coast and the ban issued by Admiral von Schröder (28 October 1914) on entering the beach for the civilian population meant the end of beach fishing. The bombings and especially the concern of the Germans that civilians would give “signals” to enemy warships were the reason for this ban. Although beach fishing was not practised anymore, a photographer from the Marine Corps had a few beach fishermen pose with their gear for an “action picture”. This photo was published in the *“Kriegs-Album des Marinekorps Flandern 1914-1917”*. It had to show that the German military was interested in the regional way of fishing. Five awkwardly posing fishermen with one dragnet and three push nets meet the photographer’s requirements, but they do not seem to have set one foot in the water (see picture)

### What about the other beaches along the coast?

Blankenberge, with its many hotels, was ideal for the German occupiers to billet troops. Also in this case, the esplanade became an exclusive German military area, the civilian population was not allowed to enter the beach, and bathing machines and a bathing service were put at the disposal of German soldiers so they could swim in the sea in summer. To ensure the troops’ safety, the *Kommandantur* requisitioned the local lifeguards. The rules were apparently relaxed later on and civilians were allowed on the beach from 1 p.m. to sunset. The area between Hotel Bürgerhof and Hotel

Excelsior (approx between the Kursaal and the Pier) remained exclusively reserved for the military, however. On 23 April 1917 *Leutnant und Platzmajor Letz* noticed that these rules were sometimes broken and from then on parents were held responsible for children ignoring the orders. Lt Letz made the following known:

*“Blankenberge, 23 April 1917. To the town council of Uytkerke.*

*Certain people, in particular elderly fishermen, have recently been found on the beach before 1 p.m. on repeated occasions. Furthermore, children and adults are often found in the prohibited area between Hotel Bürgerhof and Hotel Excelsior. As a result, the following has to be officially announced once more:*

*All civilians are strictly prohibited from entering the beach prior to 1 p.m. and after dusk. Entering the prohibited area of the promenade and of the beach between Hotel Bürgerhof and Hotel Excelsior is also forbidden. Parents shall be held responsible for children who violate this order. Violations shall in any case be punished as severe disobedience as from today.*

*By order of (signed) Letz, Leutnant und Platzmajor”.*

The neutral Netherlands were spared German occupation. To prevent Belgians from fleeing to the north and to halt the increasing smuggling during the first months of the war, the Germans constructed an electric fence on the Belgian-Dutch border. This “electric fence” stretched from the beach in Knokke (see image) over the area north of Antwerp all the way to Aachen. Construction

commenced on 31 March 1915. The fence in Knokke was energised with electricity on 31 August 1915. From then on it was impossible to smuggle or flee to the Netherlands over the beach.

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- *“Der Krieg hat uns mit ungezieferreichen Volkern in Berührung gebracht,...”* (page 44) in: *An Flanderns Küste, Kriegszeitung für das Marinekorps*, 1916-1918, 498 p.
- The rhyme was taken from page 44 in: *An Flanderns Küste, Kriegszeitung für das Marinekorps*, 1916-1918, 498 p. Translation according to Elleboudt and Lefevre: “Is het ook geen wereldbad heden, het maakt als luizenbad ons blijde” on page 274 in: *Oostende onder de Duitse bezetting 1914-1918*, Ostend, no date, 570 p. Free translation with a view to rhyme: “Alhoewel geen kuurplaats heden, maakt het ons als luizenbad tevreden”...
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- Boatswain’s mate Richard Fiedler, born in Lücknow in 1888, served with the High Seas Fleet (Hochseeflotte) before the war. He was a talented artist and this was noticed by Marinekorps Flandern. At their request he drew numerous illustrations for the magazine *An Flanderns Küste*. He died on 17 August 1918 from injuries sustained when an allied aircraft bombed Bruges (page 474, *An Flanderns Küste*).
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