

WW2 Memorials and Remembrance: German Military Cemetery in Cassino

VDK, Robert Tischler, Gerd Offenberg, Susie Müller-Diefenbach, German Soldiers' Cemetery

/Abstract

*"... May the teaching imparted by the fallen soldiers
be a guide to life and peace
for the present and future of humanity ..."*

Walter Trepte,
president of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge,
in his speech at the memorial ceremony,
for the inauguration of the
Germanic Military Cemetery of Cassino-Caira,
May 4, 1965.

The WW2 produced more than 250 thousand victims in central and southern Italy, and particularly in Cassino territory, very close to the German defensive Gustav line. Aim of this article is the documentation and valorization of these special architectural heritage that are silent witnesses to what the war has destroyed but mostly what peace has been able to rebuild. Today in Cassino area there are five military cemeteries in which rest soldiers of thirteen different nationalities who participated in Montecassino battle: Polish cemetery; Commonwealth cemetery; German cemetery; French cemetery and Italian cemetery. All the memorials were designed by some of the best architects and sculptors of the time and have monumental characteristics. We focus on German military cemetery in Caira (Cassino) designed by German architects Robert Tischler and Gerd Offenberg, both chief architect of the German War Graves Commission "Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge" - VDK.¹

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One of the most brutal events of WWII was in central Italy, close to German defensive Gustav line. It was the battle of Montecassino, which takes its name from the Benedictine abbey near which it was fought.

On 8th of September 1943 Italy ceased hostilities against the Allies signing the Armistice. In their retreat to the north, the Germans fell back on the so-called "Gustav Line", which cut Italy in two and which passed near the city of Cassino. This situation stalled until the Allies broke Gustav Line and entered Rome freeing it on 4th of June 1944.

Those that are remembered as the battle of Cassino and Montecassino began on 10 September 1943 with an aerial bombardment of the city by the Anglo-American Allied air forces and culminated the following year in the two violent battles of 15 February 1944, with the destruction of Montecassino Abbey, and 15 March 1944 with the destruction of the city of Cassino. The Montecassino battle produced more than 250 thousand victims¹.

Immediately after the battles, even before the war had ended, the bodies of soldiers killed in action were buried in provisional graves close to the combat areas. Such temporary cemeteries were organised by nationality.

After the end of the war -and in some cases years later- the governments of the nations that took part in Montecassino battle decided that the soldiers who died on the Gustav line should be buried in the places where they had fought and fell and to build some memorials.

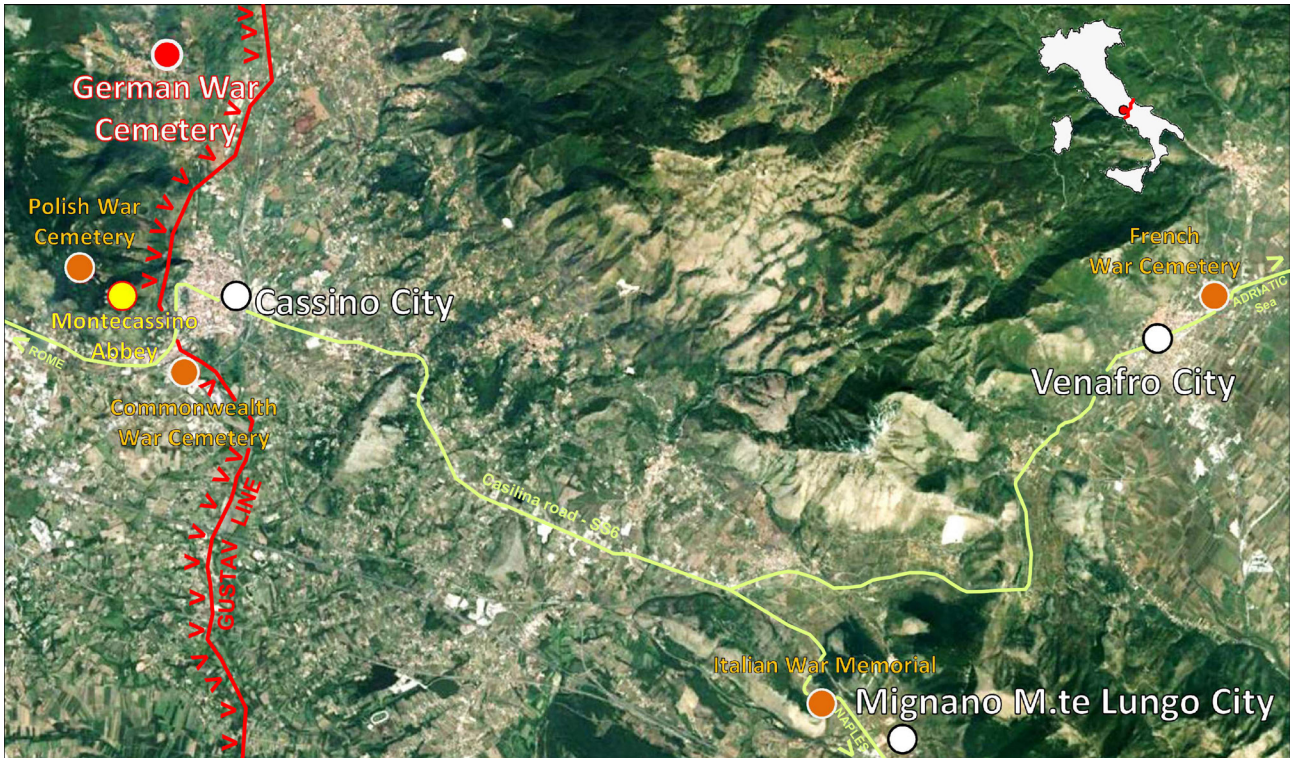
The memorials were designed by some of the best architects and sculptors of the time; they were able to significantly shape the sites, creating monumental scenarios of artistic, symbolic and scenic interest, despite being singularly heterogeneous in terms of style and typology. All the cemetery has monumental characteristics bestowed a definitive structure on the territory, in perpetual memory of the fallen.

Today in Cassino area there are five military cemeteries in which rest soldiers of thirteen different nationalities who participated in Montecassino battle. They are: Polish Cemetery in Montecassino with 1052 graves; Commonwealth cemetery in Cassino with 4271 graves; German cemetery in the village of Caira near Cassino with approximately 20080 graves; French cemetery in Venafro with 4345 graves and Italian Cemetery in Mignano Montelungo with 974 graves [Fig. 1].

The war cemeteries in the Cassino area are a topic of great interest, but still underestimated and little studied despite their historical and symbolic importance. They, together with the city of Cassino and the Abbey of Montecassino are important and touching symbols of the Second World War. This contribution focuses on the complex history of the design and construction of war cemeteries in the Cassino area, with a specific focus on the German monumental cemetery.

Focus of our research is the recovery and dissemination of historical docu-

¹ Even today are not precisely determined the number of soldiers of various nationalities fallen in the battles for Cassino.



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ments, particularly the original project drawings of the Second World War cemeteries in Italy. These documents, currently preserved in some archives or by the associations of the countries responsible for the maintenance of military cemeteries, offer precious information on design methods and representative methods chosen by different designers of various nationalities and with different training.

The research also aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the various monuments from an architectural and design point of view, to identify recurring typological patterns and understand how these elements influence the symbolic perception of visitors. Another aim of our research is to explore the symbolic dimension of war cemeteries to highlight how these places were designed and built to reflect and transmit values of peace and collective memory.

The Polish, British and French war cemeteries

The Polish cemetery is close to the Abbey of Montecassino. On 18th of May 1944 Polish soldiers climbed up to the almost destroyed abbey and defeated the last defending German troops. This was the last action in the battle for Cassino and Montecassino.

Polish cemetery is located on a wide trapezoidal area whose required the levelling of cratered land devastated by bombs. For its construction General Anders² who commanded the II Polish Army Corps established a committee for

2 Władysław Anders, (Błonie, Poland 1892-London 1970) played a fundamental role in the battle of Montecassino.

Fig. 1
Position of German Cemetery in Caira (Colle Marino) in the Liri Valley. The location is related to the other war cemeteries in the area and to the Gustav Line.

coordinating the necessary technical, legal and financial resources³. Architect Wacław Hryniewicz⁴ (a Polish Army lieutenant) designed the cemetery and by architect Jerzy Skolimowski⁵ (Olympic Rowing silver medal at Games of the X Olympiad in 1932 Los Angeles). Polish cemetery was built between 1944 and 1946 with the contribution of Polish soldiers of the II Army Corps and with the help of Italian workers.

The Polish architect and sculptor Michał Paszyna⁶ created the sculptures. The two hussar eagles on pedestals at the entrance gate are by Italian sculptor Duilio Cambellotti⁷. The entrance has a long pedestrian approach path which leads to a semi-circular travertine paved area that precedes the burial plots. The rows of graves are arranged in six rectangular plots divided by a central sequence of steps, at the top of which are located an altar and ramps leading to an external green space with a monumental cross marked out with trees. The latter frames the large stone eagle, the symbol of Poland. The burial area is dominated by the colour white which recalls the stone paving, the retaining walls and the gravel paths between the individual tombstones. The green space at the upper section of the cemetery creates a strong chromatic contrast, accentuated by the sloping lie of the land. Polish cemetery was consecrated on 1 September 1945 with a multi-faith ceremony attended by representatives of Polish Government and Allied Armies Command.

The most important military cemetery of the British Commonwealth in Italy is in Cassino. The site for the cemetery was chosen as early as January 1944 but due to the continuation of the battle it was only possible to use it after the retreat of German forces. It was inaugurated in 1956 in the presence of the Commander of all Allied forces in Italy, the British General Harold Alexander⁸ and all the ambassadors of the Commonwealth.

In the central part of the cemetery, on the sides of a large ornamental pool, is located the *Cassino Memorial* that commemorates soldiers who fell in action throughout Italy and whose graves are not known. The architect and urban

3 Once completed, the cemetery was initially entrusted to the monks of Montecassino. The cash contribution, which should have covered the ordinary maintenance costs of the structure for a long time, soon became insufficient. So, the management of the cemetery was taken over by Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti in guerra italiano (General Commissariat for Honors for the Fallen in Italian Wars).

4 Wacław Jerzy Hryniewicz, (S. Petersburg 1909-London 1987). Was an architect, graduate of the Warsaw University of Technology. He participated - with awards - in numerous architecture competitions and at the 1937 International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Paris. He participated in the battle of Monte Cassino. The design of the Polish War Cemetery in Monte Cassino was developed together with the architect Jerzy Skolimowski.

5 Jerzy Walerian Skolimowski, (Łuków 1907-London 1985). Was an architect, graduate of the Warsaw University of Technology. He was awarded, in 1939, by the Association of Polish Architects for the design of the Polish pavilion. Decorated with the "Virtuti Militari" cross, he had an extensive career as a military and as a designer. After the war, having settled as a refugee in London, he will work as an architect under the name of George Skolly (aka George Deen). He was a lecturer at the Polish University in exile in London and a member of the Society of British Industrial Art.

6 Michał Paszyna, (Warsaw 1903- Castello di Rotaio-Camaiore 1970). He was an architect and sculptor, he created the decorative elements of the Polish war cemetery in Bologna, built in 1946 on a project by Eng. arch. Zygmunt Majerski. He was a professor at the Silesian Polytechnic in Poland.

7 Duilio Cambellotti, (Rome 1876-Rome 1960). He was a sculptor and master of applied arts; he was intensely involved in the aesthetic-social problems of his time. As a sculptor, in the first post-war period, he also created some monuments to the Fallen in Terracina and Fregene.

8 Harold Alexander, (London 1891-Slough 1969). He was commander of the allied forces in Italy, he was one of the protagonists of the battle of Cassino. Together with General Eisenhower and the Italian Marshal Pietro Badoglio, he concluded the armistice of 8 September 1943.

planner Louis de Soissons⁹ designed the memorial. In the 1920s he was credited as the designer of England's *Welwyn Garden City*. This city enacts Ebenezer Howard's theories about ideal cities on a human scale. He studied in Paris at Ecole des Beaux Arts. After Second World War, the fame of the landscape architect, in addition to his experience in the garden city, earned him the prestigious commission of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, on behalf of which he will design forty-six military cemeteries in Italy and Greece.

The British cemetery is conceived as a private garden, placed higher than the level of the road from which it is not possible to see the inside of the cemetery itself. A fence creates a feeling of private space and symbolically focuses the vision on Montecassino. Close to the entrance there is a rectangular pavilion, which acts as a filter and element of communication between the external and internal space.

The tombs are organized in a rectangular layout and arranged according to an orthogonal grid in the center of which there is an ornamental basin aligned with the entrance temple. The pedestrian paths are only in the entrance areas and around the pond, leaving the visitor free to roam freely in the green of the large lawn where the tombstones are placed.

According to an agreement signed with Italy, the care of the cemetery it is delegated to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission – CWGC¹⁰. It was instituted by Royal Decree on 21 May 1917. It deals with the maintenance of the graves of 1.7 million men of the Commonwealth armed forces who fell in the WW1 and WW2.

The French cemetery was built between September 1945 and December 1946 by the *Genie Militaire Francais* on an area of about 70,000 square metres. Near the entrance there is a chapel which contains the history of the French army battles; the French architect André Chatelin¹¹ designs this "Chapelle". The cemetery is organised in three parts according to the religion of the buried soldiers. The graves are white on a grass surface, and everyone carries the fallen's name, rank and date of death. The first part contains the graves of French soldiers and is in front of the entrance near the Chapel, crosses mark all graves. The second part of the cemetery is spread around a minaret and contains the tombs of Moroccan and Tunisian troops in French contingent. These graves are marked with round stones facing Mecca as customary in Muslim religion. The third part, at the bottom of the cemetery, is dedicated to soldiers belonging

9 Louis de Soissons, (Montreal 1890-London 1962). He was a landscape architect and designed garden cities. His training took place between London and Paris, where he attended the École des Beaux Arts. after World War II he designed forty-six military cemeteries with significant environmental characteristics between Italy and Greece on behalf of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

10 Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was established by Royal Decree on May 21, 1917. It deals with the maintenance of the graves of 1.7 million Commonwealth soldiers who fell during the two world wars. The CWGC also deals with the construction and care of memorial stones for the fallen, whose burial place is unknown. The Commission is also interested in safeguarding documents relating to cemeteries and memorials in various countries. The cost of running the cemeteries is shared between member governments in proportion to the number of their graves.

11 André Chatelin, (Paris 1915-Boulogne-Billancourt 2007). In 1943 he won the first prize of the Grand Prix de Rome for the Architecture section. In 1947 the French Ministry of Defence commissioned him the project of military cemetery of Monteriggioni (Siena) which will not be built.

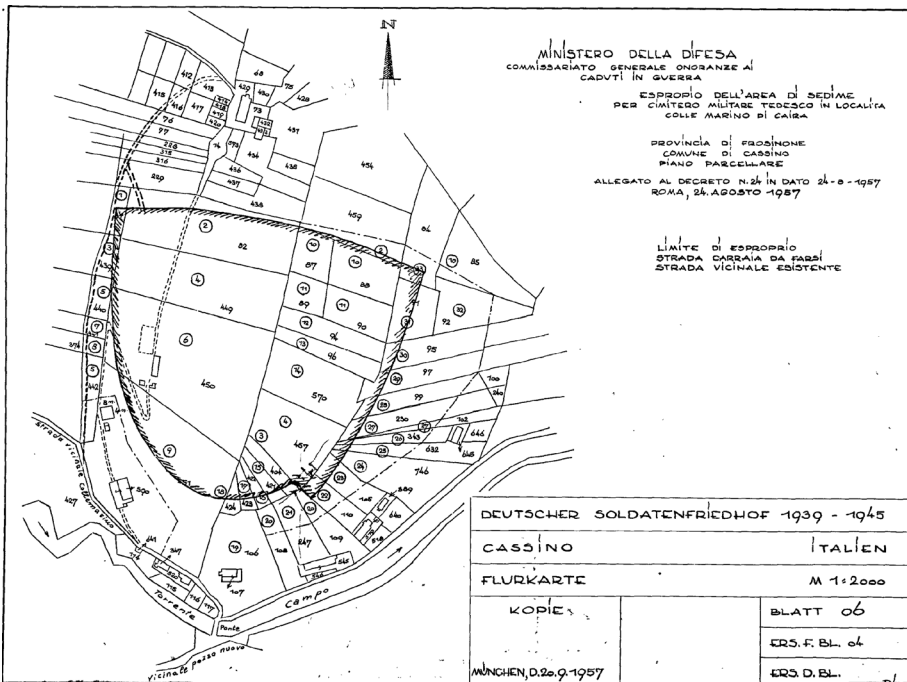


Fig. 2

Location of other German military cemeteries in Italy, with reference to the number of fallen buried. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 3

Detailed plan of expropriations for the construction of the German cemetery by the Italian Ministry of Defence, Commissioner General Honors to the Fallen in War – CGOC. Original in scale 1:2000. (VDK Archive).

to other faiths, those of the Jewish religion and those coming from the African animist areas of the French colonies.

Italian Military Memorial in Mignano Montelungo

In December 1943, on the border between Latium and Campania regions, in the municipality of Mignano Montelungo, a violent battle was fought to breach the Gustav line. In the mid-1950s, the Italian military cemetery was built in this area by architect V. Kusmisky¹². We know little about this designer; some clues say he was born in Ekaterinoslav (Russia) in 1908 and graduated from the University of Rome.

The cemetery develops along vertical lines with rows of tombs arranged in six orders, centrally divided by a sequence of steps culminating in a portico with two side wings. The facade of the portico bears the Latin epigraph "*Mortui ut patria vivat*" (dead so that the Homeland may live). In the center of the memorial there is a black marble altar, above which a white marble statue of a dying soldier was erected. It is by Italian sculptor Pietro Canonica¹³.

The graves of the 190 dead in Montelungo are placed on both sides of a portico. On six terraces there are the graves of 784 soldiers who died in the war of liberation from fascism in various conflict zones. The cemetery has an access stairway aligned with a statue of the Madonna placed at the bottom of it.

The Caira German cemetery

The German cemetery is located near the village of Caira, close to Cassino. It is one of the largest German war cemeteries in Italy [Fig. 2]. The guidelines for the creation of the German cemetery were developed by the German War Graves Commission "Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge" - VDK. The VDK is a private organization dedicated to the identification and maintenance of the graves of Germans who fell abroad. The VDK was founded in 1919 after the end of the First World War, since the early 1930s it has built many German war cemeteries¹⁴. The German military cemetery of Cassino is one of the fourteen projects that the VDK has conducted in Italy.

Construction of the German cemetery began in 1959 under the direction

12 Vladimiro Kusmisky, (Ekaterinoslav, 1908). Some clues can be found in an October 1942 issue of the Regia Gazzetta which lists the name of those who passed the exam for the profession of architect. Among the names we read: Kusmisky Vladimiro, by Alexander, born in Ekaterinoslav (Russia) on November 25, 1908, graduated from the University of Rome. His name is also found in a 1960 document from the Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile. This Committee, headed by Thomas Whittemore, aided and supported many young Russian exiles in various European countries. Then Kusmisky, assisted by the Committee as a refugee, studied architecture in Italy.

13 Pietro Canonica, (Moncalieri 1869-Rome 1959). He attended the Albertina Academy in Turin and participated in numerous national and international exhibitions. He worked at the main courts of Europe, making busts aristocrats. After the First World War and after the Second World War, his sculptures concerned monumental and celebratory compositions.

14 In 1954 the Federal Government entrusted the Volksbund with the search and care of the fallen in war abroad.

Fig. X

of Robert Tischler¹⁵ who was a landscape architect [Fig. 14]. From 1926 to 1959 Tischler held the position of chief architect of the VDK and designed many German war cemeteries. Caira German cemetery was completed in 1964 by Gerd Offenberg¹⁶ who succeeded Robert Tischler as chief architect of the VDK.

VDK preferred simple formal solutions that established a relationship with the surrounding landscape, creating a shady place for the fallen to rest. This specific typological model, in close connection with the landscape, is attributable to an innovative approach by Gerd Offenberg. He departs from Tischler's original plan giving the same symbolic importance to landscape and buildings, integrating them with an articulated network of paths.

The cemetery develops concentrically around a hill, covering almost half of it [Figg. 4-5]. The tombs are arranged to form ascending terraces divided into 34 blocks [Fig. 12]. They, following the shape of the hill, converge towards its summit where there is a large bronze cross [Fig. 13]. The general composition is based on a small variety of materials and shapes that give the whole cemetery an essential image. This design purpose can also be found in the tombs marked by simple marble tombstones that emerge isolated from the green of the lawn, devoid of any funerary decoration. [Fig. 11]. Starting from the main road a short pedestrian path arrives at the Pavilion which is the formal entrance to the memorial [Fig. 6] and the filter with the outside [Fig. 10]. At the entrance to the path there is a bronze sculpture by Suse Müller-Diefenbach¹⁷ who was director of sculpture courses at Weimar Academy. The sculpture represents the figures of "*Affliction and Consolation*" (Trauer und Trost) recalling two parents who have lost their son.

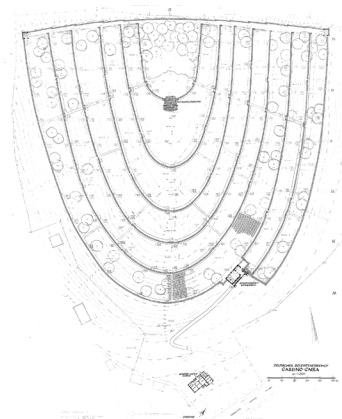
The cube-shaped entrance building is a work that surprises with its shapes and volumes, they are the result of a careful design that makes use of stone slabs of regular shape, minimalist, to which the sculpture placed in the center of the ceremonial hall acts as a counterpoint. The space has a strong symbolic appeal, immersing the visitor in a contemplative atmosphere [Figg. 9-10]. Here light is protagonist, it is designed to create optical illusions and suggestive play of shadows and to emphasize the space.

The complex, which is accessed via a flight of steps, is geometric in an alternation of solids and voids, lights and shadows that fit inside the structure and give volume to the solids [Fig. 10]. You enter in silence, on tiptoe, each sound has an acoustic return that recalls the monuments of classicism. The surfaces are regular to emphasize that German minimalism that gives the work an "bunker" effect. However, the effect is broken by the large opening that opens

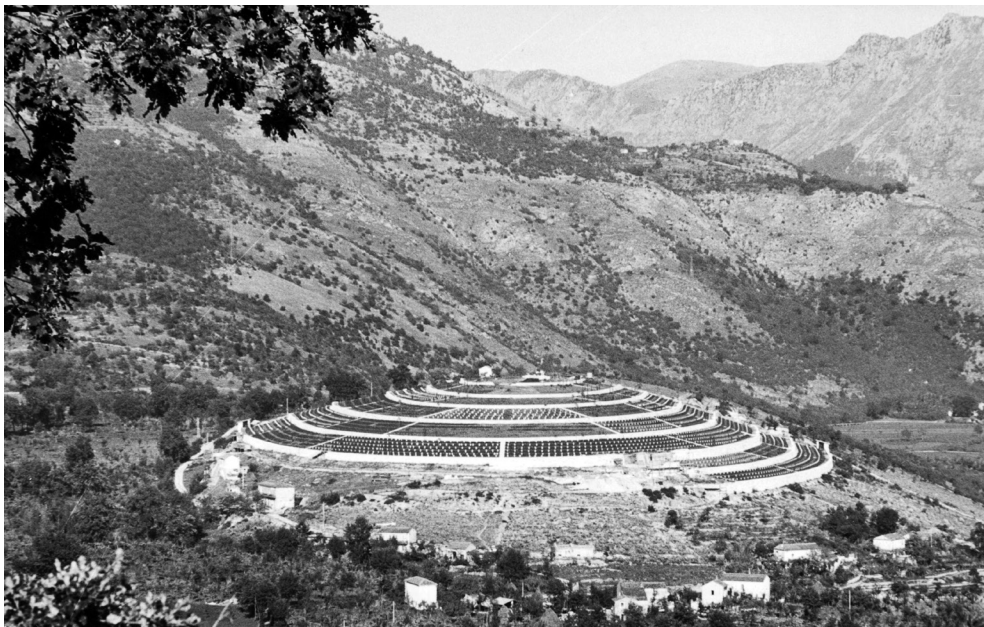
15 Robert Tischler, (Frontenhausen 1885-Munich 1959). He was a landscape architect.

16 Gerhard Offenberg, (Erwitte 1897-Mainz 1987). In 1942 he headed the Faculty of Architecture and Fine Arts in Weimar, between 1948-1960 he headed the unit for urban and regional planning of the Ministry of Finance and the reconstruction of Rhineland-Palatinate.

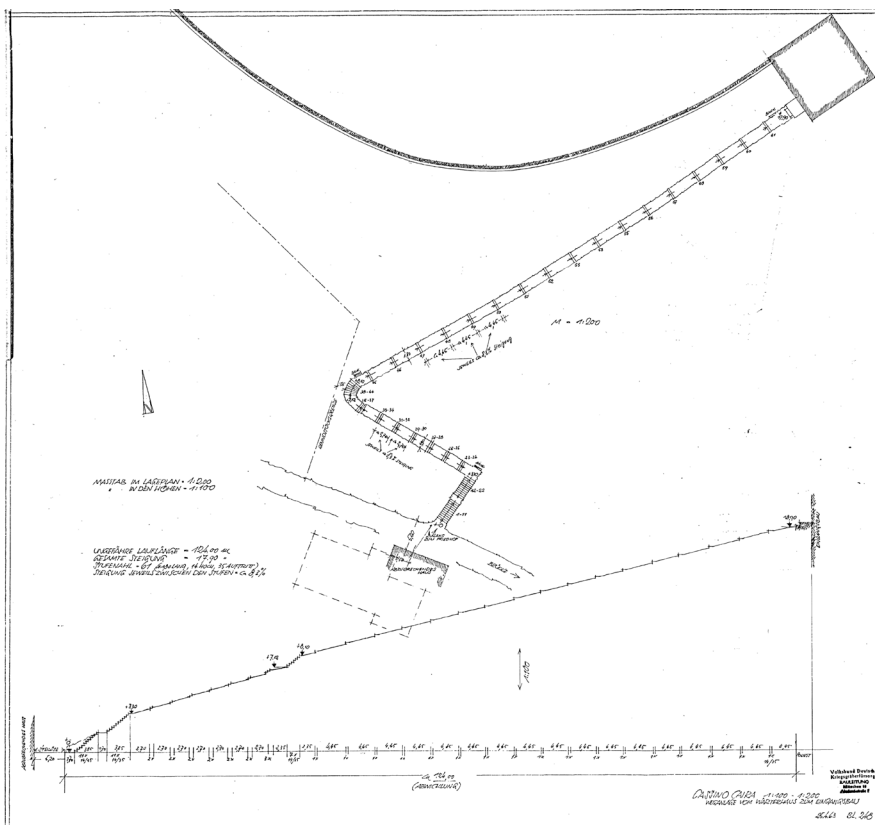
17 Suse Müller-Diefenbach, (Stuttgart 1911-Tübingen 1997). She studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart. She was director of the sculpture course at the Weimar Academy. From 1945 to 1951 she was a lecturer in life drawing and modelling at the Technical University of Stuttgart, Department of Architecture.



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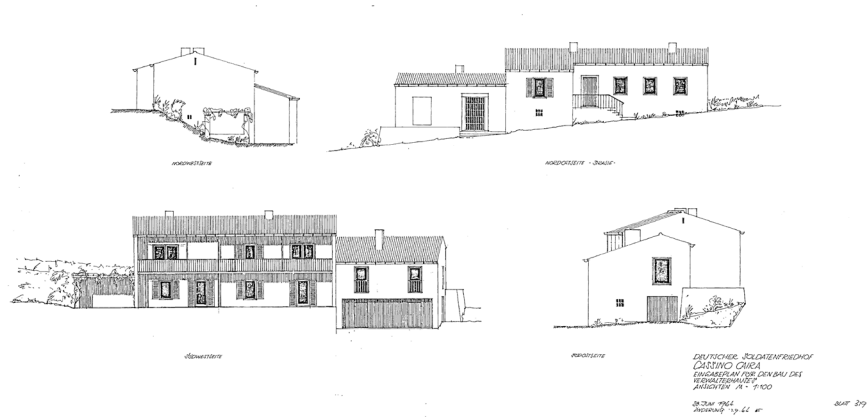
Fig. 4
General plan of the cemetery, with a quoted plan of the new arrangement. Below reception building and caretaker's home. At the end of the access path, there is the entrance building to the cemetery area. Original in scale 1:250. On the right plastic of project of the entire cemetery. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 5
Panoramic view of the German military cemetery, in 1965 (VDK Archive).

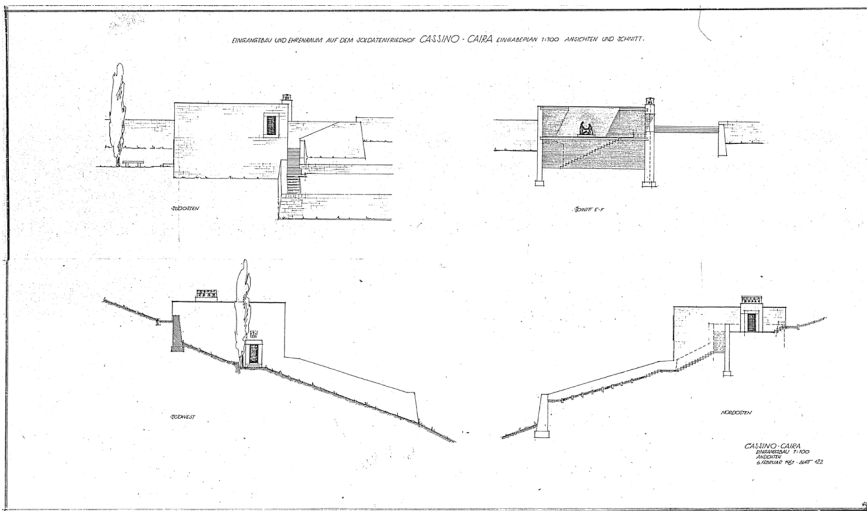
Fig. 6
Floor plan and detail section of the access ramp to the cemetery (from reception to entrance). The ramp is 124.00 meters long and has a vertical drop of 18.90 meters. Original in scale 1: 100 (floor plan) and 1:100 elevation). (VDK Archive).



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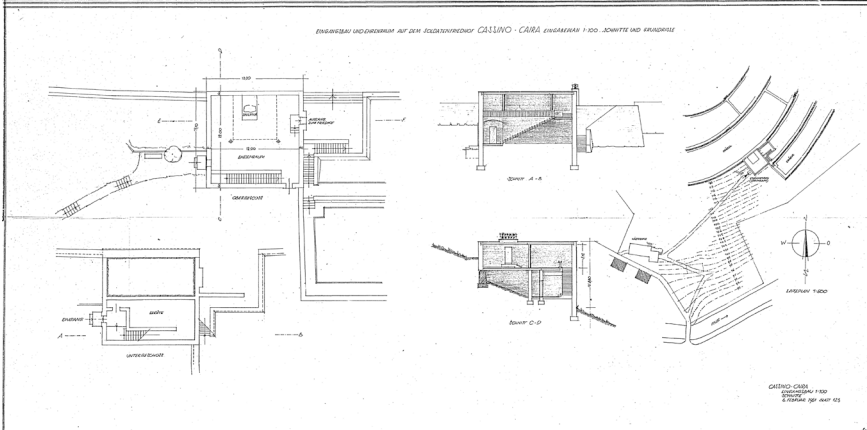


Fig. 7

Reception building and caretaker's home. On the right the entrance building. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 8

Project drawings: elevations of reception and caretaker's home. Original in scale 1: 100. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 9

Project drawings: elevations and sections of entrance building and ceremonial hall. Original in scale 1: 100. (VDK Archive).

towards the sky, letting in a bright cone of light. The passage through these pure forms, which capture and reflect the light, calls the visitor to an act of transition, with a strong visual and emotional impact. On the one hand the memory of what happened, on the other the glare that leads to what will be, remaining suspended on an incorporeal concept of life and death [Fig. 10].

In one of his reports, the designer himself describes the construction of the building and the choice of sculpture recalling two parents who have lost their son. "... I inserted a simple travertine cube into this landscape ... in this cube, between the simple walls, a linear staircase leads to the hall of honor. Here, under the open sky, there is a sculpture 'Affliction and Comfort'. The argument arose from conversations with my wife, having lost our son. ... This bronze sculpture is the only work of art in a simple but precious space made of travertine. ..." [Fig. 10].

German Cemetery: Project Drawings

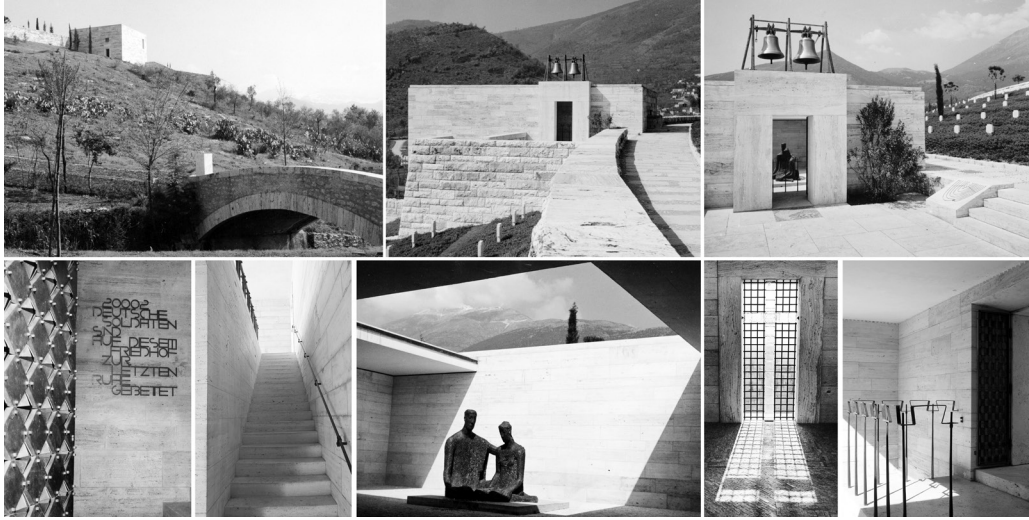
The construction of the German Cemetery of Caira was certainly preceded by an extended period of analysis and study, both formal and architectural, of the territory and the chosen area. The design respects precise guidelines of the VDK. These follow a repeated typological model of close connection with the nearby landscape. Some recurring architectural elements characterize the general layout of the cemetery: the entrance, the ascent path, the monument of honor, the large summit cross. They determine a pleasant relationship between visitors and the surrounding environment. The secretary of the VDK, Christel Eulen, in a speech identifies the choices for the location of military cemeteries: "... we like to lead our dead towards the light and lay them on the heights of a hill for their last rest ...".

The project for the German military cemetery of Caira highlights, more than others, the stylistic and aesthetic evolution followed by the VDK and by its designers Tischler and Gerd Offenberg. The model and the previous tradition of the "Totenburg" (Fortresses of the dead) characteristic of the period 1933-1939, are no longer followed. The design is therefore aimed at greater transparency and the characterization of a larger open space.

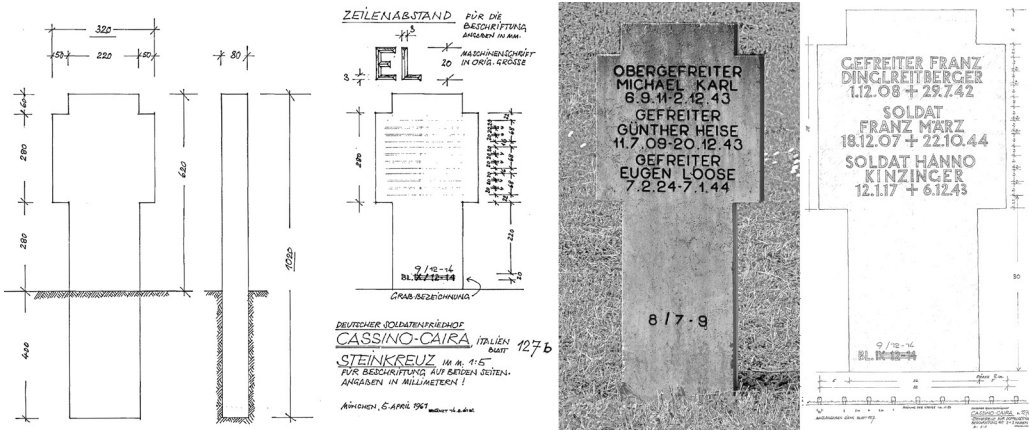
The project graphics attached to the design documentation of the cemetery are accurate, even if essential. In this contribution, some general drawings are shown in the figures, (Detailed plan of chosen area; elevations and sections of entrance buildings; floor plan of the access ramp and details of the large commemorative cross and soldiers' tombstones) [Figg. 3, 6, 8, 9,11, 13].

Conclusions

The war cemeteries built in Cassino area are silent witnesses to the tragedy of war and the regenerative power of peace. The city of Cassino and the Abbey of Montecassino were destroyed during the Second World War. They and the



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cemeteries represent not only the memory of the victims, but also society's ability to rebuild and be reborn from the ashes of destruction; they are fundamental for understanding the historical and moral legacy of the conflict and the values of peace.

The war cemeteries in the Cassino area are a topic of great interest, but still underestimated and little studied. Each of them deserves further study due to the importance of the designers involved, their integration with the surrounding landscape, the profound symbolism they express, the innovative architectural solutions and the use of materials. This study aims to be a starting point for a deeper comprehension and valorisation of these monuments, which helps to understand their symbolic and planning value. In this contribution, we examined the German military cemetery, highlighting the main design choices, some of which anticipate the minimal art of the second half of the twentieth century, recognizable in the "Ceremonial Hall" with the sculpture "Affliction and Consolation" (Trauer und Trost). The precise historical reconstruction clarifies the real developments of the construction methods of an architecture that presents some references to rationalism, with a singular and well-defined typology. This trend, combined with a strong scenographic component, characterizes a model that is also found in other military cemeteries, although with significant variations.

This contribution, focused on the horrors of war, intends to promote the collective memory of past conflicts as a warning and a call for peace: "...those who doubt Europe ... should visit the Military Cemeteries ...". Jean-Claude Juncker (President of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019).

Fig. 10

Entrance building of the military cemetery and ceremonial hall. Top: panoramic view and view of exit portal from cemetery side. Down: entrance door, internal staircase, ceremonial hall with the sculpture "Affliction and Comfort" by the sculptress Suse Müller-Diefenbach, artistic stained glass window and exit towards the cemetery. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 11

Detailed drawings of buried soldiers' funeral crosses. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 12

View of a sepulchral circle and stairway from one circle to another. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 13

Project drawings of the top of military cemetery with the large commemorative cross. Photographic views and detailed construction drawing of the large metal cross. (VDK Archive).

Fig. 14

Architect Robert Tischler, designer of the Cairra cemetery (in the center).

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