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Marinegebiet

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The *Marinegebiet* on the Belgian coast was the Imperial German Navy's base for attritional warfare against Entente shipping in the North Sea. The resulting occupation regime was particularly harsh on civilians; their plight was compounded by British aerial and naval bombing.

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Territory and Purpose

Among the European territories [occupied](#) by imperial [Germany](#) during the First World War, the *Marinegebiet* (Marine Area) stands out for its functional specificity. This area on the [Belgian](#) coast was occupied by the Imperial German Navy, specifically by the *Marinekorps Flandern* (Naval Corps Flanders), which built it into a base from which to attack Entente shipping. Led by Admiral [Ludwig von Schröder](#) (1854-1933), an old acquaintance of Admiral [Alfred von Tirpitz](#) (1849-1930), the *Marinekorps* took command in the area on 20 October 1914. Not an actual army corps at first, it consisted of a single naval division of some 17,000 reservists and regular troops, taken from the bases of Kiel and Wilhelmshaven. From November 1914, a second division of 20,000 made the unit a corps. A third division would be created in June 1917. The area under its command, the *Marinegebiet*, was a wedge of territory of some 400 km², delimited by an arc that ran from the Belgian-Dutch border to the Belgian coast four kilometres west of Ostend. It comprised some forty kilometres of Belgian coast, with a triangle of harbors – Ostend, and Bruges with its brand-new sea-

port, Zeebrugge. The headquarters of the *Marinegebiet* were at Bruges. The *Marinekorps* built up the *Marinegebiet* into a base for the kind of [naval warfare](#) known as *Kleinkrieg* – not the full frontal clash between warships on the high seas (*Großkrieg*), but the lateral [attrition](#) of vulnerable Entente shipping routes in the North Sea, using destroyers, [minelayers](#), and B- and C-type [submarines](#). Its submarine flotilla, led by *Korvettenkapitän* [Karl Bartenbach \(1881-1949\)](#), would be responsible for about one-quarter of Entente and [neutral](#) tonnage sunk during the entire war. In the process, the Flemish coast became one of the most heavily fortified and occupied coastlines in the world.

Civilian Participation

Von Schröder enjoyed both *Immediatstellung*, i.e., he answered only to [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), and had complete authority over his area, including over [civilian matters](#). From the start, this exclusively military regime severely curtailed the rights of the 200,000 or so civilians under its jurisdiction, and pressed or forced many of them into its service. In Bruges alone (a city of 80,000), by the war's end, an estimated 4,000 Belgians worked in the reparation workshops, on the docks and in dredging. Others were sent to reinforce the frontline defenses or the military frontier on the Belgian-Dutch border. Recalcitrant workers faced a penal camp in the village of Dudzele north of Bruges, or the murderous penal colony in the fortress of Sedan (France). Because suspicion against local workers ran high, only German personnel – both *Marinekorps* troops and subcontracted workers from Germany - were allowed near the submarines and other confidential *loci*. The *Marinekorps*' structural lack of manpower worsened considerably from 1917 as a result of the ever-intensifying naval and aerial British bombing campaign against the bases, which necessitated stepped-up repair efforts even as more men were sent to the fronts – where, as was clear by the [spring of 1918](#), the war would be decided, rather than on the seas. For this reason, the bold British [raids on Ostend and Zeebrugge](#) of 23 April 1918, and the second Ostend raid of 9-10 May 1918, inconclusive to begin with, did not influence the war's outcome.

Bombings and Poverty

These bombings, together with the anti-[aircraft](#) counter barrage, deepened the civilian misery: in Bruges, 247 people were killed and a similar number was severely injured; in Ostend, as [war diaries](#) show, lethal bombings became an almost daily (and nightly) occurrence in the summer of 1918. The war brought other hardships: the freezing of employment – other than work for the *Marinekorps*, or eking out a living through [prostitution](#) or petty crime - made for bitter poverty with attendant [malnutrition](#) and disease, even if the aid provided by the international [Commission for Relief](#), the [National Committee](#), and the municipal governments introduced redistributive arrangements that, however timid, broke through the pre-war exclusive reliance on charity. As for Germany, for a brief moment during the defeat, on 5 November 1918, von Schröder seemed to be the man of the hour, almost tasked with the quashing of the “[rebellion](#)” in Kiel – proof of the shadow cast by the all-military *modus operandi* and the seeming success of the *Marinekorps*.

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