



Liberation Route Europe

TOUR & TRAVEL GUIDE GERMANY

## Julius Erasmus and the Vossenack cemetery



Julius Erasmus

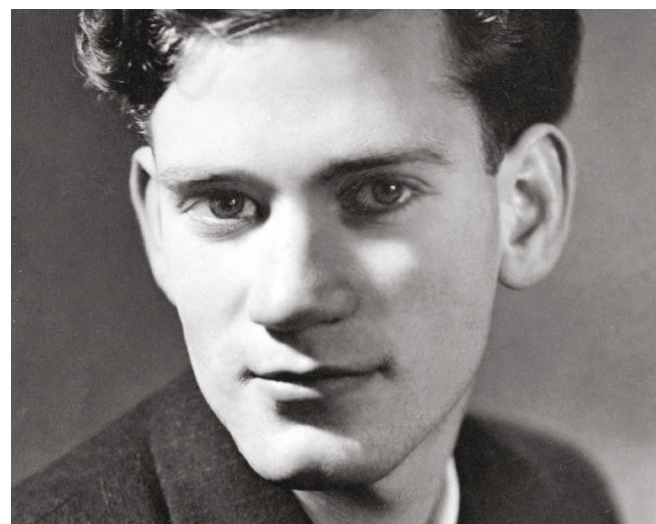
The former German Engineer Captain Julius Erasmus returned to the Hürtgen Forest just months after the end of WWII.

He found dozens of bodies of German soldiers still lying in the woods and decided to give them a respectful grave. In the following years, he recovered 1.569 German bodies from the forest, often putting his own life at risk, as the terrain was mined. He collected as many personal data as possible and carpentered simple wooden crosses for every grave. Today's war cemetery in Vossenack - situated on Hill 470, a scene of fierce fighting - is the resting place of the bodies that Erasmus recovered, with the help of villagers.



Julius Erasmus

## Ralph Neumann



Ralph Neumann

Ralph Neumann grew up in Berlin as the son of Jewish parents. He eluded deportation twice: in early 1943, when he was just 16, and in early 1945, when he managed to flee from the Gestapo during an air raid.

Shortly before the capitulation of Nazi Germany, he participated in an action of resistance in Berlin to protest against the Nazi appeal for fierce resistance to Soviet soldiers: on the night of 18 April, 1945 the Uncle Emil Group painted the word Nein (NO) in large letters on train stations and building façades.

Two weeks later the war was over in Berlin. Ralph Neumann later recalled: "We wanted to shout to the world that we were again free. We hugged and kissed and danced around... Our new-found freedom was emotionally overwhelming; but joy was also mixed with great sadness. The reality of the loss of our mother, brother, and other relatives came to the forefront. The report that millions were killed in the holocaust was devastating news."

"Joy was also mixed with great sadness"



## Joe Polowsky



Joe Polowsky seated in a Jeep with American and Soviet Soldiers (credit: City of Torgau)

Joe Polowsky was one of the U.S. soldiers who met the Soviet troops on the Elbe near Torgau in April 1945. After the war, he dedicated his life to promoting peace and mutual understanding among nations. Torgau remained an important symbol for him and he was buried there in 1983 despite the Cold War.

Born on 2 October 1916 in Chicago, Joe attended the University of Chicago before being drafted into the U.S. Army's 69th Infantry Division in December 1941. As the youngest son of Jewish-Russian parents originally from Kiev, Polowsky spoke fluent Russian. On 25 April 1945, as part of a reconnaissance platoon led by Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue, they became the first Americans to meet Soviet soldiers on the Elbe River near Torgau – a symbolic meeting representing the closure of the Eastern and Western Fronts. The photo of this meeting circulated around the world and still stands today as a potent symbol of the end of the war.



Joe Polowsky at Eble Day in 1960 (credit: City of Torgau)

## Sophie Scholl

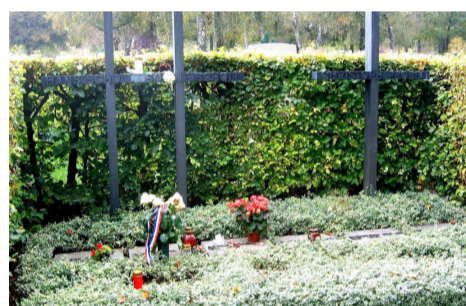


Sophie Scholl

Sophie Scholl was part of the White Rose (Weiße Rose) resistance group.

The group consisted of a few students and professors of the University of Munich, who printed and distributed anti-war pamphlets around German cities between June 1942 and February 1943. This action was motivated by their experiences of fighting on the Eastern Front, which resulted in their call for non-violent resistance against the Nazi regime.

Sophie, a biology and philosophy student, joined her brother Hans, who was already engaged with the group. On 18 February 1943, Sophie and her brother were caught distributing pamphlets by the janitor of the university. The same day they were arrested by the Gestapo. The process against Sophie and Hans took place behind closed doors four days later. Together with Christoph Probst, they were convicted to the guillotine, and the verdict was executed that same day.



Graves of Sophie and Hans Scholl

## Key events & commemorations

27<sup>th</sup> January Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism

February Battle of Hürtgen Forest

23-27<sup>th</sup> March Crossing of the Rhine River

16-19<sup>th</sup> April Battle of Seelow Heights

25<sup>th</sup> April Elbe Day – First Meeting of American and Soviet Forces in Torgau

8<sup>th</sup> May End of the war

27<sup>th</sup> July Remembrance of 20 July Plot (Operation Valkyrie)

3<sup>th</sup> October German Unity Day

Two Sundays before the first week of Advent Volkstrauertag (People's Day of Mourning) Also called 'Memorial Day'

## History



Berlin in air war

## Battle of Hürtgen Forest

During the fall and winter of 1944 and 1945, the longest battle of the war on German soil took place in the Hürtgen Forest.

It caused numerous casualties on both sides. The Hürtgen Forest consisted of thick woodland, bare hilltops and deep gorges not far from the Belgian border. Heavy rain and snowfall and a lack of roads made it extremely difficult to penetrate. Nonetheless, the Allies pushed into the rough and unfamiliar terrain in order to secure their advance towards the Rhine. The battle proceeded from mid-September 1944 to mid-February 1945, and ended with an Allied victory.



Hürtgen Forest

## Crossing of the Rhine – The Rhineland Offensive

After the failure of Operation Market Garden in September 1944, the Allies developed a new plan to invade Germany: Operation Veritable.

Over half a million troops assembled, along with vast amounts of armaments. Cities such as Kleve and Emmerich were razed by the Allied air forces. The final hurdle was the Rhine itself. The crossing near Wesel (Operation Plunder) was one of several coordinated Rhine crossings. A million Allied soldiers participated. In support of the crossing, 14,000 paratroopers were dropped behind enemy lines (Operation Varsity). At the city of Remagen in Rhineland-Palatinate, the Allies managed to capture Ludendorff Bridge – one of the few remaining bridges across the Rhine. Following the crossing of the Rhine, the Allied forces were able to advance further into the heart of Germany.



Ludendorff Bridge



Wobbelin

## Berlin – the symbolic city of WWII

The German capital is one of the key cities of WWII, if not the symbolic city for the war and its consequences on Europe.

It was here that the Nazis planned and implemented the Final Solution to the Jewish question following the Wannsee Conference. In the latter part of the war, the Allies heavily bombed the city causing great destruction and suffering for the local population. The Battle for Berlin, in spring 1945, left huge scars on the city itself and caused enormous losses to the Soviet Army in the attempt to encircle the capital and put an end to the Nazi regime, which eventually happened in early 1945. Berlin was seen as the final stop of the Liberation. The German Armed forces



Berlin in the air war

signed their unconditional surrender at the headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration in Berlin - Karlshorst. It was also in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam where the Allies held the Potsdam Conference that would shape the post-war world order and the ultimate division of the city in four zones of occupation, each for one victorious power. Ultimately this division would last for decades. Berlin was shaped deeply by WWII, leaving a lasting heritage. A variety of museums, documentation centres, and memorials tell its recent history from a multitude of perspectives.

## In the footsteps of the Soviet Army

In early 1945, the Western Allies were approaching German territory from the natural border of the river Rhine, while the Soviet Red Army launched a ground offensive from the Vistula river to penetrate German territory from the East.

The main objective of the Soviet Army was the encircling of the capital of the German Reich, Berlin, which proved to be challenging in the Seelow Heights. The German resistance and the high ground near Seelow cost time, energy and lives, but they could be overcome on 19 April 1945, beginning the proper advance onto Berlin. The ring around the German capital was completed on 25 April, and on the same day the American and the Soviet soldiers met for the first time in Torgau, on the river Elbe. The final conquest of Berlin would take some more days: the assault to the Reichstag, the symbol of the Nazi rule, would be completed on 30 April. The capitulation of Germany would be signed at the Soviet headquarters in Karlshorst on 8 May 1945.



Elbe Day

## The Liberation of the Camps

As the Liberation progressed towards Germany, both from the East and the West, the Allied armies took over concentration camps and other sites where Nazi crimes were committed.

The majority of the camps were evacuated by the German forces as the Allies advanced into the territory of the German Third Reich, and prisoners were often forced to extreme death marches towards other locations. The Red Army liberated several concentration camps in present-day Poland and in the Baltic States already in 1944. In turn, it was the turn of the Stutthof camp in Poland, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück in northeast Germany. The US Army liberated Buchenwald concentration camp and 20,000 prisoners on 11 April 1945, and further moved on to Mittelbau-Dora, Flossenbürg and Dachau camps in Germany, and Mauthausen, in Austria. In turn, the British forces liberated the rest of the camps in northern Germany, including Neuengamme and Bergen-Belsen. Thanks to the photo and video documentation of the liberation of the camps taken by the liberating forces, the horrors of the Holocaust were exposed to the public opinion worldwide for the first time.

Read more at : liberationroute.com

The Liberation Route Europe has been a "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" since 2017.

EMME JOHNSON, Project Officer  
 +32 (0) 467 32 60 82  
 e.johnson@liberationroute.com

JOEL STOPPELS, Guide Network Coordinator  
 +31 (0) 6 36 33 53 70  
 j.stoppels@liberationroute.com

GERT-JAN JACOBS, Travel Trade Communications  
 +31 (0) 6 22867342  
 g.jacobs@liberationroute.com

NETHERLANDS  
 Newday Offices  
 Jansburgtunnel 30  
 6811 AE Arnhem, NL  
 +31 (0)85-3309090

BELGIUM  
 Rue de Slassart 131  
 1050 Brussels, BE  
 +32 (0) 485 136 833

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## Battle of Hürtgen Forest



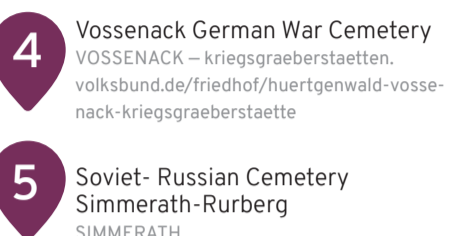
1 Museum Hürtgen Forest 1944  
VOSENACK – museum-huertgenwald.de



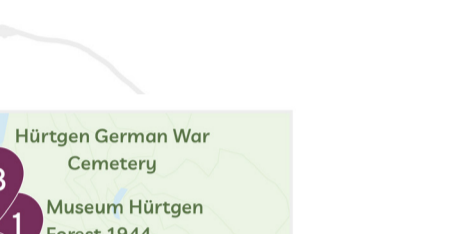
3 Hürtgen German War Cemetery  
HÜRTGEN – volksbund.de/kriegsgraeberstaette/huertgenwald-huertgen-kriegsgraeberstaette.html



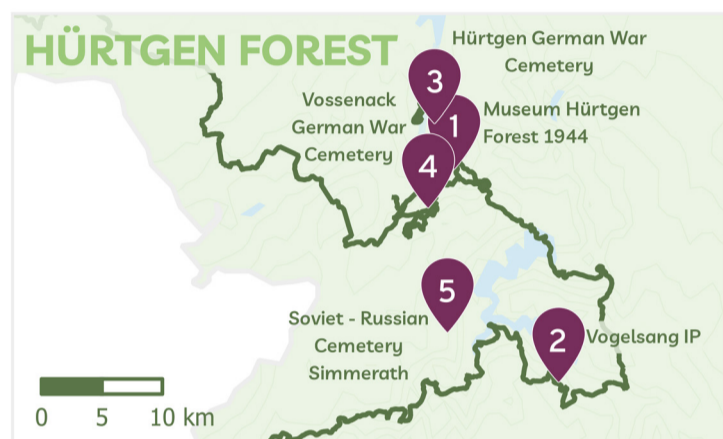
2 Vogelsang IP  
SCHLEIDEN – vogelsang-ip.de



4 Vossenack German War Cemetery  
VOSENACK – kriegsgraeberstaetten.volksbund.de/friedhof/huertgenwald-vossenack-kriegsgraeberstaette



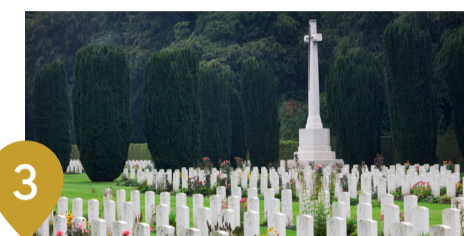
5 Soviet - Russian Cemetery Simmerath  
SIMMERATH



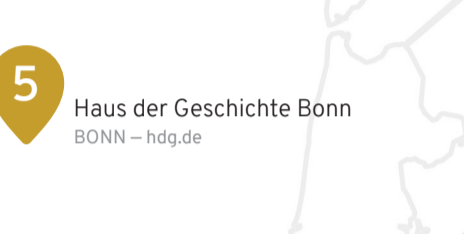
## Crossing of the Rhine – The Rhineland Offensive



1 Peace Museum  
REMAGEN – bruecke-remagen.de



3 Reichswald Forest War Cemetery  
KLEVE



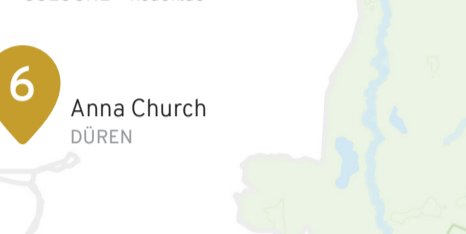
5 Haus der Geschichte Bonn  
BONN – hdg.de



2 Peace Chapel & 'Golden Mile' Prisoner of War Temporary Enclosures  
REMAGEN



4 ELDE-Haus NS-Documentation Center Cologne  
COLOGNE – nsdok.de



6 Anna Church  
DÜREN

## Others



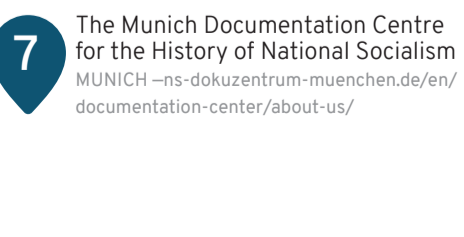
1 Memorium Nuremberg Trials  
NUREMBERG – museums.nuernberg.de/memorium-nuremberg-trials



3 Dokumentation Obersalzberg (World War II Memorial and Educational Center)  
BERCHTESGADEN – berchtesgaden.de/en/salt-history/world-war-ii-memorial-educational-center



5 Fort Zinna  
TORGAU – diz-torgau.de



7 The Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism  
MÜNCHEN – ns-dokumentation-muenchen.de/en/documentation-center/about-us/



2 Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds  
NUREMBERG – museums.nuernberg.de/documentation-center/



4 Documentation and Information Centre (DIZ) Torgau  
TORGAU – diz-torgau.de



6 Peenemünde Historical-Technical Museum  
PEENEMÜNDE – museum-peenemuende.de



See Inset

6 Aachen

5 Bonn

4 Cologne

2 Remagen

1 Koblenz

3 Kehl

4 Elde-Haus

5 Haus der Geschichte

6 Bonn

7 Remagen

8 Remagen

9 Remagen

10 Remagen

11 Remagen

12 Remagen

13 Remagen

14 Remagen

15 Remagen

16 Remagen

17 Remagen

18 Remagen

19 Remagen

20 Remagen

○ Capital — Hiking Trail  
● City — River

0 50 100 km

## The liberation of the Camps



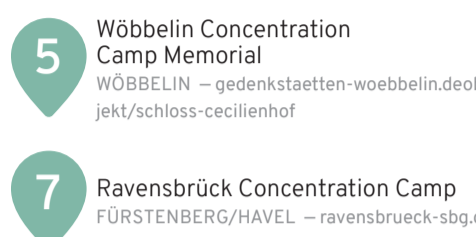
1 Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum  
ORANIENBURG – sachsenhausen-sbg.de/en



4 KZ Dachau  
DACHAU – kz-gedenkstaette-dachau.de/en



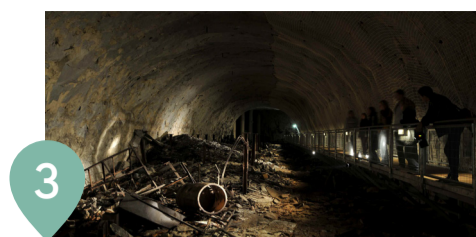
2 Buchenwald Memorial  
WEIMAR – buchenwald.de/en/72



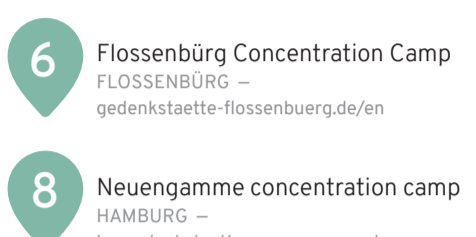
5 Wöbbelin Concentration Camp Memorial  
WÖBBELIN – gedenkstaetten-woebbelin.deobjekt/schloss-cecilienhof



7 Ravensbrück Concentration Camp  
FÜRSTENBERG/HAVEL – ravensbrueck-sbg.de



3 Mittelbau-Dora  
NORDHAUSEN – buchenwald.de/en/29



6 Flossenbürg Concentration Camp  
FLOSSENBURG – gedenkstaette-flossenbuerg.de/en



8 Neuengamme concentration camp  
HAMBURG – kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de

## In the footsteps of the Soviet Army



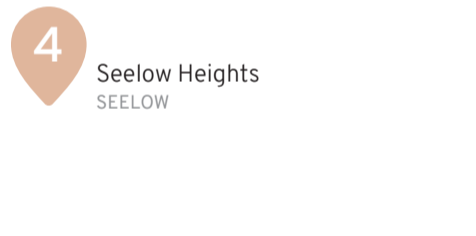
1 Museum Berlin-Karlshorst  
BERLIN – museum-karlshorst.de



2 Soviet-American Encounter Memorial  
TORGAU – tic-torgau.de



3 Soviet War Memorial Treptower Park  
BERLIN



4 Seelow Heights  
SEELOW



5 Reichstag  
BERLIN – bundestag.de/besuche/architektur/reichstag

## Berlin – the symbolic city of WWII



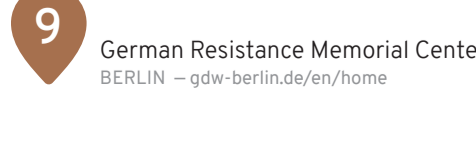
1 Allied Museum  
BERLIN – alliiertenmuseum.de



3 The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe  
BERLIN



5 Topography Of Terror  
BERLIN – topographie.de



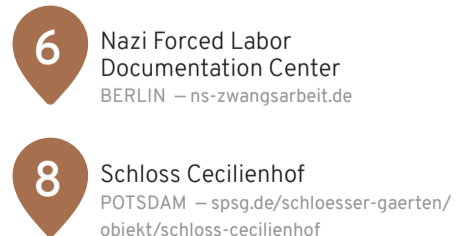
7 Reichstag  
BERLIN – bundestag.de/besuche/architektur/reichstag



2 Museum Berlin-Karlshorst  
BERLIN – museum-karlshorst.de



4 Soviet War Memorial Treptower Park  
BERLIN



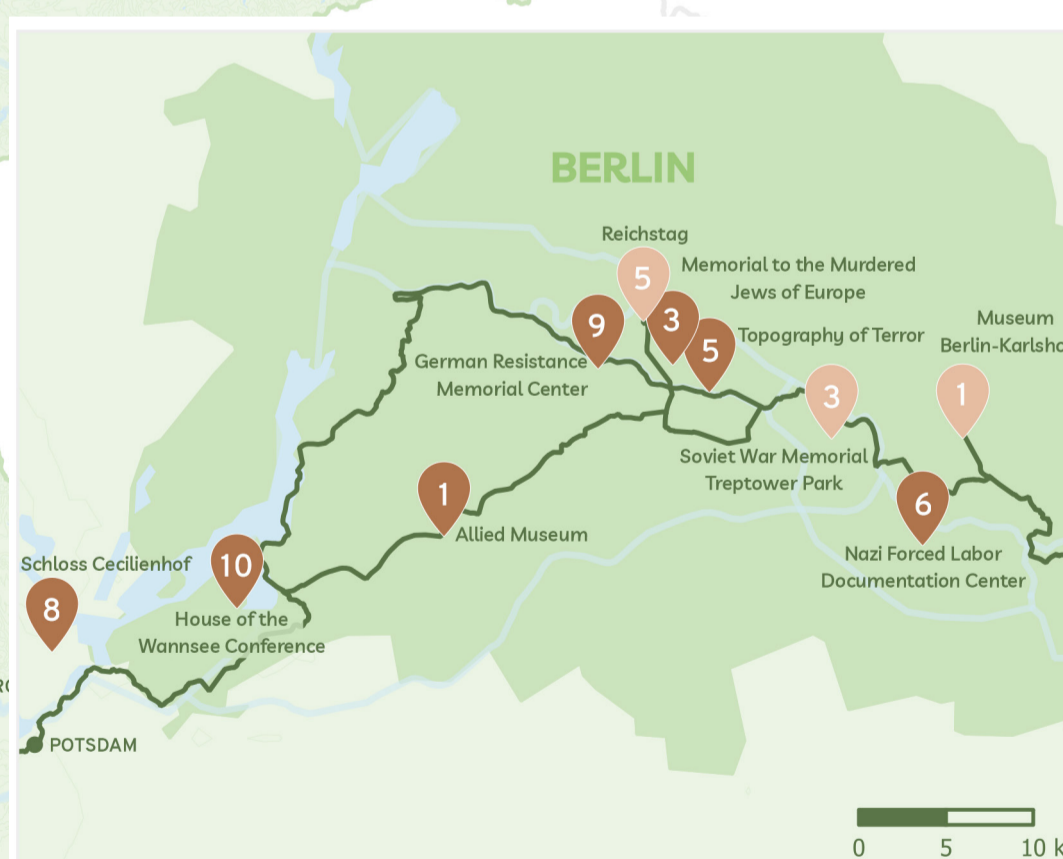
6 Nazi Forced Labor Documentation Center  
BERLIN – ns-zwangsarbeit.de



8 Schloss Cecilienhof  
POTSDAM – spsg.de/schloesser-gaerten/objekt/schloss-cecilienhof



10 House of the Wannsee Conference  
BERLIN – ghwk.de/en



0 5 10 km