

Car tour of Sedan



The Fond de Givonne district after the invasion

① The Fond de Givonne Church and District

The German troops coming from Bouillon in Belgium entered Sedan by the *Fond de Givonne* district on the morning of 25th August 1914. After setting fire to La Chapelle and part of Givonne, they also set ablaze the *Fond de Givonne* district, in particular its church, claiming that it had been used as an observation point.

Some weeks later, the Protestant pastor of Sedan suggested to the Catholics that they use the chapel (today destroyed) adjoining the Protestant orphanage (today No. 30 *Rue du Faubourg du Fond de Givonne*). The future Cardinal, Yves Congar, whose family lived close by at No. 36, was deeply moved by this generous offer which probably contributed to developing his ecumenical vocation. Saint Stephen's Church (*l'église Saint-Etienne*) was rebuilt identically to the original in 1925.

② The Station Bridge

Built from 1881 on, the bridge next to the station was mined

by French engineers and exploded on the arrival of German troops to delay their crossing of the Meuse river. On 25th and 26th August, the area around the bridge was the scene of particularly violent fighting. During the occupation, the Germans set up a temporary metal bridge, which they destroyed on leaving. A footbridge, 1.20 metres wide, made it possible to cross the Meuse again in 1919 whilst waiting for a temporary bridge to be built in 1920.

③ The Railway Station

The Ardennes department railway network was of considerable strategic importance for the German army during the Great War. It was widely used and extended to bring its men and arms to the front, transport the wounded and supplies, but also to send to Germany all the raw materials and articles requisitioned in the occupied territories. A sorting area for looted goods (*Kriegsbeutesammelstelle*) was set up in the Sedan railway station and the youth of Sedan were forced to work there.

Early in 1918, the Sedan station also saw the departure of dozens of hostages for German labour camps. In the Ardennes department, as in other occupied regions, they were chosen from among important citizens in retaliation for France's refusal to hand over to the Germans those Alsacians who had crossed the border

into France at the beginning of the war. On 6th January 1918, the train carried off twenty-one men from Sedan to the camps of Milejany and Roon in Lithuania, and, on 12th January, it was the turn of twelve women from Sedan to leave for the Holzminden camp in Germany. Most of these hostages returned after some months (first the women, on 8th July, then the men, on 23rd July), but two died while in detention.

Before retreating in November 1918, the Germans blew up the central building of the station. It was rebuilt between 1919 and 1924.



The destroyed station

④ The Torcy Cemetery

At the end of the municipal cemetery in Torcy is a national necropolis containing the remains of French and allied soldiers (British, Romanian, Russian and one Belgian), most of whom fell during the Great War. In this necropolis, as well as in the one in Noyers-Pont-Maugis, both created in the early 1920s, a large number of single and mass graves, initially spread throughout several towns and villages in the Ardennes department, were brought together. The soldiers are buried in separate graves,

identified by stone crosses or headstones, and in an ossuary containing 2,089 unidentified bodies.

Lined up against the outer wall of the necropolis, to the left of the entrance, are around twenty graves of soldiers who died for France during the Great War and whose bodies were recovered by their families when the conflict was over.

⑤ The Asfeld Barracks

By taking *Boulevard Chanzy* to reach the Dijonval manufactory, you will see, on the plateau opposite, a long yellow building. This is the Asfeld barracks, which evokes terrible memories, for it was used during the Great War not only as a military hospital but also as a training centre for young German doctors. According to eye-witnesses, they would practice on the corpses of prisoners from the labour camp.

⑥ The Dijonval Manufactory

Sedan's industry suffered badly because of the war, and its famous Dijonval, the largest cloth manufactory in Sedan, was no exception. Production had already slowed down or ceased altogether, since the workforce had left for the front. Factories were now to be deprived of their production equipment. In fact, the Germans organised the systematic pillage of their occupied territories. Not only were wool and tens of thousands of pieces of fabric requisitioned, but the machinery was also sent to Germany, either to be used in

industries there, or to be broken down to recover the metal. In 1918, of the 1,250 weaving looms in Sedan before the war, only 207 remained.

The maps of the city made by the Germans during the occupation mention that the Dijonval manufactory was used as a military cartography centre.

⑦ The Hospital

On its arrival, the German army found the two existing hospitals (the civilian hospital, still in use, and the military hospital, destroyed in the 1960s to make way for the towers of the *Résidence Ardenne*) insufficient for its needs. It also used all the field hospitals set up by the French during the fighting in Belgium. The Germans added more military hospitals by requisitioning large buildings, such as barracks and the museum.

Sedan thus became a "hospital city" for tens of thousands of soldiers who had been wounded or were suffering from contagious diseases, like typhus. The women of Sedan were in charge of washing the bedlinen ; food and supplies were obtained by requisitioning.

⑧ The Saint Charles Cemetery

Along the central path of the first plot on the left, 6 rows before the end, is the grave of Louis Busson, director of the Sedan gasworks, who was shot as a spy by the Germans on 13th July 1916. The *Kommandantur* had the cemetery closed

several days after his burial to prevent crowds from gathering around his tomb.

On the second plot on the left, inspired by classical Antiquity, towers a monument that has been badly damaged by the weather. Erected in reinforced concrete by the Germans in 1915, it was originally intended as a homage to the 500 German soldiers buried all around it in a reserved, tiered enclosure. The bodies of the soldiers were moved to other cemeteries in the 1920s, and the surrounding wall was destroyed in 1937. Today, this monument to the dead is all that remains of the German necropolis ; it is among the largest and most important commemorative monuments built by the German army in occupied territory during the Great War, and one of the few still standing.

A little further ahead are the rows of crosses and headstones of the military cemetery, which contains 1,469 bodies. These include French, British, Russian and Romanian soldiers, as well as Belgian and French civilian dead. Beyond the military plot, on the left, are several rows of graves erected by the families of soldiers who gave their lives for France.



The German monument

I.M. communicer - Maquette Ville de Sedan



Cover : the *Kommandantur* at 2 *Place Turenne*
Old postcards : Amicale philatélique et cartophile sedanaise et Médiathèque municipale Georges-Delaw. (*Sedan Association of Stamp and Postcard Collectors and the Georges Delaw Municipal Media Library*).
German map of the city in 1918 : Médiathèque municipale Georges-Delaw

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A qualified tour guide approved by the Ministry of Culture would be delighted to welcome you. Our guides are thoroughly familiar with every nook and cranny and will give you the keys you need to understand the scale of a square, the town's growth over the centuries, etc. They would be happy to answer your questions. Feel free to ask!

The Heritage Activities Department

The Heritage Activities Department coordinates the heritage initiatives of Sedan, Town of Art and History. It offers year-round activities for Sedan's residents and school groups and would be happy to assist with a project.

Group visits

Sedan offers tours throughout the year by reservation, with a large variety of themes. For more information, contact the Heritage Activities Department or the Tourist Office.

Sedan belongs to the national Towns and Areas of Art and History network

The Heritage Department of the Ministry of Culture and Communication awards the Towns and Areas of Art and History label to local communities that develop heritage-related activities. It guarantees the competence of the tour guides and heritage activity managers and the quality of their work. From ancient ruins to 21st century architecture, these towns and areas showcase their heritage in all its diversity. Today, a network of 181 towns and areas throughout France offers you its know-how.

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Charleville-Mézières, Reims, Langres, Châlons-en-Champagne, Troyes, Amiens, Cambrai, Noyon, Laon, Soissons, Metz and Barle-Duc have also received the Town of Art and History label.

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"The territories ravaged by the Great War have been described as red scars. The scars of the occupation are ingrained in souls, bodies and landscapes ; they are often invisible. [...] It is up to us to reveal them."

Annette Becker, *Les cicatrices rouges 14-18 France et Belgique occupées*, Fayard, 2010

Towns and Areas of Art and History
Guided Tour

come hear the tale
of Sedan during
the **Great War**



Sedan during the Great War

On 2nd August 1914, most of its male population left Sedan because of the mobilisation, and several shops and factories had to close. Even the Mayor, Frédéric Bacot, was mobilised, leaving his assistant in charge with around ten municipal councillors. The regiments based in Sedan also left for the front, namely the 28th and 30th dragoon regiments and the 147th and 347th infantry regiments.

Once Germany had entered neutral Belgium on 3rd August, the people of Sedan watched the French troops advancing proudly northwards to back up the Belgian army. However, the 4th French army was rapidly pushed back. The wounded began arriving in Sedan's hospitals, and field hospitals were set up in large buildings, such as the Turenne and Nassau Colleges and the Crussy retirement home.

Before long, Belgian civilian refugees began crossing the border, bringing stories of German atrocities which struck fear into the population. Evacuation was considered, but rejected by the Mayor. On 24th August, French troops retreated and returned to Sedan to set up camp on the left bank of the Meuse river. On 25th August at 8 am, the Uhlans (German cavalry armed with lances) reached Sedan via the *Fond de Givonne* district, to which they set fire. The Battle of Sedan, on 25th and 26th August, led to the death of about twenty civilians. The French troops, who were holding the banks of the Meuse,

received orders to retreat, and the fighting moved to the hill of La Marfée (27th-28th August) and then in the direction of the Aisne river.

Behind the front lines, Sedan was occupied by the German army, as were the Ardennes department, nine other departments of north-eastern France and part of Belgium. As they were completely cut off from the rest of France and, in fact, prisoners in their own city, the inhabitants were oppressed by the Germans, and subjected to hostage-taking, restrictions and requisitioning of all kinds. The factories of this renowned textile city had their machinery taken, destroyed or sent to Germany. Sedan became a hospital city where the Germans treated tens of thousands of their wounded or sick soldiers. From 1917, part of the castle was turned into a labour camp for Belgian and French political and common-law prisoners.

In 1918, French and American troops reached the Meuse several days before the armistice, but the right bank of Sedan was not liberated by General Gouraud until 17th November, six days later, as agreed by the warring parties.

Although its architecture remained relatively unscathed (destruction is estimated at 2.5%), the city was nevertheless left completely depleted, exhausted by over four years of occupation. It took several years to restore it to its former power, in particular its industrial strength.

Walking tour of the city centre

① Place d'Alsace-Lorraine and the Battle of 1870

The First World War, or Great War, takes on particular significance at Sedan, since here, perhaps more than anywhere else, it is seen as a consequence of the Battle of 1870. It was this crushing defeat which, several months later, led to the harsh conditions of the preliminary treaty of Versailles, signed on 26th February 1871, according to which France had to give up Alsace and the Moselle department. *The Place d'Alsace-Lorraine*, created several years later, is a reminder of this debacle, not only through the monument in its centre, but by virtue of its very name. The names of the streets surrounding the square also contribute to keeping alive the memory of cities annexed by Germany, such as Mulhouse, Strasbourg, Metz and Phalsbourg.

In France, the desire to recover its lost provinces and exact retribution for the humiliating defeat of its army at Sedan spurred the people to take revenge. In Germany, on the other hand, this resounding victory united the States which had joined forces against France. In the German empire, *Sedantag* (Sedan day) was celebrated as a German national holiday until 1918. On both sides of the border, then, the Battle of Sedan in 1870 sowed the seeds of the Great War.

② Turenne College

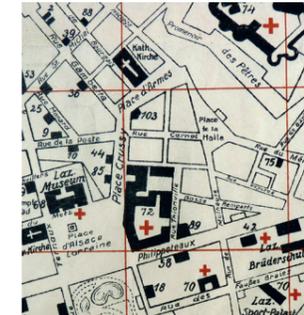
On their arrival, the Germans took over several field hospitals already established in

the grounds of such spacious buildings as Turenne College and Nassau College. The use of these schools as military hospitals, and the absence of teachers, who had either been called up or taken hostage, disrupted the schooling of the children of Sedan. Volunteers were called upon to take over classes and some teachers even gave lessons in their homes.

On the college walls is a plaque to the memory of Yves Congar, a former pupil born in Sedan in 1904. He was a brilliant theologian who was named Cardinal shortly before his death in Paris in 1995. Throughout the whole war, he kept a diary illustrated with drawings depicting the daily life of his family. Through his young eyes, he offers a particularly vivid picture of life under the occupation.

③ The bells of Saint Charles' Church, an example of requisitioning

The Germans systematically pillaged the regions they occupied. While the early examples of requisitioning seemed fairly logical (cars, bicycles, arms),



Extract from a German map of 1918

this tactic became increasingly varied and sometimes absurd (fuel, sheets, mattresses and even sewing machines). Requisitioning of food was undoubtedly the most painful for the population to bear, as people were already struggling to find sufficient food.

The occupying forces carried out a veritable hunt for metal to meet the needs of their army. They removed the bells from the Town Hall, the royal Dijonval cloth manufactory, the Protestant church and Saint Charles' Church. To replace them, new bells were cast in 1921. Still in use to this day, they are decorated with patriotic symbols, such as cannons and figures of Joan of Arc and victorious French cocks crushing German eagles.

④ Place Goulden, a German propaganda centre

During the entire occupation, the territories under German command were cut off from the rest of France. No information was available, neither letters (except for prisoners of war) nor newspapers. The occupying forces took advantage of this situation to set up a propaganda system aimed at influencing or demoralising the population. In Sedan, propaganda was spread principally from the bookshop on *Place Goulden*, which sold false postcards and the infamous *Gazette des Ardennes*. This newspaper, printed at Charleville, was published by French citizens who were brought to trial for this in 1919. While they mistrusted the paper, people nevertheless continued to buy it to look for the names

of their relatives on the list of prisoners and their places of detention that it published.

⑤ The Kommandantur / Garrison Headquarters (2 place Turenne)

The *Kommandantur*, the administrative headquarters of the German army in Sedan, was set up in a bank at 2 *Place Turenne*. This elegant building of the 1880s was more impressive at that time than it is today, as it still had its left section, which was destroyed during the Second World War, when the bridge over the Meuse was blown up. On 25th August 1914, this bridge was the only one in Sedan not to be blown up, because the explosive charge used by the French combat engineers was insufficient. When German troops once again had to be stopped in 1940, the charge was doubled and, this time, proved effective.

The *Kommandantur* issued all the rules, prohibitions, fines and requisitions as well as all decisions which, in most cases, deprived the citizens of Sedan of their possessions and freedom. In fact, the population was under strict control: people were forbidden to leave the municipality and subjected to a curfew, and, in 1916, an obligatory identity card (*Ausweis*) was introduced. The inhabitants of Sedan felt like prisoners in their own city. They were obliged to carry out forced labour: different tasks were assigned to them according to age. In addition to requisitioning, a large number of taxes were imposed, often as punishments (for example, after acts of sabotage).

⑥ Avenue de La Marck : requisitioning of lodgings

Avenue de La Marck is a good example of requisitioning of lodgings in entire buildings or even whole streets. In 1915, all the residents of this beautiful street were expelled to make way for officers no doubt attracted by the elegant architecture and proximity to the *Kommandantur*.

Requisitioning also extended to stores: around fifty were replaced by shops reserved for Germans.

⑦ The Macdonald Barracks

A little further along *Rue Thiers*, two plaques are a reminder that the two huge parallel buildings of the Macdonald barracks, the largest in Sedan, once stood between this square and the Meuse river. They housed the 28th dragoon regiment and part of the 147th infantry regiment before they left for the front at the beginning of the Great War. Although it was no longer a fortress city after 1870, Sedan actually remained a barracks city until 1984. During the occupation, the Macdonald barracks was used as a military hospital.



⑧ The Labour Camp

At the west entrance to the castle is a plaque reminding one that, from January 1917 to November 1918, the occupying forces used it as a labour

camp, (called *bagne*, or penal colony, by the people of Sedan). Belgian and French political and common-law prisoners were held here. The terrible conditions of imprisonment were comparable to those in concentration camps: there was severe malnutrition, prisoners were crammed into filthy cells, morning roll-calls were held outside, regardless of the weather, before the prisoners left in small groups for their places of forced labour, they were executed without warning for the slightest misdeed, beaten, and the sick and wounded were killed. It is estimated that, of the 5,200 men who entered the Sedan labour camp, only 1,000 survived.

⑨ The Monument to the Dead

Place Nassau contains the monument to the dead designed by Auguste Théâtre, an art teacher at the Turenne College, and erected by subscription. The first stone was laid in 1922 by Marshal Pétain, the « Hero of Verdun ». Two years later, the monument was inaugurated by President Poincaré and General Gouraud, the liberator of Sedan in 1918. It bears the names of 667 citizens of Sedan, soldiers and civilians who died during the Great War.

Opposite this monument, part of the *Avenue Philippoteaux* was renamed *Avenue de Verdun*.

The district of Frénois, which was an independent village until 1965, has its own monuments to the dead, one in the open air, the other inside the church (not open to visitors).