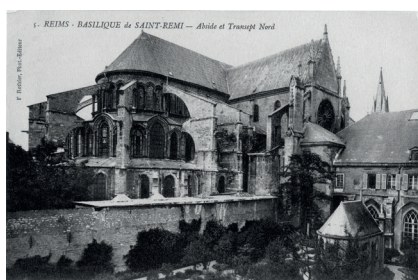


7 ORDEAL AND RECONSTRUCTION (1914-1931-1958)

1914-1918, the terrible years



Pictures 34 and 35 – Postcards showing the basilica before and after 1915 – coll. TD

During the Great War, Rheims was martyred, which shocked the whole world. The Basilica was not spared. From the very first days of the conflict, Rheims was occupied by the enemy. The front line was on the north and east boundary of the city. The French troops used the former abbey and the basilica as a hospital and detention centre for the German wounded and prisoners. It was not unusual to requisition places of worship to place makeshift beds in war time.

In 1916, the apsidal chapels were destroyed. In 1918, an incendiary projectile set the timber work on fire; the wooden vaults built by Narcisse Brunette in the 19th century were irretrievably lost.

The disaster grew even worse; the war wreaked havoc upon the north tribune, the grand organ, and the choir organ. After the end of the devastating conflict, the south tribune of the nave collapsed, due to bad weather and the lack of inverted pressure.

The reconstruction, a long and delicate period

Immediately after the end of the war, in the summer of 1919, German prisoners were requisitioned to clear out the ruins and proceed to the filling of gaps. The cult was resumed sporadically in the north aisle, which was less damaged. From 1921, the south walls were re-erected with the salvaged stones. Stone by stone, the reconstruction required patience and courage. Henri Deneux (1874-1969), an architect from Rheims, was missioned by the City authorities and the National Monuments Organisation to reconstruct the religious monuments of the city. Thanks to his research on medieval techniques and how to adapt Philippe Delorme's timber work methods, the framework was made lighter and the work time reduced.

The end of the restoration

The nave was inaugurated in 1931 – but the restoration campaign was far from complete when Deneux's work was finished in 1938, and when money became scarce. Deneux left a huge number of sketches, documents and photos of the work he had planned on the Cathedral, the Basilica and Saint-Jack Church. The Second World War put an end to the work. The Basilica was fully returned to the cult for good.



Picture 36 – Reconstruction of the nave (1920s) © Ministry of Culture - Médiathèque de l'architecture du patrimoine (diffusion RMN)