

VERDUN 1916

February 21st

December 18th

Hell cannot be as terrible as this.

—French soldier

The outbreak of World War I

At the beginning of the 20th century, a struggle for power in the world led to increased tensions between hostile states, particularly Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire who were opposed to Anglo-French domination.

The young, united German state demanded a new, more beneficial division of the colonies and challenged the maritime power of Great Britain by expanding its own fleet.

The Balkans remained the most tense region in Europe. The countries that had gained independence not so long before – Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria – were trying to strengthen their positions at the expense of their neighbors. Bulgaria at the expense of collapsing Turkey and developing Greece. Serbia at the expense of Austria-Hungary, a country with a large Slavic minority.

The area of contention between the two countries was Bosnia – with Sarajevo as its capital, previously annexed by the Habsburg kingdom.



June 28th, 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, is shot dead in Sarajevo by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. This starts a sequence of events that will lead to the outbreak of the Great War, now known as World War I (1914-1918).

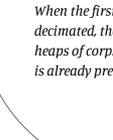
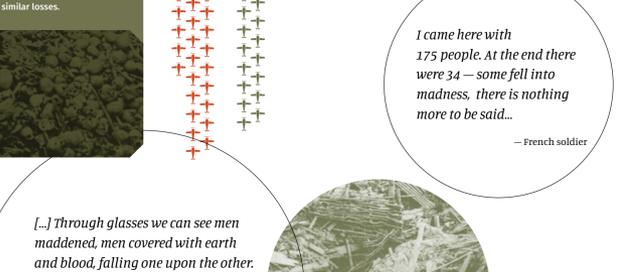


Outbreak of war 1914

The System of Alliances



Before the Battle – Forces, Leadership and Weaponry



Gen. Philippe Pétain



Gen. Georges Nivelle

In 1915, the French command withdraws most of its guns from Verdun, recognizing the area as a point of minor strategic importance.



Gen. Paul von Hindenburg



Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn

Erich von Falkenhayn orders the German 5th Army, led by the Crown Prince Wilhelm, to attack Verdun without ordering the capture of the fortress itself. Prince Wilhelm decides himself to order his troops to take the fortifications around the city. Verdun is greatly damaged, but the Germans never capture it.

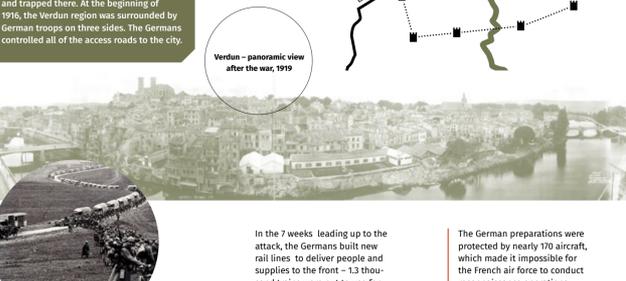
302 days
How long the Battle of Verdun lasted

316 m
10 square kilometres
The battle was fought over an area of no more than 10 square kilometres. Statistically, losses on both sides amounted to 70 thousand men per 1 square kilometre.

[...] Through glasses we can see men maddened, men covered with earth and blood, falling one upon the other. When the first wave of the assault is decimated, the ground is dotted with heaps of corpses, but the second wave is already pressing on.

—French soldier

Artillery and heavy machine guns



During the Battle of Verdun, 80% of the casualties were caused by artillery fire. The soldiers who survived that, were then decimated with machine gun fire during subsequent attacks on fortified enemy positions.

Maschinengewehr 08/15

A German light machine gun designed in 1915 and largely popular among the German units during WWI. Calibre: 7.92 mm / Effective range: 800 m / Rate of fire: 450 rounds/min.

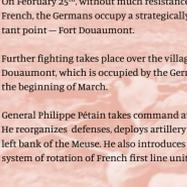
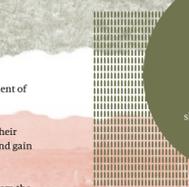
Verdun – a City Fortress

For the Germans, the Verdun fortress had been an obstacle in their march on the West for centuries. After the defeat of France in their war with Prussia in 1871, the city became a border fortress. In the summer of 1914, when the battle of the Marne took place, Verdun resisted every German attack preventing its enemies from entering the heart of France from the east. If it had fallen, Paris would have fallen too, and thus the war would have ended. The attack on Verdun forced the French army command to throw all human resources available into the defense of the city.

Located on the bank of the Meuse River, Verdun was surrounded by a ring of fortifications. The hilly terrain made combat operations difficult. The city was surrounded by 10 forts and 47 fortified observation points armed with 155 mm and 75 mm guns, machine guns and manned by approx. 65 thousand soldiers.



War of Annihilation
The author of the plan, known as Gericht (meaning 'judgment'), was the chief of the German general staff, Erich von Falkenhayn. He intended to "bleed France white". Long-lasting, massive artillery fire on an unprecedented scale was meant to destroy the French army and any subsequent units sent to reinforce the front. The remnants were to be pushed back to the Meuse River and trapped there. At the beginning of 1916, the Verdun region was surrounded by German troops on three sides. The Germans controlled all of the access roads to the city.



Voie Sacrée

The French had only one way of supplying the front – the so-called 'sacred' road (French: Voie Sacrée). Several thousand trucks and hundreds of other vehicles with supplies and tens of thousands of soldiers passed along this route.

In the 7 weeks leading up to the attack, the Germans built new rail lines to deliver people and supplies to the front – 1.3 thousand trains were put to use for this purpose.

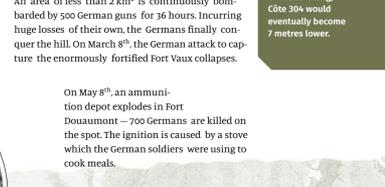
The German preparations were protected by nearly 170 aircraft, which made it impossible for the French air force to conduct reconnaissance operations.

Battle – Course Of Events, Turning Points, Phases

Phase I

German offensive
February 21st – March 4th

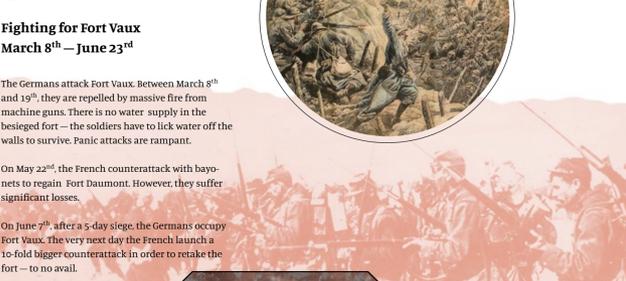
In the morning, a 9-hour German bombardment of French positions begins. In the afternoon, the German offensive starts their assault. The Germans occupy several towns and gain land. French lines of defense are in turmoil.



On February 25th, without much resistance from the French, the Germans occupy a strategically important point – Fort Douaumont.

Further fighting takes place over the village of Douaumont, which is occupied by the Germans at the beginning of March.

General Philippe Pétain takes command at Verdun. He reorganizes defenses, deploys artillery on the left bank of the Meuse. He also introduces a new system of rotation of French first line units.



Phase II

Battles for Le Mort Homme and Hill 304
March 6th – May 31st

The Germans cross the Meuse and fiercely attack the hill and fort Le Mort Homme (Dead Man). However, the French hold back their onslaught with machine gun fire from Côte 304 (Hill 304). The Germans then decide to take Hill 304 first.

German Attack on Côte 304 (Hill 304) and Fort Vaux
An area of less than 2 km² is continuously bombarded by 500 German guns for 36 hours. Incurred huge losses of their own, the Germans finally conquer the hill. On March 8th, the German attack to capture the enormously fortified Fort Vaux collapses.

On May 22nd, the French counterattack with bayonets to regain Fort Douaumont. However, they suffer significant losses.

On June 7th, after a 5-day siege, the Germans occupy Fort Vaux. The very next day the French launch a 10-fold bigger counterattack in order to retake the fort – to no avail.

70% of the entire French army fought at Verdun at various times.

Rotation of Soldiers
The Germans hastily replace the fallen with young, inexperienced soldiers. A French list their divisions according to the newly developed system dubbed 'Morla' (eng. treadmill) – which assumed the rotation of units at specific intervals.

Barbed wire
Coils of barbed wire effectively hindered ethnie infantry attacks. The barbed wire was stretched in front of the trenches far enough away to prevent the enemy from successfully throwing grenades. The wire entanglements often withstood intense fire – after bombardments, the tangled coils of barbed wire were no less effective.

The Tunnel Wars
Opposing troops often dug tunnels under enemy positions to detonate explosives. The longest ones were over 600 metres long and about 40 metres deep.

July 1st, 1916
A British mine was detonated during the battle of the Somme, leaving a crater 30 m deep and 100 m wide.

July 7th, 1917
At Messines, Belgium, a series of 455 tons of detonations killed around 10,000 German soldiers.

Phase III

Fighting for Fort Vaux
March 8th – June 23rd

The Germans attack Fort Vaux between March 8th and 19th; they are repelled by massive fire from machine guns. There is no water supply in the besieged fort – the soldiers have to lick water off the walls to survive. Panic attacks are rampant.

On July 18th, an ammunition depot explodes in Fort Douaumont – 700 Germans are killed on the spot. The ignition is caused by a stove which the German soldiers were using to cook meals.

After 3 months of fighting and colossal losses on both sides, at the end of May, the Germans conquer the Le Mort Homme hill.

Verdun Hell
Murderous battles take place over every meter of the terrain. Soldiers get bogged down in mud, drink from bullet craters, and the wounded die in agony.

On August 22nd, the Germans begin their artillery bombardment. 230 artillery fire over 100,000 poison gas missiles. The French, however, manage to resist the attack.

The German attack on Fort Souville collapses, but Fleury is partially destroyed by the Germans. The French hold German positions in the town.

The Germans approach Verdun, but in the evening the fighting stops. In the sweltering heat, the soldiers lack ammunition and water. The French retreat through Verdun. There is chaos, dozens are dug in the city. The Germans are pinned down by the French artillery, while the French launch local counterattacks.

On August 1st, the Germans attack again, wanting to fortify the Fleury-Thiaumont section. Thiaumont changes hands many times. The troops on both sides are extremely exhausted. The Germans lack ammunition, artillery and fresh supplies. The front line is practically non-existent. The battle area is covered with mud strewn with craters and the decaying bodies of the fallen.

The number of defectors increases, the front soldiers become numb by seeing the bodies without heads, without legs, shot through the belly, with blown away foreheads, with holes in their chests, hardly recognisable flaps, pale and dirty in the thick yellow brown mud, which covers the battle field...

—A German officer

Mort pour la France
The towns that died for France
The picturesque town of Fleury changed hands 16 times. It was eventually razed to the ground and never rebuilt. Several other towns near Verdun had a similar fate.

General Falkenhayn resigns. Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff take command. On September 2nd, Hindenburg orders the cessation of German operations near Verdun.

Its ne passeront pas!
They will not pass!

Mud, heat, thirst, dirt, rats, the smell of sweat and the spores of the foul smell of excrement and terrible fear...

—A soldier's account

Phase IV

The last German offensive
June 23rd – September 6th

First Assault
On June 23rd, the Germans begin their artillery bombardment. 230 artillery fire over 100,000 poison gas missiles. The French, however, manage to resist the attack.

July 1st, 1916
In the north, on the Somme, Anglo-French forces launch an offensive, thus relieving the front at Verdun. The French lose 200,000 soldiers there (killed, wounded and missing).

The German attack on Fort Souville collapses, but Fleury is partially destroyed by the Germans. The French hold German positions in the town.

The battles of Verdun and the Somme in 1916, as well as the Nivelle offensive in the first half of 1917, almost led the French army to death. The army was on the verge of open rebellion. It took both ruthlessness, and also the intellect of Verdun's hero, General Philippe Pétain, to stop the decline of his army, and last until the first troops of the US army landed in France, which in 1918 finally managed to tilt the scales of victory to the Entente's advantage.

On November 2nd, French forces enter Fort Vaux, which was demolished by the Germans. By mid-December, the French have pushed German forces back to their starting positions of February 1916.

The Battle of Verdun – months of senseless, ghastly attrition in a battle over a few square miles – practically ends where it began.

After the battle

Direct Effects

The German offensive ends in total disaster. But Erich von Falkenhayn's main goal of bleeding out French forces is largely achieved. The terrible sacrifices of both fighting sides are futile – neither side manages to move the front line, gain or regain any territory. The heroic defense of the French at Verdun consolidates further French efforts to defeat the Germans. On the other hand, the enormity of the losses causes a noticeable decline in the morale on the part of the French army and in French wider society.



Long-Term Effects
After the fighting, the vicinity of Verdun was considered a so-called red zone – an area excluded from all human activity. There is still human and animal debris and unexploded bombs in the ground and the area is still chemically contaminated.

The Buried
This man is in his foxhole buried alive; He's barely breathing, with his bare hands, he digs out the earth. [...] The earth collapses, cracking limbs, The bloody stream runs faster, Making the ground ever more viscous. Soon he scratches out other matter Spongy and wet. The spongy matter is human.



Despite the bloodbath at Verdun and on the Somme, life in Paris went on as if there were no war. There were revues and theaters, people having fun in amusement parks. The stars of the Parisian stage continued to triumph, including the famous Mistinguette, performing at the famous Moulin Rouge.

Losses

Commemoration

The Memorial de Verdun was erected on the site of the destroyed village of Fleury-devant-Douaumont.

The Douaumont Ossuary, built in 1932, commemorates the unknown victims of the battle. It contains the remains of approx. 150,000 unidentified French and German soldiers found on the battlefield.

The remains of an unknown soldier were transferred from the Battlefield of Verdun, and laid to rest in 1920 under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, where the following inscription was placed:
There lies a French soldier who died for his homeland, 1914-1918

Józef Piłsudski, the Marshal of Poland, awarded the French unknown hero resting in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier the Order of Virtuti Militari (1922), as well as to the city of Verdun (1921).

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