

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.

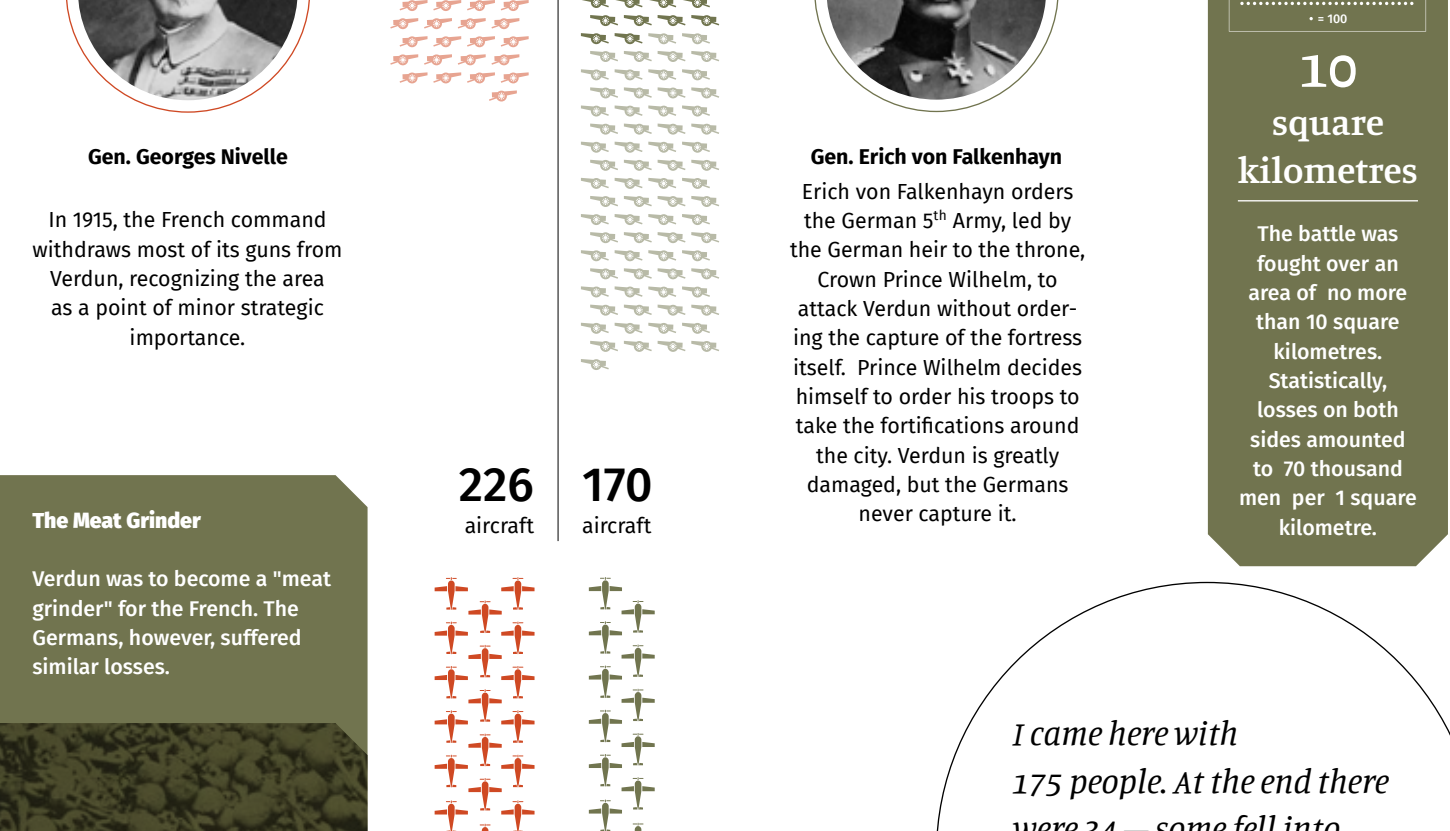
The area of contention between the two countries was Bosnia – with Sarajevo as its capital, previously annexed by the Habsburg kingdom.

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

France

1 140 000 soldiers

388 field artillery

244 large-caliber artillery

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.

Germany

1 250 000 soldiers

500 field artillery

700 large-caliber artillery

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.

The Meat Grinder

Verdun was to become a "meat grinder" for the French. The Germans, however, suffered similar losses.

226 aircraft

170 aircraft

I came here with 175 people. At the end there were 34 – some fell into madness, there is nothing more to be said...

— French soldier

[...] 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 13 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.

Verdun – panoramic view after the war, 1919

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.

