



World Heritage Battlefields

VERDUN 1916 – AUDIO #2

Narrator:

This programme is brought to you by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk as part of the World Battlefield Museums Forum.

[Sombre music intro playing]

Narrator:

Courage, Sacrifice and Heritage are values crucial to understanding battlefields and reflecting on man's historic struggles. As places of remembrance and focal points to pay our respects, battlefields bring back images of the past we can explore and research.

Today we need to understand that preserving and conserving battlegrounds and their artefacts for future generations should be our major goal. When we have gained this understanding, we can think about battlefields as open-air museums and commercial tourism destinations. After all, battlefields are guardians of memory shaping our collective historical identity.

["La Marseillaise", French anthem playing]

Narrator:

We now go back to that fateful Summer of 1914. First to the balcony of the Königliches Schloss in Berlin, then the podium of the Assemblée Nationale in Paris.

[Crowd cheering; 1914 speeches by the Kaiser Wilhelm II and the French President Raymond Poincaré]

Wilhelm II:

A momentous hour has struck for Germany. The sword is drawn, and I cannot sheathe it again without victory and honor. *[Crowd cheering, clapping hands]*
Down with the enemies of Brandenburg! Three cheers for our army! *[Crowd cheering]*

Poincaré:

France has just been the object of a violent and premeditated attack. Our fine and courageous army, which France today accompanies with her maternal thought has risen eager to defend the honour of the flag and the soil of the country. *[Cheering crowd]*

She is supported by the loyal friendship of Great Britain. And already from every part of the civilised world sympathy and good wishes are coming to her. For today once again she stands before the universe for Liberty, Justice, and Reason.

'Haut les coeurs et vive la France!' [*Crowd cheering, shouting*]

Narrator:

[*Atmospheric music*]

In January 1916, as the Great War entered its second winter, many believed it would be over in a matter of weeks. Soldiers were expected to come back home "before the leaves fall". This was not to be though.

Instant victory by either of the fighting sides was impossible. Military potentials were inadequate, societies were unprepared to get engaged, and economies had to be integrated into the war.

At the beginning of 1916 the Western Front was still a major war theatre. Since autumn of 1914, the war was mainly fought as trench warfare. Both warring sides, the French and the British on one side, the Germans on the other – wanted to break the front and crush the enemy.

The 1915 operations failed to achieve this goal. The Germans came up with a new strategy – a well-planned offensive would bleed the French to death. A mastermind behind the plan called *Gericht* (judgement in English) was Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the German General Staff.

[*Drumming sounds heard*]

Expert:

Prof. Jarosław Centek, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun:

In 1915, the Central Powers repelled all Allied attacks on the Western and Italian fronts and took the initiative in the war. They also launched a major offensive against Russia. It pushed their troops out of Polish territories and deprived them of offensive capabilities for some time.

The next step was Serbia, which succumbed to an offensive mounted by the Germans, Austro-Hungarians and Bulgarians. In spite of these successful operations, the German and Austro-Hungarian chiefs of staff decided to operate separately.

The Germans chose Verdun as their objective. The author of the plan, general Erich von Falkenhayn, wrote in his memoirs that he wanted to bleed the French army. This, however, most probably wasn't his original goal as historians have not come across the memo he quotes.

Nevertheless, based on other sources, one may assume that he planned to force the French to use their reserves in a defensive battle around the fortress in order to launch an offensive in another sector of the front.

The Germans concentrated an impressive array of heavy cannon and howitzers for their planned assault on Verdun. 2 500 000 artillery shells, transported on 1300 trains were brought in by the Germans for the first six days of battle. The front line trenches were greatly expanded to accommodate incoming troops.

[*Frontline sounds: rifles firing, shooting, distant explosions; tense music building up*]

The German offensive started on the February 21st, 1916. On a front just 14 km wide, the Germans used 62 infantry battalions supported by 760 guns and flamethrowers, mortars, and engineer corps.

Only during the later course of the battle the Germans attacked on the most reverse western bank. The French soldiers fought fiercely but were unable to stop the enemy advance. On February 25th, Fort Douaumont was lost. This was the climax of German successes in the first phase of the battle.

A second major assault on March 9th proved unsuccessful. In May, the French tried to take the initiative and counterattacked Fort Douaumont. They managed to enter it but were eventually repelled.

The following month, the Germans finally captured Fort Vaux as well as strategic points on the other bank of the river Meuse like Mort Homme and Hill 304.

The Anglo-French Somme offensive and Russia's Brusilov's campaign deprived the Germans of reserves. On September 2nd, a new chief of staff, Marshall Paul von Hindenburg, decided on defensive tactics and ordered the strengthening of positions already held. The initiative passed to the French.

On October 24th, a massive counterattack was launched and resulted in forts Douaumont and Vaux being regained. On December 15th French forces stuck again, driving Germans back to the February front line. In effect, no territorial gains were made by either side, only a huge number of casualties.

While the French rotated their divisions regularly, the Germans kept them in place for longer until they entirely lost their offensive strength [operational effectiveness]. The French casualties nearly topped 350 000. This number includes 59000 fatalities, 88,000 MIAs (missing in action) and 212,000 wounded.

German casualties were close to 336 000 men including 41,000 fatalities. The French launched 17 000 000 shells during the battle, while at its peak, the German artillery fired 93 000 pieces of ordnance daily. The battlefield became an empty, dead lunar landscape.

[Atmospheric music]

Narrator:

Verdun is a small city, surrounded by hills on the Meuse River in Lorraine, in the east of France. Ever since the early Middle Ages it had been on the Franco-German border.

A French fortress was built there, blocking any planned march to the west by the Germans. After the defeat of France in the war with Prussia in 1871, Verdun stayed within the borders of France and became a border fortress. In the summer of 1914, during the Battle of the Marne, Verdun withstood every attempt to take it, preventing German forces from entering the heart of France from the east.

It is less than 240 km from Verdun to Paris. If the German army had managed to capture this stronghold, there would be little to stop them reaching the French capital, as the terrain between the two cities was rather flat, without great natural obstacles such as rivers. Moreover, at that point, France had no significant military reserves.

The fall of Verdun would have marked the fall of Paris, and thus of France.

Prof. Karol Polejowski, Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

In January 1916 the Verdun front was a bow-shaped line, with the city of Verdun surrounded by a ring of strongholds. Fort Douaumont, was the biggest of them all.

The defences looked good on paper, but in reality most of the forts were unprepared.

In fact, the Verdun sector was one of the weakest along the French defence lines.

Von Falkenhayn's attack was meant to force French general staff to throw as many troops as possible to defend Verdun, where they would bleed to death. This would pave the road to German victory.

So von Falkenhayn ordered the German 5th Army commanded by Wilhelm, German Crown Prince of Prussia to attack in the direction of Verdun, but he never said that Verdun had to be taken.

Contrary to von Falkenhayn's orders, Crown Prince summoned his soldiers to take the city itself. According to German plans the deadly and devastating bombardment was to precede the infantry attack.

[Battlefield noises, shooting, single gunshots; music with drums]

French General Gallieni was fully aware of Verdun's defensive deficiencies, but Gen. Joffre was convinced that there was nothing to worry about. Joffre was soon to learn how wrong he had been in his judgement.

[Serious rhythmical music]

Narrator:

Everyday life for the soldiers during this campaign is best described in the words of British medical staff posted on the Verdun front.

[K. Burke, W. Kenyon and S.M. Edwards],

The biggest battle ever known is going on now. We guessed that an attack on Verdun was planned, as the fact that the Germans tried to cut the railway all pointed to it. Now we know.

There has been the most tremendous attack conceivable, huge guns first, blowing everything to pieces, and men beyond all count. *[Pensive instrumental music]*

At first it seemed that the Germans were getting the best of it, the French to fall back a bit, all trenches on both sides were blown to pieces, the losses in men were enormous, the Germans of course suffering most, and they say that their bodies are lying in heaps.

The work here is terrible. Such wounds and a great many cases of gas gangrene and in spite of amputations, we have had a lot of deaths. It is simply awful, for the number of wounded is impossible to cope with and they lie unattended, too, for days and there are no hospitals nearer than Bar, as Clermont has been shelled.

The French soldiers who come in are all extraordinarily cheerful, more so than they have ever been before, in spite of the fearful time they have been having. They all say it's Germany's last effort [...]. Never has there been such an exciting time, and never has the end of the war seemed nearer. Oh that it might end, for these last 10 days have made us realize the ghastliness of it as we never did before.

It would be useless to pretend that one entered Verdun without emotion. Verdun, sorely stricken, yet living, kept alive by the indomitable soul of the soldiers of France, whilst her wounds are daily treated and healed by the skill of her Generals. A white city of desolation, scorched and battered, yet the brightest jewel in the crown of France's glory; a shining example to the world of the triumph of human resistance and the courage of men.

Prof Karol Polejowski: [After the Battle]

In military and strategic terms it was a defensive victory for the French because the German offensive failed to achieve its goal.

But Von Falkenhayn's initial objective was achieved – the French lost a lot of blood. With 80% of huge losses on both sides as a result of artillery barrage.

Today people may be shocked with the fact that despite the bloodbath on the front, despite tens of thousands of French soldiers being massacred at Verdun and on the Somme, life in Paris went on as usual.

We must also remember that yet another offensive was launched by Franco-British forces at the start of July 1916 on the Somme, towards the north. There, the French lost an additional 200.000 soldiers – killed, wounded or missing.

Yet, it is Verdun that has come to symbolize the bravery and sacrifice of the French soldiers. Verdun and the river Somme in 1916 and the Nivelle Offensive near Soissons and Reims in 1917 practically bled the French army to death and it was now on the verge of open revolt.

It took the hero of Verdun, General Petain's steadfastness and wisdom to stop the decomposition of the army and last until American army landed in France. The entry of America into the war tipped the military balance and led to final victory in 1918.

[Classical symphonic music with choirs singing]

Narrator:

And how is it remembered? *[Elevated rhythmic music with drums]*

The enormity of destruction and loss transcends arithmetic, maybe we can get a better understanding by turning to a poem written by a first world war soldier, Wilfred Owen, who later perished in that terrible conflict.

[Serious piano music]

Anthem for doomed Youth

What passing bells for those who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns,
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons,
No mockeries for them from prayers and bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, – The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; And bugles
calling for them from sad shires.

[Mournful chant with accordion]

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes,
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds, And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Narrator:

[Sombre music intro playing]

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How does this Battlefield fit in with the objective of commemorating relics, remembering innocent victims and perpetrators in the best possible way?

Prof François Cochet, Head of the Scientific Council of Memorial de Verdun:

By the end of the first world war, a lot of veterans intend to visit the place where they fought. A first generation of Public Memory is rising during the years nineteen twenties et nineteen thirties, that can be identified by the feeling of a constant sorrow and mourning.

The Douaumont Ossuary is certainly the most important monument of this first generation of shaping the Verdun Memory

But after the Second World War, the need is very strong among the survivors veterans of the Great War to explain to younger generations what they felt and what they endured. The ancient battlefield is deeply modified by weather and vegetation. The battle is more and more difficult to explain.

So appeared at the end of nineteen fifties the will to build a Memorial, that can carry and endorse the fighting experience of all veterans passed through the battle of Verdun.

Who could lead such an important project? A name obviously appeared. In the nineteen sixties, Maurice Genevoix was a well-known writer. He was the perpetual secretary of the prestigious French Academy.

He intimately knew the war through his flesh and blood. As a lieutenant, he led a platoon at war and could speak of every traumatism known by soldiers. He really was the right man in the right place to build the Memorial.

Of course, Maurice Genevoix was not alone. But when the Memorial officially opened, on September 1967, Maurice Genevoix really embodied the whole dream of shaping the soldier's Memory that became a reality on this day of September.

Since this day, the Memorial tells not only the Great War, not only the biggest battle of the Great War, but tells the soldier's testimony, with the German or the French eyes with a successful plan.

Narrator:

Nicolas Czubak, Manager of the Learning Resource Centre at Verdun:

The main mission of the Memorial de Verdun is to transmit the memory of the soldiers, French and Germans, who fought here on the battlefield of Verdun.

Our mission is to make it understandable to our generation and the following ones. This means that we must adapt our scientific and pedagogic purposes in order to meet the expectations of our contemporaries but always keep serious and objective.

The former Memorial was well made and very emotive, but it talked only to the older generation who knew the war or not directly by telling of those you knew the war- fathers, uncles etc.

Besides the permanent exhibit, temporary exhibits are set up once or twice a year to make exhibits about War medicine from then to now, War photographs from the 19th century to today, Prisoners of War with the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross).

Another goal followed by the staff of the Memorial is to make it one of the largest centres for veterans' testimonies related to the First World War.

We've got a lot of documents (writings, notebooks, paintings, draws, hand-made objects by soldiers) which can make us understandable and nearly touchable the experience lived by soldiers during that war.

Prof. François Cochet head of the Scientific Council of Memorial de Verdun:

The Memorial insists on the twin visions of German and French soldiers. The battle of Verdun is quite the same from one side or other. The same suffering feeling, the same vision of a kind of hell on earth. This new look on the shared memory of war is something very important regarding to the present time. There is a new challenge, and new public to win.

Nicolas Czubak:

The First World War is the bloodiest war that France has ever lived. 1 400 000 men were killed, more than 4 million were lightly or seriously wounded. This war was a great slaughter.

During the four years of war, one battle emerged in France more than others, the battle of Verdun. This fact created a huge, shared memory not only for the veterans but also for their families and the entire society.

Narrator:

Prof. Karol Polejowski, Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

The Verdun battle was fought over a relatively small stretch of land. But this battle traumatised the entire generation of the French and the Germans. The number of the fallen is beyond our understanding and still shocks us today.

[Solemn music]

In a letter from the frontline, one of the French soldiers wrote, 'Je crois que l'enfer ne peut pas être pire que ça. Des cris, le tonnerre affreux de la mitraille, des chevaux qui se sauvent au grand galop. Non, je me demande comment on ne devient pas fou'; 'Hell cannot be so terrible as this. The yelling, the deafening din of artillery, horses fleeing at full gallop. I ask myself, how not to go mad'.

The Verdun Memorial Museum have joined World Battlefield Museums Forum that originated at Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk in 2018.

The Forum attempts to unify efforts to commemorate important battlefields and preserve their heritage regardless of when and where they were fought. After all, understanding past events promotes critical approaches and helps to draw conclusions for the future.

[Atmospheric music with chants]

Narrator:

After the end of WWII, Verdun again became what it had been in the interwar period.

With the development of Franco-German co-operation, Verdun also became a place of reconciliation between the two countries and their peoples.

And this is the true significance of the Verdun battle-site today.

For whoever is unaware of history is doomed to repeat it.

[Orchestral music with wind instruments, with a flourish]

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