



History 101

Verdun!

For centuries, Verdun had played an important role in the defense of its hinterland, due to the city's strategic location on the Meuse River. Attila the Hun, for example, failed in his 5th-century attempt to seize the town. In the division of the empire of Charlemagne, the Treaty of Verdun of 843 made the town part of the Holy Roman Empire. The Peace of Munster in 1648 awarded Verdun to France. Verdun played a very important role in the defensive line that was built after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. As a protection against German threats along the eastern border, a strong line of fortifications was constructed between Verdun and Toul and between Épinal and Belfort. Verdun guarded the northern entrance to the plains of Champagne, and thus the approach to the French capital city of Paris.

The Battle of Verdun was one of the major battles during the First World War on the Western Front. It was fought between the German and French armies, from 21 February to 18 December 1916, on hilly terrain north of the city of Verdun-sur-Meuse in north-eastern France. The Battle of Verdun ended in a French victory since the German High Command failed to achieve its two strategic objectives: the capture of the city of Verdun and a much higher casualty count inflicted on the French adversary. As a whole, the Battle of Verdun resulted in more than a quarter of a million battlefield deaths and at least half a million wounded. Verdun was the longest battle and one of the most devastating in the First World War. A total of about 40 million artillery shells were exchanged by both sides, leaving behind an endless field of shell craters still partly visible today. In both France and Germany, Verdun has come to represent the horrors of war.

At the beginning of the Battle of Verdun, on 16 April 1916, General Philippe Pétain had already issued a reassuring order of the day ending with: "*Courage! We shall get them*". These admonitions betray a sense of concern by the French leadership at the morale problems which would sporadically manifest themselves at Verdun during the late summer and fall of 1916. Those would later culminate into the French army mutinies that followed after the Nivelle offensive of April 1917.

The Battle of Verdun became a symbol of French determination to hold the ground and then roll back the enemy at any human cost. However, the French High Command had been caught unprepared by the assault on Verdun in February 1916. As time passed, Verdun became a battle of attrition where artillery continued to play the dominant role. A significant factor that helped the French Army was their intensive use of trucking to keep troops and supplies coming onto the front lines. Furthermore, during the summer of 1916, a standard gauge railway bypass was completed and took over from the truck traffic on the *Voie sacrée*.

The German planners saw Verdun for what it was: a salient cut off on three sides, a *cul-de-sac* without effective railway communications and thus a trap onto which they could strike a fatal blow against the French Army. What they did not anticipate was that, once the initial surprise had worn out, French logistics would improve with time and rob them of their initial advantage. It has often been remarked that Verdun was, in large part, a logistic victory of the French trucks over the German railways.

Verdun remained a symbol of French determination for many years. At the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1953–54, General Christian de Castries remarked that the situation was " somewhat like Verdun."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Verdun]

