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The battle of Verdun 1916, why and how?

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The battle of Verdun 1916, why and how?

“...Victory in a decisive battle is the crucial moment in a war. Victory alone breaks the will of the enemy and compels him to submit to our will. It is not the occupation of a stretch of land or the conquest of a fortified stronghold, it is the destruction of the enemy armed forces alone that, as a rule, will decide. The latter, therefore, is the primary objective of operations...”

(Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke)¹

1916 was a year of major battles and key political events such as Verdun 21 February 1916, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 16 May 1916, the naval battle of Jutland 31 May 1916, the Brusilov offensive 4 June 1916 and the Somme Offensive 1 July 1916.

The battle of Verdun is of particular importance as a pure Franco-German military confrontation, which was to have major implications for both countries, France in particular. In 2016 The President of France, Mr. François Hollande and The Federal Chancellor of Germany, Ms. Angela Merkel met on the battlefield and particularly at the Ossuaire, to commemorate the centenary of the battle. The Ossuaire enshrines the earthly remains of more than 120,000 soldiers from both armies and thus is a lasting symbol of the battle and its scale. In front of the Ossuaire is a French military cemetery of about 15,000 dead French soldiers, the size of a French infantry division in the days of the battle. For perfectly understandable reasons Verdun is primarily remembered for its appalling losses and sufferings with more than 300,000² soldiers killed in both armies over a period of about 10 months. Those losses and sufferings, numbing as they are, often lead us to forget the why and the how of the battle, why and how Germany wanted the battle to unfold and why and how France picked up the gauntlet.

The military strategic situation of 1915 and 1916

To understand Verdun 1916 it is necessary to understand the major events of 1915 and to analyse the conclusions of the military commanders of particularly the French and German Armies as well as of the British Army.

In 1915 France launched three great offensives, all having as their purpose to achieve a decisive result, to break the stalemate on the Western Front.³

The first one took place in Champagne from 16 February to 15 March; it failed in breaking through.

The second one was in Artois from 9 May to 24 June; it also failed in achieving a break-through.

The third and last one was the second offensive in Champagne from 25 September to 1 November; it was a failure anew.

However, the three French offensives and similar British offensives did lead Germany to transfer about 10 divisions from the Russian Front to the Western Front. Germany and Austria-Hungary also failed to achieve any decisive result against the Russians in 1915 partly thanks to the pressure of the French and British offensives on the Western Front.

1915 also saw the failure of the “Dardanelles offensive” launched on 25 April with the purpose of capturing Constantinople; knocking Turkey out of the war as well as opening a direct line of communication to Russia. It was also an attempt at an “indirect approach”, bypassing the German and Austro-Hungarian Armies in their fortified defensive positions be it in France, Belgium, Italy or Russia.

On the Western Front, the French High Command concluded that France, even though supported by the British Army in Belgium/Northern France would not be able to achieve a decisive result on its own. It was therefore necessary to develop a common approach by all Allies and coordinate operations of the French, British, Russian and Italian Armies. It was also necessary to develop a “comprehensive”⁴ approach englobing all dimensions of power at the disposal of the state(s). This led to the Chantilly Conference of 6-8 December 1915.⁵ The conference, hosted by France (General Joffre), saw the participation of Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Belgium and Serbia.

In his *Mémoires* Field Marshal Joffre describes quite precisely the two main elements of the French position.⁶ France is fully mobilized and is close to fully exploiting its manpower resources. It is therefore necessary to get more out of the contributions of the remaining Allies, in particular Great Britain and Italy. Further, there is a need for rest and reorganization among all armies of the Allies, particularly in the light of planned, coordinated and decisive offensives in 1916 against Germany and Austria-Hungary. The first decisions, relating to a Russian offensive (that ended in the Brusilov Offensive starting on 4 June 1916) and the Somme Offensive (actually starting on 1 July 1916), are also taken at the conference. It is expected that 1916 will prove a year of decisive military results.

It is also necessary for the Allies to look at the doctrinal, organizational and training challenges in the light of heavy losses in 1914 and 1915. Better combat efficiency is to be achieved by a reinforcement of artillery both in numbers and in quality and development of new weapon systems such as tanks, aircraft and chemical weapons. Further to that is a strong need to improve cooperation between artillery and infantry as well as command and control of larger formations on the battlefield. The Allies also have to consider the lack of key equipment of the Rus-



The German Chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, who selected Verdun as the place for his signature offensive on the Western Front. (Photo: Upper part of large portrait by Albert Meyer from 1 January 1913, Bundesarchiv. Wikipedia)

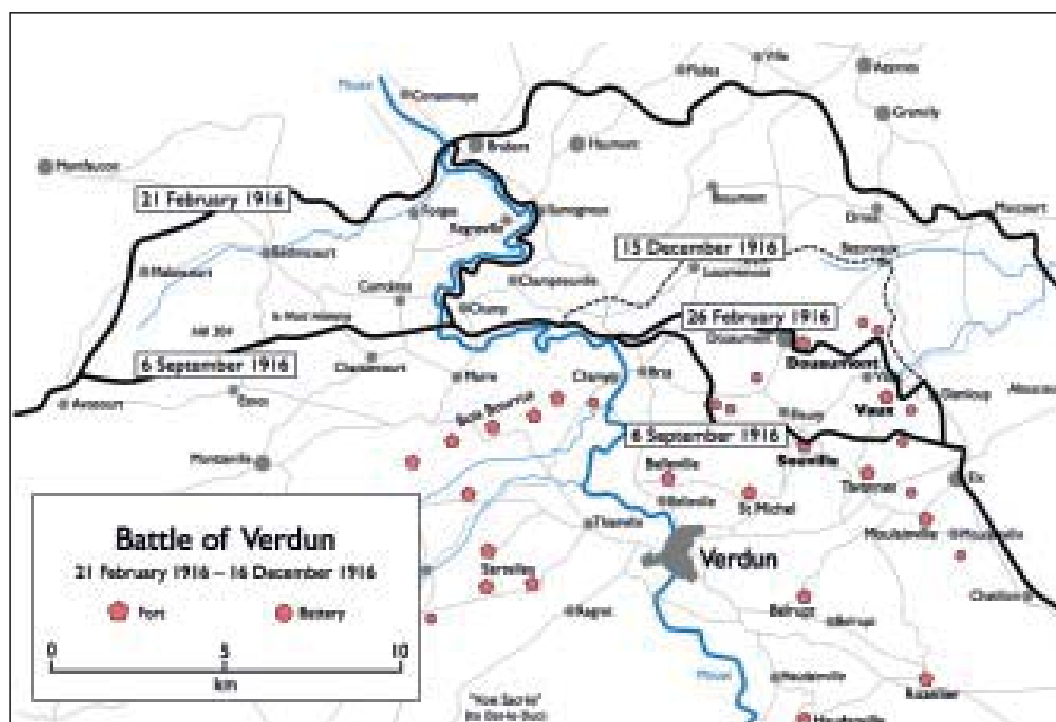
sian Army, the difficulties of the Belgian Army in increasing its manpower with large parts of Belgium being occupied, and the need to rebuild the Serbian Army.

On the German side, conclusions are different.

The German Army is facing the paradox of having had two of its former most senior commanders, von Schlieffen and von Moltke (the younger) doubting the ability of Germany to win a war against the Allies (primarily France, Great Britain and Russia). If a victory is to be achieved, risky as it is, there is a need to

develop the operational capacities of the German Army, making it possible to achieve decisive results at the very beginning of a conflict.⁷ As we know, the German Army failed to achieve such results in 1914, be it on the Eastern or Western Front. On top of that, on the Eastern Front, the German Army fights alongside the Austro-Hungarian Army, which quickly proves to be both badly prepared and equipped for a long lasting European military conflict. Neither should the command and control issues of the German Army be forgotten. The roles of the Emperor (Supreme Warlord), the Private Military Staff of the Emperor, the Imperial Government under the Chancellor of the Empire and the General Staff often lead to turf wars as well as putting together dysfunctional command and control of field armies engaged in operations. It particularly leads to a profound discrepancy between possible political goals for military operations and the real operational capabilities of the German Army.⁸

On 14 September 1914 General Eric von Falkenhayn had taken over as the new Chief of the General Staff. He shared the views of von Schlieffen and von Moltke (the younger) about the need for decisive operations. However, military events in 1915 had convinced him that it was almost impossible, at best very difficult, to achieve a breakthrough on the Western Front leading to a decisive military victory. His views were based on the successes of the German field armies in resisting French offensives in particular in Champagne in 1915. He therefore concluded that a new approach should be developed to achieve a military decision on the Western Front that could create the basis for a peace acceptable to Germany. Von Falkenhayn also had to take into consideration the requirements of the Eastern



(Wikipedia)

Front created by the weaknesses of the Austro-Hungarian Army, which he had been forced to reinforce on a number of occasions. He was also confronted with the views of two senior commanders on the Eastern Front, Generals von Hindenburg and Ludendorff, both convinced it was possible to achieve a decisive military victory against Russia.

Von Falkenhayn needed to balance the various requirements, be they political or military, which would put a particular strain on his limited resources. This was a key factor in the decision-making process for operations to take place in 1916.

Von Falkenhayn's choice

Von Falkenhayn's choice is a battle which will lead to such French losses that a weakened France, de facto, will be forced out of the war. Great Britain will then, precariously standing alone on The Western Front, be defeated on the battlefield before it develops its full military potential. A conventional frontal attack leading to a breakthrough is considered improbable, it is therefore necessary for the German Army to choose an area of operation which will favour its actions as well as forcing the French Army into a battle of attrition. According to von Falkenhayn's Memoirs he presents this concept to the Emperor in the so-called Christmas Memorandum.⁹ Recent historical works by Robert T Foley, Antoine Prost and Gerd Krumeich as well as Holger Afflerbach, Olaf Jessen and Paul Jankowski refute its existence, it being possibly a post-World War 1 justification by von Falkenhayn for the Battle of Verdun as it unfolded. It seems most probable that von Falkenhayn did choose an approach which was to lead to massive French losses (later described as "*bleeding white*" the French Army) to be followed by a return to manoeuvre warfare after a major French defeat. This view seems confirmed by the Chief of Staff of the Vth Army (General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf) in the interviews conducted by the Reichsarchiv in 1933, as it works on the official German history of World War 1.¹⁰

But why choose the French Army and not the British Army? As France has engaged all its potential, be it human or industrial, since 1914, von Falkenhayn assesses, that the French Army is exhausted and will collapse under the pressure of an existential battle. Further, German Commanders are convinced of the superior operational skills of the German Army. Both assumptions will prove baseless and will contribute to the stalemate and massive losses endured by both sides during the battle of Verdun.

Why choose Verdun? Initially two options were tabled, Belfort and Verdun. Verdun was chosen for a number of reasons. A perception that it was a city which France would fight to retain regardless of costs; a terrain which was considered to favour the attacker (the Germans), good lines of communication (which was not the case for the French forces deployed around Verdun) and the fact that Vth Army had been studying a number of options to capture Verdun city. Once the concept is approved and Verdun chosen as the point of main effort, von Falken-

hayn initiates the operational planning. It is based upon a German study going back to mid-November 1915, *Operation Waldfest*. The planning is conducted by the staff of the Vth Army under command of the German Imperial Crown Prince. The Chief of Staff, to some extent the real commander of the Vth Army, General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf travels to Berlin on 14 December to present the draft plan to von Falkenhayn.¹¹ The first draft of the operations plan proposes an attack on *both* sides of the Meuse River, which roughly speaking runs from south to north and cuts the city of Verdun into two parts. The objective for the attack is the city of Verdun.

The force required (23 infantry divisions) is considered excessive by von Falkenhayn, who directs the offensive to be conducted solely on the eastern side of the river (the right bank). As to capturing the city of Verdun, he remains indecisive. He assesses that the French Army will fight desperately to defend the city as well as launching counter-attacks to recapture lost ground or stabilize the situation. This will lead to the same result as the French Offensives in Champagne, exhaustion of the French Army opening up for decisive action by the German Army.

Here it becomes necessary to analyse the linkage between the strategic intention described above and the tactical choices open to Vth Army. Those tactical choices are to be shaped in such a way that the French Army will deem it vital to fight a decisive battle, which will deplete it to such an extent that it will no longer be able to defend France. Constant in Vth Army's various proposals is the requirement to maintain a clear tactical objective, primarily to capture Verdun itself. It brings to the fore whether the German assault on Verdun was to just destroy the French Army or building on such an achievement to recreate the possibilities for manoeuvre warfare after a breakthrough. Pétain in his little book "*La bataille de Verdun*"¹² definitely supports the perception that von Falkenhayn wanted to achieve a breakthrough and then defeat the French Armies in a manoeuvre warfare phase.

The German plan is accordingly to be based on superior artillery both in quantity and in quality. This superiority in firepower will lead to the destruction of French formations in terrain favouring the actions of German units. Based upon the latest guidance, Vth Army forwards a new draft on 6 January 1916. The Vth Army is to capture the Froide Terre-Fort Souville-Fort Tavannes line, the last dominating terrain before the valley of the Meuse. Controlling this key terrain will give control of the city of Verdun and its surroundings. However, Vth Army still insists on attacking on both sides of the Meuse River in contradiction with the provided guidance. The attack on the left bank is to take place after the main attack on the right bank. The argument put forward by Vth Army is the necessity to control the terrain on the left bank, from where deployed French artillery can intervene decisively against the main attack on the right bank. Von Falkenhayn again rejects this even though both the Crown Prince and his Chief of Staff are convinced of the necessity to attack on both sides of

the Meuse River. Von Falkenhayn states he does not have the necessary forces for Vth Army to simultaneously attack on both sides of the Meuse River. The Vth Army will have to do with the assigned five Army Corps put at its disposal for the offensive and concentrate on conducting the offensive on the right bank of the River Meuse. But von Falkenhayn ambiguously recognizes the validity of the arguments put forward by the Vth Army and therefore assigns one supplementary army corps of two infantry divisions to conduct an attack on the left bank of the River Meuse. This attack will only take place on his direct order and only after the main attack on the right bank is on its way. In other words, Commander Vth Army, The Crown Prince, does not have full control of either his plan or the major formations assigned to him for the operation. This lack of coherence will lead to further difficulties in the finalization of the plan itself and will have major repercussions as to the conduct of the operation particularly in its initial phase.

The German plan

Based upon the latest guidance provided by von Falkenhayn, Vth Army's plan is approved on 4 January 1916. Commander Vth Army and his Chief of Staff try to bring together the strategic intent, as formulated by von Falkenhayn, and the tactical orders given to subordinated Army Corps and Divisions. To attack towards Verdun and capture the vital heights and forts dominating the city, eventually to capture the city itself and thereby force the French Army to conduct costly counter attacks, which will be broken up by superior German artillery and superior fighting skills of German formations. This will force France to use its last reserves, creating the possibility for the German Army to inflict a decisive defeat on the French Army. With the French Army defeated, the German Army can then concentrate on defeating the British Army before Great Britain and its Empire develop their full potential. Von Falkenhayn expects a quick decision, a view not shared by the Vth Army, where both Commander and Chief of Staff have strong doubts as to the validity of the plan. This highlights anew the discrepancy between the strategic intent and the feasibility of it at the operational and tactical levels. Very quickly, as the battle unfolds, Vth Army will be confronted with the classic dilemma of "*too little too late*".

Vth Army plans to use five army corps of which three are the main effort, the real attacking force.¹³ The attack is to be supported by a major concentration of artillery, about a minimum of 1,200 guns of all calibres. As ordered by von Falkenhayn, the attack will only take place on the right bank. Orders are issued to subordinate formations on 27 January 1916 and the offensive is planned to start on 12 February after a day of artillery preparation of about 1,000,000 rounds. The operational order is highly detailed as to coordination between infantry and artillery thus, hopefully, minimizing losses. Paradoxically the attacking units are to maintain a relentless pressure on the enemy during the whole attack¹⁴ while

at the same time using artillery to overcome major obstacles and thereby not be forced into costly attacks. This brings anew to the fore the difficulties in bringing the French Army to fight an existential battle as necessitated by the concept behind the German plan. Even though Verdun is not an objective, the attack is to be conducted against Verdun, which, in retrospect, leads the Vth Army to de facto try to capture Verdun.¹⁵

Bad weather delays the offensive until 21 February. This delay will have major consequences as the French forces reluctantly become aware of the preparations for a German offensive, leading to a reinforcement of the defence of Verdun at the very last moment. Up to now, the French Army was concentrating on its upcoming participation in the Somme Offensive and was not considering the possibility of a German main effort against Verdun. Further, stringent security measures were in place on the German side, maintaining strict operational secrecy. Had the German offensive started on 12 February it might well have led to the capture of Verdun. On the other hand, the French forces could have retreated to the left bank of the Meuse River and fought a defensive battle making best use of this major obstacle.¹⁶

It is not the intention here to describe the battle itself in details, but it can roughly be divided into the following four phases.¹⁷

1. 21 February to 4 March, the right bank.
2. 6 March to 30 April, both banks.
3. 1 May to 15 June, attrition battle.
4. 20 June to 3 September, last attempt to “capture” Verdun city.

The dilemmas of the battle

In February 1916 the French Commander in Chief, General Joffre, considers the French participation in the French-British combined offensive on the Somme as his first priority, as it had been decided during the Chantilly Conference in December 1915. In his *Mémoires* Field Marshal Joffre describes how he intended the French contribution to be 39 regular Infantry Divisions and three Territorial Divisions to be supported by 1,700 heavy guns. On 20 May the French contribution has been reduced to 26 Infantry Divisions and 700 heavy guns.¹⁸ On 1 July, the start of the Somme Offensive, the French contribution has been cut to an initial participation of eight Infantry Divisions under command of the French Sixth Army. The consequences of the battle of attrition at Verdun are very clear, the main effort of the French Army is no longer the Somme Offensive but “*holding the line*” at Verdun on both banks of the Meuse River.

Which events and decisions on *both* sides led to this situation?

The fierce French resistance as exemplified by the fighting at Bois des Caures, an area of German main effort. The story of Bois des Caures is well described by Alistair Horne, Alain Denizot and Alain Bernède in their respective books. What makes this phase of the battle interesting is that the French resistance both sur-

prises and delays the German attacking forces. It quickly shows the fallacy of two essential German assumptions:

- A. French forces are exhausted, they will give in when confronted with massive German artillery fire and determined German attacks.
- B. German units are superior in quality and equipment when compared with their French equivalents.

Those two assumptions are wrong for the following reasons:

- A. The limited results of the German artillery preparation even though it lasts about 12 hours and uses about 1,000,000 rounds (covering the whole front of Vth Army). The two infantry battalions of Lieutenant Colonel Driant are still able to resist and delay the German attack thus giving more time for higher headquarters to move reserves to Verdun. This is largely thanks to an exemplary preparation of the French defensive positions¹⁹ in Bois des Caures by highly experienced troops as well as the leadership of an outstanding tactical commander, Driant.
- B. The German artillery preparation starts at about 4 am on 21 February. It implies the first assault against the French positions takes place at about 4 pm leaving only limited time to operate in daylight.²⁰ The assault is de facto a reconnaissance in force and only captures the northern limit of Bois des Caures. This might be correct in the light of von Falkenhayn's plan to fight the battle with artillery, but it is not coherent with Sixth Army's intent to keep up a relentless pressure against the French units. Further, it allows the French formations to reorganize themselves during the night.

The failure of some of the forts protecting Verdun is largely due to the wrong French conclusions on the use of forts. The disarmament of the forts around Verdun, the main reason for the speedy capture of Fort Douaumont by the German Army, is a result of the "experience" with the Belgian forts around the city of Liège. The Belgian forts could not resist the fire of the German siege artillery for long. The French High Command concluded that forts no longer had any defensive value and disarmed the majority of forts around the city of Verdun. They did not take into consideration a fundamental difference between the Belgian forts of Liège and the most modern French forts of Verdun.

Due to the fast development of plunging fires with modern high explosive shells in the 1880s, a number of French forts were reinforced by the addition of a layer of concrete and sand. Douaumont had thus been strengthened with a layer of concrete between 1.5 to 2.5 meters thick, resting on a layer of sand about 1 meter thick. The concrete layer acted as armour plating and the sand layer as shock absorber. Further, a thick layer of soil was spread over the concrete layer. Douaumont proved to be immune to all types of shells apart from French 400 mm and German 420 mm shells. The Belgian forts were built in non-reinforced concrete without special plating layers of concrete and absorbing sand. The comparison

was also erroneous, as it did not take into consideration that the Belgian forts had not been designed to withstand the heavy German siege artillery, which was then still in its infancy. Also forgotten was that the siege of Liège had delayed the German movement through Belgium by ten days, a delay which proved precious for both the British and French as well as Belgian forces in this phase of the war.²¹

Very quickly, the French High Command is confronted with the necessity to decide where the defensive battle is to take place. Is it to take place on the Meuse River? Alternatively, should it take place on the right bank, the area chosen by the German as favouring their attack? In his instruction to General de Castelnau and General Pétain, General Joffre states that a retreat to the river can take place if necessary. But on 24 February 1916 in the evening, Prime Minister Aristide Briand visits General Joffre in his headquarters and convinces him (orders him?) to fight the battle on the right bank.²² Indirectly von Falkenhayn sees his strategic intention supported by a French political decision that French soil will not be given up without major resistance. The French Army must stand and fight. This it will do with its back to the river and in an area chosen by the Germans as favouring their offensive actions.

Strange as it may sound, on the same day, the Crown Prince begins to doubt the validity of the assumptions of the German plan. He is confronted with the weariness of the attacking infantry divisions and a lack of reserves. He later assessed that Verdun was within reach if he had been given the necessary reserves for keeping up the momentum of the attack.²³ This assessment might be true considering the French wavering until the evening 24 February. Sixth Army therefore proposes to extend the battlefield and proceed with the attack on the left bank. Although initially rejected by von Falkenhayn, he bows to the request on 29 February and releases the two infantry divisions kept in reserve for that purpose. Those two divisions are to capture Mort-Homme height as well as Height 304, which are the two dominating terrain features on the left bank. Whoever controls them, controls the left bank. Vth Army assesses that control of those two heights will make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the French artillery on the left bank to continue to support the French efforts to contain the German main effort on the right bank. The attack on the left bank is launched on 6 March and has some initial success, but is quickly contained by stubborn French resistance. It is interesting to note that Vth Army's initial plan, to attack on both sides of the river Meuse, finally takes place 14 days after 21 February, the beginning of the German offensive. Vth Army will, in due time, succeed in capturing parts of Mort-Homme and Height 304, but it will never be able to influence, in a decisive way, the use of French artillery in position on the left bank. This artillery will continue to fire into the right flank of the German attackers on the right bank. Its role will be decisive.²⁴

On 27 March von Falkenhayn begins to doubt the outcome of the battle.²⁵ The German Army has already suffered losses of 82,000 men (all categories). Now it is Vth Army, which considers the plan sound. It bases its assessment on a delu-



French infantry resting in a damaged Verdun trench. (Foto: Roger Viollet , Getty Images-Verdun, history.com)

sional calculation of French losses. If the pressure is maintained, the increasing French losses will lead to the breakdown of the French Army, thus opening up for a decisive German victory. Vth Army now fully adopts the von Falkenhayn concept of capturing key terrain and forcing the French army to conduct bloody counter-attacks. Further, the German Corps Commanders recommend keeping up the pressure for two reasons.

One, it is necessary to capture the defined key terrain, which will be the basis for German defence and will force the French forces to attack under very unfavourable conditions. *Two*, it would be bad for the morale of the troops to disengage and retreat in the wake of heavy losses when Verdun seems to be within reach.

By the end of April 1916, all German reserves are engaged in Verdun and further forces are transferred from the Eastern front. 21 German divisions and a substantial quantity of artillery are now fighting around Verdun. It has now be-



The town of Verdun eight months after the bombardment. (Gallerie Bilderwelt, GettyImages, history.com)

come the German main effort on the Western Front. Von Falkenhayn is convinced his plan is working. The French army is assessed to have lost about 525,000 soldiers (all categories) versus 250,000 (all categories) on the German side. The wearing down of the French Army is taking place. However, on 4 June 1916 Brusilov launches the Russian Army offensive. Rapidly the Fourth Austrian-Hungarian Army is destroyed, forcing von Falkenhayn to reassign forces to the Eastern Front, reinforcing/relieving the beleaguered Austrian-Hungarian forces. Nonetheless, on 24 June von Falkenhayn states anew that the decisive battle will be on the Western Front and at Verdun. This view is finally shattered on 1 July when the British Army, with the French Army in support, launches the Somme offensive. The Germans no longer can maintain the main effort at Verdun and have to reassign their forces at Verdun to other sectors of the Western Front, de facto bringing to an end the offensive against Verdun.

On 8 July von Falkenhayn defends his assessment of the situation in a meeting with the Emperor. He upholds the view that a decision is only achievable on the Western Front because the French Army is suffering such losses that it will not be able to maintain its cohesion through the winter of 1916-1917. France will then sue for peace.

Wilhelm II is not convinced, on 29 August Field Marshal von Hindenburg is appointed Chief of the General Staff and on 2 September, he orders the offensive against Verdun to be stopped.²⁶

On 26 December, after a long political-military crisis, General Joffre hands in his resignation. It is accepted.²⁷

What can we learn from Verdun?

Coherence between political objectives and military possibilities

In both France and Germany, political-military relations were difficult, but the difficulties were different in scale and the reasons for the difficulties also different. France being a parliamentary democracy maintained full political control of its war aims. The political-military relations were more complex, particularly during general Joffre's tenure as Commander in Chief of the French field armies. Ulti-

mately, it would lead to his resignation, or dismissal. The difficulty of the French political-military relations was the fundamental question of whether political leaders should have a say, ultimately a veto right on military decisions pertaining to the conduct of the campaign and or battle(s). In the case of Verdun it is interesting to note that Prime Minister Aristide Briand was the one “*deciding*” that Verdun must be defended and a retreat to the Meuse was not an option. Whether the consequences of this decision were fully understood by the political decision makers or the military commanders, is strongly questionable. The glory of the French “*victory*” at Verdun would quickly overshadow the option of retreat to the Meuse and the possibility of a less costly defensive battle using the Meuse River as an obstacle. The frightening losses of the battle led to a glorification of the French soldier, “*le poilu*”. On the other hand, nobody could predict the outcome of the battle and we should be careful as to post-event rationalisations as exemplified in many of the various writings of the key political leaders and military commanders on both sides.

On the German side, the picture was even more complex. The German Empire was in no way a monolithic organization with the Emperor at its head. The Empire consisted of four kingdoms, six grand duchies, five duchies, six principalities, three free cities of Hanseatic origin and an imperial territory. To this must be added various military structures, primarily the Prussian and Bavarian ones, both with different military traditions and, to a certain extent, different doctrinal approaches. Political decision-making and military power were also divided among a number of decision makers, the Emperor, his military house, the General Staff, the Chancellor (appointed by the Emperor but without a real political backing) and the Reichstag with its elected members. This eclectic division of power makes it extremely difficult to develop a coherent “*comprehensive*” strategy regarding war aims, military capabilities and their ability to sustain war aims as well as conduct of operations and their prioritisation.

In 1918, under the leadership of von Hindenburg and Ludendorff, a de facto military dictatorship was put in place and political activities became subordinated to the conduct of military operations.

Coherence between military strategic aims and military tactical possibilities

As the French Army was fighting a primarily defensive battle, albeit under highly unfavourable conditions, it would to a lesser extent be confronted with discrepancy between the military strategic aim, to keep Verdun under French control, and the tactical ability to do so. It proved to be possible, which does not automatically imply that it was the right decision.

The losses of the French Army during the battle became deliberately distributed²⁸ by the rotation of divisions put in place by General Pétain. The emotional impact of this on the majority of French soldiers and thereby the population at large cannot be underestimated. At the same time the French Army implemented substantial tactical innovations, a flexible approach to defensive operations where



The intensive use of “*the sacred way*”. (UIG, Getty Images, history.com)

possible, a strengthening of cooperation between infantry and artillery particularly in the attack (rolling barrages) and a rigorous approach to logistics as exemplified by the procedures adopted in maintaining the Voie Sacrée open and supplies flowing.

It was different on the German side, where the aims of von Falkenhayn’s plan and the conduct of the battle by Vth Army did not match. The fundamental question is whether they could match. Von Falkenhayn had chosen to fight a battle of attrition with superior German artillery and forcing the French units to conduct an existential battle. Such a concept seems to disregard that attrition cannot be controlled and can quickly become a two-edged sword. Even though French losses were bigger than German losses, the difference was insufficient to warrant a German victory.²⁹ Where the issue of attrition takes on another dimension is in relation to the sizes of the two populations. Germany felt the pressure, but did manage to contain the effects, while France reached its maximum in relation to losses of manpower. One could argue that the losses at Verdun reduce the French Army’s ability to sustain further catastrophic losses such as the ones experienced in 1917 during the Chemin des Dames Offensive.³⁰

Lessons identified and their use

Intelligence assessments are among the most complex issues a military commander has to deal with. It is not only a question of gathering intelligence and analysing it. It is also a matter of being able to look at the assessment with an appropriately open mind and accept the unsavoury conclusions.

From a French perspective, the German choice of the attack against Verdun on 21 February was most inconvenient in relation to what was to be the main French



Georges Leroux's iconic Verdun painting *L'Enfer* from 1921. (Flickr)

effort in 1916, the Somme Offensive. Verdun was for a long time considered a secondary operation by General Joffre. He remained reluctant to release divisions and artillery units to General Pétain and his successors in command at Verdun.

Another dimension of wrong lessons identified and learned was the role of fortresses. Before concluding that French forts are no longer of any value, it would have been useful to conduct a proper comparative analysis. It would have shown that the Belgian and French forts were not comparable and therefore conclusions as to the combat efficiency of the Belgian forts were irrelevant to a number of the forts of Verdun.

On the German side, a number of assumptions proved to be fundamentally wrong. The German Army was not in 1916 a substantially more capable fighting

force compared to other armies and the French one in particular. The resilience of France in being able to sustain casualties and generating combat power was also underestimated. One could argue that those two assumptions were based upon an arrogant intellectual approach to the military conundrum facing all armies in 1916, how to obtain a decisive effect on the battlefield.

In hindsight, there is much to be learned from the battle of Verdun. The battle might be more than a hundred years old and seem antiquated from a 21st Century perspective. However, the fundamental issues of political military relations, coherence of military aims and objectives in relation to political aims, the relationship between the various levels of warfare and the use of intelligence at large are still highly valid, *if studied in depth*.

Noter

- 1 Quoted in von Priesdorff, Kurt (ed.), *Soldatisches Führertum*, Hamburg 1936, vol. VII, pp. 371-391, cf. p. 389. Translated into English in *Operational Thinking in Clausewitz, Moltke, Schlieffen and Manstein*. (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Freiburg im Breisgau, Second edition 1988), p. 27.
- 2 Total losses, be they killed in action, missing in action, died of wounds or just wounded still need to be studied fully. The numbers chosen reflect “killed in action” and are on the conservative side and build upon all read sources, which differ on this issue; see Jankowski, Paul, *Verdun* (Oxford 2014), pp. 116-120, 257-261.
- 3 See Doughty, Robert A., *Pyrrhic Victor* (Belknap & Harvard 2005), pp. 125-135; Foley, Robert T., *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* (Cambridge 2005), pp.178-180.
- 4 Comprehensive approach is the name of the NATO doctrine developed following operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan in particular. It highlights the necessity to use all dimensions of power, be it economic, diplomatic, political or military to achieve a decisive result.
- 5 See in particular Joffre, Joseph, *Mémoires du Maréchal Joffre*, volume 2, (Les éditions de l’officine, Paris 2008), pp. 118-122.
- 6 See note 4.
- 7 Foley (2005), pp. 56-81.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 109-126, 154.
- 9 von Falkenhayn, Erich, *General Headquarters 1914-1916 and its Critical decisions* (Hutchinson, London 1919, reprint by The Naval and Military press, Uckfield 2004), pp. 209-218; Wilhelm, Crown Prince of Germany, *Memoirs of the Crown Prince of Germany by Crown Prince Wilhelm* (Thornton Butterworth, London 1922, reprint by The Naval and Military Press , Uckfield 2006), pp. 173-174.
- 10 Prost, Antoine & Gerd Krumeich, *Verdun* (Éditions Tallandier, Paris 2015), pp 26-28.
- 11 Foley (2005), pp. 210-216; Crown Prince Wilhelm (1922), pp. 174-176.
- 12 Pétain, Philippe, *La bataille de Verdun* (Perrin, Paris 2015), p. 38.
- 13 Bernède, Alain, *Verdun 1916 Le point de vue français* (Éditions Cénomane, Le Mans 2002), p. 79.
- 14 BAMA, PH5/476, A.O.K.5. Befehl für die Angriffskorps. 27.1.1916. Paragraph 3.
- 15 Foley (2005), pp. 210-214; Denizot, Alain, *Verdun 1914-1918* (Nouvelles éditions latines, Paris 1996), pp. 77-79.
- 16 Foley (2005), p. 217; Joffre (2008), p. 149.
- 17 Genevoix, Maurice (ed.), *Verdun 1916, Actes du colloque international sur la bataille de Verdun 6-7-8 juin 1975* (Nancy 1976), p. 119.
- 18 Joffre (2008), pp. 169-171.
- 19 Even in our days, the French defensive positions in Bois des Caures are easy to identify. They reflect an ability to continue fighting even when surrounded by enemy forces as well as the extensive use of communication trenches and a number of primitive concrete bunkers.
- 20 There is different information as to when the assault started, but it did take place at either 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. The same goes for the start of the artillery preparation.
- 21 Holstein, Christina, *Fort Douaumont* (Pen and Sword, Barnsley 2002), pp. 24-30, 35-38.
- 22 Doughty (2005), pp. 271-273; Joffre (2008), pp. 150-154.
- 23 Crown Prince Wilhelm (1922), p. 175.
- 24 Foley (2005), pp. 223-225; Denizot (1996), pp. 98-99); Holstein, Christina, *Verdun, the left bank* (Pen and Sword, Barnsley 2016).
- 25 Foley (2005), pp. 227-231, 235.
- 26 von Hindenburg, General-Feltmarskal Paul, *Mit liv* (Aschehoug, København 1920), p.131; Ludendorff, Erich, . *My war memoirs* (Naval and Military Press, Uckfield 2005), pp. 244, 246, 265; Foley (2005), p. 258.
- 27 Joffre (2008), pp. 314-317.
- 28 Foley (2005), p. 259.
- 29 See notes 2 and 25..
- 30 Murphy (2015), pp. 160-165.