THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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revolution in the grand style, we are entitled to believe that Russia's
internal troubles will compel her to give in within a relatively short
period. In this connection it may be granted she will not revive her
military reputation meanwhile.” What made even a weakened Russia
too difficult to knock out of the war was the lack of a strategic objective: the capture of St. Petersburg would have merely symbolic results; an advance on Moscow led towards the vast emptiness of the interior; while the Ukraine, though a prize of great value, was inaccessible except through Romania, whose neutrality Germany would be ill-advised to violate. Dismissing involvement in the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Salonika fronts as irrelevancies, and accepting the British portion of the Western Front as too strong to attack, he therefore concluded that, since an offensive somewhere was necessary, because “Germany and her allies could not hold out indefinitely,” it must be made against France. “The strain on France,” he wrote, “has reached breaking point—though it is certainly borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeed in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for, that breaking point would be reached and England’s best sword knocked out of her hand.” The operational solution to his analysis was for a limited offensive at a vital point that would “compel the French to throw in every man they have. If they do so the forces of France will bleed to death.”

He already had “the vital point” in mind, the fortress of Verdun in a loop of the Meuse, isolated during the operations of 1914, exposed to attack from three sides, badly provided with communications to the French rear area but lying only twelve miles from a major railhead in German hands. He quickly secured the Kaiser’s agreement to what would be called Operation Gericht (Judgement) and, while a dissenting Hertzendorf proceeded to prepare his own offensive against the Italians, began to mass the divisions that would try “the remarkable devotion” of the French to its limit.

1. Offensive at Verdun

Verdun had been a fortress in Roman times and its defences had been renewed many times, by Vauban in the seventeenth century, by Napoleon III and most recently in 1885, when its circle of detached forts had been duplicated with another at five miles' distance from the small city's centre. The new forts had subsequently been strengthened with concrete and armour but, following the British withdrawal from Namur to German heavy artillery in the aftermath, Verdun had become a fortress of strategic value in its own right.

Opposite his and its neighbour, three divisions of XXX Corps, the 51st, also a reserve division, from Liége; the 37th Division, from Besançon; the units of the divisions that formed the 56th and 59th Battalions of Chasseurs cleared the Bois des Cautres north of Verdun; and had been there ever since and been crowned by the French Academy. Lieutenant Colonel Emile Driant, constitutionally insubordinate soldier, nationalistic books on future warfare, of Tomorrow, foretold a great victory that had been won by the French Academy, and had been carried by the French Academy. 

Operation Judgement was scheduled...
with concrete and armour but, following the collapse of Liège and Namur to German heavy artillery in August 1914, the French had lost faith in all fortifications and Verdun's fortress guns had been dismounted and sent away for use in the field. The battle of 1914 had flowed around it but its value as a point of pivot had been forgotten in the aftermath. Verdun had become a "quiet sector" and its garrison had been whittled down until, in February 1916, it consisted of only the three divisions of XXX Corps, the 72nd, a local reserve division, the 31st, also a reserve division, from Lille, and the 14th, a regular division from Besançon; the 37th Division, from Algeria, lay in reserve. Among the units of the divisions that formed the garrison the most notable were the 56th and 59th Battalions of Chasseurs à pied, notable because they had cleared the Bois des Caures north of Verdun of Germans in 1914 and had been there ever since and because they were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Emile Driant, a local member of parliament, a constitutionally insubordinate soldier and the author of numerous sensationalist books on future warfare, of which the best known, The War of Tomorrow, foretold a great victory by France over Germany and had been crowned by the French Academy. Driant, in the Bois des Caures, commanded the foremost sector of Verdun's defences on the east bank of the Meuse.30

Opposite his and its neighbouring positions, Falkenhayn had assembled, during January and February 1916, a reinforcement to Fifth Army, the German Crown Prince's, of ten divisions, including six regular, supported by an enormous concentration of artillery. Among the 542 heavy guns were thirteen of the 420mm and seventeen of the 305mm howitzers that had devastated the Belgian forts eighteen months earlier, and to supply them and the field and medium artillery a stock of two and a half million shells had been accumulated. The whole of the French defensive zone on a front of eight miles—one German division and 150 guns to each mile—was to be deluged with preparatory fire, so that "no line is to remain unbombed, no possibilities of supply unmolested, nowhere should the enemy feel himself safe." Falkenhayn's plan was brutally simple. The French, forced to fight in a crucial but narrowly constricted corner of the Western Front, would be compelled to feed reinforcements into a battle of attrition where the material circumstances so favoured the Germans that defeat was inevitable. If the French gave up the struggle, they would lose Verdun; if they persisted, they would lose their army.

Operation Judgement was scheduled to begin on 10 February. Bad
The battle of Verdun

weather postponed it from day to day, during which growing intelligence of an impending German attack gradually brought the defenders to a better state of readiness, insufficient, nevertheless, without substantial reinforcements of guns and men, to guarantee successful resistance. On 19 February the rains stopped, next day a warm sun dried the ground, and early in the morning of 21 February the bombardment opened. All morning it raged and on into the afternoon; in the Bois des Cau res, 500 by 1,000 yards square, it is estimated that 80,000 shells fell before the German infantry appeared. Only Driant’s meticulous preparation of his position left any of his men alive to fight.

Had the Germans attacked in strength they must have overrun the devastated enemy positions on the eight-mile front, but they did not. The philosophy of the operation was that artillery would destroy the French defences, which would then be occupied by the infantry in follow-up. Driant and half of his soldiers survived until the next day, when stronger waves of Germany infantry appeared to overwhelm them. There were equivalent advances either side of the Bois des Cau res. The French outer trench lines were crumbling and the defenders began to fall back, overwhelmed by fire and numbers, towards the old forts of Vaux and Douaumont. On 23 February a surviving lieu-

tenant of the 72nd Division signaled commanding officer and all company of the battalion is reduced to approximating, neither ammunition nor food. What could be done in the absence of re-supply had the whole of the outer trench zone was abandoned their positions in terror. Vaux and Douaumont stood as perches of the heights above the Marne. German artillery observers directed bridges across the Meuse which succumbed. February, Douaumont fell, taken by 24th Brandenburg Regiment who, near-miss, decided to explore the infield on the fort’s capture spread panic among the first of the reinforcements arriving. of food were pillaged on the word that prepared for demolition and retreat was at point of falling.

Had it fallen the results might have been catastrophic in the conduct of the war, for it was indeed wooded terrain to its rear was perfectly lower than the French were to suffer the months to come. On the morning of the 20th Castelnau, who had come from the Marne, arrived at Verdun, assessed the situation and forward positions must be held. A devout Catholic and a member of army, Castelnau saw the fight for Verdun as a way to sustain the defence of the national territory, ultimate victory. The decision he took, which Falkenhayn might have hoped to prevent it, Philip Pé tain, the oppo site was not a man for he his disbelief in the doctrine of the old in the pre-war army. At the war’s had won him rapid promotion, of the 33rd Regiment, in which Cha to, by 1916, command of Second A
tenant of the 72nd Division signalled to higher command, “The commanding officer and all company commanders have been killed. My battalion is reduced to approximately 180 men (from 600). I have neither ammunition nor food. What am I to do?” There was little that could be done in the absence of reinforcements. On 24 February, the whole of the outer trench zone was overrun, many of the defenders abandoning their positions in terror and fleeing to the rear. Only Forts Vaux and Douaumont stood as points of resistance on the forward slopes of the heights above the Meuse which, if taken, would allow German artillery observers to direct fire on to Verdun itself and the bridges across the Meuse which sustained the resistance. Then, on 25 February, Douaumont fell, taken by a lone German sergeant of the 24th Brandenburg Regiment who, blown into the fort’s moat by a near-miss, decided to explore the interior, found it occupied by only a handful of French troops and bluff them into surrender. The news of the fort’s capture spread panic among the troops in Verdun and even the first of the reinforcements arriving to strengthen the front. Depots of food were pillaged on the word that the Meuse bridges had been prepared for demolition and retreat was imminent. Verdun seemed on the point of falling.

Had it fallen the results might have been beneficial to the French conduct of the war, for it was indeed a death trap, while the broken and wooded terrain to its rear was perfectly defensible at a cost in life much lower than the French were to suffer in and around the sacrificial city in the months to come. On the morning of 25 February, however, Joffre’s deputy, de Castelnau, who had commanded the Second Army at the Marne, arrived at Verdun, assessed the situation, and decided that the forward positions must be held. A “fighting general,” a romantic, a devout Catholic and a member of an ancient French military family, de Castelnau saw the fight for Verdun as a test of his country’s capacity to sustain the defence of the national territory and keep alive the hope of ultimate victory. The decision he took on 25 February was the one for which Falkenhayn might have hoped and the soldier chosen to implement it, Philippe Pétain, the opponent Falkenhayn might himself have chosen. Pétain was not a man for giving up. Taciturn and charmless, his disbelief in the doctrine of the offensive had denied him promotion in the pre-war army. At the war’s outbreak, however, his refusal to be deterred by losses had won him rapid advancement, from the colonelcy of the 33rd Regiment, in which Charles de Gaulle served as a subaltern, to, by 1916, command of Second Army. On his arrival at Verdun he
telephoned the commander of XX Corps, newly arrived in reinforce-
ment, to say, “I have taken command. Tell your troops. Hold fast.”

Pétain at once identified two essentials for the defence: to co-ordinate
the artillery, of which he took personal control, and to open a line of
supply. Henceforth it would be the Germans on whom fell a constant
deluge of shells as they clung to the front line or made their way for-
tward to battle through the narrow valleys beyond the Meuse. Behind
Verdun, the single road that led to Bar-le-Duc fifty miles away was des-
ignated a supply route for trucks alone; 3,500 were assembled to bring
forward the 2,000 tons of stores the garrison needed daily, the troops
being ordered to march up and down the roadside fields. Any truck
that broke down was pushed off the road, lest it interrupt the day-and
night flow of traffic. A whole division of Territorials was employed in
road repairs and France was scoured for additional transport. Eventu-
ally 12,000 trucks would be used on what became known as the Voie
sacrée.

A sanctified battle was what Falkenhayn had wanted France to fight.
He had not counted upon the fervour the French would show. Already
on 27 February, the Germans recorded “no success anywhere.”33 The
XX “Iron” Corps had come into line and its soldiers were sacrificing
themselves in a desperate effort to defend every foot of ground held;
among those of XX Corps wounded—and captured—that day was
Charles de Gaulle. The Germans sought to overcome the resistance of
the French infantry by pushing their artillery ever closer to the front,
through saturated ground that demanded ever larger teams of horses to
move a single gun. An immediate result was appalling casualties among
the gun-teams—7,000 horses are said to have been killed in one day—
yet, despite the growing weight of bombardment, the French line
would not shift. By 27 February, the Germans had advanced four miles
and were within four miles of the city but no increase in offensive effort
could push their front forward.

On the last day of February, Falkenhayn and the Crown Prince con-
ferred and agreed on a new strategy. Since the narrow-front attack on
the east bank of the Meuse had not achieved success, the offensive must
be broadened to the west bank where, behind the heights of the Mort
Homme and Côte 304, the French were hiding the artillery that failed
the German infantry struggling to reach the positions from which they
could look down into Verdun itself. The terrain on the west bank was
different from that on the east, open and rolling instead of broken and
wooded. Falkenhayn had been advised to include it in his original
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assault plan, for the reason that advances there could be easily gained. So they were on the first day of the assault, 6 March, when the French 67th Division collapsed. The Germans were swiftly counter-attacked, however, the ground was regained and once again the line stuck fast. Simultaneous efforts on the east bank, in the direction of Fort Vaux, Douaumont’s neighbour, were equally ineffectual. The ruins of the village of Vaux changed hands thirteen times during March, and yet the fort itself still lay tantalisingly beyond German reach. It was, moreover, defending itself resolutely. Both the French and Germans were learning that the lessons of Liège and Namur were not as conclusive as had seemed. Fortifications, even quite antiquated fortifications, could stand up to intense and prolonged artillery bombardment and buttress trench lines, if occupied by garrisons prepared to sit out heavy shellfire and wait for assault by unprotected infantry. It was inexperience that had caused the Belgians, whom the Germans later came to respect as dogged defenders of any position they occupied, to give in; by 1916, the French had discovered that shellfire often sounded much worse than it was, had nerved themselves to sit it out and to repay the infantry attacks that followed with murderous small-arms fire.

By the beginning of April, Falkenhayn’s belief that he could win a victory of attrition without exposing his own army to comparable loss was failing. The opening attack on the narrow front east of the Meuse had been checked at the outer line of fortification. The second offensive on the west bank had faltered under fire from the heights of the Mort Homme and Côte 304. At the beginning of April it was decided to abandon the strategy of limited offensive and attack across the extent of the whole front, now nearly twenty miles wide. The operation began on 9 April and lasted four days, until the descent of drenching rain stalled all activity for the rest of the month. On the first day the Germans reached what they thought was the crest of the Mort Homme, only to find that the real summit lay just beyond their reach. The fight for the feature then resolved itself into an artillery combat. An officer of the French 146th Regiment, Augustin Cochin, spent from 9–14 April in the Mort Homme trenches without seeing a single German, “the last two days soaked in icy mud, under terrible bombardment, without any shelter other than the narrowness of the trench... The Boche did not attack, naturally, it would have been too stupid... result: I arrived there with 175 men, I returned with 34, several half mad... not replying any more when I spoke to them.”

During May, after the bad weather relented, it was the Mort
Homme that absorbed German efforts. On 8 May the French lost the true crest but clung on to the neighbouring slopes, against which the Germans picked step by step throughout the rest of the month. The final line of resistance delineated by Pétain on taking command was breached as they continued their advance but their progress was too slow to threaten the integrity of the Verdun position. Their casualties had now exceeded 100,000, killed and wounded and, though the French had suffered equally, most of the losses borne by the Germans had fallen on the same formations. While the French rotated divisions through Verdun, the Germans kept divisions in the line, making good casualties with replacements. By the end of April, forty-two French divisions had already passed through the Verdun sector, but only thirty German, and the disparity would persist. The German 5th Division, which attacked on the first day, was in line until the end of February, returned between 8 and 15 March and then again from 22 April until the end of May. The 25th Division was engaged from 27 February to 16 March, from 10 to 25 April and then again until 19 May. Between March and May the casualties in its infantry regiments amounted to 8,549, or over a hundred per cent of their strength.

A high proportion of losses on both sides was the result of the French policy of conducting an “active defence,” counter-attacking whenever possible. One opportunity that offered was at Douaumont, where carelessness detonated a German ammunition store inside the captured fort on 8 May. The vast explosion persuaded the French to venture an attempt at recapture on 22 May, and the assaulting parties succeeded in storming the fort’s outworks and scaling the exterior before they were repulsed a day later. The initiative, nevertheless, rested with the Germans who continued to attack wherever they could and at the beginning of June gathered forces for a decisive effort. They consisted of the divisions of I Bavarian, X Reserve and XV Corps, attacking side by side on a front of three miles, with one man per yard of front, supported by 600 guns. The objective was Fort Vaux, which between 1 and 7 June, the Germans first surrounded, cutting off the garrison from contact with the French rear area, and then blew up section by section. Ultimately the commander of the garrison, Major Raynal, was forced to surrender for lack of water. The attackers paid this man the honours of war and the German Crown Prince, to whom Raynal was taken, presented him with a sword to replace the one he had left behind.

Direct command of the Verdun sector had now passed from Pétain, whose disregard for casualties troubled the artillery expert, fluent and persuasive in battle, since the beginning of the war, due to earlier differences with politicians. He was already in charge of the surviving French forts of Souville and Vaux, which he ordered downhill all the way to Verdun, less than 500 yards away, and once the fort fell into enemy hands. It was taken only several hours before the city fell into enemy hands. The French finally took Souville on 11 July, having been opposed by a bombardment of chlorine—on the French artillery’s roster as a weapon of war—but only thirty-five thousand German casualties occurred.

Despite the German surrender, the future commander of Sixth Army, the Alpenkorps, an elite mountain division, was ordered to remove his troops from the Souville heights. The French advance petered out on the fort and, in the summer heat, the French gained no ground. Nevertheless, the Souville heights were held, and as night fell, the Alpenkorps gave up its position.

That day, 23 June, marked both the end of the Verdun offensive and the beginning of the French counteroffensive. About twenty million men had been drawn into battle since 21 February, with the population depleted. Moreover, the French had suffered more casualties than any other power. The Algerian Army had become a place of yield victory. The Germans made a last stand to reach Fort Souville, but it was be
whose disregard for casualties troubled even Joffre, to Nivelle, an artillery expert, fluent and persuasive in manner, who had risen rapidly since the beginning of the war, due to his perfect English and winning ways with politicians. He was already improving control of the French guns, which were beginning to achieve dominance over those of the enemy and eventually swung the balance of advantage in the French favour. Meanwhile, however, the Germans sustained the offensive, gaining pockets of ground on the east bank and pushing forward towards the surviving French forts of Souville and Tavannes. From Souville, “it was downhill all the way to Verdun, less than two and a half miles away... and once the fort fell into enemy hands it would be but a matter of time before the city fell into enemy hands.”

German pressure continued unrelentingly after the fall of Vaux until on 22 June a new assault was preceded by a bombardment of “Green Cross” gas—an improved form of chlorine—on the French artillery lines, which contained 600 of the 1,800 French guns at Verdun. Temporarily robbed of artillery protection, the French defence faltered before an attack by the *Alpenkorps*, an elite mountain division of Bavarian guard and German light infantry; among the light infantry officers was Lieutenant Paulus, the future commander of Sixth Army at Stalingrad. A soldier of the *Alpenkorps* recorded that, during the course of the successful advance that followed the bombardment, he glimpsed the roofs of Verdun from the Souville heights. He was, however, probably mistaken. In the afternoon, the German advance petered out in the broken ground around the fort and, in the summer heat, thirst attacked the soldiers in the foremost positions gained. No water could be got up from the rear and, as night fell, the *Alpenkorps* gave up its effort to press onward.

That day, 23 June, marked both the high point and crisis of the Verdun offensive. About twenty million shells had been fired into the battle zone since 21 February, the shape of the landscape had been permanently altered, forests had been reduced to splinters, villages had disappeared, the surface of the ground had been so pockmarked by explosion that shell hole overlapped shell hole and had been overlapped again. Worse by far was the destruction of human life. By the end of June over 200,000 men had been killed and wounded on each side. The losses had fallen more heavily on the French, since they had begun the war with a third fewer men than the Germans, but to both armies Verdun had become a place of terror and death that could not yield victory. The Germans made a final effort on 11 July, which reached Fort Souville, but it was beaten off. Thereafter the Germans
ceased their attempt to destroy the French army at Verdun and relapsed into the defensive. For a while it became a quiet sector until, in October, the French moved to recover the ground lost. On 24 October Douaumont was recaptured, on 15 December a wider offensive regained much of the ground lost on the east bank since the beginning of the battle. By then, however, another battle altogether, raging since 1 July, had shifted the crux of the Western Front from Verdun to the Somme.

2. Offensive on the Somme

Verdun had been planned by Falkenhayn as an operation to “bleed white” the French army and knock Britain’s “best sword” out of her hand. Even by June, when the battle still had six months to run, it had failed in both its purposes and, as it failed, Falkenhayn's credibility as Chief of Staff had waned also. Dominating though he was in personality and intellect, handsome and forthright, self-assured to the point of arrogance and of proven ability as a staff officer and Minister of War, he suffered from the disadvantage of association, in the popular mind, with defeat rather than victory. Responsibility for the failure of the Schlieffen Plan—intrinsic though failure was in the plan's defects—and for the entrenchment of the Western Front, though it properly lay in both cases at Moltke's door, nevertheless attached in practice to him as Moltke's immediate successor. The victories of the Eastern Front, Tannenberg, even Gorlice-Tarnow, seemed the achievement of Hindenburg, and of his alter ego, Ludendorff. Falkenhayn's confederacy with the Austrian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hörzendorf, landed him with shared culpability for the poor showing of the Austro-Hungarian army against the Serbs and Russians and even for the entry of Italy into the war, since Italy's motivation was essentially anti-Austrian. The only initiative undoubtedly his own, and for which he might have taken credit were it a success, was Verdun, which, by midsummer, was palpably a terrible failure. Even before the great bombardment that would usher in the Anglo-French offensive on the Somme had opened, Falkenhayn's grip on high command was weakening, the star of his ascent and zenith already passing to the eastern titan, Hindenburg, who would replace him in August.

The Somme was to be the enterprise of another ascendant general, Douglas Haig. John French, “the little field marshal” who had taken the BEF to France, had been worn down by the attrition of his beloved