

2016/4/4: The Battle for Verdun 1916

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A fatal German strategic solo effort without participation of the Austrian alliance partner - anatomy of a key battle of the 20th century and its aftereffects

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From a present-day perspective, the Battle for Verdun has three dimensions:

- The first and certainly most significant dimension of this strategic battle is the fact that the strategy of the German chief of general staff Erich von Falkenhayn failed, which was a fatal solo effort without coordination with the Austrian alliance partner, by means of a military strategy of a battle of bleeding to death, conceived by himself, designed to induce England to withdraw from the First World War. The German losses could not be kept low. The battle slipped out of his and his military leaders' grasp. The counter measures of the French leaders were more disruptive than Falkenhayn had considered possible. The attack had come to a standstill, and the objective Cotes on the east bank of the Meuse could not be taken by assault. On 24th June 1916 the British armed forces, together with French troops, started the first Somme-Battle with enormous force application. This was no improvised operation, as Falkenhayn had intended to trigger with his attack of Verdun. Great Britain, on the other hand, followed its unswerving strategic course of militarily outfighting Germany.

- The second dimension of the Battle of Verdun is to be seen in the fact that it effectuated changes in the operational-tactical, technical and training domain. It represents the link to a series of developments leading to new moving combat procedures as well as to improvements of armament and training which had become necessary in the course of the increasing engineering of static warfare.

- A psychological third dimension has still had having its effects up to the present day. It led to changes in the general perception of war in Germany and France. It also influenced the French defence precautions after the First World War and has characterised the German-French relationship up to the present day.

At the beginning of the second phase of the Battle for Verdun already it had become obvious that the management of operations by General von Falkenhayn had failed. It was not possible, as he had assumed, to control the battle with low own and very high French losses. On the contrary, it slipped out of his hand. In the end the losses on both sides were equally high. After the First World War, the battlefield around Verdun was preserved as a monument of the war in its devastated state and was only partially reforested. In 1984, in the large French war cemetery, in front of the so-called charnel-house, where the bones of thousands of German and French soldiers are kept, President Francois Mitterrand and Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl set the seal on the accomplished overcoming of the enmity between Germany and France, which had lasted for centuries.

