



The Battle of Verdun 1916

- Verdun was an important French fortress on the Western Front.
- The Germans decided to attack it so that the French would be forced to use all their soldiers to defend Verdun. The Germans intended to defeat France in one battle by causing massive French casualties, knock France out of the war and force Britain to negotiate peace.
- On 21 February 1916 the German bombardment of Verdun began. 850 guns poured 100,000 shells an hour for nine hours into the French trenches along an 8 mile front. 140,000 German foot soldiers crossed into no man's land, some using gas shells and flame throwers. The winter weather was awful and the attack lasted for weeks.
- To start with the German shelling and attack seemed to be working. In the first five weeks of the offensive one German soldier was killed every 45 seconds. However more French soldiers were being killed and so the German generals reckoned they were still winning.
- French leaders and generals were very worried by the attack. Some French soldiers were on the brink of mutiny, refusing to obey orders.
- A new French commander reorganised supplies pouring 50,000 tons of stores and 90,000 men in week in 6,000 trucks a day to the front. Soldiers who mutinied (refused to fight) were shown no mercy and in some units one in every 10 of the soldiers was shot
- By August 1916 the French were losing more men than the Germans.
- By November 1916 the French were beating the Germans.
- There were around 700,000 casualties, 362,000 French soldiers and around 337,000 German soldiers.
- The Battle of Verdun had some of the highest casualties of any battle during the First World War.
- The French army during the First World War never really recovered from the Battle of Verdun, even though the French were on the winning side.
- Villages were deserted and completely destroyed. After the war people tried to farm on the battlefield but ploughs kept on turning up bodies, weapons and ammunition. In the 1920s the battlefield was planted with trees and turned into a quiet area, scattered with monuments to the dead.
- To some the battlefield of Verdun became a symbol of brave French resistance and victory during the First World War and of French suffering at the hands of the Germans. To others it became a symbol of how pointless all war was.



- After 1918 many French people decided that they never wanted to fight such a terrible war including battles like Verdun again.
- It meant that in 1940 when the Germans invaded France again during the Second World War many French leaders were prepared to surrender (which the French government did after six weeks).
- After the Second World War French governments still remembered the bravery of French soldiers on the battlefield at Verdun but also said that European countries like France and Germany should co-operate with each other and never go to war again.