

VERDUN, Feb-Dec 1916

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

German and Allied High Commands each planned operations in 1916 that would break the stalemate and secure a victory on the Western Front. The Anglo-French alliance devised a summer breakthrough assault on the German lines through the Ancre and Somme River valleys. As the centerpiece on a war of attrition, the Germans planned a massive attack on the French fortress city of Verdun. The Kaiser and his commanders believed the French would present a strong and vigorous defense of Verdun for symbolic as much as for military reasons.

Since the 18th century, Verdun had been a vital defensive position on the westbound approach to Paris. In 1792 it had fallen to a Prussian army and in 1870 to the Germans after a six-week siege during the Franco-Prussian War. By 1915, the German front line was ten miles from the city center.

Verdun itself was defended by 500,000 troops and a ring of fortifications, the most prominent of which were Forts Douamont, Vaux and Souville. The 21 Feb attack by 1 million German troops initiated a battle that continued for ten months, during which counterattacks merely reinforced resolve on both sides. During a one-month period, the front line between Forts Douamont and Vaux fluctuated less than 1,000 yards (Martin Gilbert, The First World War: A Complete History, p. 235).

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