ARTICLE

Contemporary Remembrance: The Battle of Verdun in the Public Eye 1916

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SUMMARY

This study examines the Great War Battle of Verdun in 1916 through the lens of the major illustrated magazine *L'Illustration*. The historiography of Verdun over the last century has seen differing interpretations that have suited the needs of each new generation. When did this ten-month-long battle become distinctly the struggle of industrialized warfare and symbol of French resistance that we mostly see it as today? A survey of a year's worth of issues reveals that the main ingredients of how scholars view the battle today were present by April 1916, ten weeks after the fighting on the Verdun front started. The battle then was seen as a difficult and heroic French victory, while today commentators see it as a standoff and a fulcrum for the fortunes of modern France, the moment when the nation began its decline as a great power.

KEYWORDS: Verdun, memory, Great War, *L'Illustration*, *La Grande Illusion*, General Pétain, Fort Douaumont, François de Tessan, historiography

Jean Renoir's influential film *La Grande Illusion* is mostly unanchored to the greater chronological construct of the Great War. Most of the film's scenes take place either in German prisoner-of-war camps or in a peasant farmhouse in the mountains, and the viewer sees no explicit references to the ongoing struggle. However, in the thirtieth minute of the film, Renoir directly shows the viewer that the great fortress of Verdun, *Le Douaumont*, has just been taken by the German forces. The viewer can see French prisoners of war reading a newspaper board in their camp with the grim announcement "FORT DOUAUMONT TAKEN!" as they pause and walk past in despondence. Soon after, a newspaper is brought to the attention of the same prisoners while they prepare a burlesque show for their German captors. Lieutenant Maréchal, played by Jean Gabin, reads that the French have recaptured the fort and, as a result, leads his fellow British and French prisoners in a rousing rendition of the *Marseillaise* (earning him a stretch of solitary confinement). This victory is short-lived, however, as in the next scene the viewer can see the newspaper board yet again, this time with the announcement "GERMAN TROOPS RECAPTURE DOUAUMONT." French soldiers shuffle beside the notice and one mutters, "Can't be much left of it!"

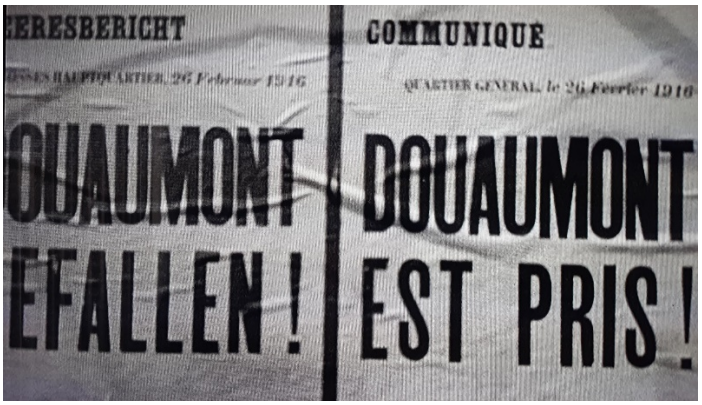


Illustration 1

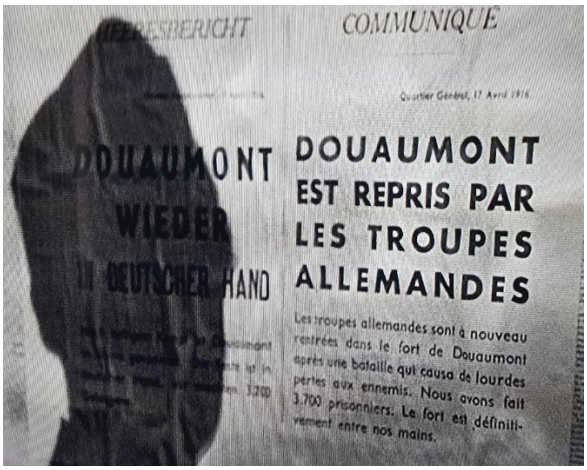


Illustration 2

Produced twenty-one years after the Battle of Verdun, this vignette from *La Grande Illusion* represents what the historian Jay Winter describes as "collective remembrance." In this collective remembrance, "history and memory are braided together in the public domain, jointly informing our shifting and contested understandings of the past" (Winter 4). According to Winter, by 1937, for anyone in their thirties or above, the Battle of Verdun in general, and Fort Douaumont in particular, could be "understood as an artifact, a construct, a kind of Potemkin Village of the mind[,] . . . a significant part of that unifying force" (23). One can view *La Grande Illusion* as an "anti-war" film that stresses international unity above nationalism and socio-economic distinctions as Europe faces the rising tide of fascism. The scenes referencing Verdun reinforce the futility of what seemed to be an endless struggle. Historians, journalists, academics, veterans, artists, and commentators have constructed multiple versions and visions of the battle over the last one hundred years. These diverse histories of the same 303 days of battle have been amalgamated and formed like sedimentary deposits, with each layer serving the need of its own present time frame.

However, this article is not so much concerned with the post-war creation of memory but instead with the "first draft" of memory created through the contemporary reporting of the French media from February 1916 to January 1917. How did journalists of these twelve calendar months view Verdun? When did it become *The Battle of Verdun* through collective remembrance, rather than a mere accumulation of assaults and counterassaults? Commentators knew by the late winter of 1916 that this was indeed a great battle and not just a German test of French defenses, but even

then, no one could have guessed that the battle would rage for many more months and cause nearly three quarters of a million casualties, both French and German.[1]

Further complicating the issue of contemporary remembrance is the issue of censorship. The French state had as many as 2,000 serving in a censorship bureaucracy during the war, an organization with a "preventive" mentality that channeled the events of the war into acceptable stories for the public. The spirit of the *Union Sacrée* of 1914 influenced various French press syndicates (*Commission de la presse française*, the *Syndicat de la presse parisienne*, and the *Association de la presse républicaine départmentale*) to cooperate—mostly—with government wishes. By 1916, a Press Bureau operating under the Ministry of War was the main conduit of information to the French media (Beurier 4). Historians Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker comment:

> After nearly three years of war, people in the interior had become adept at reading between the lines of news coming from the high command. They knew that a phrase like "desperate battles" and praise for the valor of French soldiers against the "energetic resistance of the enemy" meant that the German position had not been broken, and probably not even seriously undermined (Smith et al. 132).

As a result, any news from the front went through several filters before it arrived for consumption for the French public. One such filter was *L'Illustration*, a weekly illustrated magazine whose audience was the French bourgeoisie. The magazine focused on the news, culture, travel, and the high arts (for an American audience, one could describe it as a combination of *Life Magazine* and *The New Yorker*). In terms of chronology, this article divides reporting upon the battle into two periods: (1) 21 February to 31 July, Germany ascendancy, and (2) 1 August to 31 December, French counteroffensives and "victory."

German Ascendancy

While the German assault on the Verdun area commenced on 21 February, the first newspaper accounts of the battle appear on 24 February (and in the case of the weekly *L'Illustration*, on 26 February). Articles from the first two weeks of the assault focus on the power and intent of the German attack, especially in contrast to the relative calm of the preceding weeks. *L'Illustration* notes a "shelling of extraordinary intensity." Furthermore, "the first wounded brought to Paris [from Verdun] have made a terrifying picture of incessant rain of shells of all calibers every night" (*L'Illustration* 1916). The article from 4 March, the first time this publication used the headline "The Battle of Verdun," provides a day-by-day account of German advances and French retreats, noting that the fiercest fighting was in the vicinity of Fort Douaumont. As always, the German assault was vigorous and the French response was valiant. The report of 26 February focuses on the Fort itself: "The work, shook by the fire of enormous guns, was the object of repeated assaults which cost the enemy enormous losses. . . . Finally[,] . . . the defenders had to abandon the ruins, as the Brandenburg Regiment entered" (*L'Illustration* 1916). There is no mention that the fort itself had surrendered without much of a fight, but the implication is that the shelling and fighting rendered the fort to a useless ruin, as the March 1916 photo indicates.


L'ILLUSTRATION

SAMEDI 18 MARS 1916

DOUAUMONT

Illustration 3

By the issue of 11 March, General Pétain earned the cover photograph, as he had been given command of the 2nd Army at Verdun. The article in that issue does not detail any change in French strategy; instead, it simply recounts the slow grind of German advances and the resistance of the French.


L'ILLUSTRATION

SAMEDI 11 MARS 1916

LA BATAILLE DE VERDUN

Illustration 4

In general, the photojournalism shows some kind of French resolve, be it in the leadership, or in the case of French industry, war materiel and productivity. In an anonymous article by an infantry captain entitled "Our Infantry at Verdun," the officer writes:

> Our infantry have put in over eight weeks at Verdun, [—]the most magnificent effort of twenty months of war. Our forces are numerically diminished—we have rather less than the enemy—but they are morally fortified by the unquestionable conscience of superiority. (*L'Illustration* 1916)

In nearly every issue, readers could see images of marching German prisoners of war or a French hero, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Driant or the labors of a woman in a munitions factory.

LA BATAILLE DE VERDUN

(16-22 MARS 1916)

Nous continuons à donner ce nom aux opérations qui se déroulent sur les fronts Nord et Ouest du camp retranché, bien que, en réalité, il s'agisse maintenant d'affaires distinctes séparées par d'assez grands intervalles de terrain. Mais, pour l'ennemi, ces combats ont toujours le même objectif: la prise de la forteresse dont ses troupes sont, depuis bien des jours, tenues à la même distance.

Entre la Meuse et la plaine de Woëvre, l'ennemi n'a fait montre d'activité que dans la partie orientale, depuis les bois qui entourent la ferme d'Haudromont, à l'Ouest de Douaumont, jusqu'à Vaux. Sauf une petite manifestation allemande, le 19, la Côte du Poivre, par laquelle nous barrons les routes de Longuyon et de Sedan vers Verdun et les bords de la Meuse, est restée en dehors des actions, mais l'artillerie a donné sur tout ce front. Même un dépôt de munitions ennemi fut détruit à Champneuville. La canonnade se montra particulièrement violente les 15 et 16. Nos batteries ont eu à battre les travaux que les Allemands établissent entre Douaumont et Haudromont. Le 16, des mouvements de troupes étaient signalés près de Vaux et prises

Prisonniers allemands sur la route de Sainte-Menehould. — *Section photographique de l'Armée.*

Illustration 5

LE LIEUTENANT-COLONEL DRIANT

Illustration 6

L'ILLUSTRATION

SAMEDI 22 AVRIL 1916

UNE TRAVAILLEUSE DE L'USINE DE GUERRE

Illustration 7

Many articles in *L'Illustration* were restatements of official bulletins in April and May, which continued to report on German advances on both sides of the Meuse River. Beside editorials reinterpreting such reports, guest writers occasionally penned essays on the nature of the "battle" itself. In the issue of 22 April, François de Tessan, writer and member of the Radical-Socialist Party, wrote an essay entitled "La Bataille" that explained the nature of war to an "outsider" (i.e., civilian) who wanted a description of the battle:

> With this question, how can one reply? The battle! How can one dare to describe its exact shape? What eyes could measure, hear, and determine all the details in discovering this complex mechanism? Those who have never marched to war easily imagine themselves a soldier having panoramic impressions of the mêlée. Here is the battle! In truth, it would be so prodigious a tour de force in the conditions of modern war to make it useless to think about it. Even the leaders closest to the battle at their command posts, even the observers, who, high in the nacelles of their "saucisses," intently studying the terrain, even the aviators who cross the skies have no idea of the totality of battle. . . . A battle like that of Verdun is at one time so formidable and fragmented that a man who cries: "I have seen it!" would be an ideal personage who—master of space and time—would witness all the combats on the line of fire, discern the importance of each engagement, and infallibly analyze all the results. (*L'Illustration* 1916)

De Tessan's portrayal of the enormity of the battle and the ensuing chaos and the inability of anyone to grasp the totality of it all has echoes in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, where one reads of the atomized soldier lost in a sea of mud and trenches, estranged from a general public that has no real comprehension of the war. Verdun, by at least late April, two months into the battle, had become *Verdun*. The next four images selectively document these sentiments with a photograph of exhausted soldiers on bivouac away from the front, the extensive artillery shell damage to both Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux, and the battle lines in front of Fort Vaux before the French surrender to German forces on June 8, 1916.

Illustration 8
"Behind the front at Verdun—troops at rest on bivouac"

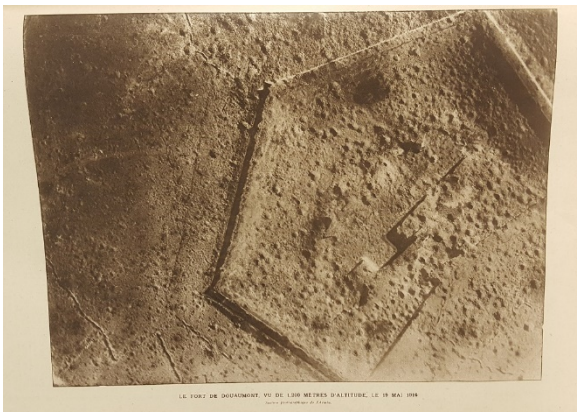
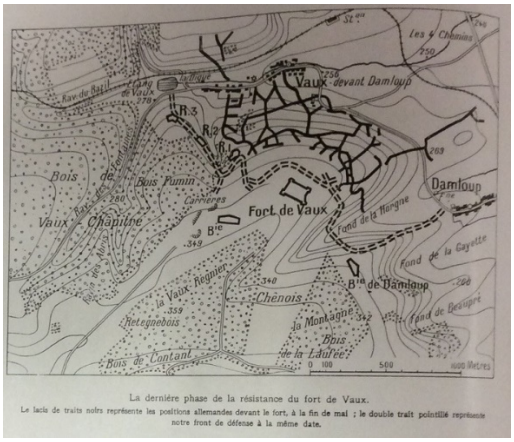


Illustration 9
"The Fort de Douaumont, view from 1,200 meters, 19 May, 1916"

Illustration 10
"The tragic ruins of Fort Vaux"



La dernière phase de la résistance du fort de Vaux.
Le liseré de traits noirs représente les positions allemandes devant le fort, à la fin de mai ; le double trait pointillé représente notre front de défense à la même date.

Illustration 11
"The last phase of resistance of Fort Vaux"

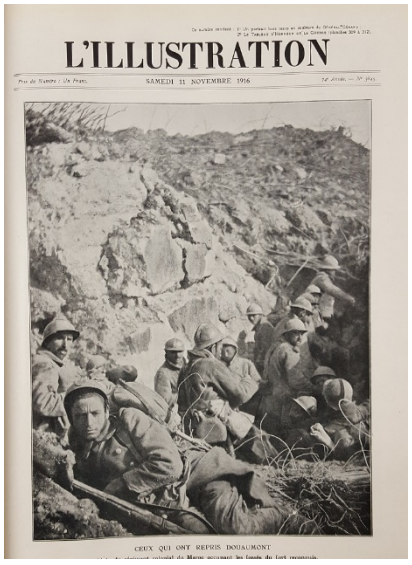
French Counteroffensives and Victory

Late May witnessed continued, but slow, German advances on the West and East sides of the Meuse River, with Fort Vaux falling in early June and Fort Souville nearly surrendering a month later. With the start of the Somme Offensive, the fighting at Verdun reached a lull, or as close to a lull as that sector had seen all that year (Brown 189). Captain André Tardieu (later Prime Minister three times in the interwar period) wrote for *L'Illustration* and assessed the first six months of the battle, writing:

> From 25 February to 25 July the Germans made their attempt and what did they gain? Almost nothing: some slopes on the left bank, some woods and a ruined fort on the right bank. The unbroken place had not fallen and even the approaches to it still held. Victory was with us. (*L'Illustration* 1916)

Tardieu's commentary fits in with the usual generous statements of French government bulletins. German forces had gained more than his assessment indicated. On the other hand, we know in retrospect that the German High Command would replace von Falkenhayn with von Hindenburg in late August and that soon after Hindenburg would cease German offensives at Verdun. And, certainly, if Tardieu's words had been written in December of 1916, he would have been mostly correct about the front being rendered *status quo ante* (Horne 302; Jankowski 102).

Starting in July, issues of *L'Illustration*, which for months had several pages in each issue dedicated to Verdun, instead dedicated those same pages to the Somme. In July, August, and September, one saw perhaps one paragraph per issue on Verdun in terms of the current battle,[2] with the renewed French offensive focusing on Fort Douaumont on 19 October (recaptured on 24 October) and Fort Vaux (recaptured on 2 November). The final French operations of the year in mid-December pushed the Germans back to nearly their starting positions in February. *L'Illustration* dedicated two cover photographs in subsequent weeks in early November illustrating French bravery in recapturing both Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux.


L'ILLUSTRATION

SAMEDI 11 NOVEMBRE 1916

CEUX QUI ONT REPRIS DOUAUMONT

Illustration 12
"Those who have recaptured Fort Douaumont"


L'ILLUSTRATION

SAMEDI 18 NOVEMBRE 1916

LE FORT DE VAUX

Illustration 13
"Fort Vaux"

In January of 1917, nearly a month after the last actions of December, *L'Illustration* featured a retrospective article on both the last French campaign in December and the battle as a whole, entitled "The Epilogue of Verdun." The byline of the article simply reads, "A Witness." Part of the article's conclusion states:

> Was Germany looking for local success in Verdun when it began the battle of 21 February [or] . . . the destruction of the French army, which was to prevent a spring offensive[?] . . . It was a vast duel in a closed field, where two champions measured each other, and the stake of the fight would go to the victor. This question has fascinated the entire world for ten months. . . . It was Germany who so chose it, who chose the weapons, the place and the conditions of the combat. Did Germany . . . sacrifice seven hundred thousand men with the presumptuous ambition of annihilating France before Verdun? It engaged all its forces, its best troops, for ten months, in furious assaults against the indomitable fortress. Had it not engaged division on division, army corps after army corps, to gain, in five months, a few meters of land on the road to the city? And even this land, bought so dearly, does it not suddenly lose it, in two days? . . . At the end of ten months of superhuman efforts, it is no more advanced than it was on the first day: that is a fact. The chapter of Verdun, thanks to Nivelle and Mangin, ends with our advantage. The epilogue of the immense battle is a French victory. The experiment is over. We will see the consequences soon in the future. (*L'Illustration* 1917)

As a macro view of the ten-month battle, the author created a collective remembrance of a clash of "champions" where only one nation could be the victor—France—while Germany sacrificed seven hundred thousand men. While contemporary interpretations most universally would state that neither side "won" at Verdun, France recovered from the nadir of July after the loss of Fort Vaux and presumably "won" the battle in the fall and early winter. No writer in a major French publication so soon after the battle would dare call this a "Pyrrhic" victory. By 1962, however, we see that very term used in Alistair Horne's classic *The Price of Glory Verdun 1916*

(14). Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker comment on this notion of a "horrible" victory: "By the end of 1916, 'victory' meant simply being able to hold on" (84). The historian Malcolm Brown writes that Verdun's "supreme legacy" was to "create an enduring wound in the psychology of the French nation" (256), while more recently, in 2014, Paul Jankowski writes:

> Its hold on national consciousness developed over time because only gradually did it emerge that Verdun would be the last great victory in battle of French arms. Nothing like it would ever happen again, not in 1917 or 1918, not between 1939 and 1945, and certainly not during the messy wars of decolonization that followed. (5)

The French population had a broad constellation of sources for information about the war. With so many men being drafted into military service and most of France's efforts taking place on France's own soil, propaganda could only go so far in sanitizing the war. As historians Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker note:

> In the end, the war "culture" of 1914–1918, resulted from a vast and extraordinary diverse creative activity, whose origins lay with individuals, not government institutions. Tens of thousands of people created the images that mobilized the French between 1914 and 1918—journalists, teachers, writers, actors, popular singers, photographers, painters, designers, film directors, artisans, industrialists, and many others. A surprisingly broad cross-section of the French population developed and disseminated the themes constructing the war, themes then interiorized by their compatriots. (54)

L'Illustration represents just one small part of the cultural construction of the war in general and the Battle of Verdun in particular. While *L'Illustration* spares readers the true horrors of war on one hand (few dead soldiers are ever seen), on the other hand, the publication includes images and corresponding texts that create a frank assessment of the immense physical devastation, the fatigue of the troops, and the incredibly large scale of the Verdun battlefront. When does "our Verdun" appear to these contemporary commentators? Based upon this analysis of *L'Illustration*, by April of 1916, all the factors we associate with Verdun are in place: massive artillery barrages with the accompanying moonscape terrain, high casualties via calculated attrition, the industrialization of war, the incomprehensibility of the battlefield, and the "heroic" French defense of *la patrie*. *Ils ne passeront pas*: They shall not pass.

Illustrations

1. "Fort Douaumont Taken!" *The Grand Illusion* (1937)

2. "German Troops Recapture the Douaumont," *The Grand Illusion* (1937)

3. Douaumont, (*L'Illustration* 18 March 1916)

4. La Bataille de Verdun (*L'Illustration* 11 March 1916)

5. La Bataille de Verdun (*L'Illustration* 25 March 1916)

6. Lieutenant-Colonel Driant (*L'Illustration* 1 April 1916)[3]

7. An industrial worker in a munitions factory (*L'Illustration* 22 April 1916)

8. Behind the front of Verdun: troops resting and bivouacking (*L'Illustration* 13 May 1916)

9. Fort Douaumont: Aerial view at 1200 meters, 19 May 1916 (*L'Illustration* 10 June 1916)

10. Fort Vaux (*L'Illustration* 10 June 1916)

11. "The last phase of resistance of Fort Vaux" (*L'Illustration* 22 July 1916)

12. "Those who have taken the Douaumont" (*L'Illustration* 11 November 1916)

13. Fort Vaux (*L'Illustration* 18 November 1916)

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Notes

[1] For a "nearly contemporary" memory of Verdun, see the 1917 works of the French Army veteran Jacques Péricard, *Face à face*, *1917 Ceux de Verdun*, and the 1919 *Michelin's Illustrated Guides to the Battlefields (1914–1918): Verdun and the Battles for Its Possession*.

[2] Some issues of *L'Illustration* during this time have retrospective articles on past battles within Verdun, such as the July 1916 struggle for Fort Thiaumont and its environs.

[3] Lieutenant-Colonel Émile Driant died in the first twenty-four hours of the battle as he led his troops to delay the massive German onslaught at the Bois des Caures.