

**GREAT WAR  
(1914-1918): THE  
WESTERN FRONT:  
BATTLE OF VERDUN  
1916**



# **GREAT WAR (1914-1918): THE WESTERN FRONT: BATTLE OF VERDUN 1916**

## **Description**

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the basic facts of the Battle of Verdun, including the reasons behind the German attack, the progress of the battle itself over the 10 months of fighting, including how the French Army was able to turn back the German assault, and finally how the failure of the German offensive at the Battle of Verdun was a critical turning point in the war, foreshadowing, ultimately, the defeat of the German forces on the Western Front.

## **Subjects**

European History, World History

## **Grade Level**

11-12

## **Duration**

90 minutes (2-3 wk. prep)

## **Tour Links**

- Museum of the Great War, Peronne
- Verdun Battlefield
- Verdun Memorial Museum
- Douaumont Ossuary, Verdun

## **Essential Questions**

- What happened at the Battle of Verdun?
- What was the German strategy in launching an attack at Verdun?
- Why did the French feel the need to defend Verdun at all costs?
- Why is the Battle of Verdun considered the turning point of the Great War on the Western Front?

## Academic Summary

"Humanity is mad. It must be mad to do what it is doing. What a massacre! What scenes of horror and carnage! I cannot find words to translate my impressions. Hell cannot be so terrible. Men are mad!"

*French Soldier's diary from the Battle of Verdun, 23 May 1916*

"To die from a bullet seems to be nothing; parts of our being remain intact; but to be dismembered, torn to pieces, reduced to pulp, this is the fear that flesh cannot support and which is fundamentally the great suffering of the bombardment."

*French Soldier from the Battle of Verdun, 1916*

"You eat beside the dead; you drink beside the dead, you relieve yourself beside the dead and you sleep beside the dead."

"People will read that the front line was Hell. How can people begin to know what that one word - Hell - means."

*French Soldier from the Battle of Verdun, 1916*

"When they came out of the battle, what a pitiful sight they were. Their expressions seemed frozen by a wisdom of terror; they sagged beneath the weight of horrifying memories."

*Marshall Philippe Petain, Commander of the French 2nd Army, Battle of Verdun, 1916*

On 17 Dec 1916, after 10 months of fighting back and forth over a patch of Earth less than 8 square miles (smaller than many major world cities), the Battle of Verdun was over. Casualties were horrific on both sides. Although some of the final numbers are contradictory, most historians agree that the French army lost over 500,000 (including 150,000 killed in action) and that the German army lost over 450,000 (including over 130,000 killed). Estimates are somewhat inconclusive due to the number of missing on both sides, perhaps as many as 250,000 total. Arguably the most important battle of the Great War, in the end, the battle itself was a draw.

The German High Command's order for an offensive at Verdun in February 1916 seemed based on sound strategic principles. Verdun, in the heart of the French province of Lorraine, was psychologically important to the French people. Strategically, it also lay along the major route to Paris. German generals believed if they could achieve a "breakthrough" in the Western Front at Verdun, then the road to Paris (and the end of the war in the west) would be open. Even if ultimate victory could not be achieved, the Germans would be able to "bleed France white" in a war of attrition, perhaps dissolving French public support for continuing the war. On the other side, a loss at Verdun would shatter the French national psyche and destroy the army's morale. The French had to hold the town at all costs. These two opposing notions led to the death of thousands on a daily basis, as the sides went back and forth, sometimes over a few yards of scorched earth or polluted mud. According to records from both sides, somewhere around 60 million artillery shells were fired in this area during the battle: about 150 for every square meter of the battlefield. Although many of the physical scars from battle are now covered with woods and greenery after almost 100

years, the French Interior Ministry estimates that as many as 12 million unexploded shells probably lie undiscovered in the Verdun area today, some perhaps containing poison gas. Recognizing the tremendous environmental and physical hazards posed by such ordinance, at the end of the war in 1918, the French government set aside over 120,000 acres across France in what became known as the “Zone Rouge”, including much of the Verdun battlefield. Much of the area is still designated as such today. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the basic facts of the Battle of Verdun, including the reasons behind the German attack, the progress of the battle itself over the 10 months of fighting, including how the French Army was able to turn back the German assault, and finally how the failure of the German offensive at the Battle of Verdun was a critical turning point in the war, foreshadowing, ultimately, the defeat of the German forces on the Western Front.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the events of the Battle of Verdun in 1916.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the reasons behind the German High Command’s decision to launch an attack at Verdun in 1916.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the significance of Verdun to the French war effort and how the French Army was able to withstand the German offensive.
4. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why the Battle of Verdun is considered the turning point in the Great War on the Western Front.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Are there any battles in American history that have ingrained themselves in American memory (for example – Gettysburg)? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Battle Verdun (20 min)
- Video – Verdun (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Battle of Verdun, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Battle of Verdun, German and French objectives in the battle and why Verdun is considered the turning point in the Great War. (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the Battle of Verdun, German and French objectives in the battle and why Verdun is considered to be the turning point in the Great War on the Western Front.

## Extension

### **On tour: Verdun Battlefield Museum and the Douamont Ossuary**

While on tour, students can visit the Verdun Battlefield Museum and the Douamont Ossuary (on the battlefield), where they can see for themselves the devastation and human costs of war. A solemn place, the Douamont Ossuary itself contains over 130,000 unidentified French and German soldiers who died at Verdun. They are “buried” in the alcoves and the remains can be seen through small outside windows. Outside the Ossuary, the cemetery contains thousands more identified soldiers. After the “Hell of Verdun”, it is a wonder why the sides decided to go at it again a generation later in an even more destructive war. On the grounds of the cemetery, students will also see a monument to Muslim soldiers from Algeria and Morocco (French colonies in 1916) who died at Verdun.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/battleverdun/](http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/battleverdun/)  
The Battle of Verdun 1916 – the greatest battle ever (website). Highly recommended for teachers and students. Contains primary and secondary sources on the Battle of Verdun, chronologically organized into six separate phases.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle\\_verdun.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle_verdun.shtml)  
“Battle of Verdun” – article from the BBC website
- [www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist\\_audoin\\_03\\_verdun.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_audoin_03_verdun.html)  
“Verdun – The Battle of France” – article by Professor Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau of the University of Picardie (France)
- [www.iwm.org.uk/centenary](http://www.iwm.org.uk/centenary)  
“First World War Centenary” – Imperial War Museums. Articles, primary sources, films, photographs and podcasts on the Great War. Great resource for teachers and students.
- [firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/owen.htm](http://firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/owen.htm)  
“Prose and Poetry: Wilfred Owen” – Firstworldwar.com, a multimedia history of World War I.
- [firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/mccrae.htm](http://firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/mccrae.htm)  
“Prose and Poetry: John McCrae” – Firstworldwar.com, a multimedia history of World War I.
- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/sassoon-attack.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/sassoon-attack.asp)  
“Siegfried Sassoon: Attack” – (poem) – on the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.bartleby.com/136/7.html](http://www.bartleby.com/136/7.html)  
“How to Die” – poem by Siegfried Sassoon at Bartleby.com
- [www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html)  
Dulce Et Decorum Est (poem by Wilfred Owen) at the War Poetry Website, David Roberts, editor
- [www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/battlefields/1193-the-battle-of-verdun-1916.html](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/battlefields/1193-the-battle-of-verdun-1916.html)  
The Battle of Verdun, 1916 – web article from the Western Front Association (UK)
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle\\_of\\_verdun.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle_of_verdun.htm)  
The Battle of Verdun (article) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- [www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-battle-of-verdun](http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-battle-of-verdun)  
The Battle of Verdun (website) – from the Imperial War Museum (UK)
- [openlibrary.org/works/OL15398662W/The\\_price\\_of\\_glory\\_Verdun\\_1916](http://openlibrary.org/works/OL15398662W/The_price_of_glory_Verdun_1916)  
The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916 (book) – by Alistair Horne. This e-copy of Horne’s classic is found on the Open Library Website. Although 364 pages, this book is highly recommended for both students and teachers interested in learning more about the Battle of Verdun. Horne’s book is still considered to be the standard on the battle.
- [www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/PowerpointPresent/WW1.ppt](http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/PowerpointPresent/WW1.ppt)

World War I PowerPoint from Susan Pojer, history teacher at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY.

- [wwiprojects.wikispaces.com/file/view/Verdun+Battle+WW1.ppt/204044816/Verdun%20Battle%20WW1.ppt](http://wwiprojects.wikispaces.com/file/view/Verdun+Battle+WW1.ppt/204044816/Verdun%20Battle%20WW1.ppt)  
Verdun Battle WWI – PowerPoint
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e4jqTF6aks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e4jqTF6aks)  
“In Flanders Fields” (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y79-PJt-YzE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y79-PJt-YzE)  
The Battle of Verdun (video)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.

### **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Verdun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Verdun)  
“Battle of Verdun” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voie\\_Sacree](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voie_Sacree)  
“Viore Sacree (Sacred Way)” – Wikipedia article on the road connecting Bar-le-Duc to Verdun – given the current name at the end of the Great War because of the role it played in the Battle of Verdun.
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douaumont\\_ossuary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douaumont_ossuary)  
“Douaumont Ossuary” – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Lesson Plans from Passports Educational Travel**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia)  
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914)  
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen)  
England and the Great War – Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918)  
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles)  
Great War – Treaty of Versailles 1919
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme)

Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles)

Great War – France: Clemenceau

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916)

Great War – Battle of Verdun

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914)

Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)

Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918)

Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

### **Key Terms**

- Breakthrough
- Great War
- Marshall Petain
- Trench warfare
- Verdun
- War of Attrition



