

As another German assault against Verdun began on the 23rd of June, 1916, French troops remembered the words of their General. Believing that an attack would occur, Robert Nivelle had urged his men:

You shall not let them pass.

He wrote those words (in French) [in his daily order](#):

Vous ne les laisserez pas passer ("You shall not let them pass").

At a later date, the phrase was somehow shortened to:

Ils ne passeront pas ("They shall not pass")

and ... the [powerful words were attributed to Philippe Pétain](#) (instead of to Robert Nivelle).

However the words were delivered, French troops did not let the Germans pass. This added even more casualties to the "battle of attrition." As one [soldier reportedly said](#):

If it goes on like this, we shan't have a man left after the war.

Although Verdun's casualties can only be estimated, at least 700,000 men were killed or wounded in action (including both sides).

To that number we must add the many who were physically uninjured but emotionally, or psychologically, scarred by all the horrors they had seen and experienced. Of the soldiers at Verdun, Philippe Pétain observed:

Their expressions, indescribably, seemed frozen by a vision of terror; their gait and their postures betrayed a total dejection; they sagged beneath the weight of horrifying memories; when I spoke to them, they could hardly reply, and even the jocular words of the old soldiers awoke no echo from their troubled minds. (Alistair Horne, quoting Philippe Pétain, in *The Price of Glory*, at page 227. See also *Europe Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, at [page 55](#), where Conan Fisher includes the same quote.)

In fact, [so many young men](#) were traumatized, in some fashion, by Verdun (and other major battles) that an entire generation was impacted:

Even for those who had not fought in the war but who had only witnessed the conflict as noncombatant ambulance drivers, journalists, or even as civilians at home, the horrors of the war left lasting marks.

The slaughter had been so widespread and grotesque, and its reasons so illogical and incomprehensible, that a whole generation in Europe and the United States saw the war itself as the most significant event of their lives.

As late as the 1970s, for people who lived through the experience, the expression "before the War" meant "before 1914."

Even though the casualty figures for the United States seemed quite minor by comparison to the loss of a whole generation of youth in Germany, Austria-Hungary, France and Britain, America reverberated with profound social, political and cultural impacts from the war. (*World War I*, by Rodney P. Carlisle, at [page 301](#).)

Even the land was laid waste by all the fighting. A [pilot flying over Verdun reported](#) what he had seen:

Every sign of humanity has been swept away ... roads have vanished like chalk wiped from a blackboard.

By the time the Battle of Verdun finally ended - on the 18th of December, 1916 - French and German casualties (including dead and wounded) were nearly 1 million men after ten months of fighting. Of the casualties, about 162,440 Frenchmen and 143,000 Germans had died.

With this massive loss of life, Verdun symbolizes the disastrous price which WWI soldiers paid for fighting in the trenches along the Western Front.

Later, in the twentieth century, the leaders of France and Germany met at Verdun, in a major scene of reconciliation. Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterand met there, in 1984, while Kohl and Jacques Chirac met there in 1996.

See, also:

[Verdun - A Vicious Battle](#)

[Verdun Must Not Fall!](#)

[Verdun - "Bleed France White"](#)

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