

The battle of verdun essay sample



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There were varying French views towards the battle of Verdun. From my own knowledge I know that to many Frenchmen Verdun stood as a symbol of French resistance, over the many previous invasions of France by Germany and others it had never fallen, it was a major city in the country and many important supply routes fed through it, but most importantly it was a city of pride to the French, it was an impregnable fortress and the fall of Verdun would mean that French morale would drop so low that many could mutiny and the outcome of the war could be put at risk.

As a result many held up The Battle of Verdun as the ‘last battle’. The French General ‘Petain’ believed along with many others that the French must win this battle, that they will win the battle, for the consequences of losing would likely be the defeat of France. Source A is a propaganda piece, it was designed to make people believe in this ‘WE must prevail’ attitude, and as a result it is very useful to historians.

Because it is propaganda it gives us the view that the French Government wanted the civilians to have, and it is likely that because of this many French people had this attitude. Source A reads ‘We will Beat Them!’. This was on a government bonds poster and would have been designed to alter people’s opinion on the subject. As a result this is likely to be a view held up by many of the French civilians, and as a result Source A is very useful for Historians studying the French attitude as the poster was designed to alter the attitude of these people.

Many of the Civilians who would have been subject to this kind of propaganda or who would hold this view would not have fought in the war,

due to government media control they would not have seen the horrific damage done at Verdun and they definitely would not have the same catastrophic casualty lists that we have today, so it would have been a lot easier for them to hold this patriotic ‘ We will win! ’ attitude. The picture in Source A is of a French soldier running into battle, enthusiastically waving the men behind him on.

This again reflects the mood of the civilians that the French army were digging in, and putting every ounce of strength into keeping Verdun. This is the kind of attitude the government would want the public to have and the government would want the people to believe that the soldiers were as determined to keep Verdun as they were, a picture like this would reinforce this. This is again useful to a historian as it shows the way the French public were being pushed into thinking, and it shows the information the French would have had when forming their attitudes towards the Battle of Verdun.

Many Soldiers and member of the public had a different view though. The horrific reality of the front line had lead many soldiers to believe that there were more important things than defending Verdun. Many believed that their friends and colleagues were dying because of petty arguments over territory and debts, they just wanted the war to be over, with the horrific amount of casualty's at Verdun more and more soldiers were becoming disillusioned with the war and with the ideals they were fighting for, pride in cities such as Verdun was no longer as important for many, who simply wanted the war to end.

Source B is an extract from a book written by someone who held this view. ' We are Dying because of squabbles about money, about land. ' This is the authors view on the Battle and is good evidence to how he and from my own knowledge I know, many others, felt about the reasons they were fighting, and shows how many were disillusioned with the war. This was another attitude toward the battle of Verdun and as an example of this attitude Source B is very useful to historians.

Both sources are very useful in informing us on the French attitude towards Verdun as they both give us invaluable information on views held by different people, as not all the French would have held Verdun with the same view and they give us a varied view on French attitudes towards the Battle. Source J is an interpretation of the success of the German attack on Verdun. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this interpretation? Explain your answer using Source J and knowledge from your studies.

Source J has few strengths but a lot more weaknesses as an interpretation of the German attack on Verdun. It is highly biased, opinion but some points are correct. Mosier says that the fact that Verdun was a loss for the Germans is a lie, provoked by French propaganda. He suggests that it was a total German win and that the French drew it on so that this would appear otherwise ' By any reasonable standard the Germans had won at the point that they wound down the offensive' but a major weakness of this viewpoint and of the source is his lack of evidence.

From my own knowledge I know that there was a lot of propaganda used in all the countries in the war, which is a strong point of the source, he

recognises the heavy use of propaganda, but this scale of propaganda was not present in France over Verdun. Also from the official casualty figures you can see that the losses suffered by both sides were more or less equal (as horrifically high as they were) 550, 000 French soldiers died, and it is estimated that 435, 000 German soldiers died although this figure could be as high as 500, 000.

The point of the Verdun campaign was to ‘Bleed France Dry’, to kill as many French men as possible, to break the morale of the French army and to give the Germans a numerical advantage. For this to work they would have to take significantly fewer casualties than the French, in the end none of this happened, the casualty rates were not far apart and the morale of the French army, although dented, remained intact, and as a result the battle must be a French victory.

This is a large weakness of the source, Mosier's claims go against modern historical opinion, but he fails to take into account basic facts such as the casualty amounts and this means the source has no basis, and is in fact totally unsupported. He talks about Verdun up to the point where the Germans wound down their offensive, and claims that up to this point the Germans had won a clear victory, but he ‘forgets’ to mention that after this point, almost all of the land won by the Germans was won back and that the German losses continued to rise while the French casualty rate slowed down.

This half-truth is a weakness of the source Mosier seems to see things up to a point where they agree with his hypothesis and refuses to recognise anything that disagrees with it. The Source as a whole is more opinion than fact,

it is not the expected opinion of Modern Historians and it focuses on small things (like the number of dead figure rather than the casualty figure which is expected to be a much more clear view of the affect of a battle on an army) rather than looking at the big picture.

It also seems totally unfairly biased towards the French, (The French, always quick to blow the whistle and signal the end of a battle if they could claim a propaganda victory); this is a ridiculous statement, backed up with no proof. The Strong Point is that the points that Mosier does look at are discussed in great detail, even if they are tinted with his biases. Mosier is renowned for his startling, unproven views, and is regarded by most as hysterical, most respected Historians look upon his work as meaningless.

One such Historian, the Italian Peter Toulini says this in his review of Mosier's 'The Myth of the Great War'- 'It cannot be said that this book charts or even discusses History, it is pure, unfiltered fiction, the work of a mad man' In conclusion, the source is based upon misleading and non-existent facts, despite the detail it goes into, that render it a weak source as an interpretation of the German attack on Verdun.

Do Sources A to K prove that the strategy of attrition employed by the Germans at Verdun was an error of judgement? Explain your answer using the sources and knowledge from your own studies. Sources A to K neither prove that the strategy of attrition employed by the Germans at Verdun was an error of judgement nor do they disprove it. The Attack started excellently, huge gains were made in the first few weeks, and all the large defensive positions around Verdun were soon taken.

It appeared that the strategy was working, with added bonuses, the Germans found the French unprepared, the defence was weak, there had not been major fighting in this part of the line for some time and the French defences were weakly manned and no warning of an attack was given. The Germans made huge gains and within a week had reached the French 3rd lines. Up to here the strategy of Attrition was working, the French were obliterated, and all defences were wiped away in the face of the massive German army.

Source E is an example of the effectiveness of the German strategy, the Fort Douamont was obliterated by the massed artillery and firepower the Germans were able to use against the French. Source E is a photo of fort Duamont before and after the German bombardment, it was produced in 1916, which means it could have been propaganda from the Germans, but this is unlikely. This helps to answer the question because it demonstrates the utter destruction that the German artillery was able to do and shows gives an indication to the amount of deaths they could have caused, and how affective the strategy of attrition could be.

The Latter half of Source F also agrees with this, " A major consequence from France was that it brought her army to the brink of self-destruction". This shows how deadly the German attack was and how big an effect it had on the French. Source F could have been subject to a bias because it was written by a British author, but this is unlikely as it was written eighty one years after the event and as such bias's based on the war are likely not to be present.

Also it was written by a historian and where as historians are not impassive to being biased it is less likely than otherwise. This source is useful because it shows what affect the battle had on the Germans, and how that in the long run, the strategy of attrition was ineffective as it “ Deprived her (Germany) of the commodity without which no country can fight: manpower”. Source E gives an alternative theory to the sources that tell us of the effectiveness of the German army.

It shows the amount and capacity of the French weaponry and it gives the impression that the Germans made an error of judgement when choosing the strategy of attrition as they failed to take into account the amount of French weaponry they would encounter and thus the amount of casualty’s they would take that would in turn make the strategy a failure. Although Source C is French propaganda it is unlikely to be one hundred percent false and because of this it is at least slightly reliable and is definitely useful because at the very least it shows us the opinion that French civilians had of the battle of Verdun.

The French continued to suffer huge losses as the massive amount of firepower the Germans had came into power, this was the major part of the operation, the plan was to grind away at the French using massed artillery too kill as many French as possible and to break the morale of the French Army. At first this worked, whole French Divisions were wiped out and the line was in General retreat chaos was the order of the day for the French and thousands were dying every day. Source B backs this up, it is an account by a French soldier ” Lying prone while the shells whistle overhead, I think ‘ Die!

Why should we die on this battlefield? '. This shows the poor morale of the French army at this point in the Battle. Source B was written by a French author who was involved in the war, and hence it is likely to have considerable anti German bias because Germans would have killed his friends and companions, but the fact that it is not demeaning to Germans and is in fact treating them as equals means that the source is unlikely to be suffering from considerable bias so it is useful when considering the battle of Verdun as well as fairly reliable.

This source does show how, the fear the strategy of attrition had on the French and how it did take a lot of casualty's, which was the aim of the strategy, but it also shows that many Germans were also dying which was the ineffective side of attrition. After this, General Petain was sent to defend Verdun from the Germans, he was a man who believed that the only way that Verdun would be saved was if every man fought to the last, he gave out an order saying that there will be no retreat and ordered every man to fight to the last.

These orders were followed, the French dug in, the fact that strong points were not being abandoned meant that the German advance was at first slowed and then halted by the French, and now the real battle of attrition started. Both sides used mass artillery, and ground each other down, now it was not only the French taking huge casualty's but the Germans also.

This was not necessarily because of an error of judgement, the Germans knew that the French would send as many men as it took to Verdun, but they could not have foreseen that they would take as many casualties as the

French did, if their plan had carried through perfectly (which no military plan ever does) then it would have worked, but as it resulted they had not expected petain and the new resolution to fight and the extra morale he brought to the French, they were not going to break down because of morale, which was the whole plan of Verdun from the German point of view.