

**Matti Münch.** *Verdun: Mythos und Alltag einer Schlacht.* München: Martin Meidenbauer Verlag, 2006. 565 S. EUR 59.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-89975-578-7.



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## The Pitfalls of a Complete History

The battle of Verdun lasted almost the entire year of 1916 and consumed approximately 700,000 German and French lives. The crucial battle continues to be a subject of fascination for amateur and professional historians, not to mention an enduring symbol of war's folly in the collective memory of western civilization. Matti Münch, a *Gymnasium* teacher and one of the amateur historians seeking to understand Verdun's legacy in twentieth-century Germany, attempts to write a "total history" of the battle from the perspective of German soldiers and the history of Verdun's ever-changing mythology. Münch questions why Verdun is the one battle from World War I that is still so widely known, as opposed to the Somme, for example. Furthermore, he deciphers the significance of the battle for Germans during different periods in the twentieth century and asks what forces influenced the Verdun myth during this same period. Münch tries ambitiously to distinguish between the authentic history of the battle and the formidable myth that more often than not substitutes for reality.

Münch eschews political and social questions related to Verdun and embraces Wolfram Wette's "military history from below" approach by delving into the varied experiences of German soldiers. Placing Verdun in the context of German strategy is not Münch's intention; that subject is best treated by *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* (2004). Instead, Münch mines an impressively diverse collection of sources beginning with letters, postcards, diaries, and memoirs from German soldiers from different backgrounds. Münch relies on the memoirs to trace the growth of the Verdun myth in the decades after the war. He also confronts effectively the problem of interpreting the more literary memoirs that mix reality with style. Münch argues that the regimental histories are the most authentic. The flood of *Feldzeitungen*, handbills, student and fraternity newspapers, and daily accounts of the battle in leading German newspapers complete the source base. Although the book includes no photographs, Münch devotes space to the importance of combat photography and military paintings. Despite referencing these varied

sources, one of the overriding flaws in the book is Münch's reliance on such authors as Ernst Jünger, Franz Schauwecker, and Erich Maria Remarque, among others. Münch uses lengthy passages from war fiction and excerpts from letters and memoirs to illustrate the horrors of trench warfare with mixed success. This approach seemingly contradicts Münch's claim to write a "history from below" and much of chapter 2, which addresses the actual battle, is rather pedestrian and unoriginal.

Chapter 2 comprises nearly half of the book, but it is the least impressive and relevant to the more interesting question of the Verdun myth and its reception throughout the twentieth century. Münch methodically and sometimes ploddingly recreates every aspect of life at the front. Some passages and observations by German soldiers are riveting, but hardly unknown or original. We learn that the trenches were a horrific environment in which bodies rotted in the open; we are presented with detailed descriptions of the blighted landscape, the unforgiving weather, disgusting smells, dirty water and food, and the particularly large and omnipresent rats; and we sympathize with the "Frontschweine" suffering from constant shelling and learn why 85 percent of casualties resulted from artillery. Münch is a strong writer and many quotes are woven into his narrative seamlessly, but to what end? Is this new information, and was Verdun any more or less ghastly than other trench experiences? Münch concludes that it was not. The more substantial portions of the chapter concern the culture of the front. Münch discusses topics such as music, prostitution, the power of comradeship and shared fate, suicide and desertion, regional rivalries between soldiers, and religious differences. Again, no new revelations emerge, but the material is interesting and relates directly to Verdun.

Chapter 3 treats the issue of trauma and describes some nervous disorders that plagued all veterans. As with much of the text, the insights are common knowledge and do nothing to underscore

the uniqueness of Verdun. The definitive work on the subject, not consulted in this book, is Paul Lerner's *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (2003). The chapter also discusses the concept of the "New Man" that supposedly emerges from the trenches. Münch maintains that Jünger and National Socialist authors used soldiers from Verdun for the archetype of this new man.

Chapter 4 finally addresses the key issue of the Verdun myth and the various ways in which it was manipulated over time. Münch begins the chapter temporally with World War I and describes the creation of the myth while the battle was fought. Daily press coverage of the battle revolved around the carnage and consistently invoked words and phrases like "verbluten," "Moloch," "Refrain des Todes," and "die Hölle von Verdun." Not surprisingly, these terms are still associated with Verdun. The German public was enthralled by these reports until the Somme began to compete for attention and Verdun settled into a long-term battle of attrition. Verdun reemerged during the Weimar era with various different meanings but primarily as the focus of the all-consuming question: "Why did we lose the war?" Münch reveals that during 1918-22, Verdun was not especially privileged in comparison to other touchstone moments like Langemarck and the Somme. The myth developed during the latter years of the Weimar era, coinciding with the explosion of war fiction and memoirs in 1928-29. Verdun became synonymous with romanticized comradeship and a sterling example of the *Frontgemeinschaft* that so many on the Left and the Right considered the model for the future *Volksgemeinschaft*. Once in power, National Socialists embraced Verdun as the breeding ground for their particular worldview and recast the battle as a German victory. While the Somme was downplayed during the Third Reich as a defensive measure, Verdun was newly interpreted as a heroic offensive. After 1940, the battle assumed even greater significance as Germany finally occupied the town of Verdun and, according to Nazi propa-

ganda, concluded the First World War successfully. Once the war turned sour and Stalingrad shattered hopes of inevitable victory, Verdun once again became an icon of failure as Stalingrad earned the moniker of "Verdun an der Wolga." Finally, Münch concludes by examining the importance of Verdun to reconciliation between France and Germany since World War II. Verdun no longer belonged to one nation; it was Europe's trauma and the perfect symbol of a shared fate. Battlefield tourism and historic joint ceremonies involving Helmut Kohl and François Mitterand ensured Verdun's continued significance.

*Verdun* is a bold but flawed attempt to write a complete history of a battle and its particular mythology. The portions in which Münch addresses the construction of the myth and its manipulation over the course of decades are far superior to the majority of the text, which is devoted to reconstructing the battlefield environment. The most interesting and relevant scholarship is left for last. In the end, Münch concludes that the Verdun myth constantly changes to suit the *Zeitgeist* and does an admirable job demonstrating how and why this process occurs throughout the course of German history.

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