

# Silence at Verdun

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May 2008

No one can say exactly when it began, but suddenly the sleek, smoothly rounded lines on the horizon shifted; the red and brown; the luminescent, glowing colors of the leaves of the forest unexpectedly took on a curious tinge, the fields faded and withered to ochre; something strange, silent, and sallow is in the landscape, and you cannot quite explain it.

They are the same mountain ranges, the same forests, the same fields and dales as before, it's still the same landscape it was an hour ago; the road, white and endless, goes through it, and the golden light of late autumn still pours out over the earth like sweet wine—and yet something, invisible, inaudible, has emerged from the distance; thunderous, solemn, and powerful, it suddenly appears and overshadows everything.

It's not those crosses by the roadside that emerge at every moment, thin and dark. Askew and rather tired, they stick out of the grass, ravaged by the wind, exhausted by the passing clouds, these crosses of the War of 1870. Slender young saplings, which someone then planted between them, have long since grown into trees with mighty branches full of twittering birds. The old trenches are no longer frightening, they barely recall death—like parkland, they are beautiful, picturesque, and lovely; good earth and good land.

It's not the character of this beautiful, terrible region, which has always been a battlefield and where war has deposited its trash for centuries, like the different strata in rocks, debris upon debris, layer upon layer, war upon war, even now precisely identifiable, from the conflicts of French kings to the trenches of Mars la Tour and the mass graves of Douaumont.

Nor is it the mysterious, ambivalent sentiment of this terrain, where the soft blue lines on the horizon mark not merely hills or woodlands, but concealed forts; the flat pinnacles before them not simply ridges, but strong, fortified heights; where idyllic valleys also serve as trenches, as valleys of death, as rendezvous points, as staging areas; where the hillocks are paved-over gun emplacements, machine gun nests; punctured by ammunition depots and tunnels; for everything here has been transformed into strategy. Strategy and graves.

It is the silence. The excruciating silence at Verdun. The silence after the battle. A silence unique to the world; for previously Nature had won the upper hand in all struggles; life rose up again from the obliteration, cities were rebuilt, forests thrived again, and within a few months young grain again swayed in the fields. But in this last,

most disastrous of wars Annihilation had achieved its first victory. Here stood villages which would never be rebuilt; villages in which not one stone stood on top of another. The soil underneath is still so full of deadly menace, of living explosive power, full of shells, mines, and poison gas that every strike of a hoe, every turn of the spade is dangerous. Trees were there that never again grew back, because not only their trunks and tops, but also their deepest roots had been hacked off, destroyed, and shattered into splinters. Fields were there, upon which plows would never again be drawn because their seeds are of steel, steel and yet more steel.

In the craters of this pockmarked land some unkempt, matte meadow grass does grow. On their edges bloom red poppies and chamomile, and even a shrub sometimes crawls shyly and slovenly out of the middle of the destruction; but this sparse growth only strengthens the impression of silence and desolation. It is as if there were a hole in the fabric of events at this place, as if time stood still here; as if time, which not only carries with it the past, but also the future, turned off its engine out of compassion for this place. Nowhere in the world is there such a land; a desert is more alive, for its silence is organic.

Nowhere in the world is there such a silence, for this silence is a daunting, petrified scream. Yet it does not contain the peace of a cemetery, for between the tired, depleted lives rests little that was young and ardent; for hundreds of thousands here the great strength that shone in their eyes, the power, which let them breathe and see and crouch and fight, suddenly shattered into atoms; in the cramped and fiercest self-defense they coveted, even caressed, life passionately, wildly, more glowingly, and more ardently than ever before; yet over this confused, strained will, this sizzling turbulence of activity, torment, hope, fear, a volley of splinters and bullets broke forth. Then the toughest, most fragile thing that there is, life, spilled its blood and the great darkness descended upon more than eight hundred thousand men.

Over these fields the forgotten years seem to continue to linger on, the years that never were, that find no peace—the scream of youth was suffocated too soon, found too abrupt an end.

Down from the heights comes a gray, leaden wind which merges with the glow of Autumn, its bright fire and golden light. Down from the heights comes the silence that saps the strength of the friendly days, as if the sun had darkened as on that afternoon at Golgotha. Down from the heights come names and memories. Vaux, Thiaumont, Belleville, Cold Earth, Valley of Death, Hill 304, Dead Man—what names! For four long years they lived under the gigantic howls of death: today the infinity of their silence grabs you. No business parties, no well-priced comfortable day trips with tours of deep bunkers romantically lit by carbide lamps can change that. This land belongs to the dead.

But on this soil that has been churned up by shells of every caliber time and again, in this land of congealed horror, in this cratered landscape, people live. You barely see them; they've adapted so well over the course of time, and so little differentiates them from the landscape. Their clothing is gray and yellow and dirty from their sacrifice. Sometimes they number in the hundreds, occasionally in the thousands, but they always work alone and are so scattered that there only appear to be a few—fleeting little ants in cavernous funnels. They live a life for themselves; they often stay for months at a time in their barracks and seldom come into the villages. They are seekers.

The battlefields have become objects of speculation. Some entrepreneur has received authorization from the government to collect all of the valuable metal. For this he has hired the seekers. They hunt for everything that has metal in it, old rifles, UXO, bombs, railroad tracks, rolls of wire, spades—for them the fields of memory, of silence, of mourning are iron, steel and copper mines. They prefer copper. It brings the best price.

Most of the seekers are Russians. In the silence they have also fallen silent. Mostly they keep to themselves. No one seeks their company; although the government gave out thousands of licenses you get the feeling that it's not right what they're doing there. Metal worth millions of francs rests in that soil, as do the tears, blood, and fear of millions.

It is a lucrative business, and many of the seekers can soon afford an automobile. For years the artillery saw to it that they could now make a living. The first hasty, superficial collecting is over; now they have to dig deeper to find the next layer of buried treasure. The earth is tough, and they've worked for a whole week on a pit of a few square meters. That's why it's important to find appropriate places. That requires experience.

Normally, long iron spikes would be driven into the soil first to search for metal. It can happen that you come across a boot that gives a little resistance, for the boots of the dead down there are generally well-preserved. But a seeker can judge that, he's got experience. He can generally judge from up there if it's worth digging. When he hits a steel helmet, well and good, that has its worth inasmuch as it points to a possible prize. There are a few old, experienced seekers who only dig where a bush sprouts. They calculate that at such places there are corpses entombed in bunkers—otherwise the bush wouldn't thrive. And usually all sorts of metals are to be had in bunkers.

If someone gets lucky, he comes across a machinegun or even a small munitions depot. Then you can win a prize of a few thousand francs. A find that everyone still talks about was a German airplane. The skeleton still squatted in the pilot's seat, and between its legs was a case with 15,000 gold marks.

It's the same everywhere. First the earth is loosened and dug up, then rummaged through by hands. Hand grenades, the German ones with a long grip, and canteens come to light. They don't arouse much interest. A rifle barrel on the other hand, twisted and corroded, is thrown onto the pile of rusted iron that has already been collected. A helmet—then a pallid, damp rag, gray-green, threadbare, already halfway to mud, a skull, with the hair still on it, blonde hair, a skull with a splintered hole that had been battered into its forehead. The seeker puts it into a small crate behind him. He shakes blotched brown bones out of the miserable, dirty green rags. The last ones he jerks out of the toes of the boot. Everything finds its way to the crate, which will be sent to the base for identification in the evening. A tattered purse with some blackened coins remains, as do the remains of a somewhat rotted briefcase. But now the spade clangs again against metal, iron stakes and rolls of wire come into sight—a good find.

It's always the same, a hundred times, a thousand times over; in the Autumn sun lies a soldier, a few shredded rags, a couple of bones, a skull, sometimes equipment with a rusty belt buckle, a cartridge pouch. I'm sure he would be happy if he were still alive.

A few seekers say that they can tell if they have a German or French skull by the

shape of the jaw bone. And it's important that the bones are brought back to the base in the evening, or else they'd be eaten by the foxes before morning. It's strange, that - here the foxes eat bones. Surely there's nothing else for them to eat. And yet many foxes live here.

The seekers crouch in their innumerable tiny holes and dig like moles. It's true that the bones they find will be identified, collected in cemeteries, mausoleums, and enormous sarcophagi. Yet it might be better to let the soldiers lie in peace, where they have rested for ten or twelve years, comrades all.

It is as if they themselves didn't want to have it any other way. It is as if the Earth itself watches over them and protects them from the hands that search for metal and gold between them. For next to the dead soldiers sleep their weapons. And often these weapons have kept their destructive power.

One hit with a pickaxe on the ground is enough. A sharp turn of the spade suffices, and the ground shakes with a dull thud, shrapnel flies, and death reaches up out of the ground towards the seekers with a quick hand. Many have already been torn into shreds, many have been dismembered, yet every week new ones arrive. Death, who first reaped the soldiers, now watches over the graves of the murdered and the earth preserves them, as if they shouldn't lie in splendid mausoleums, but instead remain where they have fallen.

And over this burial shroud time has come to a standstill before the agony which is clamped between the horizons; over this burial shroud brood silence, mourning, and memory.