

To enact and counteract reconciliation:  
The *Veillée de Verdun* and Franco-German rapprochement

Sally Carlton

University of Western Australia

Abstract:

The connotations of reconciliation are almost always positive. In certain instances, however, attempts at post-trauma understanding can be abused by individuals or groups determined to undermine the process of coming to terms with a non-consensual past. One example of such ‘counter-reconciliation’ was the *Veillée de Verdun*, a funerary vigil for the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who perished at the 1916 Battle of Verdun. The remembrance ceremony took place at the Douaumont Ossuary, constructed in the heart of the most contested section of the battlefield, which contained the bones of 130 000 unidentified French and German soldiers.

Organised by French veterans in the sincere hope of furthering international rapprochement, the vigil was attended by veterans from many of the former belligerent nations. Held on the night of 12 July 1936, the *Veillée* was seen by some observers as one potential pathway towards peace in the increasingly hostile international context. Nazi Germany sent a delegation of five hundred World War One veterans, bearing swastika flags, to Verdun to participate in the pro-peace vigil. Germany’s involvement appeared to support the pacifism espoused by the vigil; however, four years later Paris had been occupied by the Wehrmacht. The Nazis had effectively abused the pro-reconciliation intentions of the French veterans to distract public attention from their militarism. The *Veillée de Verdun* demonstrates how reconciliation can be simultaneously enacted and counteracted.

Once the ceremony had finished, the crowds filed towards the Ossuary. Standing by the entrance, I let the five hundred Germans march past. Their faces showed their emotion, and their lips were pursed. You could see just how much their hearts had been touched. The next day, all those who I could interview in the street told me so directly. What had moved them the most was the French people's sincere - even unshakeable - will for peace, a will which until then they had not wanted to believe, but of which they were now convinced. When these men from all across Germany recount to those at home what they saw and experienced, a giant step will have been taken along the road to peace.<sup>1</sup>

With these words Paul Distelbarth described the attitudes of the swastika-flag bearing German delegation at the *Veillée de Verdun*, a funerary vigil held on the night of 12 July 1936 to remember the battle which symbolised the Great War. Tens of thousands of former combatants from the belligerent nations of World War One, including France and Germany, gathered at the recently-constructed Douaumont Ossuary to remember the soldiers who had died during World War One, and in doing so promote peace.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the purported success of the vigil and Distelbarth's optimistic predictions of its role in advancing Franco-German relations, four years later World War Two had broken out and the Wehrmacht had occupied Paris. The *Veillée de Verdun* had failed to achieve its pacifistic aims. By sending a delegation to the pro-peace vigil, Nazi Germany succeeded in duping the French veteran organisers and deterring attention from its militaristic world outlook. Situating the wake in the historical context of pro-rapprochement French veteran discourse, this essay will demonstrate that in the case of the *Veillée*, remembering the 1916 Battle of Verdun both promoted and undermined Franco-German reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Distelbarth, *France Vivante: t. 2: Images de France*, Paris : Editions « Alsatia », [1936], p. 55. Paul Distelbarth dedicated an entire chapter of his book about post-war France to describing the *Veillée de Verdun*. While thoroughly informative, his impressions need to be considered in relation to his personal biases. A German combatant of World War One and self-professed Francophile whose writing reflected his hopes for Franco-German rapprochement, Distelbarth's left-wing sympathies led to his exile from Germany in 1933 for 'high treason.' The author spent the pre-war years in France before moving back to Germany in 1945. (Walther Killy (Hrsg.), *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie (DBE). Band 2: Bohacz-Ebhardt*, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag K.G. Saur, 2001, S. 558). It is also interesting to note that a firm personal friendship existed between Distelbarth and the prominent French veteran leader Henri Pichot, who agreed in 1935 to write the Preface and financially support the German version of *France Vivante, Lebendiges Frankreich*. (Claire Moreau-Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l'Allemagne de 1930 à 1945*, Berne: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 131).

<sup>2</sup> As well as France and Germany, delegations of veterans came from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, Greece, Poland and Yugoslavia. (Moreau-Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l'Allemagne*, p. 104).

<sup>3</sup> Firstly, however, some terminological clarification is required as the word 'memory' denotes different ideas. What might be termed the 'direct' or 'real' memory of World War One veterans embodies the actual lived experience of the servicemen. However, works such as this essay focus on the veterans' 'imagined' memory of the War and, more specifically, the Battle of Verdun. This memory has been selectively constructed and developed from the multitudes of personal accounts and relayed to the general population. Through conscious repetition, this memory has been digested and enforced as 'true.' See Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 5, issue 1, 2003, pp. 63-81 for an excellent description of the subtleties of memory terminology.

The processes of remembering and forgetting are fundamental to post-trauma acceptance and reconciliation. Ex-combatant memory in particular demonstrates how remembering conflict can aid present and future understanding between former enemies. One reason for the importance of veteran memory is that in many countries ex-soldiers form an important numerical, moral and social force<sup>4</sup> whose views can influence both state policy and public opinion.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, whether draftees or volunteers, combatants are active participants in conflict, and it could be argued that building understanding between veterans is even more significant than civilian reconciliation. Thirdly, precisely due to their involvement in warfare, veterans sometimes believe that they alone are capable of generating true reconciliation with former adversaries.<sup>6</sup> For French veterans of World War One, attitudes towards Germany as a former enemy nation were central to post-conflict dialogue, and broaching the ‘German Question’ was considered vital to potential future reconciliation and continuing peace.

Acknowledging the unfortunate truth that “peace is not only absence of war,”<sup>7</sup> intellectuals among the French veteran community have conscientiously publicised their versions of ‘peace’ and how it might be achieved over the decades after 1918.<sup>8</sup> For many veteran leaders in the first half of the last century, reconciliation between France and Germany was essential to the creation of lasting international peace. In more recent decades, veteran discourse has situated reconciliation with Germany within a broader dialogue of pan-Europeanism.

According to one observer, while French foreign policy traditionally attempted to restrict her neighbour’s power in order to avoid danger, following World War One this outlook changed, embracing the people’s desire for understanding between the two nations as a

---

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Prost noted that, in 1935, France counted 5.5 million ex-servicemen, totaling 42-43% of the total male population above the age of 20. (Antoine Prost, ‘Les anciens combattants et l’Allemagne 1933-1938,’ *La France et l’Allemagne 1932-1936. Colloque, Paris 1977*, Paris : Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1980, pp. 131-148, p. 131).

<sup>5</sup> For the success of the French veterans as a pressure group, see Elliott Pennell Fagerberg, *The ‘Anciens Combattants’ and French Foreign Policy*, Thèse présentée à l’Université de Genève pour l’obtention du grade de Docteur des Sciences Politiques, Université de Genève, Institut universitaire de Hautes Études internationales, thèse no. 175, Ambilly, Annemasse : Imprimerie « Les Presses de Savoie », 1966. Prost believed that due to the large section of the French public touched by the veterans and the social activities which the veterans carried out in the interwar period, the associations possessed the power to deeply influence French public opinion. (Prost ‘Les anciens combattants et l’Allemagne 1933-1938,’ p. 134).

<sup>6</sup> Certain sectors of the French combatant community certainly believed that former soldiers held the key to bridging past difference and working towards international understanding. (Prost, ‘Les anciens combattants et l’Allemagne 1933-1938,’ p. 136).

<sup>7</sup> Georges Pineau (de l’Association des Ecrivains Anciens Combattants), ‘L’esprit combattant,’ *La Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l’Union Nationale des Combattants*, vendredi 11 novembre 1927, 8<sup>e</sup> année, no. 436, pp. 1 et 3, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> This essay examines French veterans’ discourse as represented by the official publications of two major national associations, the Union Fédérale (U.F.) [Federal Union] and the Union Nationale des Combattants (U.N.C.) [National Union of Combatants], the veterans’ organisations in France with the most influence and largest memberships. Articles from the independent veterans’ newspapers *Le Journal des Combattants* have also been included. Note, however, that the comments penned by the journalists of these associations obviously do not necessarily reflect the views of the entire veteran body.

basis for European peace.<sup>9</sup> Replacing habitual animosity with aspirations for peace was no simple task, however. As one French combatant acknowledged in 1932, “wanting a real and durable peace when Europe has fifteen centuries of war behind her is not an illusion, a mistake or a foolish thought: it is a kind of intellectual and moral revolution.”<sup>10</sup> One of the changes fundamental to this “revolution” of peace was the relationship between France and Germany, as “bringing France and Germany closer together [was] the solution to the problem of peace.”<sup>11</sup>

Some veteran activists took the ideal of Franco-German rapprochement one step further, “firmly convinced [...] that joining together the combatants of all countries, and particularly joining together the German and French combatants, [was] one of the essential factors in European peace.”<sup>12</sup> They believed that links between ex-servicemen could facilitate reconciliation between former enemy nations.<sup>13</sup> This idea was based on the anti-nationalistic notion that “what characterised the man of the trenches was that he fought without hatred for his enemy: did the same pity not unite them above death?”<sup>14</sup> Thus several methods were employed to generate and facilitate relations between ex-servicemen of the erstwhile belligerent nations during the 1920s and 30s, including the establishment of various international veterans’ associations.<sup>15</sup> Through these

---

<sup>9</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Anonyme, ‘11 novembre 1932 : Quatorzième anniversaire de la victoire et de la paix. Manifeste de l’Union Fédérale,’ *Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d’Anciens Combattants et de Victimes de la Guerre et des Jeunesses de l’Union Fédérale*, 15 novembre 1932, 2<sup>e</sup> année, no. 23, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> F. J., ‘Le rapprochement franco-allemand: interview de Marcel Héraud, Député, Membre de la Commission des Affaires Etrangères, ancien ministre,’ *La Voix du Combattant*, 10 juillet 1937, no. 938, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> André Gervais, ‘Les hommes de la guerre en Allemagne,’ *Les Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d’Anciens Combattants et de Victimes de la Guerre et des Jeunesses de l’Union Fédérale*, 15 juin 1932, 2<sup>e</sup> année, no. 15, p. 2. Henri Pichot, too, believed veterans were uniquely placed to generate mutual understanding across national boundaries. (Moreau-Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l’Allemagne*, p. 53).

<sup>13</sup> Henri Pichot and René Cassin of the Union Fédérale initiated relations with the German veterans’ association the Reichsbund in 1922. (Moreau-Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l’Allemagne*, p. 1).

<sup>14</sup> Léon Viala, ‘Propos d’anniversaire,’ *Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale des Combattants*, 20 novembre 1937, 7<sup>e</sup> année, no. 133, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> The major associations included the Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants (F.I.D.A.C.) [International Federation of Veterans of the Allied Countries] founded in 1920, whose “main principal [was] to maintain, encourage and develop the spirit of camaraderie which manifested itself on the battlefields, and to put this camaraderie towards serving peace.” (A.-J. Fonteny (Président de la Fédération nationale des Combattants républicains), *Les anciens combattants et la paix. Discours à la Semaine du Combattant 5-7 septembre 1930 à Marseille*, Paris : Fédération nationale des Combattants républicains, 1930, p. 9). The F.I.D.A.C. restricted membership to associations of former Allied nations including the United States, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Greece. To counter this selectivity, the Conférence Internationale des Associations des Mutilés et des Anciens Combattants (C.I.A.M.A.C.) [International Conference of Associations of Disabled Veterans and Veterans] was founded in 1925 at the initiative of the U.F. which incorporated veterans’ associations in favour of international cooperation from across Europe. The U.F. had limited its invitation to German and Austrian associations willing to consider international relations, avoiding the nationalistic organisations. (Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française 1914-1939: vol. I: Histoire*, Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977, p. 104). Present at the first conference of the C.I.A.M.A.C. were associations from France (only the U.F.), Germany, Austria, Italy,

organisations, German veterans were invited as guests to French conferences and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> Personal connections between members of ex-enemy nations, fostered through international committees and meetings, were seen as essential in building cross-border relations.

Veterans from across the political spectrum increasingly shied from reconciliation during the 1930s as Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler became more overtly militaristic.<sup>17</sup> However, one exception to the general trend away from rapprochement was the establishment of the Comité France-Allemagne in 1935. This association was designed to facilitate relations between veterans of the ex-enemy nations. Two of the most influential and pro-rapprochement French veteran leaders of the interwar period, Henri Pichot, President of the left-leaning Union Fédérale, and Jean Goy, President of the more right-wing Union Nationale des Combattants, were the French General Secretaries. Their involvement gave the organisation a great deal of prestige among the French population, leading historians to retrospectively suggest that the Nazis used the Comité to soften public opinion to their policy.<sup>18</sup> It was during this period of increasingly strained Franco-German relations that the 1936 *Veillée de Verdun* took place, and in hindsight it seems that the Nazis once again played upon the pacifistic aspirations of the well-meaning but misguided French veterans to anesthetise public opinion to their policies.

For France, the First World War is synonymous with Verdun. The 1916 battle is associated in national mythology with resistance against the invading army to such a degree that for many observers the soldier of Verdun embodies the Great War *poilu*<sup>19</sup> and Verdun represents the heroic town *par excellence*. It was at Verdun, only 280 kilometres east of Paris, that the French army managed to halt the German advance towards the capital. The two armies held out for months in what quickly developed into a war of attrition in which millions of rounds of ammunition were expended. Eventual French 'victory' at Verdun came at a high price: 300 000 French and German dead and a further 400 000 injured.<sup>20</sup> The enormity of the Battle of Verdun enshrined the location in the

---

Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. (Fagerberg, *The 'Anciens Combattants' and French Foreign Policy*, p. 151).

<sup>16</sup> Henri Pichot traveled to Germany on a number of occasions to meet with and address important members of the German veteran community. From Germany, Erich Rossmann, President of the Reichsbund, was invited to the 1929 Union Fédérale conference at Brest. (Fagerberg, *The 'Anciens Combattants' and French Foreign Policy*, p. 154).

<sup>17</sup> French attitudes towards rapprochement were especially affected by the economic downturn in 1929 and the increasing aggressive policies of the Nazi Party. (Fagerberg, *The 'Anciens Combattants' and French Foreign Policy*, pp. 155-156).

<sup>18</sup> Prost, 'Les anciens combattants et l'Allemagne 1933-1938,' p. 131; Fagerberg, *The 'Anciens Combattants' and French Foreign Policy*, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> 'Poilu' was an informal term used during the Great War to describe French infantrymen, meaning literally 'hairy one.' The German equivalent was 'Frontschwein' meaning 'front pig.' Both became terms of endearment over the course of the War. (Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989, p. 146).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.centremondialpaix.asso.fr/verdun.html>. Accessed 22 June 2009. For exact figures, see Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun: World War I's Most Momentous Battle and the Folly of Nationalism*, New York: Doubleday, 2002, p. 7. Gérard Canini provided much detail on the breakdown of France's casualties. (Gérard Canini, *Combattre à Verdun: Vie et souffrance quotidiennes du soldat 1916-1917*, Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1988, pp. 10-12).

national mythology of both countries,<sup>21</sup> creating “an important site of French and European memory” according to Verdun’s World Centre for Peace website.<sup>22</sup>

Built in the centre of the most contested part of the battlefield, the Douaumont Ossuary contains the remains of 130 000 unidentified French and German soldiers, divided into 46 vaults to represent each of the major battlefield sections.<sup>23</sup> Added together, this equates to an unbelievable 12 000 kilograms of human bones.<sup>24</sup> Marked with white crosses, 25 000 graves constitute the nearby military cemetery.<sup>25</sup> The immense number of servicemen who died at the Battle of Verdun, of which hundreds of thousands were incorporated into the Douaumont Ossuary, ensured its existence as a preeminent site of World War One memory for both France and Germany after its inauguration in 1932. For French veterans in favour of peace, it seemed an ideal location for the major attempt at reconciliation between former enemies advocated by the *Veillée de Verdun*. As the veterans of Verdun wrote in their 1936 Peace Sermon, humanity, humbled by the enormity and anonymity of death resulting from this “field of carnage,” would call for peace.<sup>26</sup>

However, the reconciliatory properties of Douaumont have been contested. In debating the role of historical sites in German national remembrance, Rudy Koshar cited the Douaumont Ossuary as a prime example of how wartime space has been manipulated to expressly delineate victors and vanquished.<sup>27</sup> For him, displaying the bones of French soldiers under glass while their German counterparts were merely buried served to separate the erstwhile adversaries both physically and in terms of importance. Further, he argued, by instigating and supporting tours, pilgrimages and commemorative services which reflected on the loss and destruction inflicted by the War, Douaumont continued to propagate the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy of wartime propaganda. Thus given the subtle pro-France sentiment embedded in the site’s symbolism, the spatial environment of the Douaumont Ossuary can be interpreted as antithetical to reconciliation between former enemies. Nonetheless, locating the *Veillée de Verdun* at the Douaumont Ossuary, in the heart of the battlefield, served to reunite former adversaries in the very space which had once dictated their wartime activity. Healing cannot be separated from place,<sup>28</sup> and it was assumed that returning to the site of past conflict would aid the process of coming to terms with the trauma.

The *Veillée*’s night-time ceremony was simple, deriving much of its symbolic power from the lack of procedural intervention. Each veteran was designated one grave to watch

---

<sup>21</sup> Gérard Canini recognised that since World War One, Verdun’s identity has been formulated by appropriating the battlefield. (Gérard Canini, ‘Verdun: les commémorations de la bataille (1920-1986),’ *Revue historique des Armées*, no. 3, 1986, pp. 97-107, p. 105).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.centremondialpaix.asso.fr/verdun.html>. Accessed 22 June 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Anonyme, ‘L’ossuaire de Douaumont,’ *Les Chemins de la Mémoire*, avril 2006, no. 160, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.verdun-douaumont.com/en/index.html>. Accessed 22 June 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Les Anciens Combattants de Verdun, Tract ‘Serment pour la paix,’ 5 avril 1936. <http://pw20c.mcmaster.ca/les-anciens-combattants-de-verdun-leaflet-5-april-1936>. Accessed 22 June 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Rudy Koshar, *From monuments to traces: Artifacts of German Memory 1870-1990*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Wilbert M. Gesler, *Healing Places*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 1.

over while carefully chosen pieces of classical music were played.<sup>29</sup> For the German veteran Paul Distelbarth, this was a particularly moving aspect of the ceremony: “In silently watching over the dead, they [the veterans] felt just as humble, just as poor, just as anonymous and unknown as they did twenty years ago, when their unfortunate lives were hanging by a thread and each sunrise seemed like a gift from heaven.”<sup>30</sup> After the *Sonnerie aux Morts*, each veteran inclined his head and laid a flower on the grave while murmuring “For world peace.” Distelbarth also alluded to individual voices, more daring than others, crying aloud “Down with war!” and other pro-peace slogans.<sup>31</sup> Accompanied by a single canon shot, the lights were turned off for the minute of silence, in which the living were invited to commune with the dead. A second canon shot heralded the re-illumination of the Ossuary. The *Cease-fire*, such an important piece of music for the soldiers of the Great War, was played by a trumpeter, before the oath was pronounced.

The moralistic and pacifistic oath was the highlight of the ceremony. Repeated in French, German, English and Italian, the sermon read: “Because the men who lie here and elsewhere only entered the peace of the dead in order to found the peace of the living and because it would be sacrilegious for us to allow that which the dead hated. We owe peace to their sacrifice; we swear to protect and want it!”<sup>32</sup> The veterans responded but shouting in their native language “I swear!” For the French veterans, this oath was so successful that they rallied to have it repeated on Armistice Day before all the war memorials across the country.

In addition to the formal elements of the Verdun service, the presence of contingents of foreign veterans in France provided an opportunity for international socialising. Singing was seen as particularly poignant, given the popularity of wartime songs.<sup>33</sup> An example of how song was used to demonstrate forgiveness and acceptance was when, to honour Pichot’s wishes, French and German veterans sang the first verse of the well-known German war song *Ich hatt’ einen Kamaraden* upon visiting the German military cemetery at Ville-devant-Chaumont near Verdun.<sup>34</sup> With Bastille Day falling a couple of days after the ceremonies at Douaumont, the ex-combatants were invited to together enjoy the festivities (and beverages) of France’s national holiday,<sup>35</sup> another sign that the French veterans were willing to embrace international over national ties.

Unfortunately, the hopes raised by the success of the *Veillée de Verdun* were crushed by the mounting tide of war. Nazi Germany, which had played along with French veteran aspirations for peace to dampen its neighbour’s fear and deter calls for increased armament, eventually pushed the boundaries too far. By 1938 even Henri Pichot, one

---

<sup>29</sup> Distelbarth mentioned Rameau, Bach, Beethoven and Wagner. (Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 50).

<sup>30</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, pp. 53-54. The stilted language is also found in the original French.

<sup>33</sup> One contemporary newspaper article mentioned *Smile, Smile, Smile, Da kommt der nährische Franzose, Madelon, Cadet Roussel, Ich hab’ mein Herz in Heidelberg Verloren* and *Hinkey Dinkey Parley-Voo*. (Anonymous, ‘A New Verdun: French Veterans commemorate Battle with Peace Bid to Forgiven Foes,’ *Literary Digest*, 18 July 1936, p. 11).

<sup>34</sup> Distelbarth, *Images de France*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous, ‘A New Verdun,’ p. 11.

veteran who had worked tirelessly for Franco-German rapprochement throughout the 1930s, was actively criticising German foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> Viewed in this light the *Veillée de Verdun* is a striking case study. The conflicting aims of the French veteran organisers and the Nazis created an event which simultaneously advanced and undermined Franco-German reconciliation. Blinded by their hope for peace, the veterans failed to realise that the presence of a German delegation at the vigil masked the Nazis' true intentions.

World War Two shattered relations between the neighbours. After 1945, however, French veteran discourse again advocated international peace and especially the benefits of Franco-German cooperation, now situated within the broader context of pan-Europeanism.<sup>37</sup> General observations regarding the benefits of a united Europe were enhanced through direct reference to the hatreds and divisions of war:

Yesterday's allies and enemies, today gathered in the camp of free men: let us remember our dead and in their name let us destroy the hatred which animated them yesterday, so that their sons may avoid the sufferings endured by their fathers. Europe is hope. Europe demands fraternity.<sup>38</sup>

Through contrasting past discord with hopes for a collective and unified future, the veterans manipulated memory of war to propagate Europeanism and peace.

Today the Battle of Verdun remains primary to French and German memories of World War One, with regular memorial services honouring "the sacrifice of all those who fell and continue to guard the cemetery at Douaumont."<sup>39</sup> In 2006, to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle, 1916 young people from across Europe gathered in the cemetery and laid cornflowers, adopted by French veteran memorialists as the symbol of the *poilu*, on the tombs of fallen soldiers.<sup>40</sup> This simple and moving gesture harked back to the 1936 *Veillée de Verdun*, but also illustrated the pedagogy fundamental to veteran mentality. Through supporting their participation in remembrance ceremonies,<sup>41</sup> veterans encourage young people to connect with wartime memory. In "prepar[ing] the

---

<sup>36</sup> Moreau-Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l'Allemagne*, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> The foundation of the Confédération Européenne des Anciens Combattants (C.E.A.C.) [European Confederation of Veterans], which aimed to unite all veterans' associations across Europe to aid peace and international security, was one manifestation of this new discourse.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Albert Dom (Président de l'U.N.C.), 'Le 11 novembre, journée nationale du souvenir: jour de gloire et de paix,' *La Voix du Combattant/La Voix du Djebel-Flamme*, septembre-octobre 1976, no. 1418, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> E. Pierret-Gérard (Président de l'U.F.A.C.), 'Manifeste de l'U.F.A.C. A lire devant les Monuments aux Morts,' *Le Journal des Combattants et de toutes les victimes des guerres, mutilés, invalides, blessés et malades, veuves, orphelins, ascendants, victimes civiles, sinistrés, combattants de 14-18, de 39-45 et de la Résistance, prisonniers*, samedi 10 novembre 1956, 41<sup>e</sup> année, nouvelle série, no. 542, pp. 1-2, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Anonyme, 'A Verdun, 1916 jeunes se souviennent,' *La Voix du Nord*, samedi 10 juin 2006.

<sup>41</sup> This custom has been popular since the institution of Armistice Day, with school children often performing symbolic rituals such as wreath-laying and reading the names of the fallen. On 11 November 1922, the first year in which Armistice Day was celebrated as an official public holiday, the participation of school children, as well as patriotic associations and other groups, turned the day into a "moving demonstration of national solidarity and inter-Allied harmony." (François Malval, 'Le 11 novembre 1922: Emouvante Manifestation de Solidarité Nationale et d'Entente Interalliée,' *La Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l'Union Nationale des Combattants*, dimanche 30 juillet 1922, 4<sup>e</sup> année, no. 157, p. 1).

future generations so that they do not forget,”<sup>42</sup> the veterans of today are effectively continuing the oeuvre of their forefathers who attended the *Veillée de Verdun*. Remembering war is seen as a path to reconciliation and peace, as illustrated by the Douaumont Ossuary’s official website which welcomes the visitor with the words: “To conserve the memory... for peace and reconciliation.”<sup>43</sup>

The twenty-first century context means “the Germans have become our [France’s] closest partners”<sup>44</sup> in a situation which encourages cross-border interaction. Town ‘twinning’,<sup>45</sup> along with student, cultural and business exchanges sponsored by private organisations and state bodies, generate the personal contacts which veterans strove for in the post-World War One context as a means for reconciliation and peace. Children, soldiers and veterans of ex-enemy nations are invited to participate in French ceremonies of remembrance, enacting rituals of symbolic acceptance of the past. Remembering wartime divisions benefits contemporary dialogue of unity and post-trauma resolution. Such interaction has helped eliminate the potential for future conflict between France and Germany. As one veteran commented in 1930: “The more I travel and think, the more it seems clear to me that war is only rendered possible by people’s ignorance. Total ignorance of themselves, and of others.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Vélon (Président de l’Union Fédérale), ‘11 novembre,’ *Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d’Anciens Combattants, des Victimes de Guerre et des Jeunesses de l’Union Fédérale*, septembre-octobre 1992, no. 404, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.verdun-douaumont.com/en/index.html>. Accessed 22 June 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Ch. Dubois, ‘14 Juillet: n’oublions pas l’optimisme,’ *Le Journal des Combattants et de toutes les victimes des guerres. Hebdomadaire indépendant fondé en 1916 par André Linville*, 10 juillet 1993, 76<sup>e</sup> année, nouvelle série, no. 2323, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Mary-Ange Nierderl-Brissaud noted, for example, that in 2002 Compiègne (the town where the 1918 Armistice was signed and an important site of contested Franco-German memory) had been twinned with Bremen for forty years. (Mary-Ange Nierderl-Brissaud, ‘Le 11 novembre 2002 - 84<sup>e</sup> anniversaire,’ *La Voix du Combattant*, décembre 2002, no. 1680, pp. 6 et 12, p. 6).

<sup>46</sup> E. Bourcier, ‘Savoir,’ *Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l’Union Nationale des Combattants*, 11 novembre 1930, 11<sup>e</sup> année, no. 590, pp. 1-2, p. 1.

Bibliography:

Les Anciens Combattants de Verdun, Tract 'Serment pour la paix,' 5 avril 1936.  
<http://pw20c.mcmaster.ca/les-anciens-combattants-de-verdun-leaflet-5-april-1936>

Accessed 22 June 2009

Anonyme, 'A Verdun, 1916 jeunes se souviennent,' *La Voix du Nord*, samedi 10 juin 2006

Anonyme, '11 novembre 1932 : Quatorzième anniversaire de la victoire et de la paix. Manifeste de l'Union Fédérale,' *Cahiers de l'Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d'Anciens Combattants et de Victimes de la Guerre et des Jeunesses de l'Union Fédérale*, 15 novembre 1932, 2<sup>e</sup> année, no. 23, p. 5.

Anonyme, 'L'ossuaire de Douaumont,' *Les Chemins de la Mémoire*, avril 2006, no. 160, p. 4

Anonymous, 'A New Verdun: French Veterans commemorate Battle with Peace Bid to Forgiven Foes,' *Literary Digest*, 18 July 1936, p. 11

Bell, Duncan S. A. 2003, 'Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 5, issue 1, pp. 63-81

Bourcier, E., 'Savoir,' *Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l'Union Nationale des Combattants*, 11 novembre 1930, 11<sup>e</sup> année, no. 590, pp. 1-2

Canini, Gérard 1986, 'Verdun: les commémorations de la bataille (1920-1986),' *Revue historique des Armées*, no. 3, pp. 97-107

Canini, Gérard 1988, *Combattre à Verdun: Vie et souffrance quotidiennes du soldat 1916-1917*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, Nancy

Distelbarth, Paul [1936], *France Vivante: t. 2: Images de France*, Editions « Alsatia, » Paris

Dom, Jean-Albert (Président de l'U.N.C.), 'Le 11 novembre, journée nationale du souvenir: jour de gloire et de paix,' *La Voix du Combattant/La Voix du Djebel-Flamme*, septembre-octobre 1976, no. 1418, p. 24

Dubois, Ch., '14 Juillet: n'oublions pas l'optimisme,' *Le Journal des Combattants et de toutes les victimes des guerres. Hebdomadaire indépendant fondé en 1916 par André Linville*, 10 juillet 1993, 76<sup>e</sup> année, nouvelle série, no. 2323, p. 1

Eksteins, Modris 1989, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston

Fagerberg, Elliott Pennell 1966, *The 'Anciens Combattants' and French Foreign Policy*, Thèse présentée à l'Université de Genève pour l'obtention du grade de Docteur des Sciences Politiques, Université de Genève, Institut universitaire de Hautes Études internationales, thèse no. 175, Imprimerie « Les Presses de Savoie, » Ambilly, Annemasse

Fonteny, A.-J. (Président de la Fédération nationale des Combattants républicains), *Les anciens combattants et la paix. Discours à la Semaine du Combattant 5-7 septembre 1930 à Marseille*, Paris : Fédération nationale des Combattants républicains, 1930, p. 9

Gervais, André, 'Les hommes de la guerre en Allemagne,' *Les Cahiers de l'Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d'Anciens Combattants et de Victimes de la Guerre et des Jeunesses de l'Union Fédérale*, 15 juin 1932, 2<sup>e</sup> année, no. 15, p. 2

Gesler, Wilbert M. 2003, *Healing Places*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

J., F., 'Le rapprochement franco-allemand: interview de Marcel Héraud, Député, Membre de la Commission des Affaires Etrangères, ancien ministre,' *La Voix du Combattant*, 10 juillet 1937, no. 938, p. 1

Killy, Walther (Hrsg.) 2001, *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie (DBE). Band 2: Bohacz-Ebhardt*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag K.G. Saur, München

Koshar, Rudy 2000, *From monuments to traces: Artifacts of German Memory 1870-1990*, University of California Press, Berkeley

Malval, François, 'Le 11 novembre 1922: Emouvante Manifestation de Solidarité Nationale et d'Entente Interalliée,' *La Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l'Union Nationale des Combattants*, dimanche 30 juillet 1922, 4<sup>e</sup> année, no. 157, p. 1

Moreau-Trichet, Claire 2004, *Henri Pichot et l'Allemagne de 1930 à 1945*, Peter Lang, Berne

Nierderl-Brissaud, Mary-Ange, 'Le 11 novembre 2002 - 84<sup>e</sup> anniversaire,' *La Voix du Combattant*, décembre 2002, no. 1680, pp. 6 et 12, p. 6

Ousby, Ian 2002, *The Road to Verdun: World War I's Most Momentous Battle and the Folly of Nationalism*, Doubleday: New York

Pierret-Gérard, E. (Président de l'U.F.A.C.), 'Manifeste de l'U.F.A.C. A lire devant les Monuments aux Morts,' *Le Journal des Combattants et de toutes les victimes des guerres, mutilés, invalides, blessés et malades, veuves, orphelins, ascendants, victimes civiles, sinistrés, combattants de 14-18, de 39-45 et de la Résistance, prisonniers*, samedi 10 novembre 1956, 41<sup>e</sup> année, nouvelle série, no. 542, pp. 1-2

Pineau, Georges (de l'Association des Ecrivains Anciens Combattants), 'L'esprit combattant,' *La Voix du Combattant. Organe officiel de l'Union Nationale des Combattants*, vendredi 11 novembre 1927, 8<sup>e</sup> année, no. 436, pp. 1 et 3

Prost, Antoine 1977, *Les anciens combattants et la société française 1914-1939: vol. I: Histoire*, Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris

Prost, Antoine 1980, 'Les anciens combattants et l'Allemagne 1933-1938,' *La France et l'Allemagne 1932-1936. Colloque, Paris 1977*, Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris, pp. 131-148

Viala, Léon, 'Propos d'anniversaire,' *Cahiers de l'Union Fédérale des Combattants*, 20 novembre 1937, 7<sup>e</sup> année, no. 133, p. 3

Vélon, Pierre (Président de l'Union Fédérale), '11 novembre,' *Cahiers de l'Union Fédérale des Associations Françaises d'Anciens Combattants, des Victimes de Guerre et des Jeunesses de l'Union Fédérale*, septembre-octobre 1992, no. 404, p. 1

<http://www.centremondialpaix.asso.fr/verdun.html> Accessed 22 June 2009

<http://www.verdun-douaumont.com/en/index.html> Accessed 22 June 2009