

“THEY SHALL NOT PASS!”

FORTIFICATIONS, FROM THE SÉRÉ DE RIVIÈRES SYSTEM TO THE MAGINOT LINE



To accompany the 1940 commemorations, the Verdun Memorial will be presenting an exhibition on the fortifications in northern and eastern France. The soldiers' experience is at the heart of the visit: “They shall not pass!”

The exhibition traces the development of defensive systems along the frontier between France and Germany, which had historically always been an area of combat with shifting borders. Subject to regular attack, the fortifications were modernised to withstand the increasingly powerful means of destruction resulting from rapid advances in artillery.

“They shall not pass!” Fortifications, from the Séré de Rivières System to the Maginot Line, will re-evaluate the role of the Maginot Line in the defeat of June 1940, re-examining the view that it was a mistake inevitably leading to defeat, in particular due to a lack of fighting spirit on the part of the French troops. The exhibition aims to explain the Maginot Line by going back in time and seeing it in relation to the different types of fortification that had appeared following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. It traces the development of successive defensive systems and the life of their garrisons, from the Séré de Rivières System of the end of the 19th century, via the Verdun fortification during the First World War, to the Maginot Line (1929-1939), the high point of French defensive engineering.

From the design and construction of the works to the life of the troops who occupied them, the soldiers are at the heart of this exhibition which explores the subject through a wide selection of personal accounts and stories, through illustrations (photographs, personal drawings, graffiti), maps, objects and scenography.

THE MEN: DECISION-MAKERS, DESIGNERS, CONSTRUCTORS AND COMBATTANTS

The spotlight will be on different protagonists through the exhibition: the decision-makers at the start of the process (Thiers, Painlevé, Maginot), the designers and constructors (Séré de Rivières, Pamart, Fillonneau, Belhague, Challéat), and the soldiers who manned the fortifications during war and in peacetime, such as Warrant Officer Chenot (Fort Douaumont), Captains Harispe and Ménager (Fort Moulainville - Fort Douaumont), Major Raynal and Second-Lieutenant Roy (Fort Vaux), Captain Dartigue (Froideterre Ouvrage) and non-commissioned officers and soldiers such as Weiss at Fort Moulainville and German gunner Major Solf.



Fort Douaumont: A casemate for the barracks at Fort Douaumont © Jean-Luc Kaluzko

THE EXHIBITION IS ARRANGED IN FIVE CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCES:

1. A time of renewal (1872-1914)

With the loss of Alsace and part of Lorraine in 1870 and with Metz and Strasbourg becoming two powerful entrenched camps in the hands of the Germans, France embarked on a deep-rooted reform of its army and defensive system. In 1872, this task was entrusted by President Thiers to a defence committee in which General Séré de Rivières played a central part. The new defensive system for France's northern eastern borders adopted in 1874 comprised a series of entrenched camps, including Verdun, Toul, Épinal and Belfort, connected by two defensive curtains provided by forts overseeing the Meuse and Haute Moselle valleys.

This first part of the exhibition details the innovative nature of the Séré de Rivières forts and their shortcomings revealed by advances in artillery. The structures needed to be reinforced to address these advances. From the end of the 1880s, the fortifications were reinforced with concrete and their weaponry revised.

2. A time of doubt (1914- 1915)

This part of the exhibition traces the offensive by the German armies in Belgium and north-eastern France. The Germans used heavy cannon firing high-powered shells. These weapons, which had been kept secret up to 1914, were a shocking revelation for the allies. The Belgian forts of Liège, Namur and Antwerp fell rapidly, as did the forts in the north and north-east of France, where these had not been evacuated. The terrible experience of the troops stationed at Fort Manonviller in 1914, the first French Fort attacked by two 42 cm cannon, where the men faced a formidable bombardment which breached or destroyed their defences, choked by dust and smoke, raised doubts in the minds of the leading civil and military personnel who questioned the usefulness of the fortifications.

3. A time of change: Verdun (1916-1918)

This sequence shows the gradual rehabilitation of the forts during the Battle of Verdun, focussing on three main points: the setback of the loss of Fort Douaumont without a fight (25 February 1916), the heroic resistance of Fort Vaux (2-7 June 1916) and the success of the Froideterre Ouvrage (23 June 1916), which halted the advance of the Germans at a key moment in the Battle of Verdun.

Improvement works on the forts took place from March 1916. These grew in scale in July: underground tunnels, concrete optical telegraph stations, gas shelters, concrete observation posts, underground entrances distanced from the fort, wells and water tanks. Connections between the forts were also improved by installing optical telegraph and radio telegraph stations.

With the recapture of Fort Douaumont (24 October 1916) and Fort Vaux (night of 2 to 3 November 1916), the works continued in a form that foreshadowed the Maginot Line.

4. The high point (1922-1939)

After the war, France decided in 1922 to counter the future shortage of manpower by immediate investment in a system of fortifications, concentrated mainly in Alsace and Lorraine. In 1929, France's Minister of War, André Maginot, pushed through an act for financing the new defensive system designed by his predecessor, Paul Painlevé. As regards the form that the fortifications of the Maginot Line would take, the CORF (fortified regions organising committee) took inspiration from the Séré de Rivières defensive model, the experience of the Verdun forts in 1916-1917, and the German Alsace-Lorraine fortifications that they had plenty of time to study after 1918. The Maginot Line is therefore a combination of experience and borrowings.

The Maginot Line represents the high point in French fortifications as it forms an almost complete defensive system with its combination of forts and ouvrages, troops providing logistical support and heavy artillery along the road and rail systems in the intervals between them, and a communication system (radio and telephone) enabling it to fire effectively on all points identified by its armoured observation posts. This modernisation work was to create a gap between public perceptions and the reality of the Maginot Line. What had been devised by the military as a response to a specific problem would become, in the eyes of the public, a shield to protect them from all forms of war, all invasions, in line with the pacifist wishes of the majority of combat veterans haunted by the carnage of the Great War. While they knew full well that fortifications do not win a war, the military leaders allowed the politicians and the population to delude themselves.

5. A time of memory (1940 to the present)

This period opens with the shock defeat of France in June 1940. Along with practically the whole of the French army, the Maginot Line fell into disrepute.

As the military leaders had expected, the Germans outflanked the Maginot Line via Belgium in May 1940. But the battle on the Belgian plain was short-lived when the armoured divisions broke through the weak defensive positions of the Ardennes.

In June, the Germans attacked the Maginot Line in several places. They broke through on the Rhine, in the Vosges and in the Sarre Gap. However, some bastions fought to the bitter end, such as La Ferté Ouvrage to the north-west of Montmédy. All along the French-German border, from the Moselle to the north of Alsace, German attacks on the major forts of the Maginot Line failed. It was only after the signing of the armistice that the troops of the Maginot Line surrendered on the orders of the French government.

During the occupation, the Germans used several of the large fortifications as equipment stores and underground factories. In 1944, several of the fortifications temporarily resisted the American troops. At the end of the Second World War, the epic story of free France eclipsed the tales of resistance of the troops on the Maginot Line, which remained a symbol of defeat of 1940. The French army did, however, re-equip the major forts of the Maginot Line, until it was able to rely on its own nuclear deterrent at the end of the 1960s. Saved from pillage and destruction, these forts and ouvrages are of great interest today, both historically and as a memorial. They are an exceptional historical asset: few regions in the world have such a diverse collection of military architecture or spanning such a long period.



Maginot Line: Bois de Bousse Ouvrage
© Jean-Luc Kaluzko

Fort

In a fort, the Artillery has the main role of keeping the enemy's artillery and infantry at a distance and preventing movement along main routes and in designated zones in times of peace. The Infantry is in charge of defence in the immediate vicinity of the fort. The Engineers work on maintaining the defensive capabilities of the fort.

Each fort comprises a barracks, magazines, a rampart for artillery and sometimes gun turrets, all surrounded by a trench surrounded by casemates.

Entrenched camp

An entrenched camp (such as the Verdun camp) comprises a central area formed by the former fortified stronghold and a ring of forts on high points overlooking the central area.

Advances in artillery changed the organisation of the entrenched camps, particularly at Verdun. The Artillery came out of the forts and were dispersed into batteries located in the intervals between them. Work was started on building concrete batteries with armoured turrets, particularly around Fort Douaumont, but this was interrupted by the declaration of war in August 1914.

To supply these batteries, magazines were set up outside the forts and connected by railway tracks. To protect the batteries and magazines, the interval between the forts was closed off by means of infantry ouvrages and trenches connected to interval shelters.

VISUAL RESOURCES FOR THE PRESS



75 mm gun turret, Moulainville Fort, January 1916 © La contemporaine



Maginot Line: Bois de Bousse Ouvrage © Jean-Luc Kaluzko



Casemate for the barracks at Fort Douaumont © Jean-Luc Kaluzko



Entrance to Fort Manonvillier 1916 © La contemporaine



Artillerymen posing in front of the entrance to Fort Liouville © Collection ASFL



No 1 courtyard, Fort Liouville 1915 © Collection Nicolas Czubak



French soldiers in a Douaumont casemate © La contemporaine



Maginot Line: Block 7 Kobenbusch Ouvrage © Collection JL Goby



Maginot Line: Entrance to the Bois de Bousse Ouvrage © Jean-Luc Kaluzko

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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OPENING TIMES

From 2nd June to 30 September 2021: 9.30am - 7pm, daily

From 1st October to 15 October 2021: 9.30am - 6pm, Monday to Friday / 9.30am - 7pm, Saturday and Sunday

From 16 October to 1st November 2021: 9.30am - 7pm, daily

From 2nd November to 30 November 2021: 9.30am - 5pm, Monday to Friday / 9.30am - 6pm, Saturday and Sunday

From 1st December to 17 December 2021: 9.30am - 7pm, daily

TICKET PRICES

Adults, children over 16 years: Museum €12

Temporary exhibition only €5

Concessions: Museum €7.50 / Temporary exhibition only €2

Family ticket (2 adults and one child 8-16 years): €27

Battlefield - Verdun Pass (5 sites: Verdun Memorial, Douaumont

Ossuary, Fort Douaumont, Fort Vaux, Verdun Underground

Citadel): Adult (from 16 years) €28 (instead of €34) / Child

(8-16 years) €15

Free for children under 8 years

Accessible for persons of reduced mobility.

Other prices and details: www.memorial-verdun.fr

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