PAUL HAM

1914

THE YEAR THE WORLD ENDED

About the Book

In August 1914, the European powers plunged the world into a war that would kill or wound 37 million people, tear down the fabric of society, uproot ancient political systems and set the world on course for the bloodiest century in human history.

That month, the largest armies ever assembled met on a vast battlefield. By the end of the year, they had fought themselves to a standstill, eyeballing each other across the Western Front.

Few years can be said to have transformed the world. The events of 1914 created the climate that led remorselessly to the Russian Revolution, Versailles, the rise of Nazism and the Cold War. The year shaped the twentieth century.

1914: The Year the World Ended shows how that old world died. In Paul Ham's vigorous telling, the world did not stumble or sleepwalk into war, as many suppose. The great powers were not overwhelmed by events that spun out of their control, nor were they helpless before the merciless law of the survival of the fittest. The men who ran the governments of Europe chose war.

On the eve of the one-hundredth anniversary of that terrible year, Ham takes the reader on a journey into the labyrinth, to reveal the complexity, the layered motives, the flawed and disturbed minds that drove the world to war. What emerges is a clear sense of what happened and why. 'To understand the past,' Ham concludes, 'and share that

understanding, is the chief role of the historian. To understand the past is to liberate ourselves from its awful shadow and steel ourselves against it happening again.’

Contents

Part 3 1914 – In the Salons of Power

Part 4 1914 – On the Ground

Appendices

PAUL HAM

1914

THE YEAR THE WORLD ENDED

To the unknown soldier

EUROPE 1914

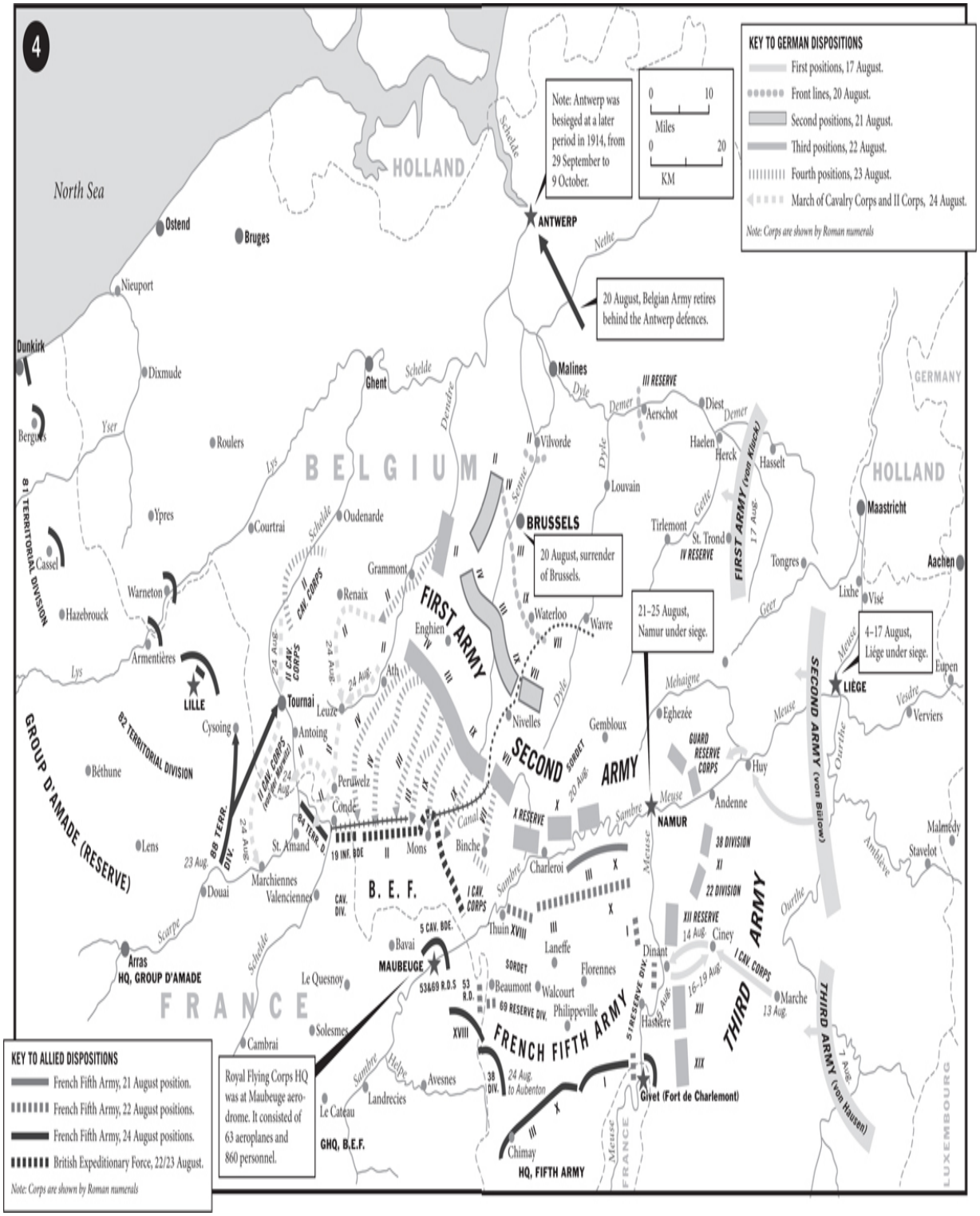
Original maps courtesy of Arthur Banks and restyled by Alicia Freile, apart from Europe 1914, Balkans 1911 and Balkans 1914 by Alicia Freile.

SCHLIEFFEN PLAN – FRANCE

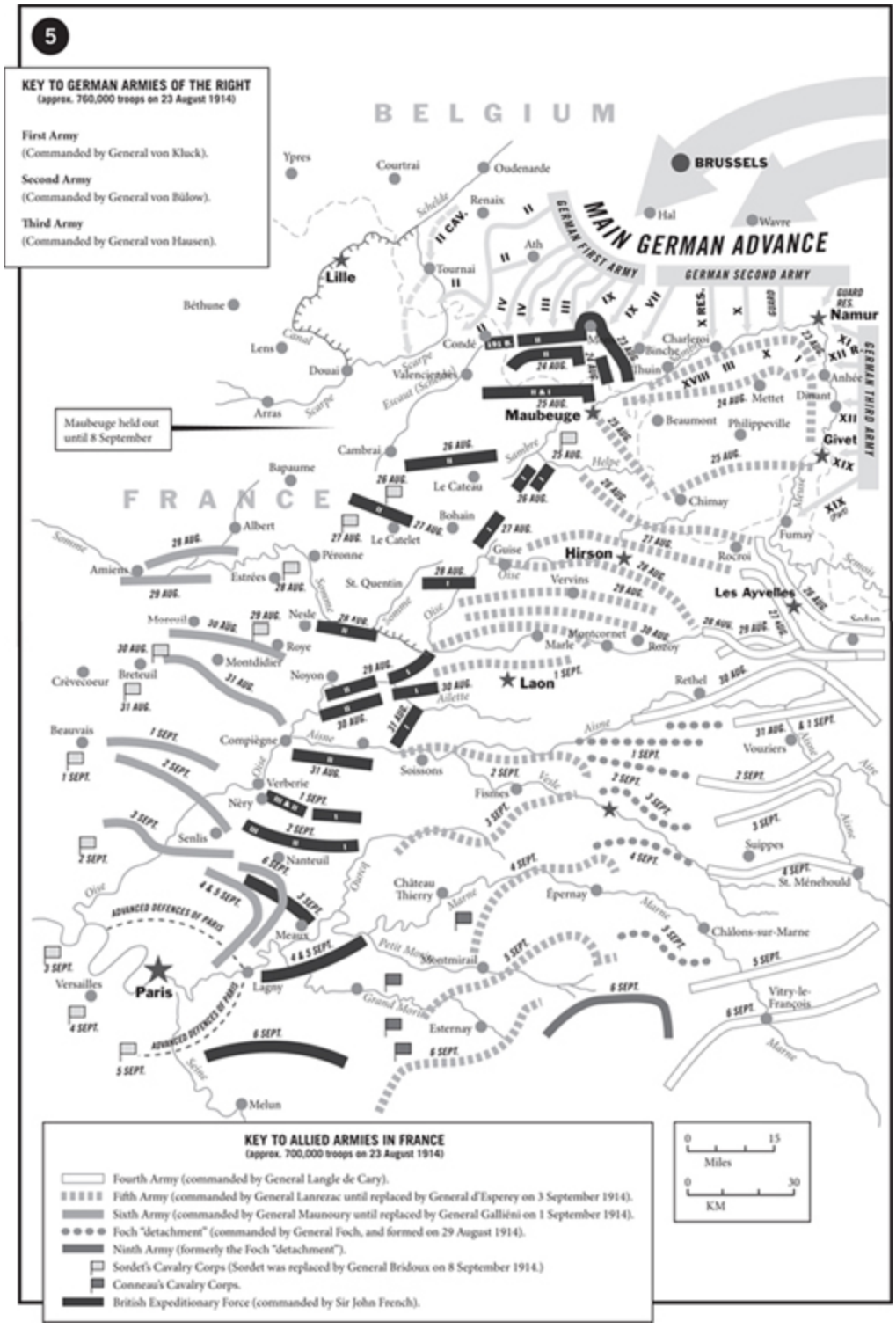
BALKANS 1911

BALKANS 1914

GERMAN ATTACKS ON BELGIUM AND THE FRENCH FRONTIERS



THE RETREAT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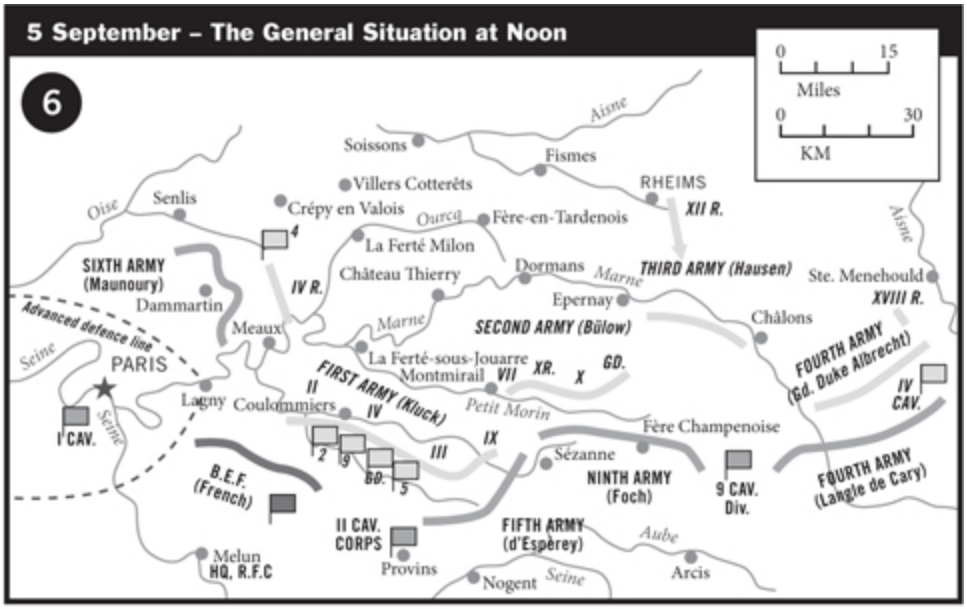
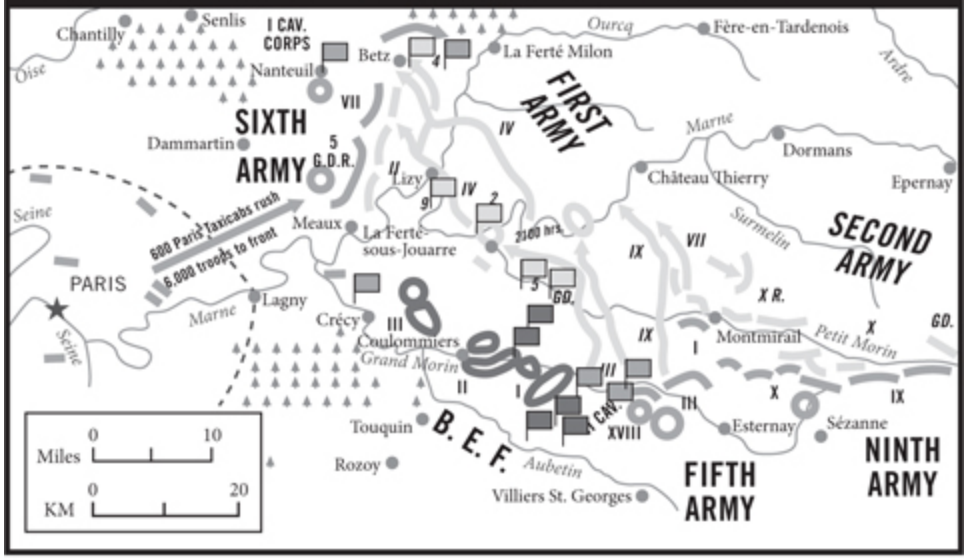
KEY TO GERMAN ARMIES OF THE RIGHT
(approx. 760,000 troops on 23 August 1914)
First Army
(Commanded by General von Kluck).
Second Army
(Commanded by General von Bülow).
Third Army
(Commanded by General von Hausen).
BELGIUM
FRANCE
BRUSSELS
MAIN GERMAN ADVANCE
GERMAN FIRST ARMY
GERMAN SECOND ARMY
GERMAN THIRD ARMY
Ypres
Courtrai
Oudenarde
Renaix
Hal
Wavre
Ath
Tournai
Lille
Béthune
Lens
Douai
Arras
Condé
Valenciennes
Maubeuge
Charleroi
Namur
Anhée
Dinant
Mettet
Beaumont
Philippeville
Givet
Maubeuge held out until 8 September
Cambrai
Bapaume
Le Cateau
Albert
Le Catelet
Bohain
Péronne
Amiens
Estrées
St. Quentin
Guise
Hirson
Vervins
Rocroi
Chimay
Fumay
Les Ayvelles
Montcornet
Marle
Rethel
Laon
Noyon
Roye
Montdidier
Breteuil
Crèvecoeur
Nesle
Moreuil
Beauvais
Compiègne
Soissons
Vouziers
Verberie
Nery
Senlis
Nanteuil
Fismes
Suippes
St. Ménehould
Château Thierry
Epernay
Châlons-sur-Marne
Meaux
Montmirail
Versailles
Paris
Lagny
Esternay
Vitry-le-François
Melun
ADVANCED DEFENCES OF PARIS
KEY TO ALLIED ARMIES IN FRANCE
(approx. 700,000 troops on 23 August 1914)
Fourth Army (commanded by General Langle de Cary).
Fifth Army (commanded by General Lanrezac until replaced by General d'Esperey on 3 September 1914).
Sixth Army (commanded by General Maunoury until replaced by General Galliéni on 1 September 1914).
Foch "detachment" (commanded by General Foch, and formed on 29 August 1914).
Ninth Army (formerly the Foch "detachment").
Sordet's Cavalry Corps (Sordet was replaced by General Bridoux on 8 September 1914.)
Conneau's Cavalry Corps.
British Expeditionary Force (commanded by Sir John French).
Miles
KM

THE MIRACLE OF THE MARNE

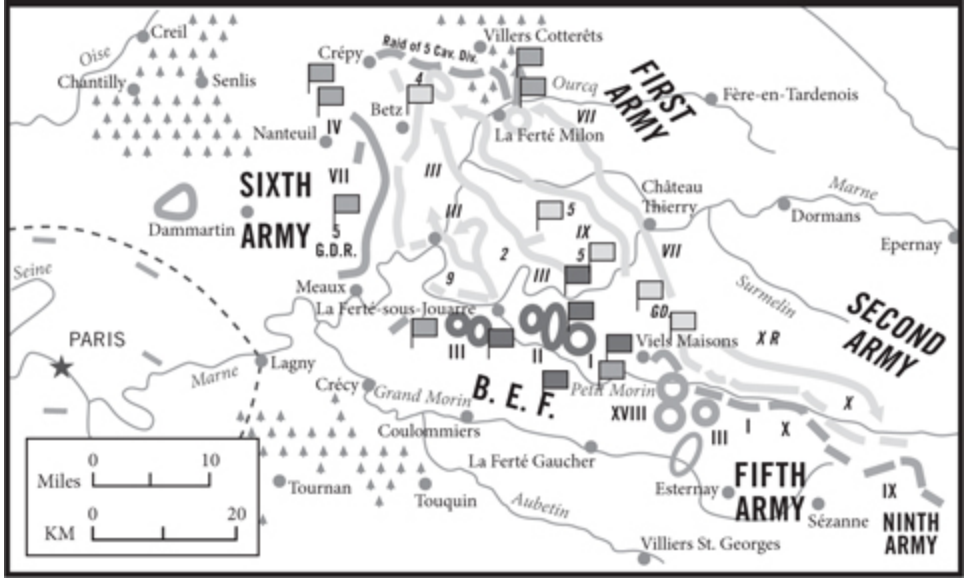


7 September – Withdrawal of the German First Army's Left Wing

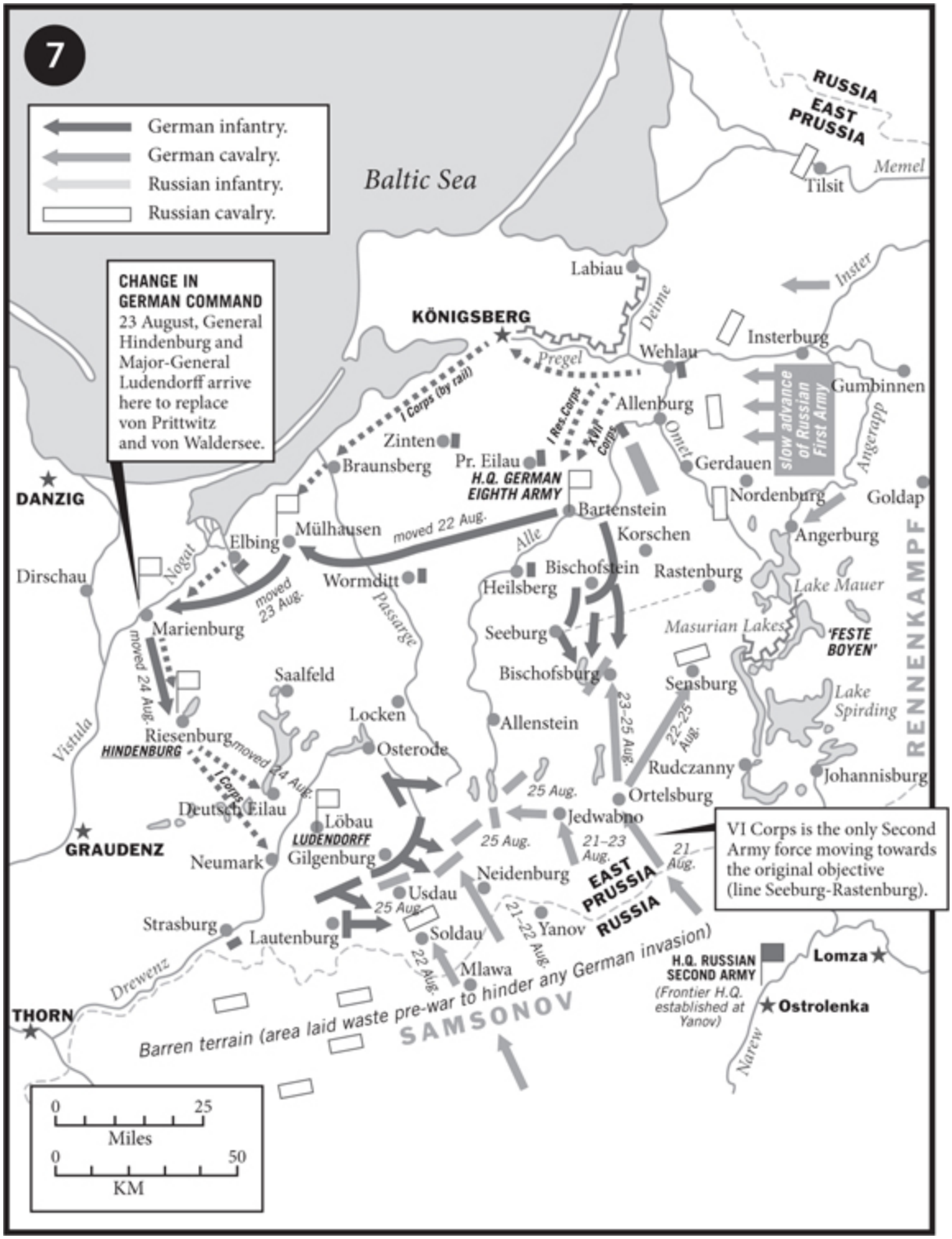


British positions
French positions
German positions
German withdrawal
Perimeter of Paris defences
Forests
Cavalry units
Note: Corps are shown by Roman numerals

8 September – The General Situation at Dusk

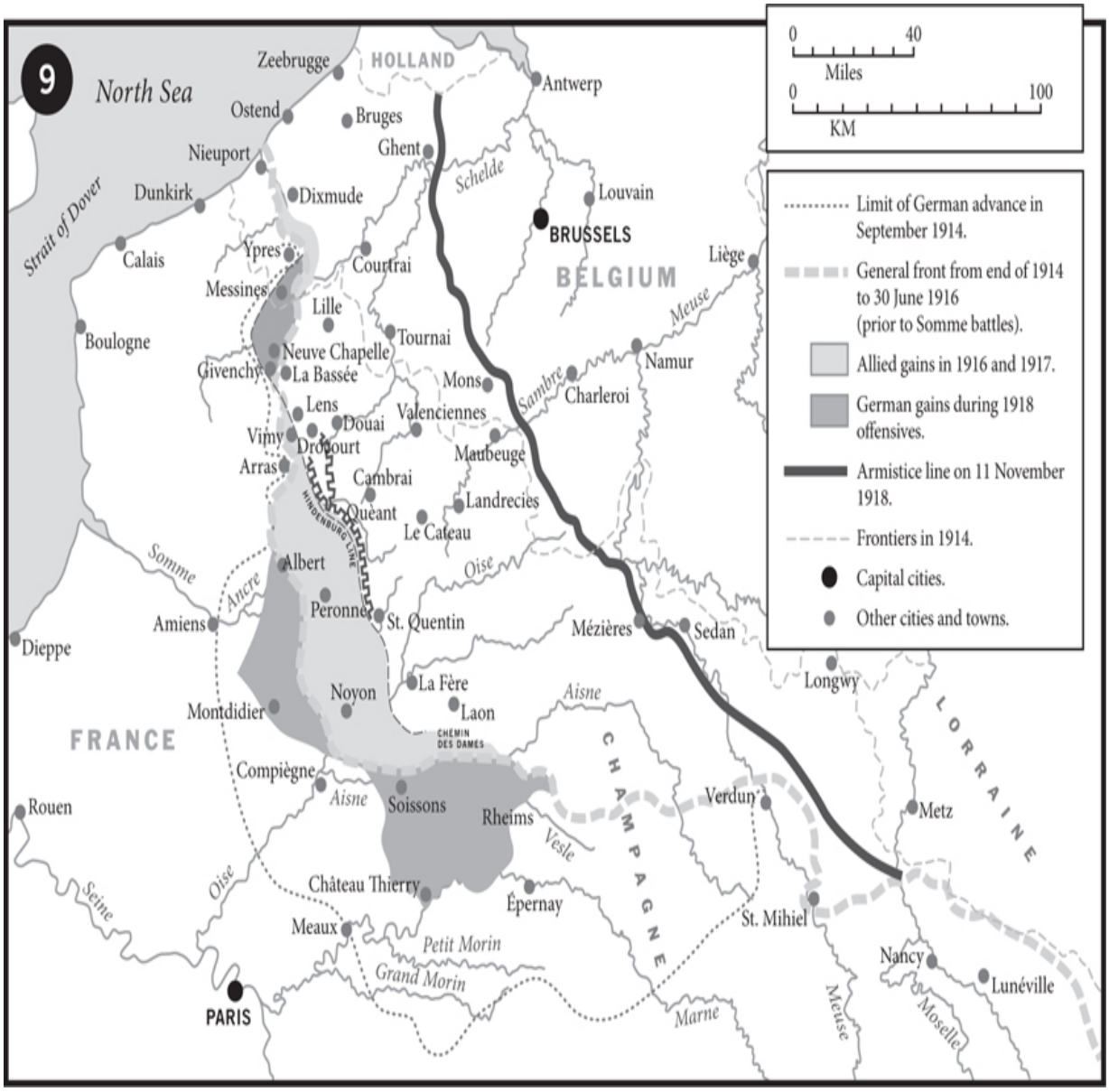


THE BATTLE OF TANNENBERG



THE RACE TO THE SEA

THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914–1918



DEAR READER,

The story of the causes of the Great War has been told thousands of times, and the archives have been ransacked in the hunt for new ‘facts’ that may help us understand it. Perhaps the subject is exhausted? Perhaps there are no new themes, facts, heroes or villains? Yet history is never complete, and, daringly, on this 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, this book takes a fresh approach, in several modest ways. It aims, for example, to simplify the story, to make the labyrinth accessible to the general reader without compromising the integrity of the whole. At times, it simply offers a portrait of the thinking of some of the main characters, to show how this reflected a pervasive feeling or mood that made war more or less likely.

1914 is a straightforward narrative history that exhumes the causes of the war through the accumulation of events, actions and attitudes that led to it. In this way, it sets that fateful year in a broader context, taking the reader on a journey that necessarily begins in the last decades of the nineteenth century and ends in the maelstrom of the twentieth. The year 1914 cannot be wrenched from its anchorage in time and examined in isolation. In the same way, the terms ‘conservative’, ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’ must be considered in their proper situations.

In places, I step outside the narrative and reflect on what caused the war, and how it ended the world as its contemporaries knew it. For example, was the war an act of God or a necessary Darwinian struggle, both of which the human hand was helpless to avert, as many leaders later claimed? How did the experiences of the rulers (monarchs, politicians, diplomats in the salons of power) compare with those of the ruled (ordinary men and women) who fought the battles?

Throughout, I rely on the primary archives of the main participant countries, as well as the classic texts. I owe a particular debt to the greatest writers on the subject, including Luigi Albertini, Niall Ferguson, Fritz Fischer, Martin Gilbert, John Keegan, John Keiger, Paul Kennedy, Bernadotte Schmitt, Zara Steiner, David Stevenson, Hew Strachan, Barbara Tuchman and Samuel R. Williamson. And I freely draw on new and less obvious sources, to set the scene for an avoidable nightmare that would determine the direction of the twentieth century.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Ham, Paris

PRELUDE

THE LONG SHADOW OF SUMMER, 1914

THE EUROPEAN SUMMER of 1914 was warmer and drier than usual. The leisured classes took tea in their sunrooms, went punting on the rivers, and attended their customary balls and parties. ‘One lolled outside on a folding canvas chaise . . . One read outdoors, went on picnics, had tea served from a white wicker table under the trees,’ writes the critic Paul Fussell, with that peculiarly American fondness for upper-class English social rites.[1] The poor waited on the rich, worked in the fields, mines and sweatshops, or begged. And they were kept below stairs, as usual.

The ‘Gilded Age’ continues to be resurrected in the twenty-first century, in popular screenplays, novels and films. The first episodes of the television series *Downton Abbey* and *Parade’s End* drew millions of viewers, enchanted by the aristocratic world of pre-war Oxbridge, winged collars and formal dress at dinner. In those tranquil days, it seemed everyone was able to quote something from the classics. Perhaps the English officer *was* the most literate young man ever to don a uniform? Many would read Shakespeare, the romantic poets and the Bible in the trenches. Many wrote poems, dared, as the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline would write, ‘to compose quatrains in an abbatoir’.[2] ‘Literature dominated the war from beginning to end,’ Fussell claims.[3]

Reminiscences of that July so often lapse into ‘mawkish and maudlin’ sentiments about a ‘sun-dappled and cultured

civilisation', warns the historian Hew Strachan.[4] And no doubt contemporary films and novels tend to draw on the experiences, or social types, of a few enlightened spirits of that lost era. A recurring character, for example, is the gallant young poet Siegfried Sassoon, Marlborough and Cambridge-educated. That summer, we glimpse him fresh back from fox hunting and about to play a game of county cricket, a 'nice' unquestioning youth of good family, an 'athlete and dreamer',[5] and unrecognisable as the broken man three years later, old before his time, who would declare through his shell shock a 'splendid war on the war'.[6] And here is Sassoon's fellow officer, Wilfred Owen, whom we find teaching English to French boys in a village in Bordeaux before the war, conceiving sweet poems with none of the restless agony of the disturbed soldier who would write 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (before he himself would die on the Western Front). Another is the writer Robert Graves, similarly young and brilliant, and a stranger to the bitter old curmudgeon who would flay in the flintiest prose the politicians whose gift to his generation was the first day of the Somme (in *Goodbye to All That*).

Yet the name the English-speaking world romantically attaches to the Great War is that of the poet Rupert Brooke. The author of 'The Soldier' was 'the handsomest young man in England', said Yeats, 'a golden warrior', who was said to express the soul of England.[7] Almost inevitably, he was Cambridge educated and a public-school dandy of the first order. 'Oh my darling are you doing too much?' Brooke wrote to an actor friend. 'You looked so like a tired child last night at Drury Lane. If you knew how difficult it was for me not to take you in my arms, with Queen Alexandria and George Bernard Shaw . . . all looking on.'[8] Brooke's death, in 1915, seemed to inter the spirit of the age, in the eyes of his Bloomsbury contemporaries and, most recently, in Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Stranger's Child*, whose main

character is modelled on him. Less well known is the pathos of Brooke's demise: he never saw combat and died of an infected mosquito bite on his way to Gallipoli.

These are the characters whose 'types' are so often used in the English-speaking world to evoke all that would perish in the Great War. That their battered lives should be deployed to symbol-ise a 'lost generation' is hardly their fault. Yet it skews the picture. Millions of ordinary young men, with no literary pretensions or public-school vowels – British, French, German, Russian, Serbian, Austro-Hungarian, Indian, African, Australian, Canadian, Irish, New Zealanders – were similarly scarred and lie forgotten in 'some corner of a foreign field'[9] or remembered only by their families, in village services, their remains buried in a distant graveyard, their letters gathering dust in library archives.

Others would survive the war and achieve immortality of a different kind. Céline, born Louis Ferdinand Auguste Destouches and decorated for bravery in 1914, would become a French novelist (author of *Journey to the End of the Night*, regarded as one of the finest novels of the twentieth century), an anti-semite and alleged Nazi collaborator during the Second World War, redeemed by the brilliance of his prose and his care for the poor. James Chadwick, interned in Germany in 1914, where he had been studying physics at the Technical University of Berlin, would earn the Nobel Prize for Physics for his discovery of the neutron, critical to the construction of the atomic bomb used on Hiroshima. Fellow physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who served as an officer in the Austrian Fortress Artillery during the war, would pioneer the wave theory of quantum mechanics and formulate the paradoxical mind experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat. And, of course, the failed artist Adolf Hitler, who volunteered for the German infantry in 1914 and earned the Iron Cross for bravery, would rise

to lead Germany to ignominious ruin in another world war 30 years later.

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The tranquillity of those days disguised an extreme peril. Few realised that a meeting of Austro-Hungarian ministers had effectively declared war on Serbia on 7 July 1914, three weeks before the outbreak of hostilities (see Chapter 25). And some cities were far from peaceful. Huge rallies filled Berlin, Vienna and Belgrade. The warm July weather and the strange sense of something in the air drew people out of their homes. In the aftermath of Franz Ferdinand's assassination, on 28 June 1914, lynch mobs prowled the streets of Vienna and Budapest. Thousands clamoured for war against their perceived enemies, be they Slav, Teuton, Latin or Anglo-Saxon – 'race' was a much bigger factor in the war than we suppose. When war was declared, in early August, there was open euphoria, weeping and embracing, old friends shaking hands. Adolf Hitler fell to his knees and 'thanked heaven from an overflowing heart that it had granted me the good fortune to be alive at such a time'.[10] It is even claimed that those balmy days hastened the leaders' decision to declare war, by enabling mass outdoor protests in favour of hostilities.[11]

Were European leaders so impressionable? Were the people and the press – Britain's all-powerful 'public opinion' – really willing war? Had public opinion compelled the German, French, Russian and British Governments to declare war? It seems unlikely. A few thousand extreme nationalists, the jingo minority and a complicit media made a big noise but were hardly representative of the mainstream. The warmongering on display in Berlin, Belgrade, Vienna and Paris did not reflect the general mood in Europe. Most French, British, Russian and German people did not want war, but they were powerless to stop it.

‘Militarism was far from being the dominant force in European politics on the eve of the Great War,’ concludes Niall Ferguson. ‘On the contrary, it was in political decline . . . The evidence is unequivocal: Europeans were not marching to war, but turning their backs on militarism.’[12] The July protests were unrepresentative of the feelings of millions of quiet, unasked mothers and fathers, wives and sisters, who dreaded the loss of their sons, brothers and husbands in a coming conflagration.

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Europe’s rulers and political leaders knew something most of their people did not: a war was coming. A few powerful, old, aristocratic men brought war on the world behind closed doors, free from the scrutiny of a fully enfranchised public or an uncensored press. They later claimed they were ‘shocked’ by it and unable to prevent it. Yet, three weeks before Germany invaded France, the German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg could say that he ‘expects that a war, whatever its outcome, will result in the uprooting of everything that exists’.[13] He played a central role in its outcome, yet later claimed, as did other leaders, that he was helpless to stop it. Yet such premonitions of armageddon filled the minds of Europe’s rulers years before 1914.

For most ordinary people, those premonitions began a few weeks before the declaration of war, in July 1914. Years later, they would look back on those summer days through the lens of a global conflict of unspeakable horror, loss and waste. And the contrast was unbearable. Understandably, they longed for that blissful peace, engraved in their minds as warm and sunbathed, as if idealising the weather would somehow suspend in aspic, if never quite retrieve, the ‘eminently pastoral’ pre-war world.[14]

A hundred years on, we dare to call it innocence. Or we presume, in our dreadful knowingness, to call it madness, or callous indifference, at a time when the greatest war machines and largest land armies were mobilising to destroy their world. But that is to project the opening blows of the bloodiest century back on a stranger, simpler time, before the guns of August blew it apart forever. The simple truth is that most people, as always, did not know what was going to happen next.

Part 1

THE TYRANNY OF THE PAST, 1870–1900s

1

NIJINSKY’S FAUN

The extraordinary thing was the way in which everyone took it for granted that this oozing, bulging wealth of the English upper and upper-middle classes would last forever, and was part of the order of things . . . Before the war the worship of money was entirely unreflecting and untroubled by any pang of conscience. The goodness of money was as unmistakable as the goodness of health or beauty, and a glittering car, a title, or a horde of servants was mixed up in people’s minds with the idea of actual moral virtue.
George Orwell, ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’

Only by understanding the past may we free ourselves from its tyranny.

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They were a louche, happy tribe, the Edwardian rich. They satiated themselves in the literature, art and finery of everything that went by the name of ‘modern’ during that period known to posterity as La Belle Époque, La Fin de Siècle and the Gilded Age. Artists, musicians and revolutionaries were thought to have flourished in what nobody knew would be the last years of a relatively peaceful era, between the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and the summer of 1914. For many, it was a time of great prosperity and an efflorescence of artistic and scientific talent redounding to the genius of the cultural heart of the civilised world: Paris. And it was a time of upheaval. ‘The world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than

it has in the last thirty years,' wrote the young French poet Charles Péguy in 1913.[1] (He would soon die on the Western Front.)

Some things had not changed: chiefly, the way most men and women *thought*. For most people, the conservative triumvirate of God, King and Country remained firmly in place in the 1890s and 1900s. The decadent values of the Belle Époque had not overturned half a century of Victorian values. In the 1900s, old-fashioned conservatism, and respect for tradition, were making strident returns, mainly among the young. In European schools and universities, French and German students were reacting against the dilettantism and indulgence of their parents' Bohemian generation, and rallying to the standards of the old world: patriotic, Christian and authoritarian.[2]

The conservative mainstream stoutly resisted democratic reforms such as votes for women, better working conditions, social welfare and universal healthcare. In this sense, the radicalism on display had barely impinged on the actual polity of the pre-war world. By the turn of the century, Australia and New Zealand were the only Western countries to have extended the vote to women, and Germany under Bismarck was the only European country to have introduced a recognisable welfare state and universal male suffrage. The essential conflict of the era, observed George Orwell, 'was between the tradition of 19th century asceticism and the actual existing luxury and snobbery of the pre-1914 age'.[3]

Victorian values did not simply disappear with the passing of Queen Victoria. She died in 1901, in the arms of her beloved grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. Her death touched all of Europe, for Victoria was the royal matriarch of three empires, closely linked through royal blood: Britain, Germany and Russia. Tsar Nicholas II, Kaiser Wilhelm II and King Edward VII were cousins. The